

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Human dignity and its implications for conversion



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Very rarely does a man in his 80s begin a large academic or religious project. And even more rarely does a person outside a particular field bring to it radically new insights.

But this is exactly what Richard Kaufman (1927-2018) succeeded to do. Known throughout his life primarily for his enormous success as a businessman, a communal leader and philanthropist, Kaufman spent part of his last years writing an extraordinary academic dissertation. The breadth and depth of his research and writing focuses on core religious and ethical questions about Judaism and conversion, and ultimately about meaningful human interaction. Kaufman analyzes with great knowledge and insight core ancient and contemporary values in the context of conversion to Judaism, as well as current thinking about effective human interaction and commitment. He created an incredible work of religious, academic and ethical importance.

Kaufman's initial focus is on the value of human dignity in the Bible and the Talmud, ultimately focusing on the religious requirement and responsibility for human dignity of all people. What could be more relevant in our time? The core questions of human dignity Kaufman discusses are essential for all human beings today, and especially for those committed to our shared, mutually respectful coexistence.

Kaufman was inspired by Donniel Hartman, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and participant in the upcoming Kaufman Interfaith Institute Symposium on May 16. Hartman writes: "The human religious desire to live in relationship with God often distracts religious believers from their traditions' core moral truths. Religious believers must hold their traditions accountable by the highest independent moral standards. Decency toward one's neighbor must always take precedence over acts of religious devotion and ethical piety must trump ritual piety." This focus on decency toward the other is a framing principle for how Kaufman views not only conversion but also how we must act toward each other.

Paul Mendes-Flohr, Kaufman's professor at the University of Chicago, wrote of Kaufman's work: "He was alert to features of the tradition that did not enhance the dignity of certain members of the community (women and the physically and mentally infirm). By focusing on the biblical and rabbinic approach to conversion and converts, Dick sought to identify what he called 'meta-values' of Judaism ... as reflecting that we are (all) created in the 'image of God.'"

Kaufman, like many of his mentors, sought to offer an ethical correction to the problems of ancient Jewish law and ensure that its approach to others and toward the future would be worthy of the ethical impulses of its past. He proposes that human dignity is a meta-value in the Jewish tradition and the meta-value in Reform Judaism in the United States. This work gives us all an important context for interfaith understanding, as well as new thinking about the role of ethics in religion.

While Kaufman discusses dozens of ancient and modern texts about ethics and conversion, it is particularly relevant because ultimately the era he focuses on is our own. And the goals of his new thinking about conversion concern our shared future, including the ways in which religion and the role of the individual have been reinvented in America.

Studying ancient and medieval Jewish legal discussions of conversion, Kaufman



Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi will speak at a symposium May 16 at DeVos Center of Grand Valley State University.

Submitted by Douglas Kindschi

IF YOU GO

What: "Conversion: Jewish and Christian Perspectives," a symposium in honor of the late Richard Kaufman

When: 2-4 p.m. and 7-9 p.m. May 16

Where: DeVos Center, GVSU, 401 W. Fulton St., Grand Rapids

Registration: Free, but necessary for parking

Info: InterfaithUnderstanding.org

highlights the consistent concern for the rights and dignity of the individual while remaining committed to the religious legal demands of Jewish law when it comes to joining the Jewish community.

For Kaufman, the prevailing ancient paradigm for conversion is the example of the biblical Ruth, the Moabite. Her "conversion" emerges out of the experience of living with an Israelite family and making the decision to join her own destiny with theirs. When she becomes a widow, her mother-in-law, Naomi, urges her to return to her father's house, to her family and religion of origin. But Ruth persists and refuses to leave the new family and culture she has come to know and love. Ruth clings to Naomi and joins her on her journey back to the land of Israel.

Ruth famously declares: "Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you dwell, I will dwell. Your people shall be my people; your God shall be my God." (Ruth 1:16) There she confirms not only her role in the family but her commitment to a people and a religion. From a place of dignity and respect, and out of love, commitment and a willingness to share the same fate, Ruth joins the destiny of the Jewish people.

The upcoming Grand Valley State University and Kaufman Interfaith Institute Symposium on May 16 will honor Kaufman by bringing Christian and Jewish scholars together to focus on the idea of conversion, both in Judaism and in Christianity. Historically, while one can be born a Jew, for others, conversion to Judaism has often been a lengthy and even discouraging process. Christianity, on the other hand, has encouraged conversion, often requiring conversion for salvation.

How, then, should we understand the nature of conversion in Judaism and Christianity?

"Does Loving my Neighbor Mean Converting my Neighbor?"

Or put another way: "In order for me to be right do you have to be wrong?"

These foundational questions that captured Kaufman's mind and soul for more than half a century will continue to be the focus of our learning and discourse May 16 and beyond.

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