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Ewart Cousins, editor of the Classics of Western Spirituality, dies

Rich Heffern | Jun. 3, 2009 NCR Today

Ewert Cousins, a world-renowned theologian and pioneer in interreligious dialogue who brought Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists together at gatherings around the globe, from the United Nations to the University of Madras, died on May 30, 2009. He was 81.

One of Cousins? greatest contributions was making the touchstone texts of Western religions accessible to a wide audience. Together with Richard Payne, he conceived of and edited the Classics of Western Spirituality, a groundbreaking, 107-volume series of classical works from the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. Cousins? own translation of the writings of St. Bonaventure was one of the series? bestsellers. Cousins was also the general editor of the 25-volume series World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest and the author of Christ of the 21st Century, Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites, and scores of major papers.

Eager to deepen understanding among the world?s religions, Cousins organized numerous conferences to bring members of different faiths together in dialogue. In 1975, he coordinated the Spiritual Summit Conference at the United Nations, the first time religious leaders spoke from the podium of the General Assembly. At the conference, Cousins was honored to introduce Mother Teresa to the assembly.

In 1998 Cousins co-founder the World Commission on Global Consciousness and Spirituality to promote peace and cross-cultural understanding; commission members include His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Nobel Peace Prize Winner Wangari Maathai. Cousins was also an active participant in the Parliament of the World?s Religions.

Cousins was born and raised in New Orleans, a city whose pageantry and festivity he carried with him throughout his life. At the age of 18, he joined the Society of Jesus and entered the seminary at Grand Coteau, LA. He completed his Ph.D in Philosophy at Fordham University and joined the faculty of the Theology Department in 1962 where he taught for forty years. His primary field was medieval theology, and he was especially esteemed for his work on Franciscan spirituality and his writings on St. Bonaventure.

It was an early experience among the Lakota Sioux that ignited Cousins? interest in interreligious dialogue. As a young Jesuit working on the Rosebud Reservation, Cousins was drawn to the richness of Native American spirituality. This sparked a desire to understand the religious experience of many traditions and led to a life of cross-cultural encounters, including a year spent studying Islam at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Bethlehem, Palestine, and numerous trips to India to study Hindu spirituality.

Cousins was admired as much for his warmth and kindness as his brilliance. He was a loving husband, devoted father, and gentle friend to many. He was predeceased by his first wife Kathryn McCambridge, and survived by his second wife Janet Kvamme Cousins, son Hilary, daughters Sara and Emily, and six grandchildren.

A wake will be held on June 5 from 6:30 to 8:30, and the funeral mass will begin at 11:00 on June 6. Both services will be at the Church of the Nativity. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to VNA Northwest,

607 Bantam Road, Bantam, CT 06750.

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