

Christian ethicist Donald W. Shriver Jr. dies at 93

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [September 8, 2021](#) issue



(Photo courtesy of Union Theological Seminary)

Donald W. Shriver Jr., an acclaimed Christian ethicist and Presbyterian minister who wrote widely about the need for White Americans to face and repent of their racist past, died July 28 at 93.

Shriver served as president of Union Theological Seminary in New York from 1975 to 1991 and is credited with hiring leading Black scholars and clergy, including James Forbes, James Washington, and Cornel West. West once called Shriver “the most

prophetic seminary president in the late 20th century.”

A son of the South, born in Norfolk, Virginia, Shriver took to heart Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and its call to White clergy. Shriver’s most celebrated book, *Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember Its Misdeeds*, published in 2005, compared the work of public repentance in Germany and in South Africa with that of the United States.

In it, he suggested that those two countries could teach the US how to publicly acknowledge and repent for past evils. Shriver believed repentance was the only hope for “a future less evil than our pasts.”

“He was a profoundly Christian man,” said West. “He was someone fundamentally committed to the Christian gospel and making the connection between love, power, and justice. There was nobody like him.”

While Shriver served as a pastor earlier in his life—mostly in North Carolina—he spent the better part of his career in higher education. He earned a doctorate from Harvard, writing his dissertation on the theology of forgiveness, and later taught at North Carolina State University.

But he spent most of his career at Union. He is credited with pulling the seminary back from the financial brink in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In addition to hiring Black scholars, he also hired feminist theologians such as Beverly Wildung Harrison and Phyllis Trible, leading the institution on a justice-oriented trajectory. —Religion News Service