

Philosopher in Service of the Church

Diogenes Allen Retires after 35 Years at PTS



Photo: Chrissie Knight

Diogenes Allen

by Eric Springsted

Books and videos by Allen

Books

- Leibniz' Theodicy*, 1966
- The Reasonableness of Faith*, 1968
- Finding Our Father*, 1974 (*The Path of Perfect Love*, 1992)
- Between Two Worlds*, 1977 (*Temptation*, 1986)
- Traces of God in a Frequently Hostile World*, 1981
- Three Outsiders: Pascal, Kierkegaard and Simone Weil*, 1983
- Mechanical Explanation and the Ultimate Origin of the Universe According to Leibniz*, 1983
- Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 1985
- Love: Christian Romance, Marriage, and Friendship*, 1987
- Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction*, 1989
- Quest: The Search for Meaning through Christ*, 1990
- Primary Readings in Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 1992
- Nature, Spirit, and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil*, 1994
- Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Help Today*, 1997
- Steps along the Way: A Spiritual Autobiography*, 2002

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Videos

- Eight Deadly Thoughts*
- Love: Christian Romance, Marriage, and Friendship*
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- Temptation*

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When in 1967 Diogenes Allen was offered the position in philosophy at Princeton Seminary, at first he was inclined not to accept it. Teaching in a theological seminary was not how one advanced a philosophical career. It was Jane Allen who, as her husband pondered the choice, pointed out that this might not simply be an offer, but a call; its importance might be its opportunity to serve. The point was not wasted on a man who after returning from England and a Rhodes scholarship nearly 10 years earlier had, instead of going straight to graduate school, gone to seminary and taken a Presbyterian parish in Windham, New Hampshire. The church had been formative of Allen, and he understood the importance of serving its people.

Diogenes Allen retired in June from his position as Stuart Professor of Christian Philosophy after 35 years of committed service as a teacher in the mission of the church. That is how Allen has always understood his role as a teacher, and he has worked hard at teaching philosophy that way. For example, in 1985, noting that fewer and fewer entering seminary students knew the philosophical background of so much theological thought, he wrote *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* precisely to teach it to them. That book and a companion anthology of primary readings published later have been the texts for a course that has long been immensely popular with PTS students. The books have also been regularly used in many other seminaries across the country. Numerous PTS students, who usually take the course in the semester they are taking introductory church history, have exclaimed how much more accessible it has made the history of Christian thought to them.

Allen will long be remembered as an extraordinary teacher, particularly for the clarity he brought to his difficult subject matter. Few have been able to make difficult thought so understandable and so attractive. Though care was required—as former student George Conway (Class of 1973, M.Div.), now himself a school headmaster, remarked—lest one mistakenly believe it was *simple* thought that could easily be put some other way than Allen had explained it!

That ability to bring clarity has also made Allen a speaker much in demand throughout the country. When he entered the parish he told the people of Windham he couldn't promise to be always interesting, but he would promise always to talk about what is important—and he hoped that would be interesting enough. It always has been. Because he is willing to talk about what is important without sounding self-important, Allen has always been able to draw in the seemingly most unlikely listeners and to excite them. One former student remembers during the 1980s inviting him to give a lecture at the college where the student was then teaching. The lecture was to take place during a mandatory convocation, which guaranteed a large but restless audience of potentially hostile post-adolescents. Allen chose to speak on Kierkegaard, causing his host to hold his breath anxiously. But not only was the audience attentive, afterwards students streamed up asking where they could find a copy of Kierkegaard.

As Jeffrey Eaton (M.Div. 1971, Ph.D. 1979) once introduced Allen, "He teaches with authority, and not as the scribes and Pharisees." And he has that ability with a wide range of people. Recently I was taking a cab at 6:00 a.m. to the airport in South

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Keeper of the Stories

William O. Harris Retires

by Kent Annan

In June, Princeton's campus lost to retirement an eloquent teller of its tales. William Harris has for the past 14 years been Princeton's archivist and librarian for special collections. He seems to know all there is to know about Princeton Seminary—the whos, whats, wheres, and whens since the founding plan of PTS was drawn up in 1811. Harris counts himself privileged to have had such an intimate relationship with this institution that, he says, for its whole history has had “sound learning and vital piety” at its heart.

His own work at Princeton has had the same heart, which comes across as this gentle Indiana gentleman excitedly considers how the Pentateuch relates to his vocation.

“I think a large part of what I do is an extension of the fifth commandment—to honor our fathers and mothers in the faith,” he says. “There’s certainly a lot to honor in the Princeton tradition. And I’ve tried to make it a little easier to honor our fathers and mothers here. Also, I feel guilty when we tell bad stories about good people. That’s hateful gossip. And that’s bearing false witness, to again use a commandment. So I’ve tried to dig out a lot of the good that has gone on here at the Seminary.”

Some of that digging has been literal.

He found the decaying remnants of the Seminary students’ 19th-century missionary museum buried in the mud in the Carriage

House’s cellar. The valuable items he found—from Buddha statues to Chinese vases to an African witchdoctor’s mask—have been restored, and PTS professor of the history of religions Richard Young has since been doing some research on the items and on the history of the Seminary’s early missions involvement. (Harris points out that Princeton sent its first missionary, Henry Woodward, Class of 1818, to Sri Lanka in 1820 and went on to send more missionaries during that time than any other seminary in the country.)

Another proud achievement was finding and then restoring some 90 portraits of PTS-associated people that had been “piled in the basement of the library like cordwood. Many were ripped and torn by frames jamming into each other, and the frames themselves were in awful shape.” They now hang around the Seminary, most prominently in Mackay’s Main Lounge and the classrooms of Stuart Hall, each with a small corresponding card that tells the story of the subject.

“I love that text in Hebrews 11—that we’re surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses,” he says fondly (a man who speaks as though the mid-nineteenth century were bumping right up next to today). “I think we ought to honor that history we have at



William O. Harris

Photo: Erin Dunigan

the Seminary, rather than to neglect or condemn it.”

Harris arrived at Princeton Seminary as a student in 1951 from his home in southern Indiana. (In June Harris returned to Indiana and moved into a retirement home—but not to worry, he had already contacted the University of Southern Indiana library, and they have since gained an adept volunteer.) He was Presbyterian and wanted to be a minister. He studied hard and also had fun.

Some of the fun, he says, came as part of dealing with what he calls a constant and unhappy part of the Seminary’s past hundred years. “There’s been a tension between those who are aggressively adjusting to the culture and those who are clinging defensively to the past,” he says sadly. It’s still here today. On a solemn note, it led to a split of the Seminary in 1929. On a lighter note, during Harris’s time some people (“well,” he sighs with a

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Bend, Indiana, when much to my surprise the radio station to which the cabby was listening broadcast an interview with Allen on the difference between eternal life and long-lasting life! I proudly told the cabby that that was an old friend and teacher. The cabby didn’t talk much, though. He was listening to the interview, even though it was the end of an all-night shift. But as I got out of the cab, he told me to make sure I told my friend that he was really good.

If Allen’s career has been a life of service, he still has had an important philosophical career. Stanley Hauerwas once called him “one of the good guys.” Allen has authored and edited 14 books, establishing himself as an authority on Leibniz and as a major inter-

preter of Simone Weil—and has been instrumental in drawing attention to her. Work he has done on the problem of evil is continually referred to in philosophical literature.

Yet, it isn’t that he has *also* had a philosophical career. The service to the church he has thought so important has shaped what he has written. He has brought concerns of spirituality both to philosophical discussions of Christianity *and* to Christians who have forgotten that “theology is prayer; and prayer, theology,” as Allen is fond of quoting the desert father Evagrius. Whether it is in his approach to the problem of evil and suffering, or to apologetics in *Christian Faith in a Postmodern World*, or in his discussions of spirituality in *Spiritual Theology*, Christian

practice has informed his thinking and writing. And the importance of that link between thought and practice has been an invaluable lesson Allen has passed on to his students. ■

Eric Springsted received both his M.Div. (1976) and Ph.D. (1980) from Princeton Seminary, and has taught on its faculty. He is currently teaching at General Theological Seminary in New York City. He recently published The Act of Faith: Christian Faith and the Moral Self (Eerdmans) and in 1998 edited a festschrift in Allen’s honor titled Spirituality and Theology: Essays in Honor of Diogenes Allen (Westminster/John Knox Press).

smile, “me included”) would torment the conservatives by drinking a little too much and then rolling a cannonball down the stairs of Alexander Hall. The directory was also dubbed “the fundy finder” when he was a student.

After graduation, Harris served as a U.S. Navy chaplain and at several churches before landing as associate pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He enjoyed the ministry, especially with youth and those who were living on the street. But the demands became too much, and the support for his downtown ministry was too little. High blood pressure and a doctor’s subsequent order meant change was necessary. So Harris started down a different path and enrolled in a one-year library science master’s degree at Indiana University.

The reminiscence turns sad and he says, “I’ve never been able quite to reconcile... well, I’ve always been a bit embarrassed about leaving pastoral ministry. I’ve always thought

it was a kind of failure on my part. But I’m not sure what else I could do.”

Well, what he did was turn his 25-year career in libraries into a ministry. He has ministered by helping people in their research, which, he says, “I’ve thoroughly enjoyed.” At Princeton, he’s aided research on Puritanism and Presbyterianism—as well as about Archibald Alexander (1772–1851, “the seminary’s first professor, who still has many books in print”); Theodore Wright (1797–1847, “the third African American to study at an American institution of higher learning, and the first to attend an American seminary”); Charles Hodge (1797–1878, “America’s greatest scholar of Augustine in the 19th century”); Emily Dickinson (1830–1886, “who had a great soul friendship—well, some say affair—with a married alum who ministered in Philadelphia but brought her often to Princeton, and mentions the town and Seminary in some of her poetry”); B.B. Warfield (1851–1921, “a great

forgotten defender of Darwin”); and Henry James Sr. (1811–1882, “who attended PTS for two years, and was the father of William and Henry James, the psychologist and novelist, respectively”), to name a few.

He has also ministered by staying involved and preaching in local churches, by taking hundreds of students and visitors on walking tours of the Princeton campus, by bringing history’s truth to light, by being a steward of the Seminary’s artifacts, and by encouraging those who have worked for him.

He ministered by making the Princeton community more aware of the cloud of witnesses by digging up their stories and then conveying them with colorful, gentlemanly flare. Harris helped to keep alive the witness of many great (flawed though they were) men and women—witnesses most importantly to the gospel, but also to the Seminary’s ministry. Princeton Seminary is grateful that this historian/minister kept his head in the clouds. ■

The Spirit of Princeton

by William O. Harris

As retirement looms I have been affectionately recalling my 52-year connection with Princeton Seminary. I entered here as a student in the fall of 1951 and feel a profound debt of gratitude for the friends, professors, and opportunities this place has given me through the succeeding years as a student, an alumnus, and, for the past 14 years, as librarian for archives and special collections. Looking back over those years with the charge to write about the peak experiences, three stand out as characteristic of the spirit of Princeton Seminary.

During my first week as a student at the Seminary, I was seated between two other students, both slightly older veterans of World War II. On my right was Hans Kirchhofer (Class of 1952), a new Th.M. student from Germany and a former officer in the *Luftwaffe*; on my left was Arthur Gebbard (Class of 1953), a former bomber in the U.S. Army Air Force. During dinner they began to share their war experiences and soon discovered that throughout the spring and summer of 1944 Hans was in charge of anti-aircraft batteries in Hamburg, while Arthur was flying bomber missions over that very city during that very time. At Princeton Seminary these two men, who only seven years before were trying to kill each other, were enjoying fellowship together at one of the Seminary’s tables. I was deeply moved by this obvious evidence of the power of the gospel to reconcile enemies and to create goodwill on earth.

Another intense experience of the Spirit’s presence at the Seminary occurred in the Mackay Dining Room in May 1991 when Carl McIntire (Class of 1931; he died this past March) appeared for the alumni/ae luncheon to celebrate the 60th reunion of his class. No one had ever said harsher things for a longer period about Princeton Seminary than had Dr. McIntire. He was one of those who left the Seminary in the famous “split” in 1929; he then became a fierce critic of both Princeton Seminary and the Presbyterian Church (USA). There was some

uneasiness at the head table about his presence at that crowded luncheon. President Gillespie, however, greeted him warmly and asked him to stand up and be recognized. The applause was deafening and the welcome genuine. I still get a lump in my throat thinking about the wonder of Christian grace shown at that moment. Dr. McIntire came to the Seminary library some years later to arrange for the deposit of his papers here. Repeatedly he recalled the welcome that he received at Princeton from the alumni/ae at his 60th reunion. He had been touched as well.

A final example of the essential spirit of Princeton Seminary is illustrated by a discovery I made while examining former PTS president Dr. Mackay’s papers after I returned to Princeton as archivist in 1988. He had carefully organized a file of the class pictures for each year of his presidency. On these he had neatly written the students’ names beside their pictures. A small notebook accompanying the pictures explained what he had done with them. He had used them as guides to daily prayer. The notebook contained special requests for prayer submitted to him by graduates through the years. This discovery reminded me of a sermon Dr. Mackay had preached on one of our weekly choir trips in the spring of 1953. His text was Exodus 28:15–30, in which the high priest is described as carrying on his breast the 12 jewels symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel and as making intercession for each tribe. Mackay’s emphasis was that ministers are called—as was the high priest—to carry on their breasts the needs and concerns of all the members of their congregations and to lift them to the Most High. Dr. Mackay practiced what he preached by literally taking the alumni/ae by name day by day to the Lord.

These insights into the spirit of Princeton Seminary represent for me our Seminary’s true glory and treasure. ■

William O. Harris (Class of 1954) retired as the Seminary’s librarian for archives and special collections in June. The inSpire staff wishes him Godspeed, with thanks for his invaluable help over the years.