

# In Memoriam: Van Austin Harvey



*Van Harvey (April 23, 1926 – July 11, 2021)*

It is with great sadness that the Department of Religious Studies announces the death of Van Harvey, the George Edwin Burnell Professor of Religious Studies Emeritus at Stanford University

Van Austin Harvey was born in Hankou, China, and raised in Esparto, Beaumont, and Merced California. At age 17, he volunteered for the Navy and was sent to Redlands University for accelerated training in the Navy's V-12 program. As a torpedo officer on a destroyer headed for Japan, he read Spinoza's *Ethics* and met a sailor who informed him that metaphysics was something he could study in college. After the war, he earned his B.A. in philosophy from Occidental College (1948), his B.D. from Yale Divinity School (1951), and his Ph.D. (under H. Richard Niebuhr) from Yale University (1957).

Van was recruited to Stanford as a full professor in 1978. He chaired the department from 1980 to 1986, was awarded the Burnell professorship in 1985, and retired in 1996. Early in his career, he held appointments at Princeton University (1954-58) and Southern Methodist University (1958-68), where he quickly established himself as a talented Christian theologian. Growing doubts about the intellectual integrity of academic theology, combined with

principled reservations about his fitness as a teacher of future church leaders, prompted him to leave SMU's Perkins School of Theology for the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Religion in 1968. While at Penn, he resolved to transform himself into a leading scholar of religious thought in the modern West. By the time he arrived at Stanford in 1978, he was a widely recognized authority on the seminal critics and reformers of religion in European modernity. Spinoza, Hume, and Kant; Schleiermacher, Schopenhauer, and Hegel; Kierkegaard, D.F. Strauss, and Feuerbach; Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud; Buber, Heidegger, and K. Barth populated his syllabi and occupied his doctoral students. His award-winning *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (Cambridge, 1995), written at the height of his career at Stanford, was the fruit of decades of reflection on the meaning and function of religion in a world that had been demystified by such "masters of suspicion."

Intertwined with his scholarly and vocational evolution was the firm conviction that university departments of religion needed to make a clean break with the aims, curricula, and structures of even the best and most ecumenical East Coast divinity schools. On his telling, this conviction took shape already as an assistant professor at Princeton University, where, to his chagrin, his chair assigned him the topic of his first seminar: "Christology." As this anecdote suggests, what is now taken for granted in departments of religious studies was then in urgent need of articulation and defense. As early as 1966, Van penned an essay for the journal *Judaism* critical of the reigning "Protestant Ethos in Religious Scholarship." While at SMU, he chaired the university's fledgling graduate program in religion. At Penn, he spent eight of his ten years chairing its young department. The extent of his influence on the institutionalization of the "secular study of religion" in North America, however, cannot be measured simply in terms of his impact on the campuses at which he taught, for he was a sought-after consultant to universities and colleges just at that time in U.S. higher education when so many new departments and doctoral programs in religious studies – especially at state universities – were being formed. He took special pride in the role he played in launching the departments at Indiana and Alabama.

At Stanford, Van quickly earned a reputation as an exacting mentor of doctoral students, a revered teacher of undergraduates, an active university citizen, and staunch supporter of liberal education. Having arrived just four years after the department's founding and been appointed chair two years later, he put his stamp on religious studies at Stanford through fundraising, faculty recruitment, and the reorganization of the department's doctoral fields. Together with William Clebsch and Lee Yearley, he transformed the

study of religion at Stanford from a relatively unknown and parochial track within what at that time was called “Humanities Special Programs” into the non-sectarian, interdisciplinary, globally oriented, and scholarly department that it is today. The current shape of the department – e.g., its strength in the study of Buddhism and Judaism – owes much to Van’s effectiveness as a program builder. With the recruitment of Arnold Eisen to Stanford in 1986, he also laid the foundation for Stanford’s interdepartmental Program in Jewish Studies. Van’s own colorful account of the pre- and early history of the department can be found [here](#).

In the wider university, Van was a forceful presence and diligent university citizen. He served on numerous important decanal, university, and Faculty Senate committees – chairing the Committee on Academic Appraisal and Achievement, the Committee on Overseas Studies, and the Committee on Investment Responsibility. When the Faculty Senate proved unresponsive to the general education needs of undergraduates, he organized an autonomous but short-lived “H & S Faculty Council” to advise the Dean on curricular matters. Practicing what he preached, he contributed courses to the programs in Western Civilization and Culture, Ideas, and Values (both precursors to Stanford Introductory Studies) and was a regular lecturer in SLE. In the 1990s and early 2000s, he taught for Continuing Studies, offering courses not only on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche but also on the social and intellectual culture of Freud’s Vienna – a longstanding fascination of his. Well into retirement, he lived out his commitment to general education on the Peninsula as a lecturer to rapt audiences at the Institute for the Study of Western Civilization in Cupertino.

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Van authored three books and dozens of beautifully crafted essays, scholarly articles, and book reviews. His first book, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (1964), was commissioned by Macmillan during the theological ferment of the 1960s when the Second Vatican Council was in full swing and the so-called Death of God Movement was stirring up controversy within the mainline Protestant churches. Written for perplexed, interdenominational laity at a time when renegade theologians adorned the pages of *Time* magazine, he set out to explain not only the central theological terms of art deriving from the classical and medieval periods but also the technical jargon of process, existentialist, and analytical philosophies then in heavy use by the major theologians of the inter- and post-war period. Remarkably, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* is still in print.



It was, however, Van's second book, *The Historian and the Believer* (1966), that secured his reputation as a subtle analyst of the philosophical issues involved in the theologies of his contemporaries. Widely reviewed and discussed, the book quickly became a staple on the exam lists of the major divinity schools at Chicago, Harvard, and Yale, but also of the nascent graduate programs in religious studies he would soon help build. In the late 90s, one reviewer summarized the book's abiding significance as follows: "This third, unrevised edition of Harvey's 1966 classic remains the best entrée into the thorny problems raised for Christian faith by the ethics of belief implicit in historical-critical inquiry. Harvey's analysis of 'the faith/history problem' as a complex *set* of problems; his painstaking treatment of the nature of historical judgment, rationality, and justification; and his trenchant criticisms of the strategies employed by the dialectical theologians and their offspring to circumvent the challenge laid down by E. Troeltsch exemplify critical revisionary theology at its best. . . ." Noting the author's singular capacity for self-revision, he continued: "In a substantive new introduction, Harvey provides a blueprint of the adjustments required not merely to keep his original thesis serviceable but also to strengthen it. Subjecting his own work to candid criticism, he identifies the fundamental weakness of the book, makes explicit the suppressed *theological* rationale underlying the thesis, and suggests that if Wittgenstein (instead of F. H. Bradley) had been his main philosophical conversation partner, the original argument would have been more nuanced and better equipped to handle the objections of postmodernists." As these comments suggest, Van continued to ponder and modify his early theological views about the challenges posed to Christian

belief by modern historical methods long after he had relinquished his claim to being a professional theologian. Indeed, as late as 2008 he took a fresh run at the topic of his first book in an article for the *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* entitled "The Ethics of Belief and Two Conceptions of Christian Faith." He considered it one of his best essays.

Almost thirty years passed between the *Historian and the Believer* and Van's next major work, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (1995). During these decades of retooling, he published regularly in top journals and was frequently invited to contribute chapters to important collected volumes and encyclopedias. If his career may be said to fall roughly into three phases, his articles and essays reveal surprising overlaps and continuities. So, for instance, as a young professor of theology at SMU, he published not only essays like "The Role of Church and Ministry in a Rapidly Changing Society" and "A Defense of Schleiermacher's Theological Method" but also "D.F. Strauss' *Life of Jesus* Revisited" and "On Believing What is Difficult to Understand." At Penn, where his long-harbored doubts about the integrity of contemporary theology became notoriously public in trenchant essays such as "The Alienated Theologian," "The Pathos of Liberal Theology," and "A Christology for Barabbases," one can also find titles friendlier to theology like "Secularism, Responsible Belief, and the 'Theology of Hope'" and anticipations of his work on projection theories like "Some Problematical Aspects of Peter Berger's Theory of Religion." At Stanford, Van's research into the left-wing Hegelians and other progenitors of modern secularism became manifest in his chapter on "Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx" for Ninian Smart's important three-volume *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*; in entries on Bruno Baur, Strauss, and Feuerbach for Mircea Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion* (to which he also contributed the entry on hermeneutics); and in essays such as "Nietzsche and the Kantian Paradigm of Religious Faith," "Feuerbach on Religion as Construction," and "Challenges to Religion in the Nineteenth Century." Yet, here again, one also finds titles reminiscent of his Penn years such as "The Dilemma of the Unbelieving Theologian," "The Intellectual Marginality of American Theology," and "Must We All Be Theologians?" (1998!) as well as two essays revisiting the intersection of New Testament scholarship, the ethics of belief, and the nature of faith.

In 1996, the American Academy of Religion honored Van with its annual "Award for Excellence in Constructive-Reflective Studies" for his last book, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*. Today, this penetrating and wide-ranging study is widely considered one of the best works on Feuerbach

(1804-1872) of the past half-century. Feuerbach came on the scene in 1841 as the notorious author of a work with the ho-hum title *The Essence of Christianity*. In attempting to demonstrate that God is humanity-writ-large and that each Christian doctrine and practice can be decoded into its all-too-human meaning, Feuerbach caused a sensation and set in motion a dramatic sea change in German philosophy from speculative idealism to positivistic materialism. Van's research set out to reignite the debate about this youngest of the young Hegelians by focusing on Feuerbach's subsequent, lesser-known writings on religion. As one reviewer summarized it, "Van Harvey's long-awaited study brings a new Feuerbach to religious studies. Harvey re-reads the chief materials on religion from the 1840s to show that the 1848 criticism of religion of the *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* represents a new model of explaining religion, distinct from and better than that of the famous *Essence of Religion* (1845). This historically sensitive 'rational reconstruction' purges the Hegelian and realist elements from the early model of religion and presents a nominalistic and naturalistic theory of religion centered on the human attempt to manage an indifferent nature." Never content with making a historical intervention in the specialist literature, Van proceeded in the book's last two chapters to bring Feuerbach's "existentialist-naturalistic" theory of religion into conversation with twentieth-century theorists such as Freud, Fokke Sierksma, Peter Berger, Stewart Guthrie, and Melford Spiro. In the final analysis, he credits the twentieth-century cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker with having (unknowingly) best captured and advanced Feuerbach's most enduring insights. Like everything he wrote, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* combines meticulous scholarship with bold theses, subtle argumentation, and intellectual passion.

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Professor Harvey was widely respected and sought out by undergraduates from every major. Indeed, many former students, across decades and across disciplines, remember him as the best professor they encountered in their Stanford days. This is probably because he strove not merely to impart knowledge but also to connect it to students' lives and, more generally, to teach them how to become independent learners and disciplined thinkers. Elizabeth Ewing (B.A., 1990; Ph.D., 2000), who took undergraduate classes from Van before becoming his doctoral student, recalls that "regardless of the topic under discussion, Professor Harvey approached his teaching with expertise, curiosity, humility, and humor. His lectures brought to life the core philosophical issues at stake and teased out the implications of religious ideas. In class discussion, he would often connect intellectual history to everyday

life, including current movies, books, and music. Sometimes, these discussions would continue long after class was over. While some found his intellectual standards daunting – he did not let unsubstantiated interpretations and poorly grounded arguments pass unremarked – Professor Harvey’s door was always open.” P.J. Ivanhoe (B.A., 1976; Ph.D., 1987), now at Georgetown, adds: “What impressed me about Van from the get-go (and inspired me to attempt to emulate him) was the fact that he always took everyone absolutely seriously and engaged them as a colleague and fellow inquirer. In basic stance and attitude, he didn’t distinguish between undergraduate and graduate students – or, for that matter, between them and distinguished professors. Some did indeed find this to be too demanding, but most, I think, came to see it as a profound and inspiring declaration of respect. The greatest aim of a teacher should be to train and inspire students to inquire for themselves – and in this respect Van Harvey was without peer.”

At the graduate level, Van was an attentive advisor who likewise set high standards for both scholarship and teaching. Ewing recalls how “he trained his graduate students to be mentors themselves and to foster the tradition of genuine intellectual inquiry, even as he guided the development of their original scholarship and contributions to the field. Graduate students were given opportunities to lecture and lead seminar in his courses, so he could guide and refine their interactions with undergraduates. In Professor Harvey’s view, excellent scholarship and excellent teaching are mutually reinforcing. Moreover, in training young scholars, he held that direct engagement with leading interpretations in one’s area of specialization was essential for developing one’s own views. Every seminar started with Van introducing various opposing interpretations of a thinker’s work. As students engaged, he Socratically pushed them to develop their own interpretations, without biasing the discussion by revealing his own perspective. Similarly, he was an incisive critic of his graduate students’ written work, which helped them clarify nuanced arguments and become stronger thinkers. It was understood that in academic discourse the ideas and interpretations were what mattered – disagreements were not personal but were opportunities to explore ideas and sharpen arguments. Teaching young scholars how to engage in academic dialogue in a civil and productive way was integral to his notion of education and to his vision of productive collegiality.”

Karen Carr (Ph.D., 1989), now at Lawrence University, summed it up this way: “Van was a superlative teacher whom I have tried to emulate as a professor in my own classes; his clarity and elegance in presenting the ideas of difficult continental thinkers was unmatched. During my six years at

Stanford, I often had a late Friday afternoon tutorial with him. One would think this timing would have been deadly, but it was the reverse: I remember leaving those meetings energized and dancing with excitement over the ideas we had been discussing. 'If I'm going to spend my life thinking about anything,' I said to myself, 'this is what I want to be thinking of.' I will forever be grateful to Van for demonstrating, in word and deed, why the life of the mind is worth pursuing and providing a model of academic excellence worthy of emulating. We are all the poorer for his passing."

In 1996, the university honored Van with the Deans' Award for Distinguished Teaching.

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Van was the recipient of an honorary degree in the Humanities from Occidental College (1964), two John Guggenheim Fellowships (1966, 1972), a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship (1979), a Visiting Fellowship from Clare Hall, Cambridge University (1979), and distinguished teaching awards from the University of Pennsylvania as well as Stanford.

He served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Religion*, the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, the *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, and the University of North Carolina Series in Religious Studies. He also served on the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship National Selection Committee, the John Guggenheim Foundation Educational Advisory Board, and the Committee on Academic Planning of the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies. In the early 1970s, he was a consultant to the National Endowment for the Humanities.

He belonged to the Internationale Gesellschaft der Feuerbach-Forscher, the North American Nietzsche Society, the Internationale Fritz Buri-Gesellschaft, the American Academy of Religion, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, and the American Theological Society, and was a frequent guest speaker at universities across the U.S., in Germany, and in Great Britain.

In retirement, he enjoyed the company of his book club friends, volunteering for Habitat for Humanity, going for afternoon walks in the Baylands, participating in voter registration drives, and playing the piano, especially jazz improvisation. He is survived by his wife, Margaret, and his sons, Jonathan and Christopher, who cared for him during his brief illness in their home in midtown Palo Alto.

— Brent Sockness, July 13, 2021