

Kim Maphis Early: Mark U. Edwards, Jr., author of *Religion on Our Campuses: A Professor's Guide to Communities, Conflicts, and Promising Conversations* (Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2006), is the guest for our chats this week and his book is the focus of our conversations. Edwards is the Senior Advisor to the Dean of Harvard Divinity School, former Academic Dean at HDS, President Emeritus of St. Olaf College, and Professor of the History of Christianity at Harvard to 1994. He has written four books and numerous articles on Martin Luther and the German Reformation. He has also taught introductory courses in computer science at Wellesley and Purdue 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 has been in attendance at several of the PTEV Conferences and has visited on several of our campuses. A brief promotional video about his work appears as a link from a homepage article on this event.

We're delighted to have you join us for the three conversations that will take place Thursday, October 11 at 12 Noon (CDT) and 4:00 p.m., and again on Friday, October 12, at 12 Noon. You are welcomed to stay and watch as the questions and responses unfold, or you may post your question now and return to the chat site to view the conversation as a transcript at the close of each day. You may also, if you log in, during the chat, click on Action and select Recent Room History to view the interchanges that took place prior to your log in.

Dayne: When will this session be available for reviewing later?

Kim Maphis Early: Each evening a transcript of the day's conversations will be available on the website. At the close of the event, these transcripts will be archived as a PDF file on the website so that you can return and print them off for continued reflection.

Vanderbilt: What in your life and work inspired this book, and why did you write it now?

Mark Edwards: I deal with this briefly in my Preface, which also offers a fairly concise summary of my goals. I also address the "why now?" question in my "Private Belief, Public Scholarship" article that was sent to the PTEV director at each school. But let me say a few brief words here.

Over my teaching career, I have learned from faculty colleagues in an Ivy League liberal arts setting, in a large public university, in a major research university, and as president of a church-related college. During the course of my career—I started teaching in 1974—I have seen religion go from a topic of marginal interest in most fields—often dismissed as the "froth on the waves" or handled reductively—to becoming (once again) a topic of central concern for disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. But even with this "sea change" in interest in religion as a subject for research and teaching, I have noticed that mention of personal religious conviction—and often deep conviction generally—has pretty much remained a "conversation stopper" within the academy. Given the crucial role of religious practice and belief in today's world—both for good and especially for ill—this reticence seemed ill-advised, disadvantaging faculty who could with honest and civil conversation come to better understand themselves, their colleagues, and their students on these important issues.

Why now? Very briefly:

1) Ironically, perhaps, for those who expect secularity and diversity always to reinforce each other, the achievement of sufficient diversity and secularity in higher education in the last several decades has opened up safe space for individuals to go public with religious convictions that they would have formerly been reluctant to mention, either for fear of majority reactions or for concern for its effect on minority sensibilities and rights.

2) The heady confidence with which the twentieth century began—namely, that reason and the scientific method were the sovereign means for understanding the natural and social worlds—has given way to more provisional claims and a greater awareness of the limits to human knowledge, now and in the future. This has opened the way for reconsideration of more “subjective” ways of knowing, including religious claims.

3) Religious conviction and practice is shaping political, economic, and social life in ways impossible to overlook or ignore even in our ivory tower. And, of course, students bring religious conviction and practice to campus and into classrooms whether we like it or not.

4) Not mentioning religious convictions does not make them go away. They are still present. They still work their influence, but perhaps without appropriate examination, discussion, and compensating adjustment. This has personal and pedagogical implications.

Shirley Roels: Mark, often some of the challenges in the relationship of religious tradition and higher education are in perception. One perception is that a religious tradition is unchanging and that the inflexibility is academically inhibiting. I found it interesting in chapter 8 that you note that historians of religious traditions can often point to many examples where beliefs and practices of the tradition appear to have changed or developed. But the perception of inflexibility remains. How does one counter such presumptions?

Mark Edwards: This is an important question but hard to answer briefly. Some things that have worked for me (as I discuss in *Community Warrant* as well as in *Religious Formation and Disciplinary Formation*, but also elsewhere):

Avoid making (when possible) dogmatic, universal claims (but, of course, without compromising one’s own core convictions). Be prepared to offer examples of development and how the tradition understands that development. Point to the intellectually sophisticated side of the tradition, which deals with just such questions (e.g., Augustine or Newman). In general, be prepared to converse explicitly with colleagues about the “provisional” (but also, conversely, occasionally dogmatic) attitude within academic disciplines but also within historical (in Christian terms, incarnate) religious traditions. Explicitly offer the distinction between truth and justification. Tie this to the “fallibilistic” ideal within the academy (often, of course, violated in practice).

Vanderbilt: Who should take the lead in encouraging faculty conversations?

Mark Edwards: For a successful conversion faculty must in most cases take the lead, set the right example, and invite their colleagues into dialogue. Administrators and other non-faculty

can offer support and encouragement, but interested faculty need to be the visible leaders and advocates.

Vanderbilt: While we're waiting for others to post questions, here's one that was submitted off-line: when you have encountered resistance to conversation about religion, what factors seem to lay behind that? When you have encountered resistance to religion itself, what undergirds that most frequently?

Mark Edwards: Another big question! Very briefly...
“Political” and “moral” factors:

- 1) a remembered history and contemporary examples of discrimination by Protestant Christian faculty and institutions against minorities, especially Jews, Catholics, and “sectarian” Protestants; analogous discrimination at Catholic institutions against non-Catholics;
- 2) a remembered history and current examples of threats to academic freedom by religious authorities inside and outside the college or university;
- 3) a remembered history and current examples of religious inspired violence and coercion
- 4) an application of the political/legal notion of the “separation of church and state” to the academy

“Academic or intellectual” factors:

- 1) rise of a persuasive and powerful “scientific” way of knowing as an alternative to religious ways of knowing
- 2) development of academic disciplines, especially the social sciences, that arise out of, but often in opposition to, religious alternatives
- 3) professional disciplinary socialization

I provide an overview of these and other factors in several chapters, especially Cautionary Tales, Encounters, Disciplinary Formation, and Institutional Settings. I encourage faculty to share stories with each other about just such issues.

Catawba: How does one respond to faculty colleagues who feel—often passionately--that religion has no place in higher education?

Mark Edwards: Your question and my answer to a similar question passed in cyberspace (see last posting). But in my earlier response I dealt more with the reasons for the resistance than with how best to respond to the resistance. I'll try to offer suggestions at several points along the way. For now, let me say that a good strategy is to acknowledge honestly and sincerely the objections before trying to change any minds.

I have learned from visits to many different campuses that if you don't start with a serious consideration of the risks of explicitly religious discourse and its sorry history in the United

States and elsewhere, the conversation can never really get off the ground or accomplish much. I recall one campus where a Jewish faculty member courageously shared with colleagues just how threatening the initiative came across to her (and to other colleagues not present), a minority member in a majority "Christian" college. Only after colleagues really recognized the legitimacy of her concerns and made significant adjustments in their own enthusiastic expectations was the project able to go forward on a more modest and also more respectful and inclusive basis.

Vanderbilt: This question was phoned in from University of the South...At Sewanee most community engagement is done through Chapel Outreach, not academic courses. We're eager to breakdown these lines, hoping to achieve greater integration between everyone's moral and curricular lives. Are there particular pitfalls we should avoid? Are there exemplary programs we should consider?

Mark Edwards: Every campus has its unique context, history, and community members, so no one strategy fits all. But take a look at my last posting. I think it is crucial to acknowledge and engage the risks right up front, taking them very seriously. Otherwise you likely won't get very far.

See also my earlier posting about faculty leadership. If you want to encourage faculty conversations, faculty themselves have to take the lead. They have the credibility, the credentials, and the personal relationships that can help a conversation convene and proceed successfully.

Goshen: What are some good strategies for guiding conversations between deeply passionate students from different religious traditions?

Mark Edwards: My book aims at getting faculty at a particular institution to sit down and converse about just such questions. Your colleagues will have the experience, insight, and wisdom to suggest and critique different strategies. I recommend tapping that local resource!

The chapter In the Classroom can perhaps serve as a setup to just such a conversation.

Mountin: But dialogue about religious topics is very contentious right now. Some clearly want to set narrow parameters to "define" what is essentially the nature of a faith tradition in the academy...others see tolerance and acceptance of traditions as a better measure of religiosity...how can we negotiate our way around these minefields?

Mark Edwards: Yes, there is a real problem here and probably no easy solutions. And each campus is likely to have its own peculiar variations on this problem.

The key, I think, is to get colleagues to sit down and converse on the question just as you have posed it. You're not likely to come up with *a* "solution" but you will surface different strategies and have colleagues who are working together to avoid or defuse the minefields.

Shirley Roels: Regarding the relationship of religious tradition and higher education for faculty members, there is another matter that is often challenging. For faculty members the particular religious tradition(s) that undergird a particular institution may look engaging and

healthy at the front end when they enter academic life within a particular institution. They sense that their personal and academic narratives are reasonably healthy matches with the religious identity of an institution and its related vision for education, as broad or as narrow as it may be. But in time faculty members discover the serious "warts" of any particular religious tradition that are true of any community of flawed (might we say still sinful?) people. As the warts become known, the sense of match can erode. Long-time insiders of a particular religious tradition may gradually perceive that they are in a relatively decent power position to help eradicate the religious warts. But those younger and newer and/or from culturally different backgrounds often perceive themselves to have marginal power in eradicating serious deficiencies in the related religious communities. The tendency may be therefore to give up on this dimension of identity and loyalty, tilting further toward identity and loyalty to one's discipline. What ideas do you have (besides reading your book with faculty) about how to create the perception that they can be influential in the redesign of a religious tradition associated with their college or university?

Mark Edwards: Boy, this is a hard question to answer in the abstract.

Let me start with a question of my own:

Do the junior colleagues actually have the power to influence the redesign? Or do they accurately perceive their relatively limited influence?

If they do (potentially) have influence, I guess one needs to start with helping them to see that power. A group of such faculty can then strategize about how best to deploy the influence they have. They can also offer support to each other.

As a historian I reflexively look for examples in the past. In this regard, I might have the younger faculty look at the influence of younger faculty in past key moments. For example, the Reformation of the sixteenth century was started and championed by junior faculty. On the other side of the ledger, junior faculty in the social sciences moved their disciplines in the 1920s towards a "value-neutral" stance.

INHEM: For those of us who are not faculty, do you have any specific suggestions about how we might encourage faculty?

Mark Edwards: Find potential faculty allies who are either already interested in these issues or could become interested. Get such (potentially) interested faculty together to talk about what, if anything, they'd like to see happen at your school. They can take it from there, with your encouragement and support. And it doesn't hurt to offer a free lunch or dinner to support them in their conversations and subsequent efforts <smile>.

David Cunningham: Concerning the earlier question (about those may feel threatened by campus religious life): One of the problems that we face is that we have so few honest-to-goodness "religious minorities" on campus (almost 100% of the faculty and an overwhelming majority of the students are at least nominally Christian). This means that anyone who sees some aspects of campus religious life as troubling doesn't even have the status of "minority religion" for the protection of dissent. And such folks often lack the theological vocabulary to express just what troubles them about some particular form of (Christian) religious expression. What campus resources can be deployed to address this

situation?

Mark Edwards: Yes, indeed. Many of us feel we're "minorities" within our own tradition. We all recognize that traditions are not homogeneous, but it serves some agendas (frequently a bit repressive) to pretend that we are do (or should) agree.

I think that these dynamics work much like those for faculty who belong to truly minority faculty positions. Again, I think that naming the reality is the first step towards addressing it. Faculty conversations built around faculty stories (including stories when individual faculty feel marginalized within their own tradition and why) can lead to strategies for moving forward.

Joseph Valparaiso: Are there assumptions that church-related institutions may have that inhibit potential facilitation of such conversation in the academy and vice versa? Any strategies that might be employed to deal with them?

Mark Edwards: Very much so. Here are a few:

- 1) Everyone here belongs to the same tradition (and understands that tradition the same way).
- 2) If you're part of the "majority" you won't (or shouldn't) feel uncomfortable with how religion is treated locally.
- 3) If you're a co-religionist you can't also in some other way belong to a minority (you're a woman, from a different geographic region, have very different political beliefs than most folks in the tradition, are gay, etc.)
- 4) Because your institution is church-related, you should never raise questions about academic freedom in the religious arena.
- 5) If you have questions or doubts, you should keep them solely to yourself.

I could go on at considerable length <smile>.

How to deal with them? I may sound like a broken record-a metaphor that our students may not understand in this CD and MP3 world <grin>--but a good strategy is to name the problem(s) and get colleagues to sit down and share insight, experience, and wisdom on how best to deal with the problem(s).

Shirley Roels: One of the challenges is indeed the "remembered" history. Often I observe that the remembered history, particularly around matters of academic freedom, is sometimes fragmentary and lacks nuance regarding the players, processes and decisions. Case decisions from years back are invoked, sometimes without an accurate recall of what really occurred and why. This can create a perception of a historical precedent that is either too narrow or too broad in its interpretation regarding a faculty member's engagement with religion, either in the classroom or in scholarship. How would you recommend that we add to the

cautionary tale about "remembered" history?.

Mark Edwards: Again, actually getting faculty to sit down and converse about that "remembered" history can help, especially if supplemented with some reading from the broader literature plus the college or university archives. Information + keen faculty minds can move matters forward.

And, of course, much depends on the specifics of the institution, the parties involved, and the issues--a cop-out answer, I know. Maybe we can discuss specifics off-line?

Vanderbilt: Here's one that was just emailed in to the office: I heard you speak at one of the PTEV campuses and saw you in attendance at some of the PTEV conferences. What is your sensibility about the place of religion on the campuses across the initiative? Has the discussion on vocation enhanced, inhibited or made little difference as these schools have considered what role, if any, religion might play on campus?

Mark Edwards: It varies from campus to campus, from discipline to discipline of those who participated, and from individual to individual. In general, religion is a conversation stopper on most campuses, even many religiously affiliated ones! Faculty in the humanities already have great latitude in how they approach explicitly religious issues; social scientists, less; and natural scientists probably least of all.

I discuss the socialization that lies behind this reticence in several chapters, especially the chapter on Disciplinary Formation, Community Warrant, and Academic Freedom. In these chapters I also suggest how faculty might explore the peculiarities of their campus. Good conversations are situated, and one major goal of the book is to get campuses to come to grips with their own peculiar situation.

Again, I hope that my book can set up conversations, but individual schools need to bring their particularity to the table to refine and sharpen the issues. To the extent I can help, I shall!

David Cunningham: Concerning INHEM's question about faculty buy-in: I would just echo Mark's comment (made in passing, and with a <smile>, but I know that he's serious about it) that it really is worthwhile to provide a bit of recognition that faculty time is valuable (e.g., by offering to meet over a meal and paying for it). To those who aren't faculty, their appreciation for this may come as a real surprise, but compared to others in "professional" positions (doctors, lawyers, CEOs), faculty went to school for just as long (or longer), get paid less, and have tiny or non-existent expense accounts. So a paid meal isn't just a perk; it's an outward and visible acknowledgement of their worth. And on a larger scale, making grant money available for course development, internship development, and so on -- even if it's only a couple of thousand -- can really help to secure faculty buy-in. Most faculty have many more good ideas than they have time or money to implement them.

Mark Edwards: I second David's comments. Faculty are truly busy and often faced with Hobson's choices about how to spend their time and any way that we can facilitate and reward faculty who give their limited time to a good cause helps move things along.

Mountin: And isn't that part of the problem we have inherited?

Mark Edwards: Yes, indeed!

Vanderbilt: Here's one that interests me: What makes for a good faculty conversation?

Mark Edwards: Put schematically, a good conversation is characterized by:

1) a quest for better mutual understanding more than for answers or resolutions on disputed questions. There should be no winners or losers in a conversation, only faculty better informed about quite different colleagues

2) true diversity in the disciplinary and religious (or alternative) backgrounds and perspectives of those participating

3) a recognition that every participant is equal and has an equal right to his or her say

4) an awareness of the situated, contingent nature of the exchange. Often this situated, contingent nature of conversations is revealed by exchange of stories and the use of these stories to better understand each other and the issues under discussion

5) a willingness to bring up feelings as well as ideas, to share that which is "subjective" as well as that which is "objective"

6) the practice of giving feedback to their conversational partners, to show that they are actually hearing what their partner is intending to say

For more suggestions and some elaboration, see the Introduction and Appendix 1, or, alternatively the last section in the article "Private Belief, Public Scholarship."

Mountin: We find strong equanimity among our faculty on religious themes and values which undergird our faith tradition: especially related to the Gospel and social justice...how important is it then that we have explicit conversations about religion as a subtext (or text), if the content of that religious experience is embraced by a clear majority?

Mark Edwards: Much hangs on how much depth there is to the equanimity of the surface. I would candidly be surprised if a number of your faculty didn't harbor some questions or other concerns--after all, we are all academics, trained to see flaws in everything we survey, including our faith commitments. And, of course, we have students to teach who may not be as clear or secure in their faith as we are, and who are almost certainly not as sophisticated as they need to be to maintain their faith while engaging our often religiously inhospitably society. We can learn from each other how to help them, and probably help ourselves in the process <smile>.

Kim Maphis Early: Thank you for your participation in this hour of conversation with Mark Edwards. A transcript of this session will be available this evening. We have five more questions in the queue that we'll turn to, along with newly submitted questions, when we return at 4:00 pm (CDT). We'll also be back on-line tomorrow, October 12, at 12 Noon.