

Langdon Gilkey (1919-2004)

Theologian for a 'time of troubles': Theologian for a 'time of troubles'

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Langdon Gilkey, a prominent Protestant theologian who wrote and spoke frequently about the relationship between religion and science, died on November 19 in Charlottesville, Virginia. He was 85. His longtime colleague David Tracy called Gilkey “the truest successor of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich and the surest theological guide for the joys and terrors of living as a modern Christian in this ‘time of troubles.’”

The author of 15 books and hundreds of articles (including several in the *Century*), Gilkey settled at the University of Chicago in 1963 after teaching at Vassar College from 1951 to 1954 and Vanderbilt University Divinity School from 1954 to 1963.

“He was a magnificent teacher and was without question one of the foremost interpreters of Niebuhr and Tillich,” said Richard Rosengarten, a former student of Gilkey’s and dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School, where Gilkey taught until his retirement in 1989. “He brought together such important doctrines in Christian theology as providence with immediate lived experience. His capacity to do that in imaginative yet concrete ways was unexcelled.”

While celebrated in academic circles for his work on Niebuhr and Tillich, prominent 20th-century Protestant theologians, Gilkey was more popularly known for his writings on science and religion. He published at length on the topic, fighting on two fronts: against Christian fundamentalist attacks on science, and against secularist attacks on religious meaning and truth. In *Creationism on Trial: Evolution and God at Little Rock* (1985), he recounted his experience as an expert witness for the American Civil Liberties Union as it challenged the constitutionality of an article passed by the Arkansas state legislature mandating that creationist views be taught alongside evolutionary theory in high schools. There, in what was called a “modern-

day version of the Scopes Monkey Trial,” he argued against Christian fundamentalist claims that “creation science” is a science, as distinct from religion cloaked as science.

Perhaps his most widely read book, however, was the story of his own theological journey. In *Shantung Compound: The Story of Men and Women Under Pressure* (1968), Gilkey narrates his departure from the liberal Protestant belief system during World War II when he was made a prisoner of war for two-and-a-half years. In China to teach English, Gilkey was interned by the Japanese shortly after Pearl Harbor. It was this experience that led to his subsequent rethinking of Christianity in the modern “time of troubles.” Acutely responsive to the need to reconsider such traditional symbols as sin and grace in the turbulent and often barbarous 20th century, Gilkey renewed and revived classical Reformation insights—largely ignored by optimistic liberal theologians—in connection with themes of estrangement, self-delusion and sin.

Gilkey worked out his own original systematic theology in three major volumes: *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (1969), *Reaping the Whirlwind : A Christian Interpretation of History* (1976) and *Message and Existence: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (1979). His interests also ranged beyond Christian systematic theology proper. During Vatican II he learned Catholic theology and became one of the major Protestant interpreters of Catholicism in his influential *Catholicism Confronts Modernity* (1975). His last books include tributes to his two main teachers: *Gilkey on Tillich* (1990) and *On Niebuhr* (2001).

In his later years, partly influenced by his participation in Christian-Buddhist dialogues and the spiritual reflections of his wife, Sonja Weber Gilkey, he became a leading proponent of interreligious and pluralist dialogue in Christian theology.