When my dad killed God

My dad, Bill Hamilton, was a beloved divinity school professor. That all changed when God died and we got run out of town.

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(*Century* illustration)

I grew up on Gregory Hill Road, an unexceptional two blocks of postwar homes in Rochester, New York. In the spring and summer we rode bikes and played baseball. In the fall and winter we raked leaves and shoveled snow. From our street you could look up to the nearby hill to see the Gothic red spires of the tower at the Colgate Rochester Divinity School (now Colgate Rochester Crozer). At Christmas they put a star on the tower, at Easter a cross, and you could hear the bells everywhere in the neighborhood. Many divinity school faculty members and their families lived on Gregory Hill Road, including my mom, five kids, and my dad, theologian William Hamilton.

The divinity school was an important presence in our lives. I remember the echo running down the school halls to Dad's office, the tuna noodle casserole at the all-school luncheons, the granular soap in the bathrooms, and the spring graduation processional when the faculty walked by in their colorful academic robes. They had a wonderful chapel where Dad performed weddings, and we got great use out of the grassy picnic area at the bottom of the hill.

Everything changed after God died and we got run out of town. Dad, it turns out, killed God.

My dad came from a conventional Baptist background. He grew up in Evanston, Illinois, just outside Chicago, the son of an electrical engineer who built windmills across the rural Midwest. He was an Eagle Scout at 13, went to Oberlin College, and joined the navy during World War II. He was training for the invasion of Japan when the atomic bomb ended the war. He did graduate work at Princeton, Union Theological Seminary, and St. Andrews in Scotland. Along the way he married my mom, Mary Jean Golden, a dancer with the New York City Ballet, and in 1953 they arrived in Rochester and used the GI Bill to build a gray house with a red door on Gregory Hill Road.

As a young minister and professor, he gained considerable success. He preached at churches and colleges around the Northeast. He wrote books and articles in the middle of the night at the kitchen table while feeding babies.

In the mid-1950s, he started appearing on the CBS Sunday morning program *Look Up and Live*, eventually writing and hosting more than 40 episodes, most of them about religion in popular culture. I remember the director inviting us kids to sit quietly in the control room and watch the taping. We saw Dad solemnly speaking into the camera, hands characteristically clasped behind his back. When I was little, I thought everyone's dad was on TV.

He smoked a pipe, drank wine, and wore sweater-vests and an FDR pin. He loved Gilbert and Sullivan, Sherlock Holmes, and Mozart. He led us in reciting the Lord's Prayer at bedtime, and on Sundays we went to church or sat on the sofa and read the Bible out loud. On summer Sunday afternoons, four families from our church would meet at the divinity school for picnics at which everyone, kids and adults, would sit on the grass, enthralled, as Dad made up stories.

He was animated, lively, funny, and smart. His students loved him. He was so charismatic that early in his career, *Life* magazine ran a photo panel calling him the Bouncing Bishop. He held court during lunch at the divinity school. The school assigned him to teach a crucial first-year required class, gave him an honorary chair, and seemed pleased with his increasing profile. They sent him to Birmingham in September 1963 to represent the seminary at the funeral of the four girls killed in the church bombing. Mom took us out of school to see him off at the airport that day because, she told us later, she feared he'd get killed. Dad got to Birmingham safely and spent that evening with Martin Luther King Jr. and other ministers.

His infamy as a death of God professor began as an academic conversation among Dad and others: Christian theologians Thomas J. J. Altizer, John Robinson, Gabriel Vahanian, and Paul van Buren, and rabbi Richard L. Rubenstein. They became known as the radical theologians, and each brought his own interpretation of the meaning of the death of God.

For my dad, the death camps of the Nazi regime posed the most difficult question about the nature and existence of God. We have only two options, Dad said. First, if God is not behind such radical evil, he cannot be what we have traditionally meant by an omnipotent God. Second, if God really is the architect of all things, then God is a killer.

"Why have monotheists become the champion killers?" Dad wrote. "What is there about the claim to possess one God that makes one dangerous? One of the things you can do to help your brothers and sisters is to take gods away from people so their weapons won't be quite as sharp as they are with monotheism." He added that "religion, at least in its monotheistic form, makes men and women evil more often than good."

When death of God ideas started showing up in Dad's writings and on *Look Up and Live*, nothing much happened. The show did a six-part series addressing death of God themes in 1962, and CBS didn't receive a single letter.

Then, in the space of one week in October 1965, both the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine picked up that, according to my dad, God was dead. Articles in other mainstream publications followed and then came the famous April 8, 1966, *Time* magazine cover shouting in red letters, "Is God Dead?" Theologians don't often see their academic ideas played out on the cover of national news magazines.

Dad liked to tell the story of how “Is God Dead?” wasn’t supposed to be the cover of that particular issue of *Time*. *Time* first commissioned a collage by the artist Larry Rivers showing related images, including Michelangelo’s God in a coffin. That coffin image proved too much for the editors. With the deadline rapidly approaching, they came up with the red letters on a black background, still one of the best-known covers in the magazine’s history.

In the midst of all this, Dad and Altizer, then at Emory University in Atlanta, put out a book called *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, a collection of essays that did well commercially and attracted a lot of attention. In 1966, he also wrote an article for *Playboy*. A student cautioned him against it. A Baptist seminary professor published in *Playboy*? That’s asking for trouble. Dad was trying to reach a wider audience, but the student was right. The *Playboy* article was mentioned more than once in letters to Colgate Rochester, and not in a complimentary way.

The arrival of the death of God in mainstream culture resonated with the cultural zeitgeist of the era: questioning authority, questioning conventional wisdom, and questioning the meaning and the existence of God. Many people took note, and often offense. *Time* received thousands of letters. Folk singer Eric Von Schmidt put out an album called *Who Knocked the Brains Out of the Sky?* Loretta Lynn put out an album called *Who Says God Is Dead!* Elton John mentioned the death of God in his song “Levon.” It comes up more than once in the movie *Rosemary’s Baby*.

It was, Dad used to say, a new kind of religious media event, and it attracted a new kind of media attention. For years reporters would call and ask the radical theologian his thoughts on the religious significance of this or that cultural event, such as the moon landing, Nixon’s resignation, or the Mets winning the World Series.

Most letters to the divinity school called for Dad’s resignation or firing. Some announced they’d no longer contribute to a school that employed him. Someone in Indianapolis returned a school fundraising letter with the words, “If God is dead, why do you need money?” scrawled across the front in huge red letters. Letters called him an “infidel,” “atheistic,” a “communist,” and an “intellectual fraud.” “Satan,” one said, “is working overtime.”

A woman in our church, my best friend’s grandmother, called him “a powerful influence for evil.” That friend’s father wrote a letter of his own supporting my Dad and refuting his own mother.

A very few letters came to Dad's defense, praising his work. "I am convinced his thought is part of a church renewal at its finest," one prospective seminarian wrote to Colgate Rochester president Gene Bartlett. "No school, theological or otherwise, could have a more articulate, ingenious, or honest representative."

Eventually Bartlett and the school decided they didn't like this kind of attention. They took away the honorary chair and turned over his first-year required course to a theologian from Union Seminary, Dad's beloved alma mater and the academic home of his mentor, Reinhold Niebuhr. That was a "gut punch," a student recalled, and it very much upset Dad. The message was clear.

Amid the death threats, hate mail, and newspaper editorials calling for Dad's dismissal, our family stopped going to church. The faculty at the divinity school, some of them our neighbors on Gregory Hill Road, turned against him.

We could see signs of the strain. He started smoking cigarettes, which he had never done before. He'd sit out in the backyard by himself at night and tell us he dreamed he was carrying our blue station wagon on his back.

In the spring of 1967, he took a job at New College in Sarasota, Florida, and we left Gregory Hill Road.

Dad never liked to talk about what happened in Rochester. Even in the normal course of life, he didn't reveal emotions easily. "What are you, a shrink?" he responded to a reporter with the temerity to broach the subject decades later. "Practicing psychiatry without a license?" He was tired of Baptists anyway, he liked to say. He'd go silent and refuse to answer questions about that time, even from Mom. The few times he visited Rochester, later in life, he grew fidgety and nervous, refusing to drive up to the divinity school or to get out of the car on a visit down Gregory Hill Road. In later years he suffered from depression and drank a lot.

But long after the mainstream media lost interest, Dad never stopped writing about evidence that God had died. He explored God and his absence in Melville, Shakespeare, Lincoln, and Dickinson. In self-published plays, novels, and essays, he continued to explore the themes that had shaped his life. He got up and made his way to his desk the day before he died in 2012. And he never stopped being a Christian, with Jesus a companion on his journey.

Dad would have been gratified to see the revival in recent years of death of God theology. The movement now has a Latin name, *theothanatology*, and adherents in a new school of younger theologians who decry the loss of critical thinking by civic leaders who ignore human suffering and deny the threat of climate change.

The day we left Gregory Hill Road for the last time we gathered on the sidewalk and climbed into the blue station wagon. I sat way in the back. As we drove down the street, my sister Kate was crying, Mom's two closest friends wept on the sidewalk, and Dick Stewart, my best friend, waved a sad farewell.

Dad left an important and perhaps misunderstood legacy, according to historian Jon Meacham. "Hamilton was no militant atheist," Meacham said in 2012 after Dad died. He was writing in *Time*, the very magazine that turbocharged the controversy with that cover in 1966. "At heart," Meacham wrote,

> he was questioning whether the Christian tradition of encouraging a temporal moral life required belief in a divine order. Could someone, in other words, live by the ethical teachings of Jesus while rejecting the existence of a creator and redeemer God? . . .
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> At a time when candidates speak of alleged wars on religion and discuss throwing up over discussions of the proper role between church and state, it is good to be reminded that there are those—like William Hamilton—who have long sought to think on these things. And any God or any faith that fears such inquiry—or such magazine covers—is probably not all that it claims to be.

I still struggle to answer questions about my dad. I write this in part because I'm still looking for answers. I have reached one conclusion: he was right. His interpretation of God and Christianity is the only thing that makes sense to me today. The religious structures we live under don't seem to work very well and aren't able to protect us from our human failings. God's gone and can't help us.

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Jon Mathieu, the *Christian Century*'s community engagement editor, discusses this article and theologian Bill Hamilton with the article's author Don Hamilton.