

## January 24, 1927-August 30, 2012

*This In Memoriam piece was written by James B. Wiggins, Syracuse University (Emeritus).*



Professor Gabriel Vahanian, friend, colleague, creative thinker and theologian, devoted father, relatively mild curmudgeon, determined marcher to the beat of his own drummer — I offer some of the most memorable characteristics and accomplishments of this remarkable man.

Born to Armenian parents in France, Vahanian received his primary and secondary education in schools in France and his baccalaureate from the Lycee of Valence. He received a fellowship to come to America in 1948, where he earned his Master's Degree in Theology from the Princeton Theological Seminary in 1950 and his PhD from that institution in 1958. Vahanian was deeply educated in the Reformed Theology of Calvin tradition. He joined the faculty in the department of Bible and religion at Syracuse University in 1958 where he taught until 1984. Vahanian returned to France as a professor at the Universite de Strasbourg in 1984 where he taught until his retirement as professor emeritus of cultural theology from the Protestant Theological Faculty of the Universite Marc Bloch. He continued his active scholarly life and published widely in France and the United States.

It was my great privilege to meet "Gaby," as he was widely and affectionately known to friends and family, in May 1963 when I was interviewed for a position in the department of religion. In preparation for that trip to Syracuse University, I had read Vahanian's book *The Death of God: The Culture of our Post-Christian Era*

that had been published in 1961 by Braziller Press. With the publication of that book his work burst into local and national notoriety.

That book was further widely publicized in the context of a theological movement identified as "The Death of God," which connected him loosely and not very appropriately to three other American Protestant theologians. The attention given to the group and each of the thinkers associated with the Death of God movement caused a cultural furor in 1962. So it was with great interest and some trepidation that I anticipated meeting Vahanian.

During his first years at Syracuse University, Vahanian established himself as a leader in the department marked by effectively agitating to have the name of the department changed from the Department of Bible and Religion to the Department of Religion. This name has been

retained ever since. Vahanian and I became friends and colleagues during the next twenty-one years as he played a major role in the department and in the emergence of the field of the academic study of religion through a number of associations. When the American Academy of Religion adopted its new name, replacing the former National Association of Biblical Instructors in 1964, he was elected as a member of the original Board of Directors. He remained an active, contributing member and participant in the AAR's drive to become a major scholarly and professional organization.

Vahanian's involvement with the AAR stimulated his creatively imagining what the study of religion at the graduate level should and could be. He was recruited to join the faculty of the theology school at Drew University in 1966. In one of the great examples of his skills and imagination, he turned the tables and persuaded the dean of the graduate school at Drew University, Stanley Hopper, and a then assistant professor in the college, David Miller, that instead of him going to Drew, they should join the faculty at Syracuse University. With the success of that coup, Vahanian set out to enlist those two important contributors and the rest of us already on the faculty to join him in conceiving and establishing a brand new PhD program in Religion — one of a very few at the time in a secular university that had no school of theology. In what was an unprecedented short time Vahanian shepherded the outline and proposal for the new program through the department faculty and then through the vetting process in the College of Arts and Sciences and the Curriculum Committee of the University Senate. In the fall of 1968 the first students matriculated into the new program and four years later, the first two PhDs in religion were conferred by Syracuse University. None of that would have happened without the imagination and skill of Gabriel Vahanian. The new PhD program drew widespread attention from other professionals in the field as they took note of the distinctiveness of it and students from all across the United States and abroad were drawn to it. Notable new faculty members were recruited in the decade of the 1970s as the college recognized the growing accomplishments of the department and allowed the faculty to grow. Among them, Huston Smith and Michael Novak were noteworthy additions. During the decade of the 1970s there were also numerous distinguished visiting professors in the department — a practice that had begun early on with the presence of the noted theologian Rudolf Bultmann. The presence of Gabriel Vahanian was a significant factor in attracting such colleagues.

Vahanian was also a very popular undergraduate teacher. His courses were always over-subscribed, and although students often remarked about how difficult those courses were, they were intellectually challenged and stimulated. So, popular but never easy, his courses were a mainstay of the curriculum of the department of religion.

In recognition of his many accomplishments both within the university, nationally, and internationally, Gabriel Vahanian was named by Syracuse University to the Eliphalet Remington Professor Chair and subsequently to the Jeanette Kittredge Watson professorship.

Even while on the faculty at Syracuse University, Vahanian maintained ties with his native France. He spent summers at a home he owned near Marseilles and when he was on leave from Syracuse University, Vahanian usually resided in France and maintained his connections with colleagues there, especially at the Universite de Strasbourg. Thus, it was not entirely surprising, but very disappointing, when he informed Syracuse University faculty in 1983 that he had accepted an appointment to the Protestant Theological Faculty in Strasbourg. Vahanian taught there until he retired. During the early years there, he also remained an adjunct professor in the department of religion at Syracuse University.

Vahanian was a prolific author. His bibliography covers a wide range of subjects, all related to his profound interest in the relationship between religion and contemporary culture. Although his book *The Death of God* (Braziller Press, 1961) is the one that many will be most familiar with, he was a major figure in developing a subfield of religion and contemporary culture that was expressed in his early book *Wait Without Idols* (Braziller Press, 1964), a study in the then developing area of religion and literature. The interest between religion and literature continued throughout Vahanian's career and was clear in his book

*Praise of the Secular*

(University of Virginia Press, 2008).

He was deeply influenced in a formative way by the theological tradition of the Reformed church and the work of John Calvin and Karl Barth. The theology of Paul Tillich, interpreted in his distinctive way, was also a lifelong interest and influence on Vahanian, as shown in his book

*Tillich and the New Religious Paradigm*

(Davies Group Publishers, 2005).

Vahanian bridged tradition from Europe to the United States as a distinguished faculty member and thinker in a secular department of religion at Syracuse University from 1958 until 1983 and then as a theologian in the Theological Faculty of a major university in Strasbourg, France, for more than a decade. Few figures of the twentieth century stayed the course and exerted so wide an influence on the study of religion and demonstrated the importance and relevance of theology to the larger secular culture as did Gabriel Vahanian.

Vahanian is survived by his wife and their son and daughter. His daughter, Noelle, and her husband, Jeffrey W. Robbins, both hold PhD degrees from the department of religion at Syracuse University, teach at the college level, and publish in the field of the academic study of religion today. Each of them, along with professors across the United States and some in Europe, implicitly and often explicitly cite the work of Vahanian in their own work, thus demonstrating the continuing influence of the thinking of this remarkable man.

A memorial service for Gabriel Vahanian was held on Friday, September 8, 2012, in the Reformed Church in Strasbourg, France. Vahanian will be long remembered as a challenging, generous, thoughtful, sometimes enigmatic, and always cherished friend and colleague. He will be profoundly missed.