

Dr. Karl Plank Oral History Interview

Interview Conducted by
Severine Stier
and
Dahlia Krutkovich
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Title: Dr. Karl Plank oral history interview, 2019 April 9

Description: Dr. Karl Plank recounts the evolution of the Religious Studies department since his hiring in the early 1980s, the types of students who have been attracted to courses that deal explicitly with Judaism, and his experience of being “read” as Jewish because of the courses he teaches.

Biography: Dr. Karl Plank received his MDiv from Vanderbilt University in 1977 and went on to receive his PhD 1983 and has taught at Davidson ever since. His courses cover wide array of subjects, from David Foster Wallace and the ethics of fiction, to the spiritual world of Psalms. In the last thirty years, he has been one of the few professors at Davidson to teach courses dealing with Judaism. As a literary scholar, he has focused specifically on Jewish textual tradition, religious and secular.

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Interviewer: Severine Stier and Dahlia Krutkovich

Transcriber: Taylor Drake

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Reviewed by Dr. Karl Plank

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Setting Description: Filmed interview with Dr. Karl Plank in his office at Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina

Transcript Notes: The following transcript has been edited for brevity and clarity.
KP: Dr. Karl Plank
DK: Dahlia Krutkovich
SS: Severine Stier

Dahlia Krutkovich: Here we are on April 9th, 2019.

The names of our interviewers today are Severine Stier and Dahlia Krutkovich. The name of our interviewee is Dr. Karl Plank, the J. A. Cannon Professor of Religion at Davidson College.

Karl Plank: J.W. Cannon.

DK: Oh God, I'm so sorry! We're here in Chambers, and I just wanted to ask for your oral consent for this oral history. We already have your written consent.

KP: Glad to give you oral consent.

DK: Wonderful.

Severine Stier: More specifically, a recording of your, of this interview will be made and the transcription will be added to the Davidson College Archives. The materials will be made available for research by scholars for scholarly publications and other related purposes consistent with Davidson College's mission and will provide you the opportunity to approve of this interview before it is placed in the archives and made available to the public.

KP: Thank you. That's fine.

S/D: Thank you.

DK: So, starting at the beginning of it all. Can you tell us about how you got to Davidson?

KP: Sure. I came to Davidson in August 1982. I came from Vanderbilt, where I was a PhD student in Biblical studies. Davidson was in the midst of a search for additional person in Biblical studies and had [pause]. Actually, they looked the previous year and the search had not been fulfilled, so this was the second year of that search.

There were already in place a specialist in New Testament and a specialist in Hebrew Bible, and because of the religion requirement having fairly heavy demand and the department's commitment to humanities, they wanted somebody to be able to do work in both New Testament and Hebrew Bible and to take part in the humanities program.

And so, I applied and that's what got me here.

I'm not sure there was a whole lot unique about the search. It was pretty standard application interview process. It did get hung up and protracted. I think I came in December. In fact, I know I came in December for the interview.

It was just about time for the for the December Break to have occurred, and things went for several months without my hearing back, which was starting to feel like a long time.

My senior colleague Max Polley, who had the Cannon chair before I did, was aware that things were stretching out, and the department had committed fully to me, but for some reason “downstairs things” weren't moving smoothly.

The regional meetings for the Southeast American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature were meeting in Atlanta in March, and Max knew that there would be Vanderbilt people there. I mean, they may have thought that I was going to be there, but he went downstairs to the administration and said, “this needs to come to a decision because there will be people there”-- will be some of my teachers there—“who will be interested in wanting to know know what's up.”

And he pretty well called the question. If there was going to be some problem about the appointment it needed to be made clear, and that night, I got a call from Dan Rhodes, the chair of the religion department, saying that the appointment had been approved.

DK: What do you think was holding up the appointment?

KP: My guess was that the administration cautious about it being in Biblical studies, and I'm not sure I fit the stereotype of what had been in place in place before. In fact, the department was having a bit of a bit of growth and a little change.

In Fall '82, I came, and Bill Mahony came. Bill Mahony came in Comparative Religions at that time, and there had been no one full-time in that. Before, they'd had a two-year visitor doing some of that. And I was an addition as well.

But at that time, the religion department was-- I don't mean this in this in a stereotypical way, because these work for people whose scholarship was strong. They were excellent teachers, and good in every way you would want, but they did hold in common the fact that they were all Presbyterian and all ordained.

Everyone in the department before Bill and I came was ordained.

DK: Was that a rule?

KP: I would find it a little hard to imagine it would have been a rule more than *Ha Makom*, a custom of the house, a custom of the place.

A habit, if you will, that had been formed and it made a certain amount of sense with the church-relatedness [of the college], and it was sort of a productive relationship for all people in the department.

It wasn't that they were teaching because they were ordained. They taught because they were good scholars and had the degree and were excellent teachers.

They brought to bear the extra dimension of being ordained. I couldn't do that.

I couldn't bring that. I was still finishing the PhD, my dissertation wasn't quite done then, but it was far enough along to be convincing. But I had a Divinity degree as well from Vanderbilt, but I was not ordained. My guess, if I had to wager something from just scuttlebutt, was that the President may have been cautious about the ways in which I would have been a productive participant in Church life and that sort of thing.

DK: Did they ask you about your church life during their interview process?

KP: I believe we talked about it. Actually, I'd had a pretty strong, as it turned out, had a pretty strong church life. It was easy enough to find out, and it was no problem telling them. I was a professional Church musician, as well as having done the stuff that divinity students did, and I was on the staff for a while at the large Presbyterian Church in Nashville, where the senior pastor was a prominent Davidson graduate, so I think probably Dr. Spencer and I in talking, just getting to know each other, made reference enough to that. He knew my life as a musician, and so he was aware of that.

But again, my guess is they weren't sure of what it would have meant for me to have had the Divinity degree and not pursued ordination and wondered if that was a signal of discontentment of some sort that might prove difficult. In no way could I say that was a game-changing thing. But it may have introduced caution.

I mean they had not at any point kicked me out of the search. It was just slow, slow-going, and for all I know sometimes they are, but I do want to tip my hat to Max Polley because I do know of his role. He was very supportive of me and took initiative to see that this wasn't unduly prolonged.

DK: Can you talk about the state of Hebrew Bible courses at Davidson when you when you came in '82.

KP: There were three of us in Biblical studies: David Kaylor in New Testament studies and Max Polley was a specialist in Hebrew prophets, and I could do some of both. I actually had written a New Testament dissertation, but I think one of the things that attracted the department to me was that I had a record of pretty strong versatility, and I can say some more about that in a bit.

But back to the to the Bible stuff, both Max and David's work would have been oriented in ways that were customary for persons who had been trained in the 50s and 60s. They were both historical-critical in their orientation. Very rigorous historical-critical work with texts. Exegetically oriented, which meant they worked closely with texts.

They also were concerned, I would say, as were Biblical scholars at that time, with what might be thought of as Biblical Theology-- a way of thinking about theological implications of these texts. So, it was not out of bounds for them in dealing with students to deal with questions of, "if one did take this text seriously, if one was devoted to it, what might it mean?" They were willing to deal with issues of a theological meaning, not out of an assumption that everybody did care about that, but they were willing to take the stance that you could reflect on what it might mean if one were to take it seriously. They were open to that. And they were aware of the spectrum of

kinds of students they would have, which you know, this was before even co-education, so it was a very homogeneous group. But you know, if you took however many students-- guys at that time-- together and considered their religious dispositions, even if they all grew up Protestant and in the South, there was going to be a spectrum, so [Kaylor and Polley] were far from assuming that everybody was interested, as they were. They would welcome questions of theological meaning, and at that point particularly in the late '50s and early '60s, there was something known as the Biblical Theology Movement, and so they were scholarly in tune with that the way other scholars were dealing with questions of meaning and authority of Scripture and that sort of thing.

I think the piece though that characterized Max and David's work was that they both were very political. David especially on the activist front, but Max cared a lot about it too from his work with prophets. Generally, whenever you teach "for" something, you're also teaching "against" something else, and they were particularly concerned with the ways in which fundamentalist Christianity in the South translated into certain political postures that affected stances on race, war, and the like. So, they used their historical criticism pretty strongly, as a way of combating what they thought the difficulties of uncritical fundamentalism would be.

Then I came in trained largely as a literary critic, so in a Venn-diagram, I could share with them some historical things, we occupied that middle, but I had been trained as a literary critic primarily. I was writing a dissertation on irony, and so the kinds of questions I would ask, and the ways that I approached texts were kind of different.

If they were looking for the ways in which you could use the text to see behind it, to the ways in which early Christianity or ancient Israel had understood their religion, that was what they did.

I looked more at the kind of world that the text itself created imaginatively and pursued that kind of an angle. I shared with them a concern for hermeneutics. The literary perspective gave me some ways of talking about hermeneutics-- ways of interpreting, ways of translating text from one situation to another-- that gave me, I think, more arrows in my quiver than they may have had had for that.

The three of us taught a strong set of courses, and [I] valued their collegiality, their mentorship greatly and felt that we were good for each other. We had not been to school in the same time or the same places.

We didn't do the same things, but it felt more or less like we were on the same team finally.

SS: Could you speak to some of the changes you've seen within the Religious Studies department while you were here?

KP: Oh, yeah. So, if we do the math, I'm in my thirty-seventh year? Actually, if I could lead into that?

SS: Yeah.

KP: I mentioned that when Bill Mahony came, he was the first tenure-track position in Comparative Religions, non-visiting, and that was already a change.

I think one of the things that attracted the department to my coming was not just the Biblical Studies piece, but my ability to do courses in Judaism.

So, between Bill's work in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam all three of which he taught-- he sort of got everything else for a while—and my additions in Jewish literature and thought, the department, in '82, was actually stretching.

It was not just a question of, “What can you come to do for us in terms of Biblical studies?” but, what else can you do? That was not uncommon for graduate education in the '70s, anticipating that you would have a college of appointment in a Liberal Arts department, would value and emphasize versatility.

So, at a place like Vanderbilt, if you had, say, if you were doing the New Testament program, you would have also qualified in Hebrew language, methods in Hebrew Bible and would have been prepared to teach that.

You also were required to have a strong, I guess you would call it a “minor area” of concentration, which for me was the was Jewish literature and thought. So, all that was on my transcript. I'd had coursework and exams in Rabbinics and medieval Jewish thought and in Modern and contemporary Jewish thought, as well as a kind of literary sensibility, that would have had some traction, so they knew that, and could have anticipated that I was going to be bringing that.

I think it was one of the things that I had that other candidates would not have, and at that point there had not been courses in Judaism. The closest that would have occurred in '55 Will Herberg, who had written a book called *Protestantism, Christianity, and Judaism*. It's kind of a classic in American sociology of religion. Max had known that book and thought it would be helpful to try to construct a course around it. And so, he had a course on American Protestantism, Judaism, and Catholicism, and it was about what you would expect: a kind of orientation to what those traditions look like in current American culture, and then Max also had some interest in the Holocaust.

We weren't far past the beginning stages of Holocaust theology and some literature. Wiesel's *Night* would have been out four or five years earlier and that sort of thing.

But nobody had offered courses discreetly in Judaism.

So, when I came, within my first two years, I offered a course in Jewish and Christian parable literature, which had parables of Jesus, Rabbinic parables, parables of Kierkegaard, Kafka and the Hassidim, so you had Rabbinic and Hasidic parables all of a sudden having their way.

I did as soon as I could, which again would have been those first two or three years, a course in Modern Jewish Thought, which went from the Enlightenment forward.

So, you had Mendelssohn and then the Buber and Rosenzweig generation, the time of reform, Fackenheim, and we'd do something current, and then I started at the same time, a course in modern Jewish literature, modern Jewish fiction.

So from between '82 and '85 all of a sudden we had two courses devoted to Jewish literature and thought, one had a lot of Jewish material, and even when I was doing Biblical work, I did a whole lot of Midrashic work as well, so there was a kind of cast to the way I was teaching.

You add those in with Mahony's courses and all of a sudden the department within a few years looked quite different than it had in, say, '81, where the courses reflected a college version of a Christian seminary program largely, which wasn't unique here. Most college departments were like that. You would have had somebody in theology, somebody in ethics, some biblical stuff, and a historian of Christian thought. That general mix organized the department's curriculum in a particular way.

So, when the parables course started, what category are you going to put that in? You know, we had these distribution requirements within the major, and they were like a line of Biblical courses, a line of theology courses, and a line of ethical and historical courses, and you added another line to deal with non-Western-- they would have called non-Western at that point—faith traditions.

But something like the parables, yeah, it had Biblical Studies in it, but it was a lot more than that. It had some theology in it, but it was not really that. And so, it caused us to start to rethink categories or generate conversation about that actually those requirements or distinctions meant. [...]

We had the lines but didn't know what to call them. That was the sign of change though, and all of a sudden like on that theology line, you had modern Jewish thought, so instead of Barth and Tillich, a student could have met that by studying Buber, Rosenzweig, and Heschel. So those were early changes, and it created a kind of momentum, slow momentum. Momentum is usually slow around here [...]. But, we began to add eventually specialists in East Asia, specialists in religion and science, all the way up to now specialists in Islam.

And you don't stay doing [simply] what you what you came to do. People grow. And so, you know, we've seen our interests diversify.

The biggest change you asked about the department over the, the near forty-years has been in terms of the diversification of the curriculum, particular attention to multiple religious traditions with some depth attention to those, methodological diversification.

When I came, almost everybody was an historian or a theologian. Now all of a sudden, you know, then we had literary oriented people, and [pause] semiotics was in. Discussion of other methods in history of religion came to bear phenomenology. So, we became methodologically diverse as well.

DK: And you became the Religious Studies department.

KP: Yes, you know, that's become really very recent within...

DK: The last three or four years?

KP: Yeah, yeah certainly no further back than that, and that's kind of a tip of the hat to this diversification. It also suggests something about methodology and approach that Religious Studies identifies the department with kind of an outsider's approach.

It's not that you don't make the move to the inside to consider what an insider's view would be, but you're aware of the distinction. And so, if you're self-conscious about that, you are not making assumptions about the inside that you don't have, and makes clear that one's not doing a religious version of insider baseball when you when you teach this stuff.

SS: Did you feel like Jewish students were particularly drawn to your course offerings?

KP: I thought you were going to ask that at some point. It's a good question.

Um. It would have been hard for me to say early in my career who the Jewish students were.

Nobody was going around with a name tag on and identified. And particularly in the '80s and '90s, it would have been a hard place to be observant, so any Jewish students we would have there would be exceptions, and I can think of exceptions, but in general, they would have been fairly assimilated in an almost self-selecting way.

But I would get interesting surprises in that Modern Jewish Thought course. The course deals with problems of tradition in modernity. A motivating tension of the course is what happens to traditional life when it moves into a modern context?

And to sensitize students to that issue [pause] I found it very helpful to use Stella Suberman's memoir, *The Jew Store*, which is the story of her family's emigration and setting up a juice store in rural Tennessee. The version of modernity at that point is rural Southeast America, and they've come from observant families, so the tradition-modernity confrontation there is, is really rich. It wasn't unusual for a student to pull me aside or stop in the office and say, "this really reminds me of my grandparents." And you actually have a sort of researched pattern, in the way in which traditional interest skips a generation.

So, the grandparents may be traditionally oriented, the parents move away, and then the grandchildren reclaim that-- that's a pretty recognizable pattern.

So I was getting some interest like that, but I would have to say that I think the greatest interest didn't fall out in terms of religious affiliation, as much as being drawn to thinkers like Buber and Heschel-- that they seem to get at fundamental issues and perspectives in a way that were attractive.

The literature course, also, was worked in that same way. The year I started teaching, Chaim Potok, who was still a thing at that point, had come to speak at Davidson. John Kuykendall had just become president, and I guess had heard him lecture and read or had got to know him or something but facilitated his coming to speak.

SS: What year was that?

KP: '84, '85. Something like that? And so here was Potok doing his talk about culture-culture confrontations, and you know basically doing his talk version of everything you would find from *My Name is Asher Lev*, which I taught, and *The Chosen* and *The Promise*, which I enjoyed reading for pleasure.

But *My Name is Asher Lev* was a strong novel, and what was interesting is that people in class would not know the world of Asher Lev or wouldn't likely have ever seen a Hassid. It would have seemed exotic, but the way in which Potok wrote was in such a particular way. He conveyed particularity-- the particularity of culture. I can remember him speaking in his talk about how particularity calls to particularity.

So those who had never seen a Hassid were finding themselves identifying and relating to the world out of its particularity, which really is a great lesson that much more alienation or difficulties ensue from generalities than from particulars; there is something winning about particularity, and *My Name is Asher Lev* was a strong case in point that the students didn't need to be Jewish or know that world.

What they needed to do was know themselves in a particular way to see the equivalent version, and then the novel became very meaningful to them.

I would say something like that has continued throughout.

There are times I will get students who would self-identify as Jewish and want to know more about their tradition. There are times in which I may have somebody who is dating somebody who's Jewish, and... Seriously! Just one... last time I did *Modern Jewish Thought*, "This relationship feels serious. I want to know more, more about it!" and I'm not sure how this is going to help but we'll give it a give it a go! General intellectual interest and curiosity. So, it's kind of all over the place and hard to know, but I wouldn't say the majority of students who taken those courses have identified out of a strong Jewish. My guess is part of that is there may be a sense of "that's not what I want to want to do." That, had "I wanted to do that," I might have done that someplace else. Or, maybe in the same way in which we see it in students in the department, there's a kind of attraction to what is not your own, that traditions that are not your own sometimes lure much more.

So, I mean I've got in mind a number of Jewish students who were serious. Some serious in ways that were observant, some serious in ways that weren't observant. I've got in mind students who were from assimilated families, and a lot that came out of general curiosity and interest. It'd be hard to characterize really what the constituency has been.

DK: So, about students who related to someone like Chaim Potok, who don't necessarily know or aren't familiar with the kind of like Hasidic world-- what would you say their level of cultural fluency or even knowledge of anything Jewish is? That is, cultural or religious Judaism in general, not just something as particular as Hassidism.

KP: It would sort of depend on where they grew up, and, and what their experience was, and generally I would say the cultural fluency was low or the exposure was low. That's gradually increased decade by decade. I guess we've all lived in our sort of pocketed neighborhoods, and the Southeast was one of those is one of those in some ways, but the New South also started to change.

I don't mean to suggest we were just recruiting in the South. But in the 80s, all colleges were still more regional than you would find them now. So, if someone had grown up in Atlanta or Charleston, where there are serious sized Jewish communities, they may have gone to school and had some fluency, had friends that had got them involved and came to know Jews, know a little about it. But it would have been pretty hit or miss early on.

And that's where the gap is. In the kind of courses I could do or was willing to do weren't the kind of courses that were "Jewish appreciation" or "Intro to these are your holidays and this is how you do them". I mean the courses I would do would be philosophical, theological, and literary in very critical ways, so say we were dealing with Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, which takes its cues from certain holidays, very theological philosophical book, but uses certain holidays as a platform, you know, those students would not know what he was talking about at first, and so there would have to be some kind of ways of catching up. So, it wasn't just the lack of knowing the Hasidic neighborhood of Asher Lev. There would be low cultural fluency, generally.

DK: Did Jewish students ever come to us at the classroom and say like this experience is difficult for me, or I just had this moment where someone said that such and such to me?

KP: Uhh... I was friends in the way that a professor can be friends with students, close to a number of Jewish students... I don't have memory of them talking to me about problems, and it surprises me a little, because I assumed, when I think of it, that those problems had to have been there. It couldn't have been an easy place to be, and I was close enough to them, and I felt they took me in confidence in ways that would have made it possible for them to say those things, but I don't have a lot of memory of them.

And, you know in some ways, if you think particularly in you know, like the '80s and '90s, many of the Jewish students that came here may well have been out of a desire for further assimilation and distance from Judaism, and this would have been a very good place to do that.

So, in that case, they would not be troubled by some of the things that might trouble a current student with more cultural fluency, more conscious of identity issues, and in the context where religious particularity is more elevated.

The conversation in the '80s and '90s just really wasn't like that. To put it in a little bit of

context, this is this may be more context than you want, but it's an interesting point in thinking about my own development and how my education proceeded.

In the 50s-- this is a generation of my teachers-- there were only four professors of Jewish Studies in North American universities. You had Harry Wolfson at Harvard, Salo Baron at Columbia, Walter Fischel at Berkeley, and Lou Silberman at Vanderbilt.

So that, in terms of where would you-- unless you were part of a Jewish community or living in proximity to one-- you weren't going to get that in the schools. "Jewish Studies" was not really a category.

The first doctoral program in Jewish Studies outside of Jewish seminaries like JTS or Hebrew Union would have been at Brown under Jacob Neusner's influence, and that program flourished, it was pretty idiosyncratic, but that was the first one and that's in the in the 70s.

So you're not going to come into a department or program where people are talking about "Jewish Studies" as a category. You might have had somebody trained in Jewish history in a History department, Jewish literature in a literature department, but it really was not a category in its own right in the universities even in the '70s, so I considered myself very lucky to be at one of the places where I could have the minor concentration in it and get a good foundational education and trust that when I got a job, I would be able to work it in.

To think of that in a period of 70 years, going from four North American University professors teaching what we would recognize as something like Jewish Studies, to now-- is it's quite a contextual difference.

DK: To go back to when you first got to Davidson-- So, your transcript is pretty nakedly, pretty transparently influenced by Jewish thought, Jewish things but you're also four years out of The Linden Affair.

Do you remember, first of all, how people were talking about Linden? Or whether that was raised with you in anyway? Or do you feel like-- not to posit too much of a theory-- but do you feel like some of the hold up in your hiring process was almost a kind of delayed anxiety?

KP: There may have been some anxiety under the covers with it.

Nobody was talking about it to me, perhaps for good reason. I did not learn about The Linden Affair until I was already here, and I don't think I heard about it here. I think I heard about it when I went to a conference, and somebody said, "Well how, how are the Jewish state of affairs at Davidson now?" And so I got a kind of quick education, but it wasn't in play during the interview, and it wasn't something people were talking about to me in those first years.

It may have been, you know, I was really an unkosher animal in more than one way.

I mean I was just as categorically odd because I had the expertise to teach some of these things and a clear interest, which would have been transparent on the transcript and was transparent in the way I talked about it. I think my desire to continue to work in that area was

Was clear, and to the credit of everybody in the department, nobody ever got in my way, and not only did they not get my way they encouraged. It was greenlit the whole way! And but the oddity I would not have presented the problem that Linden did because I was affiliated, in serious ways, with a Christian community. And had those bona fides as well.

But there may well have been some underlying anxiety just the aftershock of having dealt with that. So, what are we getting into when we have someone here who looks like he's going to extend teaching in Jewish courses?

DK: And not to draw a comparison between these two incidents, but for someone who ended up having a swastika drawn on his door...

KP: Yeah.

DK: Can you speak a little to that?

KP: Yeah, you know that's an interesting thing, what Dahlia's referred to.

Early in my career, I can sort of date it because I remember what office I was in before the Chambers' renovation. I was out, my first two years, out in the hall in a windowless closet, which is now our mail room.

But I had a poster up advertising an essay contest or a conference of some sort, with a Jewish theme and somebody had written had drawn-- this is an odd thing-- but a very small minuet swastika on it, and part of the oddity was why such a small swastika?

I mean doesn't it rate even if a full-sized swastika if you're going to go out, why like that?

What students would not have known, and what faculty would not have known... They would have had no way of knowing what my own religious affiliation was one way or another and it's often a natural assumption or common assumption I should say that you assume somebody's teaching out of their own experience or out of their own affiliation, and that wasn't the case here, but somebody may well have inferred that because I taught what I did that meant that I was Jewish, and students will often ask me, a midway through a course, are you? Are you not?

And I may well have confused them, because particularly at that point in time, I was still teaching some New Testament courses. And I don't know what they would have inferred from... from that... I don't know the intent of that swastika. I didn't take it as benign. I remember being angry about it and also sort of intrigued at how small of what the rhetorical intent was to both draw it, and draw it small... And there was a little circle around it, so it's like "I've drawn it small, but I want you to just see it!"

So it was it was odd, and you know the this sort of antisemitic vectors that a community can experience can be aimed in a confusing sort of light, not just to those who are Jewish but to those who seem to express overt care for it, and I would have been in obvious ways in that group, I would assume. And so I assume we had a little bit of nasty scribbling going on going on with that.

SS: Do you remember any other particular incidents of antisemitic hate speech anything or just types of ignorance on the part of the students or even maybe on the part of the faculty?

KP: Antisemitic feels too strong a term to use other than in soft ways.

There would be more expressions of things to me that seemed ignorant rather than intentionally malicious. Ignorance of certain things or assumptions about... how to put this... it seemed too easy to make assumptions about what a person's religious convictions were from what they taught and that was across the board.

Why do we assume we know what somebody's religious orientation is any more than any other kind of orientation? It's as if the assumption was everybody had some sort of identifying marker that could be read. So, the kinds of ignorance or presumptuousness that I would have in mind was something that sort of felt presumptuous-- that you're acting as if you know something about me that you don't.

Or that you seem to know or care about my affiliation in a way that seems irrelevant at the time, and to go back to the earlier point about cultural fluency, I mean the lack of that means that there's all kinds of potholes out there that people would step in.

As an illustration, and this isn't of a particular, well I don't know if it is or isn't, but it's an example of how odd the fluency can be:

My very first year here I was teaching a course on Paul. I was setting out maybe first or second day something about Paul's world and Paul's Judaism and was talking about the confusion or the tension between Jews and Gentiles in Paul's world. And there was a student who kept thinking that I was saying Jews and "genitals" and everybody in the class you know kept on laughing and the student couldn't get it. It was just one of those odd moments, and she was a very-- she was a very shy first-year student—and you could tell she just had not gotten it.

The word Gentile was not known. She was smart enough to know the other one, but couldn't figure out, and I don't know if I had mentioned, you know, in Paul's world we were talking about controversies over circumcision, so it could have happened. But it was a kind of language miscommunication that just shows you cannot assume fluency of any sort. So, I mean I would have thought I could have talked about Jews and Gentiles in a way.

DK: She'd never seen herself as a Gentile, if you will?

KP: No, no. That's right. And, you know, what a way to start your first class. For her and me both. I don't have much experience or memories of people confiding in me with things that I

would recognize as blatantly antisemitic nor uhh... I wasn't the kind of faculty who was going to ask permission about what to teach. I didn't assume I needed to but wasn't about to, but I never experienced any pullback from anybody in the department at all. I just experienced... greenlights all the all the way.

And I think that's where I would have experienced it at the level of terms of what the curriculum was, what I was doing in the classroom and that never came up. The department was not like that at all. And we just assumed as a department that nobody else really understood what we were doing anyway and had like a six-year-old's view of religion most of the time, and well, whatever the religion was they weren't going to... They weren't studying with us. They didn't know what we were doing, likely assumed it was Christian nurture of some sort, and if that was the assumption we just more or less had to let it let it go. It was absurd.

DK: Well, I was going to say, even last semester [\[around the unmasking of students with neo-Nazi affiliation\]](#) you felt like Jewish students were coming to you and asking for some sort of personal help really.

KP: Yes. And maybe it was the overtness of the events last year that allowed that to happen. It was not unusual, the conversations I had.

I always have conversations with students in class, and they're often pertinent, personal, and revealing, so I was not surprised that any student came to me to talk after something like that.

The surprise was what the precipitating event had been. And I could certainly talk to them in terms of like trying to relate it to things we were doing in class. And could speak, you know, broadly in that way. I also recognize that if the need was to talk to somebody that had more affiliation in the game than I did. I understood that as well, but the conversations... I appreciated students trusting me to come and talk about those things in the same way that you appreciate enjoy the conversations generally. It's just that we had all of a sudden, an event that seemed more overt not so precedented in my experience. So, we had now a defined topic to talk about rather than identity in more habitual and customary ways.

DK: Do you feel like...well. Do you think...well. Over your time here at Davidson has there been like a comparable event that has really just shaken campus to its core? Aside from national events, like someone's assassination or 9/11 for instance?

KP: Not in my time, I don't think, but if you go back just before my time co-education, integration, and issues around the Vietnam War, all would have had that same potential where there was need for a lot of consciousness raising and serious reflection on the relation of education to our identities and what we're doing in those.

You know, in terms of Vietnam War, you had required ROTC here that at that time, so that was a huge issue. Integration was a huge issue. Co-education belongs on the same the same list. So, it's not that the history of the college, since the 60s, has been without precipitating vents that were critical and conscious, conscience disturbing, but they had that kind of 60ish flavor to them. I guess I would have to say it's been more common underground, I suspect, during my time.

SS: Great! In the interest of time and our camera's battery. Is there anything else you'd like to add to the to the record while we have you?

KP: Just frankly that I mean what a privilege it's been to be able to teach Jewish literature and thought in this in this place. To have seen the ways in which it's made difference in student's lives, Jewish and not. And not that this is the litmus test, but there were two students that got so serious about it that they converted. One of them is now getting a graduate degree in Hebrew studies, and the other's a serious Jewish advocate as a lawyer.

And those events were interesting to me, but just the ability to teach materials that meant so much to me as a student and wanting to share them and to have the chance to do that here has been one of the real gifts from which I'm grateful. And the conversations that it's enabled-- in good times and in more trying times-- or even further the chance to share with you guys some of these reminiscences means a lot.