

GEORGE SHERER NOSS
(21 February 1898 – 11 November 1989)

by

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George Sherer Noss

After applying for a teaching position at Berea College in the summer of 1944, George Sherer Noss accepted an offer from the College for the position of Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion in the Department of Philosophy and Religion.¹ He began teaching in the academic year of 1945–46.² George came to Berea College at mid-career, after many years of service in other contexts of teaching and ministry. He then taught at Berea College until his retirement from teaching in 1966.³

George Noss held several academic degrees: the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree from Bowdoin College (1920) (with a focus in English and History); the Bachelor of Divinity (B.D.) degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York (1930) (focusing on Christian history, Old Testament, and New Testament); the Master of Sacred Theology (S.T.M.) degree (*magna cum laude*) from Union Theological Seminary in New York (1937) (with a focus in Christian Missions); and the Doctor of Theology (Th.D.) degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York (1943) (also focusing in Christian Missions).⁴ The dates when Noss completed each of his academic degrees display larger-than-typical gaps at that time between his academic achievements. That factor itself, however, indicates additional and quite significant features about Noss's life and career prior to his service at Berea College.

George S. Noss, born to Lura A. (*Boyer*) Noss and Rev. Christopher Noss on 21 February 1898 in Sendai, Japan, lived much of his life in the land of his birth. George's parents, Lura (*Boyer*) (25 June 1870 – 26 February 1907) and Christopher Noss (23 September 1869 – 31 December 1934), for many years served in northern Japan as missionaries of the German Reformed Church in the United States, arriving in Japan sometime during the late nineteenth century.⁵ George had several siblings and half-siblings. George's mother, Lura (*Boyer*) Noss, also had given birth to George's older brother, John Boyer Noss (1896–1980), later, himself a well-known scholar of global religions. Lura Noss died in 1907 at a young age. George's father, Christopher Noss, later married again at least one other time.⁶

George spent the early years of his childhood in Wakamatsu, Japan. For his final year of high school and then college, however, his parents sent him to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. George attended Franklin and Marshall Academy there for his final year of high school (1915), then began his collegiate education at Franklin and Marshall College (1915–18). Franklin and Marshall College has deep roots in the German Reformed Church in the United States. Briefly interrupting his collegiate education, in 1918, George entered the U.S. Army, in which he held the rank of Corporal during his enlistment (from September through December of 1918). Following his short term of military service during the First World War, George returned to complete his collegiate education at Bowdoin College, from which he graduated with the B.A. degree in 1920.⁷

After George Noss completed his studies at Bowdoin College, he taught English and economics at Tilton School, in Tilton, New Hampshire, for one year (1920–21).⁸ Approximately one year after George had completed his B.A. degree at Bowdoin College, he and Marie Margaret Geissinger (23 February 1896 – 31 August 1995) married on 27 June 1921. George returned to Japan with Marie later in 1921, where they served as missionaries, through the Mission Board of the Evangelical Reformed Church.⁹ The Nosses served in Japan from 1921 to 1941.

During his lengthy ministry as a missionary in Japan, George served in several capacities and contexts. Initially, he returned to Sendai, Japan, the town of his birth, where he taught English and Latin at North Japan College (1922–27).¹⁰ George and Marie then moved to Aomori, the northernmost city on Honshu, the main island of Japan, in the Aomori Prefecture, where they worked for a decade. While in that part of Japan, George helped to establish the Hachinohe Konakano Church, in the city of Hachinohe.¹¹ During his service in the Aomori Prefecture, George returned to the United States periodically to pursue his initial graduate degrees in Christian ministry and missions: completing his B.D. degree at Union Theological Seminary in New York

(1930); and completing his S.T.M. degree at Union Theological Seminary in New York (1937).¹² In 1930, after he completed his B.D. degree at Union Theological Seminary, George received ordination into the ministry of the Evangelical and Reformed Church (now part of the United Church of Christ).¹³

Although George and Marie returned to continue their service as missionaries in Japan from 1937 to 1941, they returned to the United States after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. From 1942 until 1945, George Noss taught Japanese language, history, and civilization at Columbia University in New York City, while he completed his Th.D. degree at Union Theological Seminary in New York.¹⁴

During George's tenure at Berea College, George and Marie Noss participated deeply in the life of both the College community and the larger community of the town itself, developing permanent ties to both College and town. In 1949, although George had taught at the College for only four years, "under the auspices of the Student Association," the College called a special meeting and named him "Professor of the Year." Also by 1949, two children of the Nosses, Margaret and Dorothea, had graduated from Berea College.¹⁵ Although by the time of George's retirement the Nosses lived on Prospect Street in the town of Berea, George and Marie had served as the first "Head Residents" of the Dana Residence Hall, which the College constructed in 1960: George holding the position of "Director" and Marie serving as the "House Mother," as the College then designated "Head Residents" of its residence halls.¹⁶ Marie had served on the staff of the College library as well.¹⁷ Even after his retirement from the College in 1966, George remained active in and around the community of Berea. In addition to serving as pastor of a small church in Newby, Kentucky, George held the office of "Police Judge" for the town of Berea from 1970 to 1978.¹⁸



George Sherer Noss in His Office at Berea College

George Noss's many years of life in Japan, not only provided George with both fluency in the Japanese language and extensive knowledge of Japanese culture, but also left within him an abiding love for Japan and its people. Inspiring his life-long hobby of knife-making, which he began in 1930, he had studied the spirit and practice of making Samurai swords in Japan.¹⁹ In the victorious heavily-anti-Japanese atmosphere of the United States after the Second World War, George pointedly and publicly criticized the posture of the United States toward Japan both during and following the war. George described the occupation of Japan by the United States as "the greatest possible humiliation to the Japanese." He also predicted that history would remember the dropping of two Atomic bombs on Japan after peace-negotiations had begun as "a war crime," in the same way that history would remember "Buchenwald."²⁰

One of George Noss's publications demonstrates his profound and abiding sensitivity to the Japanese people and their culture. In that publication, George shared insights that he had gleaned from Japanese Christians for interpreting Christian scriptures. He illustrated his claims about the distinct ways in which Japanese Christians interpreted scriptures through their own cultural lens by examining the "Parable of the Prodigal Son," which George described as "the story of the Lost Son." George pointed to how Japanese Christians employed several elements of their culture in their readings of scripture: the tendency "to emphasize the group" rather than the individual person in their reading of the story; their high esteem for knowing and remembering extensive networks of human relationships; their value for "the tradition of the professional storyteller"; their appreciation for the "feeling of oneness with the land" and their care of the land as a result of their Shinto traditions; among several other insights from Japanese culture that deepen their interpretation of this parable by Jesus. George accomplished beautifully his aim in this publication: to demonstrate "that[,] since every branch of the human family has its own special gifts, the reading of the Bible by different peoples helps us all to benefit by varying and special insights into its meaning."²¹

Throughout his life, George maintained his ties with Japan. Taking a temporary leave from his teaching duties at Berea College, during the academic year of 1955–56, George spent a sabbatical leave in Japan. For this leave, George and Marie Noss took passage on the ship, Kikawa Mari, to Kyoto, Japan, where George taught Christian theology at Doshisha University for the academic year.²²

George Noss devoted the vast majority of his time and energy as a teacher, minister, and missionary to his responsibilities within the local contexts of his work. Nevertheless, he still participated actively in the larger academic circles of his profession and educational training. George attended annual meetings of the academic organizations in which he held memberships: the American Academy of Religion; and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He also held memberships in other professional societies that attested to his love for the outdoors and his avocation as a cutler or knifemaker: the American Forestry Association; and the American Guild of Craftsmen.²³

As indicated previously in many ways, George Noss affirmed several key values and held firm convictions. As examples, on one annual "Faculty Data Sheet" for Berea College, when responding to questions about whether or not he held honorary degrees or membership in honorary societies, rather than giving merely negative responses, George wrote more clearly: "do not believe

in honorary degrees”; “do not believe in ‘honor’ societies.” During George’s funeral at Union Church in Berea, Kentucky, Warren Lambert identified his own most significant memory of George as “his uncompromising demand for excellence in all things,” in the pursuit of which he demanded most “of himself.”²⁴

George Noss died on 11 November 1989, at 91 years of age, in the Winchester Manor Nursing Home, where he and Marie lived during the latter years of their retirement. Marie herself died just a few years later, on 31 August 1995, at 99 years of age. Their families buried them in the cemetery of Berea, Kentucky.²⁵

The life and career of Professor George S. Noss profoundly manifested so much of that for which he prayed on behalf of the community of the College during a time of worship in Phelps-Stokes Chapel in 1950. He reflected, “in [his own] conduct and attitudes the noble traditions of unselfish devotion, unstinted effort, and broad tolerance” [that] have made the name of Berea [College] admired and loved.” Through his work, the College became “even better for [his] having been here.” Indeed, he explicitly actualized the blessing that harmonized “[his] capacities and [his] aspirations,” insightfully perceiving “[his] duty plain” and possessing “the will and courage to perform it.”²⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ Photographs of George S. Noss, courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College (Berea, Kentucky) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9.00, Box no. 103; Record Group: College Photo Archives; Description of Records: Faculty and Staff: Murray, Mary Ann – Rogers, Mrs. John A. R., File 103-7, “RG. 9: Noss, George S. 103/7 Photo Archives.”: Berea College; Berea, Kentucky).

² “Noss, George Sherer: Application for Position at Berea College / Berea, Kentucky” (17 June 1944) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty / Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell–Nystadt, File 59/21: “RG. 9: Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.” [Berea College: Berea, Kentucky]); *Bulletin of Berea College: The General Catalog (1946–47)*, new series, no. 138 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College Press, November 1946), 61, 91 (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

³ *Berea College Bulletin: College Catalog Issue (1966–1967)*, series 24, no. 1 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College Press, September 1966), 96, 130 (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

⁴ “Noss, George Sherer: Application for Position at Berea College / Berea, Kentucky” (17 June 1944) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty / Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell–Nystadt, File 59/21: “RG. 9: Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.” [Berea College: Berea, Kentucky]); *Bulletin of Berea College: The General Catalog (1946–47)*, new series, no. 138 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College Press, November 1946), 91 (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

⁵ Published accounts list “Rev. C. Noss and wife (absent)” as missionaries of the “Reformed Church in the U.S. (German)” in Sendai, Japan (e.g., *Directory of Protestant Missionaries in China, Japan and Corea for the Year 1904* [Hongkong, China / London, England: The Daily Press, 1904], 36 (https://divinity-adhoc.library.yale.edu/directories/1904_Directory.pdf); accessed 20 October 2021, 12:39 p.m.).

⁶ See “George Sherer Noss” (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/9949818/george-sherer-noss>; accessed 20 October 2021, 1:00 p.m.). George’s older brother, John Boyer Noss, published many editions of *Man’s Religions*, as well as numerous other books on religions of the world. See John B. Noss, *Man’s Religions*, 5th ed. (New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1974), xii. Also see the biography of George’s father, Christopher Noss: Armin H. Kroehler, *Forth to Sow: The Life of Dr. Christopher Noss, Missionary in Northern Japan* (Japan: Kyo Bun Kwan, 1961).

⁷ “Faculty Data Sheet: George Sherer Noss,” p. 2 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College, 27 January 1964) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty/Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell–Nystadt, File 59/21: “Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.” [Berea College: Berea, Kentucky]) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky); and “The Department of Philosophy and Religion,” in *The Berea Alumnus* vol. 27, no. 7 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College Press, April 1957): 7.

⁸ “Noss, George Sherer: Application for Position at Berea College / Berea, Kentucky,” p. 1 (17 June 1944) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty / Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell–Nystadt, File 59/21: “RG. 9: Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.” [Berea College: Berea, Kentucky]) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

⁹ “Faculty Data Sheet: George Sherer Noss,” p. 1 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College, 27 January 1964) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty/Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell–Nystadt, File 59/21: “Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.” [Berea College: Berea, Kentucky]); and “Nosses Mark 61st Anniversary,” *The Berea Citizen* (29 July 1982) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9.00, Box no. 58; Record Group: Faculty and Staff; Description of Records: NOF–ORW; File 58/4: “RG 9.0 Noss, George [1945–1978]”) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

¹⁰ “Noss, George Sherer: Application for Position at Berea College / Berea, Kentucky,” p. 1 (17 June 1944) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty / Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell–Nystadt, File 59/21: “RG. 9: Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.” [Berea College: Berea, Kentucky]) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

¹¹ William Ross, “Biography,” in *Dr. George S. Noss, Th.D.: Master Knifemaker, In His Own Words*, ed. Annette Smith (Danby, Vermont: Blue Beach Farm Press, 2018), 9; and “Nosses Mark 61st Anniversary,” *The Berea Citizen* (29 July 1982) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9.00, Box no. 58; Record Group: Faculty and Staff; Description of Records: NOF–ORW; File 58/4: “RG 9.0 Noss, George [1945–1978]”) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

¹² In his application for the teaching position at Berea College, George Noss explains the large gaps of time between the completion of his academic degrees: related entirely to his service as a missionary in Japan. See “Noss, George Sherer: Application for Position at Berea College / Berea, Kentucky,” pp. 1–2 (17 June 1944) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty / Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell–Nystadt, File 59/21: “RG. 9: Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.” [Berea College: Berea, Kentucky]) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

¹³ “Noss, George Sherer: Application for Position at Berea College / Berea, Kentucky,” pp. 1–2 (17 June 1944) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty / Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell–Nystadt, File 59/21: “RG. 9: Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.” [Berea College: Berea, Kentucky]) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky); and John B. Stephenson, President of Berea College, “Memorandum to members of the College and General Faculties and Retirees,” RE: The Death of George S. Noss (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College, Office of the President, 16 November 1989) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9.00, Box no. 58; Record Group: Faculty and Staff; Description of Records: NOF–ORW; File 58/4: “RG 9.0 Noss, George [1945–1978]”) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

¹⁴ “Noss, George Sherer: Application for Position at Berea College / Berea, Kentucky,” p. 1 (17 June 1944) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty / Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell–Nystadt, File 59/21: “RG. 9: Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.” [Berea College: Berea, Kentucky]) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

¹⁵ “About Berea People,” in *The Berea Alumnus*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College Press, October 1949), 24; Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky.

¹⁶ “Faculty Data Sheet: George Sherer Noss,” p. 2 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College, 27 January 1964) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty/Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell–Nystadt, File 59/21: “Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.” [Berea College: Berea, Kentucky]); “Dr. and Mrs. George S. Noss,” *The Berea Citizen* (12 October 1978) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9.00, Box no. 58; Record Group: Faculty and Staff; Description of Records: NOF–ORW; File 58/4: “RG 9.0 Noss, George

[1945–1978]”) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky); and “Dana Residence Hall, Berea College” (<https://www.berea.edu/student-life/home/campus-life/residence-life/residence-halls/dana-residence-hall/>).

¹⁷ “Faculty,” in *The Berea Alumnus*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College Press, November 1955), 15; Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky.

¹⁸ “Nosses Mark 61st Anniversary,” *The Berea Citizen* (29 July 1982) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9.00, Box no. 58; Record Group: Faculty and Staff; Description of Records: NOF–ORW; File 58/4: “RG 9.0 Noss, George [1945–1978]”) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky); also see William Ross, “Biography,” in *Dr. George S. Noss, Th.D.: Master Knifemaker, In His Own Words*, ed. Annette Smith (Danby, Vermont: Blue Beach Farm Press, 2018), 9.

¹⁹ William Ross, “Biography,” in *Dr. George S. Noss, Th.D.: Master Knifemaker, In His Own Words*, ed. Annette Smith (Danby, Vermont: Blue Beach Farm Press, 2018), 9.

²⁰ “Noss Believes MacArthur’s Work Is Done,” *The Berea Citizen* (16 January 1947) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9.00, Box no. 58; Record Group: Faculty and Staff; Description of Records: NOF–ORW; File 58/4: “RG 9.0 Noss, George [1945–1978]”) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

²¹ George S. Noss, “Some Japanese Interpretations of the Bible,” *The Journal of Bible and Religion*, vol. 22, no. 3 (July 1954): 187, 188, 189, 190, 192.

²² “Faculty,” in *The Berea Alumnus*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College Press, November 1955), 15; Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky.

²³ “Faculty Data Sheet: George Sherer Noss,” pp. 2 and 4 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College, 27 January 1964) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty/Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell–Nystadt, File 59/21: “Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.” [Berea College: Berea, Kentucky]); and “About Berea People,” in *The Berea Alumnus*, vol. 21, no. 5 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College Press, February 1951): 142.

²⁴ D. Warren Lambert, “Reminiscences of George S. Noss,” p. 1 (Berea, Kentucky: Union Church, 13 November 1989) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9.00, Box no. 58; Record Group: Faculty and Staff; Description of Records: NOF–ORW; File 58/4: “RG 9.0 Noss, George [1945–1978]”) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky).

²⁵ John B. Stephenson, President of Berea College, Memorandum to Members of the College and General Faculties and Retirees RE: The Death of George S. Noss (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College, Office of the President, 16 November 1989) p. 1 (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9.00, Box no. 58; Record Group: Faculty and Staff; Description of Records: NOF–ORW; File 58/4: “RG 9.0 Noss, George [1945–1978]”) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College: Berea, Kentucky); and “Faculty,” in *The Berea Alumnus*, vol. 60, no. 4 (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College Press, Spring 1990): 34. Both President Stephenson and *The Berea Alumnus* erroneously referred to George as “101 years old.”

²⁶ George S. Noss, “Prayer in Chapel” (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College, Phelps-Stokes Chapel, April 1950) (Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library: Record Group 9–A, Box 59; Record Group: Faculty/Staff; Sub-Group: Personnel Files; Description of Records: Newell – Nystadt, File 59-21, “Noss, George S. Professor of Philosophy and Religion, College II 1945 Com.”: Berea College; Berea, Kentucky).