

Talking about Religion: Faculty Book Interviews as a Contribution to Interreligious Dialogue

Chris Benda

Divinity Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, USA.

E-mail address: chris.benda@vanderbilt.edu



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Abstract:

Since May 2010, I have been conducting interviews with faculty members affiliated with the Divinity School and the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University. Those interviews have centered on recent publications – mostly books – by those faculty; they last anywhere from half an hour to an hour and a half, and all are freely available from the library Web site and the university's institutional repository. In May 2016 I started a second series of interviews, this one focusing on open access publications (so far, journal articles). These interviews tend to be shorter; all of them are also available online, along with copies of the publications discussed. Topics for both series of interviews are wide-ranging but tend to be religious/theological or philosophical in nature and have included discussions of books concerned with various aspects of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. In this presentation, I will talk about why and how I do the interviews, difficulties encountered during the interview process, feedback received (including impressions from interviewees), benefits of the interviews, and future directions.

Keywords: religious studies, interviews, scholarly communication, university faculty, academic libraries

I. Introduction

How can libraries promote interreligious dialogue and thereby support greater social solidarity? The papers presented at this session suggest a number of possibilities. My contribution can be broadly situated in the context of scholarly communication, which is defined by the Scholarly Communications Committee of the Association of College & Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association, as “the system through which research and other scholarly writings are created, evaluated for quality, disseminated to the scholarly community, and preserved for future use. The system includes both formal means of communication, such as publication in peer-reviewed journals, and informal channels, such as electronic listservs.”¹

The initiative that I shall be discussing, a faculty interview program, falls into the dissemination portion of the above definition. Yet I would not want the community to which this initiative is

¹ ACRL Scholarly Communications Committee, “Principles and Strategies for the Reform of Scholarly Communication 1,” June 24, 2003, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/whitepapers/principlesstrategies>.

disseminated to be limited to a “scholarly” one unless we understand “scholarly” in a broad sense to refer to people, inside the academy or out, who are interested in the academic discussion of religious traditions.² In terms of promoting interreligious dialogue, the interview program approaches this task at something of a slant, in that such dialogue is not the explicit content of the interviews. However, inasmuch as the conversations expose listeners to scholarly exposition of multiple religious traditions – and variations within those traditions – if nothing else they serve as resources for such dialogue to the extent that they inform the thoughts and actions of listeners, including those beyond the academy.

In what follows, I describe the interview program at the Divinity Library, Vanderbilt University: its origins and purposes; the practicalities of preparing for, carrying out, processing, and disseminating the interviews; some of the outcomes of the program; and future directions. Perhaps this paper will serve as an inspiration for others to get involved in a similar program at their institutions. In any case, I hope it will serve as example of how libraries – in this case, academic libraries – are uniquely positioned to provide resources for the fostering of interreligious dialogue.

II. Origins of the Faculty Book Interview Program

For some time, when I took walks or did housework, my practice was to listen to an hour-long radio program hosted by Robert Harrison, a French and Italian professor at Stanford University. Called “Entitled Opinions,” the show was available to me as a podcast. It consists mostly of interviews with professors at Stanford and other universities – interviews that are wide-ranging, covering topics in the arts and sciences.

I enjoyed the conversations and began to think about doing something similar at Vanderbilt. However, rather than trying to carry out wide-ranging discussions, I thought early on about orienting the interviews to recently published or forthcoming faculty books – for two reasons: first, such an approach would provide a ready focus to the interviews; second, unlike Robert Harrison, I am not knowledgeable enough to do what he does so well. I also decided to focus on faculty in the Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion (GDR) rather than the faculty at Vanderbilt as a whole (or even just the faculty in the College of Arts and Science). My background in seminary and in the study of the Hebrew Bible at Vanderbilt inclined me toward religious and theological topics. The purpose of the interviews, as I conceived them, would be to give listeners a sense of what the interviewee’s book is about while also enabling the interviewee to elaborate on areas of the book of particular concern to them. I did not intend to do book reviews or critical readings; rather, the interviews were intended to be a venue where scholars could share their findings with an interested audience through their responses to a set of somewhat open questions that were nevertheless grounded in a close and careful consideration of the text.

I talked with Bill Hook, the Director of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library and my supervisor, in late 2009 about the proposed program, and he was supportive. I then got in touch with two faculty members, both in the area of Hebrew Bible and both who had upcoming book

² This also seems to be the way Michael J. Altman is thinking about the scholarly part of scholarly communication in his article on podcasting religious studies, as he issues a call for religious studies scholars who present their research in ways accessible to an interested audience, one that includes fellow scholars but also must take in the general public. See Michael J. Altman, “Podcasting Religious Studies,” *Religion* 45, no. 4 (2015): 573–84, doi:10.1080/0048721X.2015.1055668.

publications. One of the faculty members readily agreed, and we worked on scheduling the interview. After some postponements, we were ultimately able to settle on early May 2010.

In the meantime, I took part in the Wabash Colloquy on the Role of the Theological Librarian in Teaching, Learning, and Research in Wabash, Indiana, in late April 2010. One of the outcomes of the program was that each participant was to develop an individual strategic plan. Up to this point, I was uncertain about the degree to which I would pursue the interviews as a long-term project, so my decision to tell my Wabash colleagues about the interview program and make it part of my individual strategic plan was one that I did not take lightly. Thus, even though the Wabash Colloquy took place after I had already committed to conducting my first book interview, it played a part in birthing the interviews in that it exerted some pressure on me to think of them as something more than an experiment which I could easily abandon.³

III. First Interview and Results

Conceiving of an interview program is one thing; achieving it is another. I turn now to some of the practicalities of doing the interviews. Since the first interview serves as something of a template (though a mutable one) for the subsequent ones, I will describe it at some length.

The process of doing the first interview began long before the interview itself. As with almost every interview so far (an exception was a dictionary) I read the faculty book twice, because I find that a second reading often turns up items missed in the first reading: emphases, organizational matters, and so on. For the first interview, I read the book in manuscript, something I have done for other interviews as well, though for the most part I deal with a published version of the book. After I finished the book the second time, I wrote up a list of questions. Sometimes I will jot down questions or ideas for questions as I am reading, but more often I come up with questions in the week or so before the interview is scheduled. The interviewee wondered if I would be sharing the questions with him before the interview. I had not been intending to do so, but, finding no strong reason against it, I shared them, something I have done with most of the interviewees since. The number of questions for this first interview was thirteen; that number has gone down to seven or eight on average. The questions were about the contents of the book, while some solicited reflection on topics not explicitly dealt with in the book but that struck me while reading it. In subsequent interviews, I also frequently inquire about the stimuli for writing the book.

The interview took place in the faculty member's office, a pattern I have followed for the most part since then. Such a venue usually provides fewer interruptions than might happen in my office, and (I assume) it allows the faculty member to be more relaxed in familiar surroundings. I also get a chance to see the faculty member in their office, something I may never have done before the interview. For the first interview, I borrowed an mp3 recorder. Since then, my recording equipment has (mostly) been portable and has always allowed me to generate mp3s. The interview itself went smoothly: I asked my questions, the interviewee answered them, and we were done in something under an hour.

After the interview, I went back to my office and edited the interview with audio software. Generally speaking, my editing is limited to removing the sounds created when pressing

³ It was only later that I found out that one of my Wabash colleagues was inspired by the interview idea and put it into practice, in a slightly different way, at his educational institution. For more on both of our approaches to author interviews, see Chris Benda and Brad Ost, "Author Interviews Panel: Faculty Involvement via Self-Promotion," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 66 (2012): 212–22.

“Record” and “Stop.” I asked the faculty member for his permission to post the interview online, something I have asked each subsequent interviewee. Once I had that permission, and a picture of the faculty member, I posted the interview on a Divinity Library interview Web page, in Vanderbilt’s institutional repository, and on Vanderbilt’s site on iTunes U.

When the interview was done, I advertised its existence to other faculty on the Divinity and GDR faculty listservs. I also solicited other interviews, receiving six e-mails of interest. These were my first surprises from the interview program: the number of respondents to my initial announcement, and the fact that almost all of them were not Divinity faculty – or even religious studies faculty. Unbeknownst to me, the GDR listserv to which I sent the initial solicitation includes faculty in a variety of subjects, including sociology, Jewish Studies, philosophy, and history. These faculty members all have some connection to the GDR, but not all of them are doing explicitly theological or religious studies scholarship. So I ended up with more variety than I anticipated.

IV. Subsequent Interviews

As I indicated above, the first interview provides a template for the interviews that have followed. But not everything has remained the same with subsequent interviews, and here I remark briefly about several of these variations, specifically in the areas of selecting interviewees; location, equipment and software used, duration and processing of interviews; and posting and advertising of interviews.

With regard to selection: Though I contacted two faculty members to initiate the interview project, in about half of the cases so far, interviewees have been self-selecting: they have responded to the solicitation section of the e-mail announcing a recent interview. A small number of faculty members are “return customers”: whenever they have a new book, they will contact me about doing an interview. In some cases, I learn that a faculty member is working on a book and will ask for an interview. And in a few cases, someone else will recommend a colleague for an interview.

As I have said, the first interview and most of the interviews since have taken place in the faculty member’s office. In only three occasions have they occurred elsewhere: once in a recording studio (which provided a superior recording but required the interviewee and I to go to an unfamiliar location and work through an intermediary to get the recording); once by Skype (the faculty member was out of the country for an extended period of time); and once in another office (the interviewee was a visiting lecturer with no office of his own).

In terms of equipment, I have moved from a loaned Zoom H2 recording device through a MacBook Pro laptop to an Olympus WS-853 Digital Voice Recorder. The editing software I use has gone from Audacity to Garage Band to Logic Express and back to Audacity.⁴ The interviews have ranged in length from about half an hour to almost an hour and a half; on average they tend to be a little more than an hour, a bit longer than the hour I originally intended them to be. Most of the interviews undergo minimum editing, but some have required more extensive work, including the removal of unexpected noises and the need to increase the volume of the interviewee’s voice when it was too quiet. In one case, an interviewee noted errors of content, and I appended a statement of errata at the beginning of the interview.

⁴ And John McClure, homiletics professor and resident audio guru, has been an invaluable resource throughout. John loaned me the Zoom H2 for the first interview and provided significant audio assistance with many of the early interviews, and he also advised on equipment and software.

Just as the manner in which the interviews are done has changed over time, so have the advertising venues and where they are posted. From the beginning, I have posted the interviews on their own page on the Divinity Library's Web site. The URL has changed over time, but currently the main interview page is at <http://library.vanderbilt.edu/divinity/faculty-staff/interviews/index.php>. I have also separately posted the interviews to our institutional repository, DiscoverArchive (<http://discoverarchive.vanderbilt.edu/>). My intention has been to host all of the interviews on DiscoverArchive and point to them there, but technical limitations with our IR software, particularly in the way that it handles media streaming, have persuaded me to point listeners to the Divinity Library's interview page while using the IR as an archival backup. Finally, the first six interviews were added to iTunes U before Vanderbilt decided against a presence on the platform.

With regard to advertising, at first I sent an e-mail to several lists (Divinity faculty and staff, GDR faculty, others whom I thought would be interested). I also used the Divinity Library's home page to advertise, both through a slide on a slide show (since discontinued) and through a news item feature. I e-mailed a contact who worked for Vanderbilt University News and Communications and she posted interviews on the Vanderbilt news site. (This no longer happens.) As time went on, links to the interviews began to appear in the weekly Divinity School e-mail (VDS Digest) and in the monthly Divinity School newsletter (Spire). As a member of the LinkedIn social network, I began notifying some of my connections about the interviews. Finally, some departments and programs (e.g., Jewish Studies) have posted relevant interviews on their sites.

And three or so years after its inception, the interview program finally got a name: Authorial Intentions.

V. Contents of Interviews

That the Jewish Studies Program has posted multiple interviews, that several of the interviews are with faculty who have expertise in Islamic Studies, and that the most recent interview is with a specialist in Japanese Buddhism: these facts are reflective of the multireligious content of these interviews. Even the interviews on Christian topics represent a variety of traditions, from the African Methodist Episcopal Church to the Roman Catholic Church, from Syriac Christianity to anti-Trinitarian Christian traditions. This variety partly results, I think, from the fact that Vanderbilt has a Divinity School that is not affiliated with a specific Christian denomination. Indeed, the Divinity School is very interested that students be prepared to enter a religiously diverse world. Furthermore, the Religious Studies program has diversified in recent years to take in religious traditions like Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism.

As I indicated in section III above, however, not all of the interviews come from faculty in traditional religious or theological disciplines. I have had interviews on birthright tourism to Israel; Jews, Muslims, and economic life in medieval Egypt; and the hidden face of American slavery. But for the most part, the interviews touch on religious and/or theological themes, and while they do not typically discuss interreligious dialogue or interreligious encounter, as a whole they provide listeners with a variety of informed, scholarly, religious (or non-religious) perspectives and thus enable listeners to have their own encounter with other traditions – or with aspects of their own traditions – about which they may not be familiar.

VI. Difficulties Encountered

While many of the interviews are carried out without much difficulty, I encounter occasional problems. Minor difficulties include various kinds of noise, including noises from outside the faculty member's office (helicopters flying by, talking in the hallway, knocking on the door) and from inside (cellphones ringing, new messages dinging, HVAC systems). At times, the interviewees have talked rather quietly, particularly relative to me, which has required enhancing their voices in the recording so that there is more of a balance in volume between their voice and mine.

Probably the only major difficulty that I have encountered thus far occurred in my only Skype interview. We had gotten through most of the interview when a thunderstorm developed on the interviewee's end, leading us to terminate our conversation. There also seemed to be a problem with the recording, so we needed to redo the entire interview. This experience convinced me to avoid Skype interviews in the future.

And then there is the seemingly insurmountable difficulty of potential interviewees who are not interested in being interviewed . . .

VII. Outcomes from the Interviews

As may be evident, considerable work goes into these interviews. What do participants and listeners think of them? Beginning May 23 (it is still open), I distributed a survey to the following groups: students in the Divinity School and GDR; Divinity and GDR faculty, both those who have been interviewed and those who have not; individuals in my LinkedIn network; and others to whom I regularly send interview notifications. I also placed links to the survey on the Divinity Library's interview Web pages.

So far, there have been 100 responses: 16 from faculty who have done interviews; 10 from faculty who have not; and 74 from the group that includes students in the Divinity School and GDR, individuals in my LinkedIn network, and others to whom I regularly send interview notifications. I have received no responses from the survey links on the interview Web pages.

Some general impressions:

- The faculty who have done interviews are all very supportive of them and, if they still work at Vanderbilt, interested in doing another interview. Generally speaking, they find the interviews helpful in thinking about how to communicate their scholarship to other audiences, and they speak positively about the interview questions asked and the engagement of the interviewer with their work.
- The faculty who have not done interviews are much less effusive. Three of the ten have not heard of the interviews, despite the fact that all Divinity and GDR faculty receive an e-mail announcing each new interview. Those who answered the question about how interesting/useful the interviews are (five responses) labelled them "Somewhat interesting/useful" (the middle choice).
- More than half (46) of the largest group, which includes students and LinkedIn folks, have not heard of the interviews. To the extent that those responding this way are Divinity and GDR students, this is partly my fault: while the new interviews are

announced in the weekly VDS Digest, I do not send announcements directly to students. This is partly due to my reticence to engage in “shameless self-promotion,” though now that I have “informed” all of the students about the interviews through the survey I sent them, this excuse should not be operative in the future. (Another impediment to promoting knowledge of the interviews is that, other than using LinkedIn, I am not advertising on social media [e.g., Facebook, Twitter]. I may need to ask someone who has a Facebook account to advertise on my behalf, or I may need to use the library’s Facebook and Twitter accounts more aggressively.) Many of those respondents who have heard of the interviews and listened to them think positively of them: there are a number of “Very interesting/useful” responses – the top choice – to the question of how interesting/useful the respondents find the interviews.

Interviewees who took a previous survey, conducted in May 2012, had similar responses to this more recent survey. I have also received positive comments in e-mails and personal conversations and, at times, even while carrying out interviews. Beyond these surveys and a few positive comments over the years, I do not typically hear from listeners about the interviews.

Web statistics can be revealing, but those that I have are not necessarily terribly accurate. Page views of the Authorial Intentions Web site have ranged, over the last year, from six a month to 237, while downloads of individual interviews have ranged from zero to 76 per month. Google Analytics, which the library uses for its Web pages, evidently only gathers approximately 25 – 50% of Web traffic, so these numbers could be quite low. All that I can say from this is that, while the interviews may not be the most popular thing on the Internet, someone seems to be interested in (at least some of) them.

VIII. New Developments and Future Directions

The faculty interview project has entered its seventh year and does not show signs of ending. I have a draft manuscript of a book for an interview in the fall, and at least two other faculty members have indicated that they wish to do interviews about their forthcoming books.

Gradually, though, I realized that books are not the only publications produced by our faculty. (In fact, one of my interviews was about a scholarly Web site – a digital humanities project – rather than a book.) I knew that some faculty published journal articles, so I decided to begin a new interview series focused on openly accessible Vanderbilt publications that would simultaneously incorporate a greater variety of faculty work and make a (small) statement for open access. In May 2016 I did my first interview in this new series. Entitled Open Exchanges, the series so far includes three interviews, all on journal articles. The interviews are up to a half hour in length, and they are posted, with open access copies of the publications, on both the Divinity Library Web site and the faculty’s Web pages. In doing this series, I have learned more than I knew before about publisher restrictions and become reliant on the Sherpa/Romeo database, which lets me know which journal articles in what form (pre-print, post-print, published version) can be posted where and when. There have been no new interviews in this series since last September, but I hope to do more in the near future.

Late in 2016 I was asked by the current chair of the Jewish Studies program to interview Robert Alter, Class of 1937 Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. Professor Alter was visiting Vanderbilt at the end of January 2017 to do some talks on campus. Though I had not done an interview previously with a non-Vanderbilt

faculty member, nor had I done an interview that was not focused on a book or other scholarly object, I was honored to be able to talk with Professor Alter. We chatted about scholarly trajectories, disciplinary identity, and translation. Perhaps the interview with Professor Alter opens up the opportunity for future conversations with other non-Vanderbilt faculty, with Vanderbilt non-faculty (e.g., Divinity and GDR students who have published materials), or even with Vanderbilt faculty outside of the Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion.

The scholarly study of religion has much to offer our deliberations about the role of religion in society, but if that study is sequestered in the academy, society does not benefit. The faculty interview program attempts to bring such scholarship beyond the academy. The degree to which it has contributed to greater social solidarity is difficult to say, but to the extent that social solidarity is influenced by the conversations of individuals, I hope these interviews can keep the conversations – interreligious as well as other – going.

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