

Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama: Theology rooted in the experiences of ordinary people

News in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

Kosuke Koyama, a Japanese Christian theologian who was a proponent of contextual theologies rooted in the experiences of ordinary people, is being lauded for his far-sighted commitment to religious pluralism and dialogue.

Koyama, who taught for 16 years at Union Theological Seminary in New York and was the school's John D. Rockefeller Jr. professor emeritus of ecumenical studies, died at 79 on March 25 in Springfield, Massachusetts, where members of his family live.

The Japanese academic is perhaps best remembered for his 1974 book, *Water Buffalo Theology*, whose title underscores Koyama's belief that the starting point of theology must be people's own experience. The book grew from the author's efforts to communicate the Christian message to farmers in Thailand—who cultivate fields with water buffalo—while he was a missionary and teacher there from 1960 to 1968.

Union Seminary's former president Donald Shriver Jr. paid tribute to Koyama: "[He] was a master of metaphor, and was always coming up with symbols from Eastern and Western cultures, which he bent to use for insight into contemporary communication of the gospel."

Shriver recalled how Koyama, then a teenager in Tokyo, had come close to dying in U.S. air raid bombings of the Japanese capital during World War II. "Understandably, the Christian minority had hard times in Japan during the war," Shriver stated, "but etched into [his] memory were the incredibly courageous words spoken to him at his baptism by the pastor of [his] congregation: 'Kosuke, God calls you in Jesus Christ to love all your neighbors, even the Americans.' The 'even' would become a theological watchword in the rest of his life."

A graduate of Tokyo Union Theological Seminary, Koyama later studied in the U.S., earning his doctorate from Princeton Theological Seminary. He then returned to Asia for his stint as a missionary in Thailand.

He was perhaps best known in Asia for his tenure, beginning in 1968, as dean of the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology in Singapore.

In 1980, while teaching in New Zealand, Koyama addressed a World Council of Churches mission and evangelism conference in Melbourne, Australia, where he noted that historically Jesus Christ had been presented to the world “in the mold of the mind of the West.” Such theologies, he said, “have had more than one hundred years of painful irrelevance to the world outside of the West, and most likely to the West itself. Even today, most of the world’s Christians, including their theologians, believe that somehow Jesus Christ is more present in America than in Bangladesh.” – *Ecumenical News International*