

Finnish scholar's visa ordeal continues: The case of Veli-Matti Karkkainen

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 5, 2004](#) issue

A Finnish theologian, forced by U.S. immigration officials to leave the country despite holding a tenured professorship at Fuller Theological Seminary, is back at the California campus after only six weeks' absence. Whether the scholar can become a permanent resident, however, is uncertain, said a lawyer who called the dispute with government officials "a sad political fight."

The case of Veli-Matti Karkkainen, a multilingual and prolific scholar in Pentecostal and ecumenical studies, sparked dismay among educational leaders, including those at Fuller (by far the largest U.S. seminary, with more than 4,000 students).

Fuller faulted misinterpretations of the post 9-11 rules after federal officials this summer denied not only Karkkainen's application for permanent residency but also the right of him, his wife and their two daughters to stay in the country. Some U.S. immigration offices even regarded the interdenominational seminary's tax-exempt status as suspect at one point in a series of regional and federal appeals.

"Colleagues from all over the world have expressed their disappointment at our visa ordeal," the professor said. "Many constituencies with whom I have worked, such as the World Council of Churches, have shown a lot of support."

Karkkainen and his family returned in early September on limited visas, and he expects that a long application process for work permits will make him the sole breadwinner for many months. "It's one step forward and two steps backward," he said. "In a sense we are in the same place as we were four years ago when Fuller invited me on the faculty."

Fuller has about 70 foreign students, full-time and part-time, on its Pasadena campus. "We want to increase our number of international scholars, but you can't

hire people readily if they think it can only be a temporary post,” said Fred Messick, a spokesman for the evangelical seminary.

New federal guidelines requested by the Bush administration require that a “religious worker” must belong to the denomination of the sponsoring institution, but Fuller has no such exclusive ties. Karkkainen’s prior experience as a professor of theology and a college official in his native land apparently was not sufficient qualification in the eyes of the government.

The situation is not unique, said Diane Winston, who holds the Knight Chair in Media and Religion at the University of Southern California. “Immigrants across the board face strict new guidelines when applying for residency,” she wrote in an op-ed article for the *Dallas Morning News*. “Visa-seeking Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims also are encountering off-the-mark questions and narrow-gauge rulings about past activities and current affiliations.”

Before Karkkainen returned to Finland in August, Howard Loewen, dean of Fuller’s School of Theology, expressed bewilderment that such a widely published scholar of religion would not be approved to teach at a seminary training ministers and missionaries—even with government efforts that he said at times resembled “Draconian measures” in screening for terrorists.

Lawyers for Fuller helped Karkkainen to get readmitted to the U.S. by asking him to file what is called a nonimmigrant H1-B visa in which the tests for “religious worker” status do not apply. “For myself and my wife those visas are valid for three years,” the professor said. One daughter returned under that category and a younger one on a student visa.

Fuller has refiled Karkkainen’s religious worker visa petition on the basis of his four-year experience on the Pasadena faculty to bolster his case for a green card, or permanent residency, said Heidi Berger-Trombi, a Los Angeles attorney handling the scholar’s case. “The second part, a backup plan, is to file a different type of petition, with the U.S. employer sponsoring him as an outstanding professor,” she said.

“It’s going to be a long fight,” said the attorney. “I don’t know whether anything is going to change; it’s not so much the regulations as the interpretations of them.”