

UCC ROOTS

Remembering our History

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A Theologian Passionate about Civil Rights and Justice

Sometimes people think that theology is boring. However, there is a memorable moment in the 1960s when a well-known professor at a major university jumped out of the window (of a first floor classroom) to help his students expand their views of theology. Shouting the rest of his lecture back through the open window he explained how a famous theologian (Schleiermacher) changed the ground on which theology was done.

This story about Frederick Ludwig Herzog (1925-1995), a teacher of theology at Duke Divinity School, was legendary. Herzog knew that historical theology focused on whether and how Jesus was the Christ. However, he also saw how Schleiermacher privileged white, bourgeois German society and saw experience as a theological category.

For Herzog, theology needed to be grounded in civil rights activism and advocacy for justice. Born in North Dakota, he grew up in German Reformed churches. Later he studied in Europe with Karl Barth, and earned a doctorate from Princeton University in 1953. As a minister in the United Church of Christ he loved his church. However, throughout his adult life he was continually pushing the UCC General Synod to take bold actions for justice and peace, instead of issuing statements.

Herzog's commitment to racial justice was total. He regarded the widespread racial prejudice of the American south, where he came to live and teach in Durham, N.C in 1960, as truly systemic evil. In 1970 he wrote the first article in North America by a white theologian about Black Theology.

Herzog knew and often dialogued with Gustavo Gutierrez, the key voice of Latin American Liberation Theology. His own book, *A Liberation Theology*, was published in 1972. In a later book, *God-Walk: Liberation Shaping Dogmatics* (1988), Herzog summarized his theology. "The question is not 'Who Jesus is?'—It is 'What is Jesus doing now?'"

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