

In Tribute to PROFESSOR KOSUKE KOYAMA
By President Emeritus Donald W. Shriver

Kosuke Koyama and I were connected by war before we were connected by Union Theological Seminary.

Frequently in telling his lifestory he would reflect how, on a night in early March 1945, at age 15, he was almost killed by an American incendiary bomb which landed a few feet in front of him. It was a dud. Had it exploded, he might well have been among the 80,000 lives lost in the two nights of that air attack on Tokyo.

He was one day to tell us the astonishing story of his baptism as a Christian during the very days of those attacks. Understandably, the Christian minority had hard times in Japan during the war. But etched into Ko's memory were the incredibly courageous words spoken to him at his baptism by the pastor of that 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.

In that moment, off in Virginia, I was age 17, wondering if, a few months hence, I would be drafted into the army that was already advancing, island by island, to the Japanese mainland. I was, in fact, drafted a year later. The war with Japan was over. Some believed that the atomic bomb had been necessary to end it.

In his memory of that dreadful time, Koyama never agreed. His country, he said, was already defeated. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs were "kicking a dead horse." After considerable study, I came to agree with him.

Thirty years after the great Tokyo fire raids, I had my first conversation with Ko via a telephone call from New York to Dunedin, New Zealand. The result of that call was his coming to fill the chair in World Christianity at Union 1979-1996. So far as I know, he was the first Asian theologian to occupy a tenured position in the history of our faculty.

And what a unique theologian he was! Feeding the springs of his ecumenical theological imagination were his studies in Tokyo and Princeton, his partnership in ministry with his wife Lois, their subsequent work with the church in Ching Mai, Thailand, and their time in New Zealand. Coming to Union, he brought a lot of Asia to us.

In certain ways, Union was not ready for that theological imagination. I will always remember with humor the fact that in the summer of 1979 the acquisitions staff of the Union library had a book sent by a publisher entitled, BUFFALO THEOLOGY. I suppose that the staff assumed that Union had no program for teaching theology to buffaloes, for the book landed on a discard shelf outside the library door. Very soon after, Union announced that the author of that book was our new professor of World Christianity. The staff quickly recovered the volume and catalogued it.

There followed many other volumes of Asia-tinged theology from the mind and heart of this Japanese Christian intellectual: titles like *TWO MILE AN HOUR GOD* and *MOUNT FUJI AND MOUNT SINAI*. Ko was a master of metaphor, and he was always coming up with symbols from Eastern and Western cultures which he bent to use for insight into contemporary communication of the Gospel. From New Zealand he had learned from the aboriginal Maori. Unlike Westerners, the Maori image their relation to the future as behind them, not in front of them. They walk backwards towards the future with their eyes on the past, believing that clues to how to walk into a future could only be supplied us by study and re-study of the past. It was one of Ko's cautions to western theologians: do not take too seriously our brave notions of "progress" or our super-respect for speed, efficiency, and innovation. God may be a slow-mover—two miles an hour. Moving at that speed may be best for noticing carefully the glories of the countryside. Powerful people in western cities, he once remarked, are likely to travel in limousines with one-way windows; they look out without permitting others to look in. It was one of his images critical of western isolating individualism.

A careful appropriator of the Bible, he always kept his critical distance from both his native Japanese culture and his acquired culture as an American. Japanese, like many Asians, are acutely attuned to harmony with one's social surroundings. For him, one image of such harmony was the smooth, upward-curving volcanic cone of Mount Fuji. When it comes to morality for shaping a society, Japanese prefer the Fuji image. But westerners are apt to think of morality after the images of Exodus 20 and Kant's "categorical imperative." We get our moral commands "from on high." Ko found the difference between Japan and Germany, in their mutual coping with their defeat in World War Two, related in part to this difference in the shapes of morality in the two cultures, in their respective accents on shame and guilt, for example.

He never changed his view that both Japanese and Americans had sins to confess from the war of 1941-45. He understood very well why, at the behest of the postwar American occupiers of Japan, its new democracy had to disavow the ancient theory of the Emperor's divinity; and he also understood, with pride and anxiety, that Article 9 of that constitution—disavowing war as ever again an instrument of national life—was a unique Japanese contribution to present and world culture present and future. He was never very vocal about the implication of this Japanese example for the United States, but the implication was there: time for the USA to foreswear war, too?

To say that Kosuke Koyama made his imprint on ecumenical church meetings, in unnumbered intercultural theological dialogues, and in intense classroom discussions at Union and around the world, is to forge an understatement. In his quiet, persistent way of speaking and writing, humor which cloaked his seriousness, fidelity to Gospel teaching, and readiness to listen long before he crafted another of his eloquent metaphors, he was an exemplar educator and Christian witness to all who knew him. His mind and spirit linger in our reading of his books and in our memory of his gracious gifts as a colleague and friend. Before God and each other, how deeply we now grieve his death, but how grateful we are for his life.

As signs of that gratitude, at Ko's retirement from Union in 1996, Peggy Shriver wrote three poems in haiku style as tribute to him and what he meant to many of us. They grew from seventeen years of our knowing him. Perhaps in such metaphors reside our own best ways to image him:

Smiling East-West spirit,
You move with sun, and Son,
Shining peace on us.

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Like a child piling blocks
Your words construct new dreams,
Towering poet.

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Gentle and strong, as trees
Bend gracefully in wind,
You stand—and I bow.
