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Paul R. Griffin Interview, Department of Religion, Wright State University

Emmett C. Orr

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Paul R. Griffin

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Profiles of African-Americans That Helped Shape Wright State University

Interview with Paul Griffin

Date of Interview: [?]

Interviewer: Emmett Orr, School for Professional Psychology

Interviewee: Paul R. Griffin, Department of Religion

[Note: Video and audio frequently skip throughout the interview and are perceptibly out of sync between 1:00 and 2:35 and after 7:30]

Emmett Orr: Hello and welcome to another series about profiles of African Americans who've contrib[uted to] the university. I am pleased that Professor Alyce Jenkins, who has developed this series has asked me to be guest interviewer. Today my guest is Dr. Paul Griffin. First of all I'd like to welcome you Dr. Griffin—

Paul Griffin: Good morning.

EO: —and thank you for taking the time to be with us today. I'd like for you to tell us a little bit of—what we're doing is getting information about African Americans who are involved with Wright State and what their contributions have been. I'd like for you first to tell us what your title is and what your role is with Wright State University.

PG: Alright. I'm Chair of the Religion Department and also Associate Professor of African-American Religious History in that department.

EO: African-American Religious History, that's an interesting topic. Can you tell us a little bit about that what that entails?

PG: Well yes. Basically, what it entails is the study and recovery of the distant black religious past [audio skips and warps] throughout the country [audio skips] the majority of [audio skips] were in fact [audio skips] clergy. So again we're [audio skips] that set [audio skips] stage for people like Martin Lu[ther] King of the more recent area.

EO: Very interesting. When you first identified what your position and responsibility [audio skips] —as with Wright State, you spoke of, I believe, Chair of the Religion Department?

PG: Yes.

EO: Oh, that's—can you tell us a little bit about that? That's—is that a first for Wright State in terms of—

PG: Well it's the first in the College of Liberal Arts.

EO: Okay.

PG: As I understand it, I'm the first black chair there. [audio skips] —By my colleagues in the Religion Department back in April, and that election was confirmed by the dean of the college, Dean Perry Moore.

EO: Wonderful. Now you, how long have you been with Wright State?

PG: I've been at Wright State going into my fifth year.

EO: Okay, now are— [audio skips] —there other African-American faculty members on the staff in your department?

PG: No, I'm the only African American in the Religion Department.

EO: Alright. Can you t— [audio skips] —a little bit about yourself, your background before you came to Wright State, in terms of the kinds of positions you held? What brought you to Wright State? How did you get to Wright State?

PG: Okay. Yes, I began my academic career at Payne Theological Seminary, which is named after Daniel Payne, one of the people I studied in my book. I started out there as assistant professor, moved up to associate, and finally to full professor. I also was an administrator there, serving as academic dean for five years. I have this commitment to black—at least at that time in my career—that one of the best starting points would be a predominantly black school so that's when I went to Payne Seminary. However, [my training] is a little broader than just theological education. Again, as I say, I'm one of the few African-Americans trained in the history of Christianity with specialization in African-American religious history. So I had long began to consider that I wanted to sort of branch out and move up to a university level where we have more opportunities to realize some of the training that we received when we were working for the PhD. So that's basically what brought me to Wright State. I'm also a graduate of Wright State, so in one sense it's a matter of returning home.

EO: [tape skips] One of the significant roles that you played here that I'm aware of is a conference that [tape skips] happens annually. Can you tell us a little bit about that and what that conference is and what it does?

PG: Yes. The title of the conference is the National Conference on the Future Shape of Black Religion. This conference developed as a result of a conversation I had with the chair of my department one day out in the hall, and I was saying to him that I thought that, given the makeup of the Dayton community, that it would be nice for Wright State to be[come? 5:17] involved in hosting a conference that would focus on black religion. Again, black religion—and religion in general, for that matter—has played a major role in the social, political, economic structure of the United States, and that’s been especially true of black religion. You know, if it hadn’t been for the black religion, we may not even be liberated today. You know, black religious leaders certainly played a vital role in that. So anyway, as a consequence of that conference, we decided that we would look into the possibility of having a little, small conference that would bring together scholars and a few people from the Dayton community, African-American community, bring them together in dialogue about black religion.

So in January of 1991, the conference was held, and one of the things that we wanted to was to make sure that we had an academic component as well as a component from the West Side. So we decided to hold the first out in the [com]munity at Mount Enon Baptist Church, and there we had Dr. James Cone, who’s known as “The Father of the Black Liberation Theology Movement” as a keynote speaker. The conference was so successful I think we attracted nearly one thousand people out that Friday evening. And then on Saturday, that following Saturday, we came out here on Wright State’s campus and we attracted about three hundred academicians and people from the African and Dayton to that conference. The focus of that conference also included another noted scholar, Dr. William Jones from Florida State University, and, as it turned out, I was the third keynote lecture. But we had a very good time at that conference. It was an opportunity for laypeople, for clergy, and academicians to come together and dialog about what the possible future shape of black religion might be. Of course we did look at, you know, what it has been. So we sort of took off from what it has been to move into a discussion of what it can be in the future and what it must be in the future.

EO: What is significant about what [tape skips] you’ve spoken about. One of the things that’s significant about what you’ve spoken about just now in terms of that conference is the fact that you went into— [tape skips] —to the West Dayton community and what I should mention is that is the African-American community c—[audio warps] closest to Wright State. One of the African-American communities closest to Wright State. And that is not something that has been done a lot in terms of the university reaching out, but I think that it is part of the mission that we have, so I’m glad to see that becoming one of the directions of this university as a metropolitan university. Can you say something to us about the people who were involved from Dayton, the non-academicians, I would say, perhaps the clergy or the community persons in Dayton who were involved in helping to bring about that conference?

PG: Right. One of the things that we wanted to do was to get outside funding and we got outside funding from the Ohio Humanities Council, and one of their stipulations was that you have to have a planning committee that is as broad as possible, which meant something that we had to include are people from the community. In looking at that, I saw an opportunity, a great opportunity, for clergy who are leaders out there every day to become involved in the shaping of this conference in terms of its content and those kinds of things, and also the laypeople, who sometimes are sort of pushed back and don't have a voice, and I thought [audio skips] what it great idea this would be if we could, you know, bring all these people together on this planning committee. An upshot of it was that we had representation from the ranks of the clergy as well as the laypeople involved in the step-by-step planning of this conference, and the conference would not have achieved the success that it did had it not [been? 9:10] for these clergy and laypeople from the Dayton African-American community.

EO: I can say that I attended that conference and it was— [tape skips] —very pleased and impressed by the information that was shared and the number of persons that attended. One of the things that's always fascinating to me to talk to people and to listen to people when I see them having— [tape skips] —having accomplished a lot, one of the things that I'd like to know if you could share with us are who are some of your role models and some of the persons who influenced you professionally?

PG: I knew that question was coming up, and I always like to point back to my father, who was born during the reconstruction period. Matter of fact in 1883 was the exact date. He was born in Georgia and he was the son of a slave, and of course he had no opportunity to acquire learning or— [tape skips] —any of the benefits that some of us today have. So I would want to put him, lift him up, as one of the first role models in my life. One of the things that he always encouraged the children to do was to get their education, to get their education and have higher val[ues]— [tape skips]. Then, as I grew older and began attending school...public schools, there were several teachers in grade school as well as in high school who had an influence on my life. At the college level and seminary level—I'm a graduate of United Theological Seminary—I encountered a professor in church history at United Theological Seminary who said he saw something in me and encouraged me to consider being a historian. And at first, you know, history is [fine? 10:59], you know— [tape skips] —what is related to history, but he just kept prodding at me and prodding at me, and so he was very instrumental in shaping my early career as a historian: Dr. James [C.] Nelson.

And then there were a number, a small group of black scholars, who began to emerge during the late-1950s and early-1960s, such as Dr. James Cone, who were out here blazing trails in terms of developing a black liberation theol— [tape skips] —dy that African Americans could use in their everyday lives. And I read Cone's first book and I found it quite exciting, a book called *Black Theology and Black Power*, in which he

asserted that black people have to have a religion that is grounded in power. You know, economic, social, political kinds of power. And at first I was a little turned off by this but as I read it, got into it a little bit more, I said, "Yes, Dr. Cone does have some merit there." And I began using my historical background, historical tools, and looking at the whole history, and I found that black people have long been forced to fall back on religion. That's all that black people have had virtually here in America; fall back on religion to help them become liberated.

EO: Wonderful. In light of that, can you talk about what the student population is like in your department? Can you give us some information about that?

PG: Yes. Well, we're a smaller department, let me get that out. Having said that, let me say that about twenty percent of the students are African Americans in the religion department, and I would like to see that increase and we will be working as [12:48?] toward that end.

EO: Well that great because when you say twenty percent of the enrollment in the department—

PG: Right.

EO: —then that's significant when you consider the percentage that we are of the enrollment at Wright State, so I think that you have a good percentage—

PG: But we always can improve.

EO: Yeah, that's true. You had mentioned that you were the only African-American faculty person in your department. Are there any plans or do you have any ideas around changing that? Or what do you see as the future in the department?

PG: Well, I would hope that as the budget crunch sort of recedes and things begin to move that we could sort of expand the department. I would like to see it include more African Americans— [tape skips] —but I would also like to get a sort of a multicultural twist. [Tape skips] —That seems to be the buzzword today, and I think— {tape skips} —so if we can accomplish that then we will be doing something.

EO: One of the things that has impressed me about your involvement with Wright State is the way you've come onboard and have moved out and gotten Wright State's name known in the community and have done things within the community, particularly the African-American community. Are there plans, for example, as it relates to your conference, that that will continue or not, or do you have any ideas about what the future of that— [tape skips and warps]

PG: Yes, there's every hope— [tape skips] —that the conference will continue. Again, the budget crisis or crunch has had some impact on that. But we've been assured that there will in fact be a good conference this year. Matter of fact, let me give you the dates: February 5 and 6, 1993 are the dates for the conference. Again Dr. James Cone will be returning as one of the keynote speakers, and Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, an African-American female, who by the way, her roots are here in Dayton, she's a member of the— [tape skips] —St. Margaret's Episcopal Church. She's currently teaching at Howard University. She will be the other keynote lecturer. So we will have a conference this year, and this year, as we're all aware, there are a number of problems with African-American youth—low self-esteem, having few role models—so we're making youth and young adults the focus of this year's conference.

EO: I think that's wonderful because that—

PG: And we're—

EO: Go ahead, because I was gonna say that could be the salvation of our youth is to get back into religion and to get back into a realization that there is a better way.

PG: Right. And we're hoping, we have every hope that even after 1993 that the conference will somehow continue. I think it's done a lot in terms of bridging the gap between the university and the African-American community and we would like to see that continue.

EO: One of the things that was interesting to me when you spoke, you said, "This year, there'll be Dr. Kelly Brown," I believe you said would be one—?

PG: Yes, Kelly Brown Douglas.

EO: —Okay, would be one of the presenters. What has been the involvement of women in the religious movement and— [tape skips] —particularly the African-American religious movement?

PG: For that— [tape skips] —has been significant, especially in the last ten years or so— [tape skips] —last year for example, at our conference we had Dr. Shawn Copeland, who's an African-American female and black Catholic. She's a member of the Order of Preachers in the Catholic tradition, Dominican tradition, and she was the keynote speaker alongside of Dr. James Cone. Did a tremendous job looking at how black Catholics fare within Roman Catholicism, and she also looked at how the womanist theology, which is dealing with African-American females and their peculiar problems in the society, how womanist theology can begin to address issues that are impacting upon black females in this country, both in the religious realm as in the social and political realm.

EO: Yes, I was very pleased to see that Dr. Shawn Copeland was part of that because frequently when you speak of African-American religion, it seems as though those of us who are Catholic are often left out. So I was very glad to see that inclusion was made and to know that there will, that we are part of what your whole outreach is for and toward.

PG: Right, when we talk about black religion, we don't mean any one particular denomination...It's a myth to think that the black community is monolithic. I mean, there's a lot of diversity in the black community and we want to draw on that and bring all of those different groups together.

EO: That's very good. A final question in terms of your involvement and your role at Wright State: How have you—you mentioned that you were chair of the department—

PG: Just normally-elected chair.

EO: —which I think we've already said was, I consider to be, a very good accomplishment for you and, I think, a very good feature for Wright State to have. Can you speak about finally what you feel your being chair of the religion department, what that does for Wright State University?

PG: Okay. Let me begin by saying that I thank my colleagues for electing me the chair. The process was that the department member— [tape breaks] —as a whole gathered and decided that they wanted to elect one person and they elected me as the chair. I think it provides Wright State an opportunity to fulfill part of its mission which is, I understand it to be, is to be reaching out to the black community. I do have strong connections in the black community, but I think along with that, it also provides role models— [tape breaks] —a role model for black people, black students at Wright State University. One of the things, and we talked about this a little earlier, who was my role model? I think what African-American students need today are role models. Looking at people who have succeeded in spite of— [tape breaks] —and I think that this is one of the things that this position and my being in it presents for black people as well as for Wright State University.

EO: It has certainly been an inspiration for me to talk to you today, and I'm sure that your being involved with Wright State University and being here at Wright State University, you have done just that, will be a great role model for students to follow, and we're very pleased that you, first of all, have taken the time to share with us today, and secondly, that you are part of— [tape breaks] —[Wright St]ate University. So I'd like to say thank you and thank you again and good luck to you.

PG: Thank you.