

Memorial Minute, April 3, 2023 Faculty Meeting
Karl Paul Donfried, Elizabeth A. Woodson Professor Emeritus of Religion
Written and read by Carol Zaleski, Professor of Religion

Karl Paul Donfried, an internationally renowned scholar of biblical and ecumenical studies, joined the Smith faculty in 1968. He was a mainstay of the Religion Department as it crossed the threshold into the third millennium, and he served as Elizabeth A. Woodson Professor of Religion and Biblical Literature until his retirement in 2005.

Karl was born and raised in New York City to German émigré parents. After attending Trinity School, Karl became the first member of his family to go to college, receiving his bachelor's degree from Columbia, M.Div. from Harvard Divinity School, S.T.M. from Union Theological Seminary, and doctorate in 1968 from the University of Heidelberg. The sixties were heady times for biblical scholarship, with dazzling new approaches on offer for studying the making of the New Testament. Karl's *Doktorvater* Günther Bornkamm and other mentors initiated him into the so-called Second Quest for the Historical Jesus and the New Perspective on Paul. Karl accordingly devoted his scholarly career to situating the New Testament within the diverse landscapes of Second Temple Judaism, while resisting reductionist forms of historical criticism. Best known for his reappraisal of Paul's letters to the Thessalonian community, Karl also shed light on the Dead Sea Scrolls as a key to understanding Paul's theology and rhetoric. On these and related subjects, his publishing program was intense, including books which remain required reading for his field, such as *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Letters, Judaism and Christianity in Rome in the First Century, Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* – and collaborative volumes on *The Romans Debate* and *The Thessalonians Debate*. Upon retirement, and as a capstone to his specialized studies, Karl published *Who Owns the Bible? Toward the Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic*, arguing for the complementarity of historical-critical and ecclesial-canonical ways of reading the scriptures.

Karl was a pastor as well as a scholar, ordained by the Lutheran Church in America in 1963, serving at New York's Advent Lutheran Church and as a chaplain at Columbia before he came to Smith, and continuing to preach when called upon in area churches. During his years in Cambridge and New York, Karl had firsthand experience of the cultural and religious ferment of the sixties, and was acquainted with some of the charismatic figures (Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul

Tillich, Abraham Joshua Heschel, among others) of that era, valuing their social criticism and theological creativity, while reserving judgment about other, more tradition-averse voices.

Karl's outlook was ecumenical through and through. He took the lead in creating the Ecumenical School of Theology at Christ Church Cathedral in Springfield, and in 1977 the Episcopal Bishop of Western Massachusetts elected Karl as the Cathedral's first Ecumenical Canon.

Karl was active in Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue and collaboration as well. He found kindred spirits among Catholic biblical scholars (notably Raymond Brown and Joseph Ratzinger), and co-chaired the New Testament Panel of the National Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue which produced the influential volumes *Peter in the New Testament* and *Mary in the New Testament*. Moreover, Karl served as official delegate of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the October 31, 1999 signing of *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* in Augsburg, Germany – a formal affirmation that the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches now agree in their understanding of what had been a notoriously church-dividing matter, namely, justification by grace through faith. Several other Protestant churches chimed in, and the event continues to bear fruit in ecumenical accords.

As a teaching scholar, Karl kept up his international connections, serving under the Fulbright and other auspices as a visiting professor in Berlin, Hamburg, Geneva, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. Accompanying Karl on these journeys was Katharine, his wife of six decades, who fully shared in his projects while pursuing her own interests -- including a Smith degree as an Ada Comstock Scholar (1983J).

In the States, Karl taught at Brown, Amherst, Mount Holyoke, Assumption, and St. Hyacinth Seminary. But Smith was home and Karl loved teaching here. Alumnae will tell you that Karl asked a great deal of his students and research assistants, while treating them with warmth and respect and encouraging their careers; he is remembered with affection and gratitude by too many to count – among their numbers the eminent New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, creator of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*.

Karl had a vibrant family life with Kathy, their three children (Paul, Karen, and Mark), their children's spouses, and their seven grandchildren, and Karl and Kathy were immensely proud of the accomplishments (too many to list here) of all their offspring. At their gatherings – whether in Amherst, Pelham, Westport, Washington D.C., or Berlin – Karl's playfulness and

sense of fun suffused their time together. Those of us who worked with Karl still remember certain jokes (too many to recite here) and still hear echoes of his booming laugh.

At the memorial service last year, Paul spoke about his dad's love of cars. Not just cars – Mercedes Benz. Not just Mercedes Benz – but vintage Mercedes, which Karl (whose father had been an auto mechanic) and Paul and others would bring back to life, as the quintessential family hobby, supported by Kathy's enterprise as the owner of Paul's Autohaus, importer of vintage Mercedes parts. Paul mentioned that Karl was as happy spending time with auto mechanics as he was with ambassadors or popes. One reason may have been Karl's admiration for genuine craftsmanship in any field; another, more fundamental, reason was Karl's biblically grounded belief in the dignity and worth of every human person.