Robert M. Grant
1917-2014
Robert McQueen Grant passed away at his home in Hyde Park on June 10, 2014 at the age of 96.

Grant was born on November 25, 1917 in Evanston, Illinois. He received the BA with distinction from Northwestern University, a BD from Union Theological Seminary, and an STM and ThD from Harvard University. He was an ordained minister in the Protestant Episcopal Church. Grant was Carl Darling Buck Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Early Christian Literature at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where he taught from 1953 until his retirement in 1988.

Professor Grant was the most prolific and influential American historian of ancient Christianity of his generation. The author of over thirty-three books and countless articles, Grant’s work was characterized by philological exactness, a deep knowledge of the ancient world, and philosophical and theological finesse, together with a tight prose style and dry wit. Among his major works are Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought (1952); The Letter and the Spirit (1957); The Earliest Lives of Jesus (1961); Augustus to Constantine: The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World (1970; revised ed. 2004); Eusebius as Church Historian (1980); Greek Apologists of the Second Century (1988), Heresy and Criticism (1993); Irenaeus of Lyons (1995); and Paul in the Roman World: the Conflict at Corinth (2001).

Over his thirty-five year teaching career at the University of Chicago, Professor Grant taught many of the academic leaders in the field of ancient Christianity.

Grant was also an international authority on U-Boats in World War I, on which he published multiple volumes, including U-Boats Destroyed: The Effects of Anti-Submarine Warfare 1914-1918 (1964) and, most recently, U-Boat Hunters: Code Breakers, Divers and the Defeat of the U-Boats 1914-1918 (2004).

Over his extended career Grant received Fulbright and Guggenheim Fellowships, and held many honors, memberships and leadership roles in scholarly societies, such as president of the Society of Biblical Literature, the Chicago Society of Biblical Research, American Society of Church History, and the North American Patristics Society. He was an elected member of the American Academy of Art and Sciences (1981).

Mr. Grant is survived by his wife, Peggy (née Margaret Huntington Horton) of Hyde Park, and their children Douglas, Peter, Jim and Susan, six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.
Professor Grant articulated his formidable scholarship in classroom lectures and seminars as well as in his many books with his typical scholarly virtues—precision, clarity, erudition.

A private service for Professor Robert M. Grant was held on Saturday, September 6, 2014, at Hyde Park's Saint Paul and the Redeemer Church. We offer here tributes delivered by his Divinity School colleagues.

Remembering Robert Grant

David Tracy, Andrew Thomas Greeley and Grace McNichols Greeley Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of Catholic Studies and Professor of Theology and the Philosophy of Religions

Robert Grant was not just a good scholar, he was a great one—indeed, Professor Grant was one of the most important and productive scholars this university has ever had the honor to call one of its own. His scholarship on early Christianity encompassed both the New Testament itself, as well as the Palestinian Jewish and larger Greco-Roman world in which Christianity emerged as well as both the many inner-Christian controversies of the first four centuries along with the Christian-pagan debates and dialogues of that intense and complex period, so formative for Christian history. Professor Grant was one of the leading historians of both Greek and Latin Christian thought and practice. His scholarship has become indispensable to any serious student of the first four centuries of the common era.

Professor Grant articulated his formidable scholarship in classroom lectures and seminars as well as in his many books with his typical scholarly virtues—precision, clarity, erudition. Robert Grant always wrote with both an exactness and an esprit de finesse which included, at times, touches of his marvelously sardonic wit—a wit accompanied with his famous ironic smile, a gentlemanly humanistic smile worthy of Erasmus.

Besides the very great joy of being a friend of Bob and Peggy for forty-six years, I twice had the honor to teach with this august scholar who was already a legend in my own student years in the early sixties at the Gregorian University. Professor Grant’s work was then especially a favorite among the French scholars of the period. The French historians loved to quote with Gallic approval their scholarly colleague and personal friend, a Monsieur Robert Grant.

For the French, the British, the Italians and others, Monsieur Robert Grant was the great American scholar who consistently led the way in every new scholarly interest in the field of early Christian studies: Gnosticism, second century apologetics, historical critical and rhetorical interpretation of the Bible, the social economic, cultural and religious constituents of the empire from Augustus to Constantine (the title of one of Robert Grant’s most famous and influential books).

When twice teaching with Professor Grant, I always enjoyed observing the students whenever they somewhat nervously asked this formidable scholar a question: as Professor Grant replied with great deliberation, the students’ eyes widened, their pens rushed as they tried to catch some of the amazing erudition delivered with such speed and thoroughness but always with gentlemanly courtesy. The students marveled, as did I, as we witnessed together the spontaneously well-ordered erudite, lucid Grantian sentences roll out. It was a marvel to behold.

However, we are not here today only to honor a great scholar and a committed Episcopalian priest (committed, above all, to this parish, Robert Grant’s parish of so many years, St. Paul and the Redeemer). Above all, we are here to celebrate a singular life and to grieve a loss of so rare a friend. Robert Grant was a very good man. He took great pride in his and Peggy’s children and grandchildren. Thanks to his own innate gentlemanly dignity, Robert Grant was always a gracious and generous friend and colleague. Above all, of course, Bob cherished his wife and beloved best friend, the incomparable Margaret Horton Grant, known to us all as Peggy.

We are all thankful that Bob was graced with longevity. However, at this moment, longevity does not seem nearly enough. However long one lives, life is always too short. We all fiercely miss our great friend. We shall not see his like again. May God grant that the wondrous Robert Grant now find eternal peace.
One of the salient aspects of Bob’s character, however, was his capacity for friendship.

Robert M. Grant (1917-2014)
Some Memories

Bernard McGinn, Naomi Shenstone Donnelley
Professor Emeritus of Historical Theology and of the History of Christianity

In thinking about my dear friend and colleague, Robert Grant, since his death on June 10, I have not been able to escape recalling the text of Genesis 6:4 which I shall cite first in the Latin in Bob’s memory: gigantes autem erant super terram in diebus illis, or, “There were giants in the earth in those days,” as the King James version renders it. Bob was a giant in many ways. Of course, the giants of Genesis were pretty fearsome creatures, and Bob could, indeed, appear fearsome, especially to students getting ready for oral exams. But it’s not the fearsomeness that is important (Bob pretended to be much more fearsome than he actually was); it’s the impressiveness of these gigantes, which struck not only Noah’s generation but many generations to come.

Bob Grant was an impressive scholar, a real giant. This is not the place to talk about his more than thirty books and his hundreds of articles—many of which broke new ground in the study of the New Testament and Early Christianity. Scholarship always moves on, even with regard to Early Christianity. Nonetheless, it seems to me that a number of Grant’s books and articles will be read for as long as people are interested in the early days of the Church because of their originality, their precision of argument, and their strict adherence to textual evidence. Bob never cut corners in his research; he never advanced arguments that were not rooted in evidence; he had no sympathy with faddish views and sloppy reasoning. Bob’s eminence in the field of Early Christianity was already recognized in the early 1950s. The great generation of scholars who refashioned patristic studies in the middle decades of the past century was mostly European—French, German, English, Dutch. Their names live in memory. I think it fair to say that the name of Robert Grant ranks with theirs, perhaps the only American to do so. Bob enjoyed a prodigiously long career. According to my research, Bob published his first article in 1938, when he was twenty-one. It was entitled, “Known Sunk: German Submarine War Losses, 1914-1918,” and appeared in the U.S. Naval Proceedings. His next two articles also concerned U-Boat Warfare, and it was not until 1940 that he broke the surface into New Testament studies, publishing a piece on “The Occasion of Luke 3:1-2,” in the Harvard Theological Review. His last article, which I’m happy to say was at my instigation, was one on the “Apologists” that appeared in Vol. 1 of The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception in 2009, capping a scholarly production of seventy years!

The impact of a giant among scholars, however, is measured not just by books and articles, but, and perhaps more importantly, by the students he produced. For the better part of a generation the Divinity School of the University of Chicago was the premier school for the study of early Christianity in the United States, and one of the leading schools internationally. This was due to Robert Grant. Once again, there is not time to list the many young students, now distinguished scholars in their own right, who came to work with Bob Grant. Some are here; many others have been in touch with Peggy Grant over the past two months. These respected scholars and their devotion to their teacher constitute an important part of his legacy.

Bob Grant was a great scholar, an influential teacher, but also a husband, a father, an Episcopal priest, a colleague, a friend, and (let us say it) a complex, many-sided, and even quirky character. Individuum est ineffabile—there’s just no way of easily summarizing an individual like Bob. One of the salient aspects of Bob’s character, however, was his capacity for friendship. When I first came to the Divinity School in 1969, and then in 1971 when Pat and I were married, no one did more than Bob and Peggy (that great team!) to make us welcome and to provide us with good cheer based on their generosity, love, and friendship. Things were never dull at parties at the Grants, and they could always be expected to enliven any events they attended. Bob’s wit—as dry as the driest martini—was legendary, and with good reason. Much more could be said about all this, especially about how the Bob and Peggy team went out of their way to do so much for students, colleagues, and friends over so many decades; but my time is short.
The impact of a giant among scholars, however, is measured not just by books and articles, but, and perhaps more importantly, by the students he produced.

One closing story. Sometime in the 1970s, as I recall, Pat and I were travelling with Bob in England after one of the Oxford Patristic Conferences. Before we returned, we found ourselves in London and went to St. Paul’s Cathedral for the Sunday liturgy. It was an impressive service with a good sermon delivered by whoever was the Dean of St. Paul’s in those days. Bob confessed to being moved by the sermon, but whether it was due to the message itself or to the deliciously plumy accent in which it was given was unclear. Remembering this, I’m sure that Bob has already been welcomed *in aeternis* with the kind of plumy accent that he would be the first to appreciate. *Requiscat in pace, amice!*

**A Historian’s Historian**

MARGARET M. MITCHELL, Dean and Shailer Mathews Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Literature

I am truly honored that Peggy asked me to speak in tribute to Professor Robert M. Grant on this occasion. Robert M. Grant was Carl Darling Buck Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Literature at the University of Chicago Divinity School and in the Division of the Humanities, where he taught for thirty-five years (from 1953 until his retirement in 1988). Professor Grant was the most prolific and influential American historian of ancient Christianity of his generation. The author of thirty-three books and countless other publications (to speak only of ancient Christianity, let alone U-Boats), Grant’s work was characterized by linguistic precision, a deep knowledge of the ancient world, and philosophical and theological finesse, all brought together together with a laconic prose style and dry wit. Consider the sentence with which he begins his *Eusebius as Church Historian*: “Scholars have criticized the *Church History* of Eusebius for many centuries, though not always for the right reasons.” And off it goes from there.

Professor Grant was a giant on our faculty and in the international guild. In his thirty-five year teaching career at the University of Chicago he taught some of the most influential leaders in the field of early Christian studies, some of whom are here today, all with us in spirit. I have been in touch with many of those former students in the days after Bob’s death in June, and their respect, loyalty and gratitude toward their teacher are palpable. They remark not only on his intellectual influences and mentorship, but on personal kindnesses extended to them by Bob and Peggy, including memorable dinners in their home. Indeed at times they speak of Bob and Peggy as Doktorvater and Doktormutter, who together nurtured them toward the completion of their studies here.

Robert M. Grant was a historian’s historian, who repeatedly said (and I quote here from the second edition of his *A Short History of The Interpretation of the Bible*), “a true historical method requires us to take all the historical evidence into account.” He wanted not only to trace the philosophical and theological assumptions and arguments within the writings of patristic authors, but also to know how heavy the coins in their pockets felt, whose pictures were on them, and how much they could buy. Grant combined and crossed all manner of artificial separations of the work of history: intellectual, military, literary, social-historical, liturgical, political—good history required examination of all the terrain, all the evidences, all the questions. Of course to do that one must know all that evidence in the first place. I remember at my first faculty retreat after I joined the faculty in 1998, sitting next to Bob during a session on Professor Wendy Doniger’s paper on the *Kama Sutra*. Professor Clark Gilpin in his response said, “Are there any texts like this in other traditions, say, in Christianity?” and Bob turned to me with one of his characteristic *sotto voce* asides, “Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, book 7, chapters 11-13.”

And yet Professor Grant saw the work of the historian as a matter of interpretation as much as discovery:

> a truly historical method requires us to take all the historical evidence into account, and this evidence includes the purpose for which our documents were written, preserved, and transmitted. In addition, the study of the documents requires what Wilhelm Dilthey called “inner affinity and sympathy.” We enter into a conversation with the documents, and the authors who stand behind them; we do not simply judge them (*The Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, New York: MacMillan, 1963, p. 13).
He wanted not only to trace the philosophical and theological assumptions and arguments within the writings of patristic authors, but also to know how heavy the coins in their pockets felt, whose pictures were on them, and how much they could buy.

Furthermore, to understand Professor Robert M. Grant fully, one must remember that he was a church historian who assumed that good historical work should and would be a resource for contemporary Christian theology, and that meant its rootedness in a worshipping Christian community (I remember as a student hearing Professor Grant lament loudly and grumpily at one Wednesday lunch that attendance at worship that morning “rivaled Sweden”). In many of his books you can find the complaint that “bad theology” and “bad history” so often go together and reinforce one another. Though he was utterly unsentimental, the ritual of the liturgy was a central unifying point between the two.

In 2003 when Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* was a bestseller, taken by far too many to be a true historical exposée of early Christian origins, I was continually asked when I critiqued it, “well, what should I read that would be a sound historical account?” I always replied, Robert M. Grant’s *Augustus to Constantine* from 1970, but unfortunately, it is out of print. Finally Westminster/John
Professor Grant saw the work of the historian as a matter of interpretation as much as discovery.

Knox Press had the good idea to republish *Augustus to Constantine*, in 2004. It is still in print, and, according to amazon.com this morning, still selling more briskly than some books by current faculty, including myself. Bob, ever with an eye on economic indicators, would certainly appreciate that. In the Preface to the second edition of *Augustus to Constantine* Professor Grant referred to this work as “[his] favorite book,” and gave a customarily crisp summation of his scholarly own commitments:

It tells an important story and tries to remain close to the basic evidence without getting lost in minutiae or methods. Much modern work deals with details without quite showing why they matter. When I look for inspiration I turn back to my father and his teaching at Union Theological Seminary; to W.L. Westermann, with whom I studied ancient history at Columbia in 1939-1940; and to A.D. Nock and H.J. Cadbury, my chief mentors at Harvard Divinity School. I believe that all would be pleased with my emphasis on people and events and my aim at clarity of expression. To me the early church does not appear as a Gnostic sect, whether of dream-driven mystics or not, or as a band of militant revolutionists. What was it? We can only hope to find out by digging in the sources, literary, archaeological, and whatever other kind may turn up, and then drawing some conclusions. We can seek for theological implications only after pursuing this process, which I have tried to follow in my book.

My first encounter with Robert M. Grant was in 1982, when I went to his office hours with my intention to petition the Bible area for admission to PhD studies in New Testament. Across the desk in his office he said to me, “You realize there are no interesting questions left in New Testament studies, don’t you?” In the immediate moment I was unsure if Professor Grant meant this seriously or as a challenge to me; over the years and through many conversations I know it to have been the latter, and I note with a mild touché (as I said to Bob when he showed me the manuscript, in a folder marked “33”) that his final published monograph was back in the New Testament, *Paul in the Roman World: The Conflict at Corinth* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001).

Bob was a generous scholarly friend and reader to me, who in the hot summer of 1999 read through a very long book manuscript and gave me both encouragement and some specific feedback. Among his complaints were—why waste publisher’s ink and paper on all those introductions and conclusions to the chapters. If the readers can’t follow your argument through the evidence, that’s their problem! I admired Robert Grant more than I can say, and I have been honored to have inherited many volumes from his library, especially the primary sources in Teubner, Sources chrétiennes and Loeb editions. They surround me in my home and are in use every day. Not infrequently I open a book and a slip of paper falls into my lap, full of notes, textual citations and observations to be followed up on. The work goes on.

It has been a special pleasure to have joined Bob and Peggy for cocktails or meals at their home or out at Piccolo Mondo these last years. I would always want to be sure I had some good stories and jokes in hand for these friendly convivial gatherings, because Bob’s mind was sharp as ever, and he loved the quick retorts and repartees. And knowing Peggy Grant—an אשת חיל if there ever was one (so Proverbs 31:10-31, “a woman of valor”)—remains a very special gift to me and to so many of us in the Divinity School and University community.

Robert M. Grant’s work and memory will endure for a very long time. As he himself loved to quip, “When the last theologian dies, a church historian will record the fact.”