

# Taking risks: In memory of Theodore Gill, Century editor

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

Theodore A. Gill, onetime managing editor of this magazine, died last month. Mine is the only name remaining on the masthead from his time at the magazine 47 years ago. Priscilla Noble Grundy, then an editorial assistant, and Tom F. Driver, then a contributing editor, are the only other survivors. Big-name folk like Martin Luther King Jr., James A. Pike and the rest have died. Gill, my office-mate, tutored me in the ways of ecumenism and mentored me in writing. So I have occasion and reason to reflect.

Ted was at the Century only briefly, like a kind of comet who whooshed through our world and orbited off. He came with an impressive neo-orthodox pedigree, having studied with Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Brunner appealed to Gill's "natural theology" aesthetic side, and Barth won him over to Mozart.

After the Century, Ted presided at San Francisco Theological Seminary from 1958 to 1966. He was cometlike there, too, in those stormy years, building a then-unmatched faculty, spending the school into debt and taking a few too many risks.

One loses a comet's trail as it moves away, but, thanks to his son Theo, also an ecumenist and an editor, we stayed in touch as Ted taught at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York and brightened the world with his many lectures. Most fun for him was leading theological and artistic tours for pastors. The arts were big in his years at SFTS, where he had the seminary tear up a gymnasium and build a theater for the school's drama program.

At the Century, Ted charmed his colleagues. Though he was always late with his editorials, causing other editors to gnash their teeth, all was forgiven when the copy came in, because the writing was always beautiful and memorable.

You won't find many signed articles or longish reviews by Gill. One of his unsigned editorials, "A Choice of Miracles" (April 2, 1958), got him into trouble with hyperconservative supporters of SFTS. Often he and I would coauthor nonheretical editorials, and it was by working with him that I learned how to take risks—something he always did better than I—to hold readers' attention.

Like so many gifted rhetoricians, he did not finish major books; he left only two slight ones behind. Those whom he reached by voice never forgot him and can probably quote Gillisms to this day and regale one another with Gill-exploit stories. As with the sight of a receding comet we say, "You had to have been there" to know the brilliance, the friendship, the aesthetic life and sunny faith this bon vivant theologian displayed.

One sample shows that gentle Ted could get his ire up over profanations of the gospel. In October 1958 he reviewed *Popular Religion*, by Louis Schneider and Sanford M. Dornbusch. "Now come two sociologists to prove with all their tests, graphs and coding that much popular Christianity looks even more like tripe, trash and bilge to the objective observer than it does to the worried churchman. . . . Christians cannot help going red in the face for the many among them who have gone all out for . . . trifles and truffles. . . . The authors confirm in detail and in depth the terrible thinking of Christianity in its best-selling version, the tragic tethering of a many-splendored gospel to . . . the complacent blasphemy of pleasure in a manhandled God."

Tripe, trash, trifles, truffles, terrible, tragic: all those "t" words record what Ted was against. I remember him, however, as one of the most "for" Christians I've known. I picture him with Barth at his elbow, now listening to Mozart, with the seraphic hosts being enthralled by their bilge-less discourse—and Ted's rococo style.