

William Hamilton, death of God theologian, dies at 87

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 4, 2012](#) issue

William Hamilton, a theologian who declared nearly a half century ago that God was dormant if not dead, was remembered at his death for the media impact made by the "death of God movement."

The *Time* cover for April 8, 1966, with its stark words "Is God Dead?" against a dark background, garnered record sales. So did a 1966 book, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, coauthored by Hamilton and Thomas J. J. Altizer. "It was Bill who in the '60s created the scandal of a death of God theology," Altizer told the *Century*, adding that Hamilton was the more articulate.

Hamilton, 87, died February 28 of congestive heart failure in the Portland, Oregon, apartment that he shared with his wife of 62 years.

"The death of God is a metaphor," the retired theologian told the *Oregonian* in 2007. "We needed to redefine Christianity as a possibility without the presence of God." Hamilton had been troubled by such questions since his teens when two friends—a Catholic and an Episcopalian—died while a third friend, the son of an atheist, survived without injury when a pipe bomb the three were making exploded.

Like Paul van Buren, an Episcopal priest and religion professor at Temple University in the 1960s, Hamilton rejected the existence of God while focusing devotedly on Jesus Christ and affirming that his teachings and example should be followed.

Altizer, who taught for many years at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, said that even before their book came out in 1966 Hamilton explained his ideas on a CBS Sunday television program, which aired a segment from an Ingmar Bergman film, *Winter Light*, depicting a pastor who decided that God was dead.

The coauthored book was a collection of their essays, written separately. "We were both deeply Christian, but in different ways," Altizer said. "I was more of a philosophical theologian than he was. To me the death of God was the ultimate act

of God in the crucifixion and resurrection."

Churches quickly rejected the premises of radical theology, and many pastors and evangelists preached "our-God-is-not-dead" sermons for a decade or more, long after the movement itself had faded from public attention.

The Baptist-raised Hamilton, born in Evanston, Illinois, studied at Oberlin College before joining the U.S. Navy in World War II. An admirer of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Hamilton studied after the war at Union Theological School in New York, then earned a doctorate in theology at the University of St. Andrew's in Scotland. He taught at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, before launching a promising career at Colgate Rochester Divinity School in upstate New York.

After corresponding with Altizer about their ideas on Christian atheism and death of God, Hamilton invited Altizer to visit him at Colgate Rochester and to give a lecture.

Hamilton had tenure and held an endowed chair, but his reputation for radical theology rendered him and his family unwelcome at a local Presbyterian church and eventually at Colgate Rochester.

As a result, Hamilton left for a position at New College in Sarasota, Florida, teaching there until 1974 when he became dean of arts and letters at Portland State University in Oregon. He retired in 1986.

A student of Hamilton's at New College, Ronald Carter, now emeritus professor at the University of Texas, said Hamilton emphasized Christian theology that was not about the beyond but about the examples and teachings of Jesus. "Bill would say, 'Pay attention to the Christian story. Reread the Sermon on the Mount,'" Carter told the *Oregonian*.

In a 1989 *Century* article about the short-lived movement, Lloyd Steffen noted that some critics said the 1960s had its share of faddist "deconstructionist" critiques of theology and establishment. Steffen said that Hamilton acknowledged as much, saying, "Any event the media create they can uncreate."