

The Jesus diet: He "inspired a generation of young people to challenge injustice"

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When William Sloane Coffin Jr. was honored last year at Yale as a civil rights leader, an antiwar activist, an endearing university chaplain and an unfearing liberal preacher, at one point he summed up his faith—and by extension, himself: “I believe Christianity is a worldview that undergirds all progressive thought and action,” Coffin said. The Christian church is called, he said, “to respond to biblical mandates like truth-telling, confronting injustice and pursuing peace.”

What is “so heartbreaking,” he added at the April 2005 event, is that many churches are focused on management and therapy, and that parish clergy are “gumption-deficient.”

Coffin, 81, who died April 12 at his home in rural Strafford, Vermont, was to many admirers the embodiment of the Christianity he described at the Yale tribute.

“To my generation, he was a hero,” said Bob Edgar, chief executive of the National Council of Churches. He was “no ordinary man and he leaves no ordinary hole.”

“His prophetic vision brought the imagination of the biblical prophets and of Jesus to life in our times,” said John H. Thomas, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ. Ordained in 1956 as a Presbyterian, Coffin later became a UCC minister, and he remained so until his death. “He was urgent and clear, but never stern,” Thomas said.

While serving as chaplain at Yale from 1958 to 1975, Coffin was among the Freedom Riders, who rode interstate buses in the South in the early 1960s to challenge segregation. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was heavily involved with protests against the Vietnam War.

At a protest in Boston in 1967, more than 1,000 draft resisters turned in their draft cards at a church service led by Coffin. The chaplain was indicted and convicted on charges of conspiracy to aid draft resisters, but the conviction was later overturned.

From 1976 to 1987, Coffin was senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, affiliated with the UCC and the American Baptist Churches. More than 20 years ago, Coffin led that congregation in becoming the UCC’s first “open and affirming” church, a movement that now includes almost 600 congregations committed publicly to the full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons.

Also in the 1980s, Coffin headed the antinuclear SANE/Freeze campaign, acting as a major voice opposing the U.S. nuclear weapons buildup.

The current senior pastor at Riverside, James A. Forbes Jr., said that despite his last few years of failing health, “Bill Coffin was as vigilant in his fight against the war in Iraq as he was in his protest against the war in Vietnam decades earlier.”

Coffin was immortalized in the *Doonesbury* comic strip as “Rev. Sloan.” The strip’s creator, Garry Trudeau, combined the Coffin persona with the character of a Trudeau roommate who became a priest. Trudeau was

among celebrities attending the Yale tribute for Coffin, where Coffin got up from his wheelchair to speak for 20 minutes to the crowd.

Coffin had been suffering from congestive heart failure and had been under hospice care, said his daughter, Amy Coffin. “He was out in the sun. Everybody was talking and then he was gone,” she told Associated Press.

“What can we say?” wondered a fellow progressive figure, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, director of the Shalom Center in New York. “He was brave, bright committed and joyful.” Waskow continued: “I learned from him while I was still a secular activist what it could mean to be prophetically committed. ”

Coffin was born to the family of a wealthy New York furniture dealer. He went to Yale as a music student, but left in 1942 to enlist in the U.S. Army. He continued in the service until 1947, working in military intelligence and becoming an officer.

When he returned to Yale, he developed an interest in theology and philosophy. The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 interrupted his start toward a divinity degree at Union Theological Seminary. Wanting to fight communism, he joined the CIA that same year.

Three years later, he enrolled in Yale Divinity School and eventually saw his perspectives on war and justice become transformed by the social changes of that era.

When Yale bestowed an honorary doctorate on Coffin in 2002, he was praised for the transformations he had brought. “You changed the shape of college chaplaincy and inspired a generation of young people to challenge injustice.”