

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Conversion: Jewish and Christian Perspectives



Douglas Kindschi *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

“Happy is the man loyal to God, who greatly delights in the Eternal One’s commandments!” His descendants will be honored in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed. His household prospers, and his righteousness endures forever. Light dawns in the darkness for the upright, for the man who is gracious, merciful and just. His mind is firm, trusting in the Eternal One. His heart is steady, he is not afraid. He has been generous, has given freely to the poor. His righteousness endures forever; his life is exalted in honor.”

These words from Psalm 112 describe Richard Kaufman who, along with his wife, Sylvia, founded the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University. While at age 91, physically and intellectually most vigorous, an injury from a fall brought his sudden death in late November of last year.

Having completed his master’s degree at age 86 from the University of Chicago Divinity School, at the time of his death he was just a couple months from defending his dissertation for a doctorate at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland.

Dick Kaufman’s dissertation is titled, “Human Dignity, Conversion and Converts: Theory and Practice in American Reform Judaism and in the Jewish Tradition.” It is thus appropriate that the Kaufman Interfaith Institute is sponsoring a symposium May 16 in his honor on the theme, “Conversion: Jewish and Christian Perspectives.”

Conversion to Judaism has been controversial in history as well as in current discussion within the various Jewish communities. Some discourage proselytizing or seeking converts. Some rabbis will turn down a potential convert three times before beginning a yearlong study, and with assur-

ance that they will keep all of the Jewish law should they convert.

In Christianity conversion is strongly encouraged and often connected to the Great Commission given by Jesus following his resurrection. As recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, he spoke to the disciples saying, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28: 18-20)

Helping us sort out the issues in the Jewish experience May 16 will be two Jewish rabbis. Dr. Donniel Hartman, Orthodox rabbi and president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, has been in Grand Rapids a number of times as a speaker for the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue, held every three years, and for a special event, “Finding Common Ground Between Israel and Palestine.” He will be joined by Dr. Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, a Reform rabbi who worked with Kaufman in establishing the Shalom Hartman Institute — North America.

Presenting a Christian perspective on conversion will be Dr. Richard Mouw, President Emeritus of the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary and former professor at Calvin College. An afternoon seminar will explore Kaufman’s religious pursuits in his studies on conversion, as well as his relationships to the Shalom Hartman Institute and the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at GVSU. The evening session will feature presentations specifically dealing with the Jewish and Christian approach to conversion.

Find more information and free registration at InterfaithUnderstanding.org.

— interfaith@evsu.edu