

Teaching moments: Cultural critic

by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

For a generation of students at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, Langdon Gilkey reflected with wisdom and grace on contemporary events in light of Christian faith, and he reflected on Christian faith in light of contemporary events. His death in November left the theological world the poorer.

To his sharp awareness of how religious symbols and myths serve as deep structuring principles, Langdon added a confidence that the central perspectives of Christian faith have still-untapped reserves that can illumine the present situation. He was profoundly concerned with the challenges to Christian faith posed by scientific and technological prowess and also by the apparent disintegration of modern culture.

This faith had not come automatically. In classroom discussions Langdon would periodically recall his time as an undergraduate at Harvard when he was impressed by modern culture, imbued with the naturalist humanism of the philosopher George Santayana, and skeptical of the power of religious claims to make sense of the modern world. At this time in his life, religions seemed passé, and evolutionary humanism much more realistic.

His father, Charles W. Gilkey, a noted preacher and scholar, urged him to listen to Reinhold Niebuhr preach. So on one Sunday in April 1940, as world events were taking an ominous turn, Langdon attended a series of talks by Niebuhr, who soberly interpreted contemporary political and social developments in light of the principles of the biblical and Christian tradition. Niebuhr was utterly realistic about the power of sin and evil in communal life, yet he remained hopeful that the grace of God could call humans yet again to renewal. To Langdon, Niebuhr made far better sense of contemporary developments than any other figure he had heard. Within two weeks, his perspective on Christian faith had changed forever. Evolutionary humanism would for the rest of his life seem to him hopelessly mired in the illusions of a false optimism.

Under Niebuhr's guidance, Langdon came to see the questions of individual life as intricately connected to the broader processes of political, social and economic life; and he saw both as clarified most powerfully by the witness of Christian faith. Throughout his life, he sought to integrate the personal and the social in his theology, and Niebuhr remained a decisive model for this project.

In the classroom, Langdon would combine historical summaries of central Christian perspectives with interpretations of the present "time of troubles." For him, the doctrine of sin described the continuing estrangement that plagues human existence, an estrangement that takes on new forms but is never overcome. He once remarked that when young, people can hope to do a better job of leading the world; but when one comes of age and actually takes responsibility, one learns that the reign of sin, greed and selfishness relentlessly continues.

The Bible's stark insistence on the objective effects of sin may have embarrassed earlier liberal commentators; for Langdon it was profoundly and evidently true, and offered guidance in understanding historical and social processes. No matter how dark the situation may become, the doctrines of revelation, grace and redemption in Jesus Christ nonetheless offer hope that God can open up new possibilities after even the worst moral disasters in both personal and collective life. The answer for Langdon came not from within the situation but from a forgiving transcendent source of wisdom and love.

While other disciplines illumine many aspects of the human predicament, Langdon insisted that there is a religious dimension that calls for theological analysis in light of the symbols of creation, sin, revelation and grace. To reduce this dimension to merely an object of social-scientific exploration is to miss the depth and mystery of human existence, as well as its most exciting possibilities. Langdon was doubtful about metaphysical efforts to prove the existence of God, but he found the illumining power of Christian symbols validated again and again both in his personal life and in the communal drama of his time.

Langdon was well aware that it is risky to interpret one's own situation—one is too close to it. Nonetheless, he believed this was at the heart of the theological project, and he returned to the task time and time again, always alert to new developments in religion and culture. The latest news from the *New York Times* regularly found a place in his discussions alongside Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr.

As his career progressed, he became interested in ecology, with the twin dilemmas of the need for limits on production to protect the environment and the necessity of increasing production to meet the needs of a growing and developing world.

Langdon also became fascinated by the encounter with other religions and became a regular participant in interreligious dialogues. This, perhaps more than any other experience, prodded him to develop his thoughts on faith and culture, setting Christian faith in a new context of what he called the “rough parity” of religions. He did not claim to have a final answer to the significance of this encounter and was very wary of relativism that undermines any strong religious commitments. Nonetheless, he sensed that something of great importance for Christians was taking shape in interreligious encounters. To his students he was ever a source of thoughtful and constructive criticism, of insight and wit.