

Renowned ethicist James M. Gustafson dies at 95

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [February 24, 2021](#) issue



(Courtesy of Emory University)

Christian ethicist James M. Gustafson died on January 15 at the age of 95.

Gustafson's 45-year teaching career spanned three institutions: Yale—both in the divinity school and the religious studies department—the University of Chicago, and Emory University. Among his students were ethicists who would go on to have substantial influence of their own, including Stanley Hauerwas, Nigel Biggar, and Lisa Sowle Cahill.

In a tribute written for Emory, former university president James T. Laney said that with Gustafson's death the world had lost a "towering scholar."

David Kelsey, who taught with Gustafson at Yale, recalled that Gustafson, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, was a "hardheaded realist" when it came to important ethical questions. This was perhaps inspired by his two years of military service during World War II. According to a former student at Emory, Gustafson saw terrible things that left him with a "deep sense of realism about humanity."

"He pushed back against vague and oversimplified rhetorical gestures toward ill-definite abstractions," Kelsey said. "At the same time, he did so in ways that didn't just shut students down but rather drew them out and engaged them. He implicitly refused to 'solve' any student's ethical quandaries—but he helped them more clearly and carefully come to terms with them for themselves."

While at Emory, Gustafson oversaw the groundbreaking, interdisciplinary Luce Seminars, which allowed faculty to spend a year of intensive study on topics like "human being/being human." When Gustafson retired in 1998, the seminar was named after him.

Gustafson wrote 12 books, most notably *Christ and the Moral Life*, *Can Ethics Be Christian?*, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement*, and *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*.

He was a two-time Guggenheim Fellow (in 1959 and 1967) in the field of religion, as well as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2011, Gustafson was awarded the Society of Christian Ethics's lifetime achievement award for his "creative and lasting contributions to the field of Christian ethics."

"James Gustafson was at the forefront of the growth of almost every form of ethical theory and practice that burgeoned in the sixties," wrote ethicist Margaret Farley in a remembrance for Yale. "His legacy lives on in his countless former students and colleagues, as well as in the great diversity that marks his written work."