

Martin E. Marty, religion historian and former Century editor, dies at 97

by [Bruce Buursma](#)

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Martin E. Marty (Courtesy photo)

Martin E. Marty, an eminent church historian, prolific chronicler and interpreter of religion and its role in public life, died at the age of 97 on Tuesday in a Minneapolis care facility where he spent his final years.

Marty, who was also a warmhearted friend, mentor and pastor to many, taught for 35 years at the University of Chicago Divinity School and published a constant stream of books, articles, essays, newsletters and columns, with his book *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* winning top honors at the 1972 National Book Awards in Philosophy and Religion.

In 1987 he published the first of his three-volume survey of religion in the 20th-century US, in which he described the impact of fundamentalism on the religious landscape, depicting fundamentalism as a reaction not to liberal religion or textual criticism of the Bible alone but to modernity itself and its increasing secularism.

His work helped give birth to Modern American Religion and the Fundamentalism Project, a [yearslong study](#) that Marty led with religion scholar R. Scott Appleby of fundamentalism in seven major faiths around the world. The project produced [multiple encyclopedic books](#)—five of which Marty wrote or co-edited with Appleby—plus several documentary films and radio episodes that appeared on PBS and National Public Radio.

“‘Righteous Empire’ and the Fundamentalism Project continue to shape academic discourse today,” said James T. Robinson, dean of Chicago’s divinity school, where Marty helped to found the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion. Opened in 1979, it was named for Marty when he retired from the school in 1998.

Robinson said Marty, “a cornerstone” of the divinity school, influenced “the study of religion and public life with his visionary scholarship.”

Marty, who published some 60 books in all, served for a half-century as an editor and columnist for the *Christian Century* magazine and produced a biweekly newsletter, “Context,” for 41 years.

Dean Lueking, the longtime pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, Illinois, a friend of Marty’s for 75 years, remembered the prodigious industry behind his output.

“Marty had a well-ordered sense of time; every minute counts,” remembered Lueking. “He got up in the morning at 4:44 a.m. and started writing before breakfast. He was remarkably productive. He could take a 10-minute power nap and be completely refreshed.”

Born on the eve of the Great Depression on February 5, 1928, in West Point, Nebraska, Martin Emil Marty was the son of a Lutheran schoolteacher who bequeathed orderliness, ambition, and Swiss-watch punctuality to the youngster, while Marty’s mother, Anna, endowed the boy with a sunnier spirit of good-humored openness and inquisitiveness, according to Lueking, who attended seminary with Marty and knew his parents.

In 1941, Marty left home to study at Concordia Lutheran Prep School before earning his undergraduate degree from Concordia College (now University) in Wisconsin. After completing his theological training at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Marty was ordained to the ministry in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and began serving in suburban Chicago parishes, including one he founded, the Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit in Elk Grove Village.

During those early years in parish ministry, Marty pursued postgraduate work at the University of Chicago, and in 1963 he was invited to join the faculty at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

The shift from the pulpit to the academy was a springboard for Marty, who quickly emerged as an internationally known figure whose understanding of religion in a pluralistic society gave him insights beyond campus. He served as a Protestant observer during the Second Vatican Council in Rome in 1964 and became involved in the Civil Rights Movement, marching in Selma, Alabama, the following year with Martin Luther King Jr.

“He was impressive in the classroom, but that was just scratching the surface,” said Daniel L. Pals of the University of Miami, a graduate student of Marty’s in the 1970s.

“Marty was also a churchman in the most serious way,” Pals said. “Politicians paid attention to Marty. Norman Lear reached out to Marty when he launched People for the American Way. Marty just was so deft at navigating that intersection of faith and culture and how they inform and influence each other.”

For Pals, however, it was Marty's decades-long friendship with his students and their families that left the deepest impression. "Marty cared deeply about our scholarship and our academic achievements, but also about our spouses and children," he said.

"He knew there was more to life than the world of learning. For Marty you were a student with a family. He was a family person himself. That's the real measure of a Renaissance man—never a sniff of snobbery. He knew the names of the people in our families. He was so normal, so well adjusted."

John Buchanan, former editor and publisher of the *Christian Century* who died earlier this month, described Marty in an interview for this obituary as "one of the most grace-filled human beings I've met and a clarion voice of faithful reason in our culture which is so desperately needed today."

Buchanan, a longtime pastor of Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church, also paid tribute to Marty as a "world-class scholar and a devoted churchman who was always skillful in bringing out the better angels in others."

Emily D. Crews, executive director of the Martin Marty Center, praised Marty as "a devoted teacher and adviser who leaves a legacy of boundless energy and creativity. I'm surrounded by so many people who were influenced by his work—his advisees, fellow clergy, members of his former congregations. He lived a life of generosity—generous with his work, with his time, with his students and with colleagues, parishioners and friends."

Religion writers for daily newspapers counted on Marty as a go-to source of information, but also winsome wisdom and a generosity of spirit. He was prompt to answer calls and lent greater clarity and nuance to the often obscure points of religion stories. As with his students, his expertise often came with friendship, including invitations to lively wine-and-cheese gatherings in his John Hancock Building apartment in Chicago. —Religion News Service