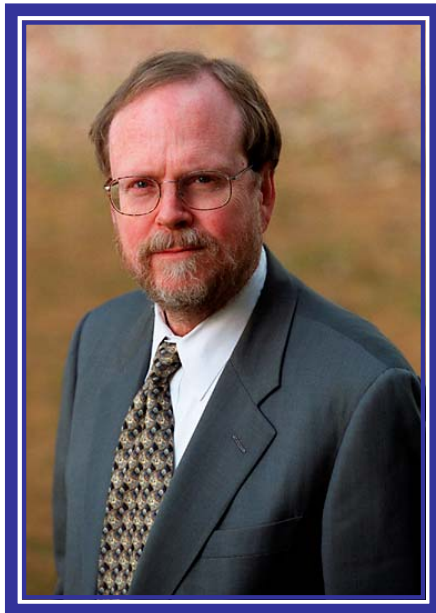


Mark Edwards on Religious Conversation among Faculty in Higher Education

By Tracy Schier

This edited conversation is the first of a series of three conversations that will focus on the role of vocation in higher education. Slated for later in 2008 are conversations with Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass; and Bill Placher.



Mark U. Edwards, Jr., is Senior Advisor to the Dean at Harvard Divinity School where he also served as academic dean from 2003 to 2007 and as Professor of the History of Christianity from 1987 to 1994. From 1994 to 2000, he was president of St. Olaf College in Minnesota. Earlier faculty positions were at Wellesley College and Purdue University. Edwards' Ph.D. is from Stanford University.

Edwards has written widely on Martin Luther and the German Reformation. Among his books are *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (University of California Press, 1994) which explores the West's first "mass media campaign" and Luther's pivotal role as both subject and object in the struggle for the hearts and minds of sixteenth-century Christians. Edwards' "other"

discipline is computer science. While at Wellesley and Purdue he taught computer science courses and has developed three commercial software programs, including *ForComment*, a pioneer "groupware" product that was designated one of the best products of 1987 by *PC Magazine*.

Edwards’ research interests in the role of religion and vocation in higher education began during his St. Olaf presidency. This conversation is prompted by his book *Religion on Our Campuses: a Professor’s Guide to Communities, Conflicts, and Promising Conversations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). In addition to the book, he has written several articles on the topic, including “Private Belief, Public Scholarship” in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (Autumn 2006). He is currently at work on a book entitled *Having a Stake, Making a Contribution: Religious Perspectives in American Higher Education* which explores how religious and spiritual perspectives influence disciplinary scholarship and is influenced in turn.

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Q. At the risk of oversimplifying or stereotyping, can you describe the type of faculty member most likely to converse with colleagues about religion?

A. Most faculty members are curious about learning new things. I guess that’s why they are where they are. So practically any faculty member is a prospective conversation partner. People who are at the extremes, however—either hostile to religion, or the other extreme, only interested in proselytizing or religious apologetics—are least likely to be interested in engaging in true conversations that can lead to mutual understanding of religion and religious beliefs and their proper role, if any, in higher education. Many times faculty members who are personally religious feel marginalized on campus. They are natural candidates to start the conversation, but, these faculty must be willing to listen and not proselytize; they must be willing to understand why colleagues are resistant and to take that resistance seriously.

Q. We all know that religious conversation does not come readily to many faculty members. What are they afraid of?

A. They are not afraid, but they do have objections that are moral, ethical, and intellectual. From the moral standpoint, they reject anything that seems to discriminate or coerce, anything that rejects or seems to marginalize others. Faculties know that the history of higher education includes a great deal of religious discrimination. In the U.S. that extended well into the 20th century. Just think of how Catholics and Jews, for example, were excluded. Even after

discriminatory quotas for Catholic and Jewish students were done away with, it took many years before faculty positions opened up. The point is to say that there is historical memory at work here, and an understandable tendency to look askance at anything that might test the diversity that came with increasing secularity. From an ethical standpoint, most academic disciplines consider it professionally unethical to bring religious considerations or perspectives into disciplinary scholarship; it is seen as subjective or a violation of disciplinary standards for evidence or argumentation. The intellectual objections come largely (but not exclusively) from the perspective of metaphysical naturalism—that assumes that no entities or events lie beyond the scope of scientific explanation. There is also a psychological dimension. A willingness to own up to the ultimate meaninglessness and indifference of the cosmos is seen by many faculty as a sign of maturity and courage; a reliance on religious explanation is seen as a surrender to childish wishes and fears.

In my book I recommend conversation in the sense advocated by the philosopher Michael Oakeshott and the historian Martin Marty. Oakeshott suggests that in a conversation there is no “truth” to be discovered and no proposition to be proved. The goal of a conversation is not to win or avoid losing an argument, but rather it is to seek better understanding and empathy for each other’s perspectives. Marty points out that arguments seek the “right answers”; conversations, the “best questions.” Oakeshott has a wonderful definition. He calls conversation “an unrehearsed intellectual adventure.” At issue, at least at the outset, is to have “an unrehearsed intellectual adventure” about these moral, ethical, and intellectual objections.

Q. Your own experiences allow you to compare religiously affiliated higher education with secular higher education. What do you see when you compare such institutions?

A. One of the most interesting things is to see how much faculties are all alike—they have all been heavily formed in the handful of secular research universities that train doctoral students. I find that there is as much difference of opinion among faculty at religiously affiliated schools (including those institutions that require statements of adherence to religious tenets of a particular faith tradition) as there is at secular colleges and universities. The reality is that there is a lot of diversity among all faculties.

I have pointed out in my writing that there is an irony at work in higher education today. Many faculty have thought that as colleges and universities become more secular and diverse, they would also become less religious. What has actually happened is that with increase secularity and diversity, minorities, including

religious minorities, feel less threatened by majorities with their orthodoxies. It has become safer for people to do their own thing, even their own religious or spiritual “thing.”

Q. At the risk of engaging in amateur psychology, can you talk about the effects that disciplinary compartmentalization has on faculty members?

A. The whole point of doctoral training and professional advancement through the ranks, from instructor through full professor, is to acquire the mindset and judgment of a professional. In this process, a professional acquires a trained eye and a seasoned judgment that can seem almost like magic to the non-professional. Consider how a professional artist can see more in a painting than the ordinary person with an untrained eye. So too, the academic professional has tacit understandings that are acquired through decades of study. The upside is that the professional sees what non-professionals cannot see; the downside is that acuity in one area may lead to blindness in another.

And we know that most academic disciplines ask their budding professionals to view their subject matter from a neutral distance, to avoid subjectivity, to forego value judgments. When this distancing becomes second nature, it can be hard to give credence to religious perspectives, however germane. Think of the methodological mindsets of some social scientists or economists who see everything through the lens of rational choice theory. This is a powerful methodology but it can easily overlook the empirical fact that much of human life is not rational and many choices and beliefs cannot be adequately explained by interest and calculation.

Academic professionalization can make life difficult for those academics who are personally religious. How do they reconcile their personal and professional convictions? Compartmentalization is a frequent strategy—we think or say one thing at church and something else at the lab. This works but is not a very satisfactory strategy for academics who are dedicated to the pursuit of understanding and even truth.

Q. Can you describe what an effective faculty seminar premised on conversation looks like and sounds like?

A. I have certain rules for conversation. First, everyone is equal; everyone has a right to his or her say. Second, conversations are situated, involving specific individuals in specific contexts. To get at this situatedness, conversationalists

often swap stories. Sharing stories is crucial to good conversations. Third, it is okay in conversations to share feelings as well as ideas. In scholarship we may try to bracket our feelings but not in conversations. This is really important. If we fail to include the emotional with the notional, we are likely to miss the real benefit of conversations. Fourth, participants must engage in good listening. There must be opportunity for feedback and questioning. Fifth, conversations on controversial topics such as religious discourse on campus are best when there is a diversity of perspectives represented in the conversation. But with this diversity comes potential danger. People of differing ranks, for example instructors as well as full professors, and people of differing fields should know that this is a place where they can speak safely. This can be hardest for minorities or people who are junior in rank—any instance where there is a perceived difference in the power structure.

Q. Are you aware of a growing number of faculties taking the initiative to have conversations such as you suggest in the book?

A. I don't see it happening as much as I would like. There are so many barriers to conversation. Thanks to the rise of the religious right and to 9/11 there is a sense of threat in the academy that hasn't been felt for a long time. This is especially true for gays and lesbians, for liberals, and, perhaps ironically, for evangelicals. Things are a bit better than they were, say, twenty or thirty years ago, but religion remains a “conversation stopper” in many academic settings.

Q. What impact, in the big picture, do you see faculty reticence about religious matters having on students?

A. An underlying assumption of the book is that in order to help students think intelligently about religion's bearing on various academic matters, faculty attitudes have to change first. If faculty learn how to converse respectfully with each other about the pros and cons of religious perspectives, they are better able to do the same with students. They can also share tips with each other about what works and does not work, where the pitfalls are and where the pedagogical gains.

Religion is everywhere, both in and outside the academy. At Harvard, for example there are active groups for just about every religious tradition that one can think of. Reluctance to address religion in part means that students can become sophisticated about all other topics but become no more knowledgeable about the bearing of their own religious views on various matters or about the

bearing of traditions and practices and beliefs of others. In most colleges and universities there is a religious studies course, but not all students take such a class and religious studies itself cannot bear the whole burden. Faculty who won't deal with religious perspectives that have bearing on their academic discipline are probably missing a teachable moment that can benefit both students and themselves.

We sometimes forget that American education was historically about character formation. Now education is more about passing on knowledge and skills. But we need to be aware that we, as professors, are shaping character whether we like it or not. Students are at a time in their lives when they are becoming more aware of their own convictions and their own abilities. They have to make difficult decisions about their future, their vocation, and about the kinds of lives they hope to lead. This is very hard work for them and we sometimes forget that we, as the professors and mentors, have also gone through such formative times in our own lives. As I have said many times in my writing, it can be both disingenuous and unhelpful to students if we pretend to them that, in our own formation and decision-making, we were not influenced and shaped by religious or other deep convictions.

Faculty members have to be prudent and develop a good sense of when the introduction of religious perspectives is appropriate or inappropriate, useful or harmful. The disciplines have standards that the faculty member must always keep in mind. And of course, the power imbalance between the teacher and his or her students needs always to be a consideration.

Q. Admittedly, some faculty members have better ability than others to personally negotiate the shoals: what to disclose? What to omit? What to avoid? What can be done, in a broad sense, to help individual faculty members recognize their abilities and their inabilities and develop a willingness to mature along these lines?

A. I think most faculty have a personal desire to be pedagogically effective, and learning from their colleagues is an invaluable way of increasing that effectiveness. Sharing classroom and other experiences with colleagues is a way that we learn from each other and pick up pedagogical strategies. Sometimes sharing involves taking a risk, especially on a controversial topic such as the introduction of religious perspectives into classroom teaching. But that risk can lead to useful feedback and to sharing what works and what doesn't work. Such sharing must be done without condescension or embarrassment. This, in itself, is a fertile area for faculty conversations if faculty are willing to tell their stories and share their experiences, both positive and not so positive.

Q. What impact do you see the growing influence of Islam in our world having on the way American academics approach the topic of religion in higher education?

A. Academics have long thought that all civilized people would eventually become secular. That has not happened. Instead, aggressive religious movements both at home and abroad seem to threaten many of the cherished values of the academy, like free inquiry and diversity of opinion. This has led some academics to become quite vocal about the dangers and irrationality of religion. There has been a remarkable spate of books advocating the “new atheism.” But for others—and I count myself among this group—the dangers posed by militant religion simply underscores the need for academics to be able to discuss honestly with each other the role of religious conviction on scholarship and teaching. If we can’t talk with each other about the pros and cons, how are we going to justify the values of the academy to skeptical outsiders? If we can’t converse with each other on this touchy topic, what are our chances of really preparing our students for the world into which they will soon be graduating?

Q. Do you see more faculty across the disciplines viewing their work as vocation? I know you are involved with the Lilly PTEV (Program for Theological Exploration of Vocation). Please talk about that also.

A. I have asked faculty across the country to recount how they became academics. Most faculty don’t use the language of vocation or calling, but they often see their work as professionals in terms that easily fit the classical notion of vocation. Most tell a story of how their particular intellectual talents and interests led them to their research and teaching interests. Many enjoyed learning themselves and wanted to help others learn. But they generally disagree among themselves on whether they were “called” to their profession, say, by God or by the nature of their innermost being, or whether it just happened, perhaps even by accident. The story that most of them tell does reflect what they value, what they find personally meaningful, and, perhaps less often, what they hope to accomplish with their lives.

The PTEV initiative has aimed to help students and their faculty to come to a better understanding of how one fits talents to needs, aligns values with what one does, and finds meaning in life. In my limited view, the PTEV initiative has had a profound effect on many students, and a more limited effect on faculty. Much

varies from campus to campus, from discipline to discipline, and from college to university, and from coast to heartland. I suspect and hope that those faculty who learned from the initiative will continue to help generations of students do better with vocational questions.

Q. As you look at how religious conversations are or are not happening on campuses, what surprises you?

A. It is harder than I thought to get faculty to talk. As I mentioned, faculty have moral, ethical, and intellectual reasons for being distrustful of any attempt to bring explicitly religious considerations back into the academic enterprise. These are not specious or silly reasons. Religion has justified discrimination, threatened academic freedom, and given comfort to anti-intellectualism. But I thought that times had changed sufficiently to overcome some of these objections. There is now much greater diversity and secularity on campus, opening space for minorities to express themselves. Academics now recognize much more than before the necessarily contingent nature of all knowledge claims. Religion has become once more an undeniable and inescapable fact of life on and off campus and around the world. It seemed to me that it was an opportune time to allow circumspective religious perspectives to reenter the academic world. But I may have been too optimistic about the new openness. On some campuses, productive conversations are now underway and, in fact, have been underway for years. But on other campuses, the resistance to religion in general has extended to a resistance to even discussing whether colleagues should discuss religion. I am sympathetic to this resistance—the dangers are real—but also disappointed because I think the dangers of not discussing religion are even more real. If we can't handle this within the academy, what are the prospects for our graduates within the larger and religiously contested world?

Q. If you were to give advice to a new faculty member—say, someone in physics—what would it be?

A. I would ask them to consider that there is a great deal of wisdom among all of their colleagues no matter what their discipline, and the best way to draw on that wisdom is through conversations. I would tell them that if they have such conversations that explore the role of deep conviction in scholarly and student lives, they will understand each other and their students better. If they can listen and learn from their colleagues, their own lives as teachers and scholars will be enriched, the life of the school will benefit, and faculty will become better

**“Mark Edwards on Religious Conversation
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from the website
Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/>

teachers and students better learners. And I would begin and end with the admonition that these conversations are meant to deepen understanding and empathy, not to arrive at “truth,” especially truth in ultimate matters. With a topic as divisive and irresolvable as religion, scholarship, and teaching, this alone is no mean achievement.