

William Placher, 1948-2008: In memoriam

From the Editors in the [December 30, 2008](#) issue

Countless times over the past two decades, when this magazine had an especially important theological book to review or topic to explore, we contacted William C. Placher, one of our editors at large. And since he could not write all the articles we suggested, we would often have to move to the next thought: Who can write almost as well as Bill?

As a theologian, Bill had an unparalleled ability to write engagingly on the most challenging subjects, to get to the heart of an issue, and to write in a way that those who are not professional theologians could understand. So if it was a book by Wolfhart Pannenberg or Jürgen Moltmann or Christopher Hitchens that needed reviewing, Bill was the obvious person to ask.

Bill's clarity as a writer was perhaps a function of a career spent making things clear to undergraduates at Wabash College in Indiana. That skill seemed also a reflection of his innate modesty. Though he had read almost everything, he never tried to dazzle you with his knowledge. In his essays as in his conversation, you got the feeling of being with a fellow Christian who had the same questions about issues of faith as you did, and who, with your help, was patiently trying to work his way through them.

It was that modesty, ironically, that led him to take on ambitious topics that most scholars would not dare touch, certainly not in the form of a magazine article. He did not shrink from trying to explain the Trinity or explore the theology of atonement or the problem of evil. (One of his articles for the *Century* was titled simply, "Is the Bible true?") For Bill, theology was too important to leave to the professional theologians—it was something that the whole church needed to care about and talk about. As both a proponent and practitioner of that view, Bill had no equal.

Bill liked to use the term *generous orthodoxy* (which he attributed to his mentor, Hans Frei) to describe his own position. In his commitment to the sufficiency of the

biblical narrative, Bill was resolutely on the side of the orthodox. In sympathetically engaging a wide range of secular and theological views, and in trying to understand those views before deciding whether to reject or learn from them, he was unfailingly generous. In that respect, Bill Placher was one of the great representatives of the mainline Protestant tradition. We are deeply proud of his association with this magazine, and we mourn his passing.

Rest eternal grant him, O Lord; and let light perpetual shine upon him.