

# Stephen Haynes

## on Church-Related Higher Education

Interviewer: Tracy Schier



Stephen R. Haynes is the founding director, since 1995, of the Rhodes Consultation on the Future of the Church Related College. The Consultation's purpose is to identify outstanding faculty at an early stage in their careers and enhance their professional and personal lives by providing them with time, support, and resources to address the crucial issues facing church-related higher education. Since the program's start, faculty members representing 90 institutions have participated.

Haynes is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Rhodes College in Memphis. His doctorate, in religion and literature, is from Emory University, and he also holds an M.A. from Florida State University and an M.Div. from Columbia Theological Seminary. He is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Haynes is the author or editor of several books and many articles. He is editor of *Professing in the Postmodern Academy: Faculty and the Future of the Church-Related College* (Baylor University Press, 2002). Among his other recent books are *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford University Press, 2002), and *The Death of God Movement and the Holocaust: Radical Theology Encounters the Shoah*, edited with John K. Roth (Greenwood Press, 1999). Recent articles include "Never Again?: Remembering Rwanda," in the January 30, 2002 issue of *The Christian Century*, and "Ordinary Masculinity: Holocaust Scholarship and Gender Analysis" in the *Journal of Men's Studies* (Winter, 2001). In addition to continuing to direct the Rhodes Consultation, Haynes is serving in 2002-03 as director of the Wabash Center Consultation for Pre-Tenure Religion Faculty at Church-Related Colleges and Universities.

This conversation is edited.

**Q. One of the purposes of the Rhodes Consultation, since the very day that you started it, is to identify outstanding faculty at an early stage in their careers and to help them clarify their vocation in church-related higher education. How do you select the participants? How do you find “outstanding” young faculty?**

**A.** Potential participants, who must show promise as excellent scholars and teachers, are generally nominated by their deans. We are looking for people who are at a fairly early stage in their academic careers, at a time when their interests and often their identities are in flux. We are interested in persons who have chosen to teach at church-related institutions (whether or not they knew what they were getting themselves into) and have been at those institutions long enough to understand, or begin to understand, the promise and the challenges of church-related higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We have seen, with the 90 or more folks who have participated in the first three rounds of the Consultation, that it has often profoundly affected the topics they research, the service assignments they take on, the conferences they attend, and the persons they network with around the country. This impact on participants’ professional formation has confirmed the wisdom of focusing on junior faculty.

**Q. Do you think that by participating in the Rhodes Consultation the scholars have become more likely to stay involved in church-related higher education for their entire career? I guess I’m thinking here of the tendency of young faculty to move around.**

**A.** My hunch is that this would be true for the great majority of those who have participated. Among those who have changed institutions, very few have gone to colleges or universities that are not religiously affiliated. And for those who have stayed, I believe they feel better about their institutions and their role there than had they not been involved in the Consultation.

**Q. Please talk about the structure of the Rhodes Consultation.**

**A.** The Consultation has evolved in three phases. There were 12 participants in the original consultation (1995-97); in the next phase (1997-99), the number expanded to 40; and in the third phase (1999-2003), 36 schools have come on board. A total of 90 individuals (and institutions) have been part of the Consultation since its inception. About 80% of those are still active.

Structurally, the Consultation operates at two levels. On individual campuses, the person who has been selected to participate in the Consultation is responsible for leading a year long series of discussions on church-related issues with fellow faculty members. As you can imagine, there are widely varying attitudes on campuses with regard to these issues. But even on campuses where people are known to be reluctant to discuss religious topics, these faculty-focused groups have been successful in involving people with widely diverging views. It is important that on most campuses that this is a faculty-only endeavor, with little or no involvement from the administration. This prompts an openness that usually cannot occur when faculty and administrators meet together. At the second level, each semester the Consultation hosts regional or national gatherings that bring campus representatives together for networking, reporting on campus projects, and renewal.

From the institutional point of view, there are two levels in the Consultation as well. After participating in the discussion phase, colleges are eligible to apply for \$5,000 Institutional Renewal Grants (IRG). These IRG proposals grow out of campus discussions and are designed to institutionalize some of the needs identified there. To this point, over sixty IRGs have been funded, and they take a variety of forms since they are fashioned by the participants themselves. A couple of examples of successful IRGs are institutional history projects, where teams of scholars work on tracing the religious history of the institution so that it is easily accessible to the campus community; and faculty orientation programs, where first or second year faculty are introduced to the unique challenges of teaching in a church-related college.

**Q. Why so much emphasis on discussion? Isn't this what academics do anyway?**

**A.** Not when it comes to certain topics, interestingly. There has been a sort of conspiracy of silence at many church-related colleges. Those who support the church affiliation realize that they are in the minority and fear invoking the

wrath of colleagues; those who oppose it realize that it is largely irrelevant to their work, so they ignore it. The Consultation's emphasis on convening faculty discussion groups is really an effort to end the silence. And we have found again and again that this effort is greatly appreciated by faculty. These campus discussion groups come to be known as "Rhodes groups" and are seen as safe places for considering topics that have not been on the faculty agenda, sometimes for a generation.

Even after funding for campus discussions is depleted, many of the groups want to continue meeting. This indicates a real hunger for these discussions on church-related campuses, especially on the part of people who came there for reasons other than the religious affiliation. These conversations offer unique opportunities for young faculty to become familiarized with the history of their institution and its religious identity, to ask questions, to express fears, and often to have them alleviated. Further, participation in the Consultation has often led faculty members to consider for the first time that their presence at a church-related college might be more than chance; that it might be a unique place to live out their academic vocation. They may have come to the college because it offered a job, but they gradually begin to see their work and their career in theological perspective.

**Q. What is it about the zeitgeist of the early 1990s that prompted the renewed interest in church-relatedness in higher education that the Rhodes Consultation – along with other Lilly-funded programs – exemplifies? I'm thinking here about such programs as Collegium and the Lilly Fellows Program at Valparaiso among others.**

**A.** I think among the things to consider are the changes that have taken place in recent decades in the professoriate. There are not only more women and minorities, but there are more men with multiple commitments than existed among the faculty who started out in the 1950s and 1960s. Young faculty members of both genders have different claims on their time – think for example of the many young faculty who have child-care responsibilities, or those who take jobs in part based on where their spouse can find work. This was almost unheard of in the 1950s and 60s, when typically only the father of a family was working outside of the home and most family decisions were made with reference to his career. The complexity of contemporary living, I think, brings a desire for integrity and a reluctance to over-identify with a professional role. These things encourage people to seek to live holistically

and discourage them from compartmentalizing faith. Younger men and women on faculties today bring their faith concerns, their life concerns, to their work more readily than their older colleagues ever did. In my view, this is one of the factors that has made people so willing to participate in programs like the Rhodes Consultation.

Another thing is that postmodernism has pretty successfully discredited the myth of objectivity that was crucial to the self-perception of academics for so long. In the '60's and '70s, the price of legitimacy in the academy was often to downplay religious identity (which was identified with "sectarianism") and to embrace value-free inquiry. But with the arrival of postmodernism in the academy and advocacy in the classroom, teachers are freer to ask, "why not talk about faith issues?" In the process, some old assumptions are being questioned – for instance, that church affiliation equates to lack of academic freedom or lower academic standards. There seems to be a new openness to recognizing that the Christian presence in higher education has often been a boon to the life of the mind, academic freedom, and the quest for social justice.

And from the perspective of the institutions themselves, it was often the case in the 60s and 70s that funding concerns dictated that a college appear non-religious. We all know that very few religiously affiliated colleges or universities are financially sustained by their churches anymore. Sometimes schools that had a religiously neutral appearance had a much better chance of securing corporate and foundation support – not to mention eligibility for government funds. Fortunately this has changed a lot in recent years.

**Q. What are some examples of programs on campuses that illustrate the effectiveness of the Rhodes Consultation?**

**A.** With the funding we have from Lilly for the third phase of the Rhodes Consultation we have been able to offer not only Institutional Renewal Grants but also a series of small grants to fund projects that have emerged from Consultation participants. For example, participants from Viterbo, Baylor, and St. Mary's (Indiana) held a conference on hospitality in April, 2000 and are currently writing book on that topic. Another example is the development of a "super group" of Concordia institutions related with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod that allows faculty at these schools to share concerns and ideas as well as programs and individual talent. Another example of a small

grant project sponsored by the Consultation is a conference to be held in March, 2002 at Pt. Loma Nazarene College in San Diego on the “Church Related Colleges in a Liberal Democratic Society.”

Other programs have not been funded directly by the Consultation but have developed out of it. For example, the Presbyterian Academy of Scholars and Teachers (PAST), which met for the first time in August, 2000 grew out of a discussion among Consultation participants at Presbyterian schools. Beau Weston at Centre College took the initiative on this, and has tapped Consultation participants to serve on his leadership team.

**Q. Are all disciplines represented among the faculty who participate in the Consultation?**

**A.** I am happy to say that, yes, in our third phase, we have folks from the sciences and social sciences as well as the humanities and fine arts. About half of the participants in the Consultation, however, have been faculty in either religion or philosophy. For one thing, it comes naturally to folks in religion or philosophy to lead these conversations on their campuses. More importantly, when we have asked deans to nominate members of their faculties for the Consultation, they have tended to look to faculty in these disciplines. But we are working on ways to encourage more widespread representation. I am very happy that we have been so successful in achieving a diversity of religious traditions. We must have a dozen or so different Protestant denominations represented and nearly as many Catholic religious communities. All this leads to healthy, respectful, and lively discussions.

**Q. Have you seen that the denominations have things to teach each other – for example, do the Protestant schools teach the Catholic schools a thing or two, and vice versa?**

**A.** First of all, what we saw right away when we began this project was how much we all had in common, more than we ever assumed. But, to answer the question, we have also learned a great deal from each other. For example, coming from a Presbyterian school, I see that many of my Catholic colleagues have the advantage of being at institutions that were founded and have been staffed (until very recently) by brothers, sisters, and priests who embody the faith in many aspects of their daily lives, including their dress. And Catholics, who are now experiencing the declining numbers of religious and priests can

learn from us Protestants. They look at us and ask, “How do you do what you do without people who so visibly embody the religious tradition?”

By the way, one thing that has been very interesting to me has been the number of people nominated to represent their institutions who do not belong to the sponsoring denomination. This blew me away at first, until I saw how dedicated these people were to the mission and traditions of the institutions they are serving. Further, I have to say that this whole enterprise, for all of us, has been an education in the diversity of American religion. Everyone gains from attempting to understand the traditions and histories of institutions of differing denominations.

**Q. I understand that some unexpected results of the Consultation have included revisions in institutional policy, mission, and self-understanding. Do you have any examples?**

**A.** These kinds of things have happened when administrators have noticed with pleasure the fact that faculty on their campus were discussing issues of church-relatedness. The administrators then want to seize on that interest in order to serve institutional goals. I can think of several colleges that have revised their mission statements, other institutions that have re-thought the ways that they hire new faculty, and others that have created new opportunities for service for the faculty who are involved.

**Q. What lessons have you learned from the last several years' experience?**

**A.** We have learned that if you get people involved in a project like this at an early stage in their professional lives you can have an impact on the trajectory of their career. We hear over and over from participants in the Consultation that their professional lives have been affected – especially in terms of how they think of their jobs as vocation. Also, we have learned that there is wisdom in networking. When people on a campus do not have colleagues who share their concerns, things can get pretty lonely. The Consultation has helped diminish some of that loneliness. We know that at some institutions those persons who advocate discussion of religious topics can be unpopular. So we would offer a caveat: beware of local politics. However, the Consultation helps people view local issues in broader, national perspective. Also, we believe the risks are worth taking. Those of us who are engaged in

this work are committed to the idea that religious affiliation does matter for the future of American higher education. You must remember that we are at a critical juncture with many of these colleges. There are still forces that may bring many of them to total secularization – we do not know how this will all play out.

**Q. Have you had any surprises as you have worked with the Consultation?**

**A.** One of the biggest surprises was the overwhelming response to our invitations to apply. There are many more people out there interested in the topic than I or anyone else imagined. In the first round of the Rhodes Consultation we received 130 applications for ten spots; in the second round we had 120 applications for 40 places; and in the latest round we had 85 people applying for 30 spots. At every turn we have faced an embarrassment of riches.

**Q. Do you see any obstacles to the current momentum?**

**A.** Well, I would say that there is always the pursuit of notoriety. There is such a dedication to getting on “lists” – best schools, top ten or twenty this or that, most selective, and so on – that it can become all consuming. Not only is the pursuit of being *regarded* as excellent not the same as being excellent, but schools often end up looking very much alike. The pursuit of recognition can easily become an obstacle to genuine church-relatedness.