

U.S. to deport Fuller professor back to Finland: Karkkainen doesn't fit post-9/11 visa definitions

by [John Dart](#) in the [July 27, 2004](#) issue

An international expert in ecumenical and Pentecostal studies is being forced to leave the United States at the end of July because he does not fit post-9/11 visa definitions for continuing as a tenured professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, whose status as a legitimate religious institution was questioned.

Veli-Matti Karkkainen holds advanced theology credentials in Finland, received a master's degree at Fuller in 1989 and returned to join the faculty at the evangelical seminary in Pasadena, California, in 2000. Karkkainen told the Century that INS officials, now under the aegis of Homeland Security, denied his visa in February and his work permit in mid-June, and in late June turned down an appeal to allow him and his family to stay.

The grounds for denial, though complex, "are the most ridiculous I have heard," said Karkkainen. "It is ironic that we are being kicked out of the country by a 'Christian' leadership, including a Pentecostal attorney general," he said, referring to the Bush administration and John Ashcroft.

Moreover, the immigration agency at the regional and national level "strongly implied" that the tax-exempt status of Fuller Seminary, the largest U.S. interdenominational seminary, was suspect, according to Howard Louwen, dean of theology at Fuller, despite the Internal Revenue Service's continued recognition of the school as a religious institution.

"The IRS and INS are at odds on how they view Fuller Seminary," said Louwen, who blamed illogical reasoning in newly crafted rules for religious visas. "I suspect that Fuller looks to them more like a multid denominational university rather than a training ground for ministers." New rules apparently accept a seminary only if it is related to one church body.

The multilingual Karkkainen, 48, said he was denied a visa extension because he was teaching at a school “not specifically linked with a denomination, and therefore it cannot be established that I have the minimum two years’ experience” to teach at an interdenominational school. Yet his very strength for Fuller graduate students is the fact that he is a systematic theologian, has published widely in Pentecostal studies and has worked closely with the World Council of Churches in recent years.

“The denial of our appeal was very painful to my wife and two daughters,” he said. His oldest daughter recently graduated from evangelical Azusa Pacific University and his youngest attends a high school in Temple City, California.

Karkkainen said on July 7 that his family will comply with the order to leave, and reapply for visas under the so-called secular category. “Homeland Security does a good job in trying to get rid of religious visa people such as myself,” he said.

Fuller has been helping the Finnish scholar in his appeals, and Louwen confirmed that the school is advising him to apply again soon for a less-demanding category of visa. The dean noted that other Pasadena institutions such as Caltech and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory “are experiencing similar complications” in keeping foreign experts.

“We are paying a very high price for the Draconian measures of Homeland Security to exclude potential terrorists from our country,” Louwen said. “While I believe in rigorous security measures to protect us, I would hope we could be more discerning in the manner decisions are made.”

Liturgical Press is publishing this fall a book by Karkkainen titled *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* as part of a series by four scholars, including Norman A. Hjelm of Wynnewood, Pennsylvania. Hjelm, a former executive with Fortress Press, said he was “stunned at the news” of the author’s imminent deportation. “It surely seems that the Patriot Act has reached far, and has evidently fallen into the depths,” he said.