

Memorial Minute for Wendell S. Dietrich, 1931-2017  
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One day during my doctoral studies I headed over to the Religious Studies office in search of my dissertation director, Professor Dietrich. He was not to be found in his office, nor in the common room of the department; not found in the coffee lounge nor the seminar room, fronting on to the old campus of Brown University. I did not find him in any of those favorite haunts; but I was not worried. I knew where to find him: Professor Dietrich would be in the library. I headed out the front door, kitty-corner across the intersection, and into the Rockefeller library —and there in the midst of the recent journals I found him, deep into the latest issue of a theological quarterly. That was the example, the life and the intellectual vocation of Wendell Dietrich. He was an academic in the deepest and truest sense. Always he had read the recent article in his field and in yours; always he knew the forth-coming volume in an important series; always he knew the comings and goings of major figures in the world of Christian and Judaic studies. He breathed the air of the university, and he invited all of us who knew, respected, and loved him, to enter that fascinating and complex world, the world of intellectual labor.

Wendell was an astute reader of texts. In my early years of study at Brown, I thought I should make progress on Albrecht Ritschl's massive third volume, *The Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*. Wendell graciously lent me his personal copy, so that I might make such progress as I was able, at leisure. I did not know Wendell well then, so imagine my astonishment when I opened the volume, to discover not one but two sets of full, careful, seaching comments in the margins of the text, each neatly labelled, precisely documented! Such a thoroughness, I was to learn, belonged to the very definition of Wendell's stature as an academic. He studied a text; he learned it; he mastered it. He showed his students what an intellectual tradition was all about, how to respect it, how to innovate over it, how to locate it as an historical artifact within a material and cultural world that is rich beyond compare. There was nothing shoddy, nothing cheap or breezy, in the way Wendell took up a text. As a reader he was relentless. I have found myself over the years tempted from time to time to cut corners in what I read or think I should read; to assume I know all that; to skim and condense. Wendell, I think, must never have suffered that temptation; or had utterly conquered it. He was careful; he was precise; but he was expansive, too. That care in study purchased him an enormous cultural landscape in which he thought, taught, and wrote.

Wendell's life work lay in the interaction and conflict between post-Biblical Judaism and Christian modernism. He taught for many years in the Judaic Studies program at Brown, and his pro-seminar on Modern Religious Thought was a rite of passage in both the Religious Studies and Judaic Studies programs. Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig were central figures in his research, and his monograph, Cohen and Troeltsch: Ethical Monotheistic Religion and Theory of Culture [Brown Judaic Studies, 1986], outlined the aims of an ambitious research program: the inheritance of the Prophets of Israel by the cultural elites of central Europe. Wendell envisioned this program from his earliest years of study. His doctoral work at Yale concerned the

ecclesiology of Karl Barth, already an ecumenical and broadly cultural analysis. At Brown, Wendell deepened his study of the architects of the modern, and expanded the frontiers to include pioneers of the German Haskalah, beginning with Moses Mendelsohn. Wendell welcomed the modern and the post-modern —not with open arms, exactly, but with a critical and discerning eye; always he winnowed the wheat from the chaff. In his teaching, his doctoral supervision, and his research, he gave only the first-fruits, the best.

I join his many students, his colleagues and family, in grieving his loss. He demonstrated and lived a scholarly life, deep and rich, that opened out to a world filled with friendship and family, most especially his wonderful wife of 52 years, Betsy, and he lived with joy even amid the costly illness that weighed heavily on his last years. I miss him; and give thanks to a Provident God for his life and for his witness.

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