

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.

Of special note is Mark's availability and willingness to be in continued conversation with PTEV partners through arranged visits to your schools. You may contact him at mark_edwards@harvard.edu, or edwards@stolaf.edu.

Kim Maphis Early: Here's a question I'm posing to Mark for when he comes back on-line: In reflecting on our noon conversation, our participants repeatedly raised questions about how to deal with tensions among faculty members or between faculty and administration (or trustees), or between faculty and ecclesial bodies regarding explicitly religious discourse on campus. How can we ease these tensions or relieve these conflicts?

Mark Edwards: Kim, the morning participants put their collective finger on perhaps THE issue. The tensions and conflicts are real and not easily resolved. I cannot offer a one-size-fits-all solution, both because campuses vary so much and because there may be no "solution" for some campuses, only a means towards a better understanding of the tensions and conflicts. Put another way, I am offering a process, not an answer or even a set of answers. This conversational process relies on the experience, insight, and wisdom of local faculty, who converse with each other according to some fairly simple but important rules. The conversations themselves rely heavily on sharing and exploring the narratives that define our institutions and our disciplines. They also invite better mutual understanding through sharing with colleagues the narratives of our own professional careers and how they fit or, alternatively, conflict with the institutional and disciplinary narratives. I also (rather tentatively) suggest areas where explicitly religious discourse may be appropriate (and where not) (a) in conversations with colleagues and (b) in the classroom—two very different contexts where different standards apply! Again, these suggestions are meant to provoke local conversations where local faculty make up their own minds; my suggestions are by no means the "final word," only (I hope) a helpful—perhaps helpfully provocative—opening word <smile>. Finally, these conversations are not intended to achieve agreement among participating faculty, but at the very least they can help faculty understand the issues and share strategies about how to deal with each other and, perhaps, how best to address even the most well-meaning intervention from the "outside."

Fred_W: How much time do you estimate it takes for a full conversation about each of the chapters?

Mark Edwards: In Appendix 1 in the book I offer suggestions about timing, seminar size, and the conversational approach. Briefly, much depends on the size of the group and the chapter in question. Several of the chapters—especially Narrative Identity, Inclinations, and Cautionary Tales—ask the participants to tell the story of their own career path, or intellectual inclinations, or key points in the history of their discipline and of their college or university. Each participating faculty member should be given sufficient time to tell the tale well and converse with colleagues about key details. This takes time, and so these chapters often work best in conversations that extend over more than one session. Other chapters can be covered in a single session and in a brief seminar some chapters can be combined or skipped.

Fred W: As a follow-up question, are these conversations best held in small groups, say 8-10 people, or with the faculty as a whole?

Mark Edwards: In Appendix 1 I offer suggestions about the ideal size of faculty seminars. I have found that faculty conversations work best with groups that are large enough to have sufficient diversity in disciplines represented and in attitudes about religion and its appropriateness in faculty conversations and the classroom—say, at minimum 8 or 9 faculty—and small enough that each faculty participant can tell his or her own story when deal with issues such as Narrative Identity, Inclinations, and Cautionary Tales—say, no more than 14 or 15 faculty. It is also highly useful to have natural scientists, social scientists, humanists, and faculty in the arts all present. Ironically, perhaps, faculty from Religious Studies can be both helpful and problematic because of the tendency to see the question of "religious discourse" as part of "their" field and we faculty don't want to trespass on other faculty's "field." But Religious Studies faculty are NOT the sole experts on this topic (as Political Scientists are not the sole experts on our individual political convictions), although they can be quite helpful in providing background.

Fred W: Sorry to keep asking such limited technical questions, but in what sort of venue are these conversations best accomplished? Retreat, brown bag lunches, faculty meetings?

Mark Edwards: Briefly, these conversations work particularly well in retreats that last four or five days (with faculty devoting most or all their time to the seminar and to social interaction around the seminar) or in weekly seminars that extend over a semester (e.g., weekly brown-bag lunches). Shorter seminars work well when focused on issues raising by only one or two of the chapters (E.g., a whole seminar devoted to Narrative Identity and Inclinations, or a seminar on Academic Freedom and religion.) The "how-to" chapters—Reticence, and In the Classroom—also work well setting up shorter seminars, so long as there is enough time for every participant to make his or her own contribution to the conversation. See my Appendix 1 for some further thoughts and suggestions.

Neville: Moving off the campus, what role, if any, do you see that colleges and universities might play in the larger culture with respect to the role of religion?

Mark Edwards: I have no special insight on this, but I do have some strong opinions [smile]. Given the enormous influence that religion plays in today's world—both for good and for ill—it behooves colleges and universities to prepare their graduates to better understand and live and work within this religiously plural and conflicted world. To reach

their full potential in providing this preparation, colleges and universities need to come to grips not only with religion as a subject of study but also as an influence on many faculty and student lives. Hence the conversation my book recommends and the hope that better understanding on campus can lead, over time, to better understanding off campus through our graduates.

Redding: Do you anticipate a serious or extended discussion about religion in the upcoming presidential election? If you could be moderator for a debate between the Republican and Democratic Parties' nominees, what would be your top five questions?

Mark Edwards: Religious issues will likely play a role, even possibly a major role, in the upcoming elections, but I don't anticipate a nuanced or sophisticated debate—although several of the possible candidates for president in both the Democratic and Republican ranks could deal with religion with the requisite sophistication if the electoral and media process allowed it. Unfortunately, the complexities and nuances of serious religious practice and belief do not translate well into sound-bites. For this reason, it is even more important that colleges and universities help their students understand the complexities and nuances that the public debate is likely to omit or flatten. We faculty can do an even better job of this if we're first able to discuss strategies and pitfalls amongst ourselves before we try out approaches on our students.

Neville: I'm a chemist. How does your project have any relevance to what I do?

Mark Edwards: When it comes to teaching, probably very little. I do offer the "Green Chemistry" example when a chemist's religious convictions underlay her decision to expose her students to a "green" approach to chemistry. But in general the natural sciences are the least likely of any of the disciplinary areas to feel a need to practice "natural inclusion" (discussed in my chapter *In the Classroom*). Biology is the one exception, and probably a negative one, since most biologists (quite rightly in my opinion) object to giving valuable class time to "Intelligent Design," much less "creation science." When it comes, however, to conversations among colleagues--and especially on matters of why you became a chemist and the assumptions underlying your discipline--your perspective can contribute to mutual understanding as much as any other faculty member's. You can also add your experience, insight, and wisdom to the collective pool, helping the group to move forward in its understanding of the complexities, risks, and benefits--and limitations!--of reviving explicitly religious discourse on campus.

Redding: Mark, in your book you raise questions about whether we as faculty can competently address more than one religious tradition. Any more thoughts on that?

Mark Edwards: Well, if we are going to "naturally include" some explicitly religious perspectives into our lectures or discussions, we probably owe it to our students to at least recognize that there are more than one tradition out there. Nowadays, even church-related colleges (Protestant and Catholic) normally have students from other traditions among their student body. How do we serve them? At St. Olaf we have "ethics across the curriculum" and participating faculty in different disciplines had to go through an intensive study of ethics during the summer before they taught their classes. These intensive sessions were led by our ethicists from both the philosophy and religion departments. I suspect that this sort

of rigorous preparation is necessary if we want responsibly to "naturally include" religion in certain disciplinary classes. But this will also probably vary from campus to campus, and I would urge participants to think about this from their own campus perspective.

Joseph_Valparaiso: What place can campus ministries have in facilitating these kind of conversations or might there be a liability attached to initiating such conversations?

Mark Edwards: This is a good question, and part of your questions points to the dilemma. When the campus ministry initiates such discussions, faculty may be more resistant than when colleagues initiate the conversation. But, as I mentioned in a post this morning, campus ministry and other non-faculty departments can help identify (potentially) interested faculty, assist them in thinking through the initiative, and offering support along the way, including (perhaps) some funding for lunches or dinners, for extra-curricular seminars, or even seed-money for developing seminars for colleagues or for students.

Sweetman: Mark, I have found that students often times are more comfortable with religious discourse than faculty, and even having discussions of their own faith lives. Do you think that there are opportunities for faculty to learn from students?

Mark Edwards: This is a fascinating questions! I hope that we faculty are always learning from our students, but I am intrigued about how we might learn from them in this regard. I need to think about this. Thank you! For now let me share my first reaction. I have a chapter on Disciplinary Formation where I argue that we faculty are intensely and over many years formed into our disciplinary way of understanding things and behaving. I even offer the deliberately provocative suggestion that we're as highly formed and socialized as any traditional monk or nun in earlier centuries. A part of that disciplinary formation has to do with religion and the propriety of bringing (according to discipline) "values," "subjective perspective", or "religious considerations" into our scholarship. That formation accounts in no small part (I think) for why even faculty who are personally highly committed are reticent about their religious conviction. My project aims at making us more aware of this socialize, how it serves our discipline and its pursuit of knowledge, but also how at this socialization may inhibit practices that the current world may need revived in a more circumspect form. But how students can help us...a great question that I need to think more about!

Kim_Maphis_Early: Thanks for your participation in this, the second of our one-hour conversations with Mark Edwards. We'll be back on-line tomorrow, Friday, October 12 at 12 Noon (CDT). Transcripts from today's chats will be available on the website this evening. Please encourage others on your campus to log-in and submit questions for our next session. Questions can be posted at any time before or during the session. And remember that Mark is available to work with you on your campus. He can be contacted at mark_edwards@harvard.edu or edwards@stolaf.edu. See you tomorrow!