

The Revd Canon Professor Leslie Houlden

Tribute by Philip Sturrock (1966)

I first met Leslie Houlden when I came to Trinity in 1966 to be interviewed having taken my entrance papers to read Modern History at School. I came to this Chapel on the first morning of my stay and found a number of similar young men here too. The celebrant came in and walked to the altar and then turning said “it seems my server this morning has overslept. Do any of you know how to do this?” Well brought up in the catholic faith I stepped forward and served at the altar. Afterwards he said “it is the custom for my server to join me in the SCR for breakfast. Would you like to do that?” Of course I accepted, and at breakfast he asked my name and then said, “it is good to meet you: I shall be interviewing you in half an hour.”

And so started a friendship that lasted to his death though his health made the last few years quite difficult.

The themes of that friendship were evident from that first meeting and the subsequent interview. Anglo-Catholic piety; rigorous scholarship and hospitality and support.

Anglican Catholic piety linked to a liturgical discipline that was never fussy, never overblown or pretentious. It was very attractive to a young Anglican who had been brought up in the faith by that special breed of priest that existed in the post war Anglo-Catholic parishes. Liturgically you knew where you were with Leslie but you were there not because you liked smells and bells but because you valued careful and considered communication with God.

The second theme was scholarship and the endless pursuit of rigorous thinking. He taught two history modules: the discovery of the New World and the development of political thought. Though he would never be dismissive of your own inadequate efforts you knew, gently, that you had more work to do before your essay would win his approbation. Although I was never a student of theology I think too that his liberal bias was challenging for many but you could be sure that it would be based on rigorous scholarship and research.

Hospitality and personal support were the hallmarks of his time here at Trinity. Many undergraduates, well beyond the confines of the chapel community, would find in him a careful and intelligent listener, who nonetheless would offer an encouraging word or reference to some other reading and often done over a meal or a glass of sherry. You almost didn't realise that the encouragement or warning had happened so skilled were his pastoral gifts but those were not the skills of a trained counsellor but rather the conviction of someone for whom hospitality was a calling and a way of expressing fundamental Christian values. The gentle warmth of that hospitality was an essential part of Leslie's character.

One of his obituary writers said that his ten years at Trinity 1960-70 were among the happiest and most fruitful of his ministry. We were lucky that he was with us at this time and I know that I speak for many Trinity students whose lives were supported, challenged and enriched by contact with him.

On his headstone, by his choice, are three words *Sacerdos*, *amator dei* and *quaerens*. Priest, Lover of God and Enquirer. They are typically modest and point the way to further work. The job is never done. Join with me on this adventure. But in this particular Trinity context I'd like to add a fourth, in English, the word Tutor, with all the connotations that word has of a learned friend helping you on the journey of life, testing with you your understanding of life's challenges and setbacks and enjoying your happiness at each little success. I am proud and grateful that Leslie was one of my life's Tutors.

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Tribute by Bishop Humphrey Southern, Principal of Cuddesdon College

Leslie Holden was appointed Principal of Cuddesdon College and Vicar of Cuddesdon from July 1970, having formerly been an ordinand student there in the mid-1950s.

He was to be the last Principal of Cuddesdon College and the first of the new Ripon College Cuddesdon, formed when the old college was merged in 1975 with Ripon Hall, a Church of England training institution of a somewhat different tradition.

This merger was an aspect of a difficult period in ministerial education in the Church of England – a period, one may observe, that never seems to end – and it is probably true to say that the amalgamation of the colleges (planning for which began in 1973) and the management of the process by which the two eventually became a single coherent entity dominated Leslie's time in office.

Holden's immediate three predecessors at Cuddesdon were each of them memorable: the humane and pastoral Kenneth Riches, the alarmingly ascetic and angular Edward Knapp-Fisher and the suave and debonair Robert Runcie. It would have been a daunting inheritance in any circumstance – but throw in a somewhat less than popular merger, and the arrival in the village of Cuddesdon's then most distinguished alumnus and recently retired Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, and the departure from the village (wholly unconnected), after 400 years' residence, of the bishops of Oxford, which also occurred in his time, and the complexity of what he had to deal with becomes clear.

One of the early disputes in the negotiations around the merger focused on where the new college was to be sited. Ripon Hall occupied elegant premises on Boars Hill – one of the best views of Oxford that there is – and when the Hall was put on the market outraged students from that institution removed the selling agent's board and set it up outside Cuddesdon with the words 'For Sale' embellished with the additional information, 'In need of modernisation'.

A full evaluation of Leslie's achievement in respect of this challenge is beyond the scope of this brief tribute, and it is perhaps inevitable that the growing together of the new institution from its separate tributary streams was something that came about more in his successor's time. But his place and contribution at this pivotal point in the college's history is nevertheless unique and undeniable. Even if Michael Ramsey's retirement in Cuddesdon was in some respects quite complicated, the village and college have Leslie to thank for his invitation a little later to another hugely distinguished retiree to make his home in among us. Professor Christopher Evans, a New Testament scholar like Leslie, came at Leslie's behest to live in the village and to

teach students (including, as it happens, myself), arriving in 1977 and remaining active as both teacher and priest almost until his death aged 105.

Perhaps surprisingly, I want to give the last word on Leslie's Cuddesdon years not to the college, but to the village whose priest and pastor he was for seven years. Mr Rhodes, churchwarden at the time, said this at his farewell (I am grateful to Mark Chapman's *God's Holy Hill, a history of Christianity in Cuddesdon* for this record):

'We shall miss him very much – but we shall remember gratefully the calm, unhurried and friendly way in which he has at all times dealt with our parish problems.'

Not just a scholar, then, but a priest, and a former of priests, as well. May he rest in peace.

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Tribute by Bishop David Stancliffe (1961, Honorary Fellow)

Those of us who knew Leslie Houlden as our chaplain here in the 1960s soon realised that behind a supportive pastoral presence lay a very sharp mind, full of common sense. I learnt from him, more than from any of my academic tutors, that the most important quest was the search for truth, and that this quest was made not only forensically with the mind, but receptively with the eye of the soul. When I came to Trinity as its organ scholar in 1961, I had rooms just above him on staircase 13, so I could not fail to become aware of his disciplined pattern of life – and his occasional playing of his piano! Before very long, I found myself drawn into the company of those who went to the daily Eucharist he offered in the chapel at 8am. Here I learned to listen, waiting on the other and watching for signs of beauty and life – a disciplined pattern of spiritual formation for which I remain grateful to this day.

Leslie had read History at Queen's before studying Theology with Dennis Nineham and David Jenkins, and his intellectual quest was never narrow. Aware of the wide context in which we lived, I imbibed from Leslie something of the catholic social teaching which he had experienced in his curacy in a poor part of Leeds. He led (with James Lambert, Fellow in Chemistry here and Richard Incedon, the Roman Catholic chaplain) annual summer camps with young men from Borstal.

But in his acknowledgement of a world where the risks of change would always trump the claims of inherited certainty, Leslie was never an uncritical liberal. Rather, he was a genuine radical, always digging deeper for the nuggets of gold among the dross; and even tiny specks of gold would be recognisable to an eye formed by faith. That's how I was taught to seek and discover the signs of love, and to celebrate the divine presence – to live as a sacramental person.

With a clerical father and two grandparents, I fought long and hard against sliding into that calling; but without any direct prompt from Leslie, that is where I found myself led. It was characteristic of Leslie's perceptive care that only after I was booked into Cuddesdon to train for the church's ministry, he offered to give me (in my final year of Greats) the 24 tutorials he would have given for the Diploma in Theology. 'You've done no theological thinking since your adolescent confirmation classes and in spite of hearing a lot of sermons, you'll be all at sea,' said Leslie with that characteristic click of his tongue. He gave me an hour each week, summarising the reading and then making me work hard to see what issues emerged, sending me away with next week's reading list and

some pointers as to where we were heading. I have been grateful for this map, this overview of the territory ever since.

Following Austin Farrer as chaplain of Trinity cannot have been easy, though Austin had himself recommended Leslie to the college. But while my father had been here with Austin and owed a lot to Austin's preaching, I am always glad to have been chaplained by Leslie, and to have inherited at least a sense that the exploration only ends in that consummation within the love of God, for which we long and pray for ourselves as well as for him. In the end, the truth is relational, not propositional: swept up into the dance of the Holy Trinity, we do not find ourselves intellectually convinced by doctrinal arguments so much as enfolded in an all-embracing love we cannot resist.

That was Leslie's credo: may he rest in peace and rise in glory.

David Stancliffe

Trinity 1961-65, Provost of Portsmouth 1982-93, Bishop of Salisbury 1993-2010, Hon Fellow 2004-