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Undercover at Falwell's Liberty University, Finding Common Ground

By Nathan Schneider

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The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University

Kevin Roose

Grand Central Publishing, 2009

A couple of months ago, I went back to visit Brown University, where I graduated from college in 2006. While waiting for a meeting in Providence's new Freemason-themed hotel, I got a surprise phonecall from Father Isaac, the cassocked gentle giant who serves as Eastern Orthodox chaplain there. We hadn't known each other well while I was a student, but I'd always liked him. Upon hearing I was in town, he thought he'd ring me up, and what followed was certainly the longest conversation we'd ever had together. He wished me well, but much more, he thanked God in a dozen different ways for the small miracle that, at Brown of all places, I had managed to be a Christian.

Brown's no fratty party school, but to cultural conservatives, it's even worse. While I was there, Bill O'Reilly did a segment on the notorious "SexPowerGod" dance that the Queer Alliance put on each year (in addition to the springtime edition, "Starfuck"). I lived in the co-ops that got Ivy-League naked parties started in the 1980s. What really drives people like Father Isaac up the wall, though, is the perception that, after these nights of debauchery, students' heads are filled (by liberal professors) with all the post-everything "theory" they need to make it all seem like exactly what a liberated, ambitious young person with tip-top SAT scores should do.

It was from this world that Kevin Roose, then a sophomore at Brown, set off to spend a semester at Jerry Falwell's arch-fundamentalist Liberty University in 2007. He went as an aspiring writer, a disciple of immersion journalist (and Brown alum) A.J. Jacobs, author of *The Year of Living Biblically*. Liberty was a gonzo experiment: get as far as you can from your comfort zone and write about it, if you live to tell the tale. What was most unsettling of all about the trip, though, is that he actually liked it there.

Like me, Roose was happy at Brown. We each ventured into religious underworlds partly to see if the culture wars between the O'Reillys and our liberal parents was

really all they made it out to be. Reading Roose's tender and endearing account of his time at Liberty, *The Unlikely Disciple* (published in March by Grand Central), I could feel the ground moving under me. It bespeaks a shift in the way the cultural Left is coming to deal with conservative evangelicalism. No longer is the other, it seems, such a mortal threat that we can't all make friends and get along.

Walking Down Liberty Way

Liberty University rests in the fundamentalist garrison town of Lynchburg, Virginia; Jerry Falwell's home. His Thomas Road Baptist Church began there in 1956, and it is now a full-blown megachurch of more than 20,000 members. Founded in 1971, Liberty set out to bring the reactionary Bible-college experience to the born-again mainstream.

It's a liberal arts school, though any dissent from political and social conservatism is subject to punishment. The required freshman science class is a crash-course in creationism. R-rated movies, kissing, drinking, uncleanliness, dancing, and profanity can all warrant fines and lead to expulsion. While by no means a leading institution by national standards, its graduates enjoyed disproportionate favor in the hiring practices of the last Bush administration. Falwell, who led the school until its death and is adored by its students, crafted Liberty as an extension of his decades-long blitz on American politics and culture.

Roose tried to do his homework before he arrived. He read C.S. Lewis' apologetic works and Susan Harding's classic study of the Lynchburg scene, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*. A Christian friend tutored him in some of the jargon. He decided to go undercover; to his new friends at Liberty, Roose said he had recently accepted Jesus as his personal savior. Nobody there guessed that he was not really among the elect.

His family of liberal, secular Quakers serve as the Jiminy Cricket on Roose's adventure. His parents live in fear that he'll fall victim to the fundamentalist machine. From time to time his lesbian aunts write to remind him of all the terrible things Falwell and his ilk have to say about folks like them. As he settles into life at Liberty, singing in the church choir, making friends in his dorm, and coming to appreciate no-touch dating, hearing from family comes less as a welcome reminder of his true self than as nagging.

Through a mix of personal moxie and unbelievable luck, Roose had quite the semester. For spring break, he joined a busload of Liberty students on a missionary vacation, "witnessing" to their godless peers at Daytona Beach, Florida. He held his own in Bible studies and received counseling for his masturbation habit. And, on behalf of the school newspaper, he landed a rare one-on-one interview with Jerry Falwell himself. When Falwell died just before the semester's end, Roose won the distinction of being the last print journalist to interview the former Moral Majority kingpin. Perhaps most miraculous of all, though: when Roose returned to campus after writing his book, he didn't get clobbered. Nobody seemed to mind that he had

been lying and spying all along.

For all his immersive enthusiasm, despite praying and proselytizing and Bible-thumping with the best of them, Roose didn't give in all the way. He didn't get "saved." His interior monologue never got too comfortable with the endless homophobia that passes for ordinary conversation among Liberty students, though he also fell short of speaking out against it at the time. When he returned, he was still a happy, post-everything Brown student. But he was still praying, even if not quite believing.

We're meant to gather that the experience was something he'd always fondly take with him, like "the world's easiest metaphor": the ineradicable residue of the Jesus fish that he kept on the back of his car while in Lynchburg. He may not ultimately subscribe to the Liberty Way, but he can at least grow through his encounter with it. "Religious conflict might be a basic human instinct," writes Roose, "but I have faith, now more than ever before, that we can subvert that instinct for long enough to listen to each other."

The Art of the Exposé

When I was at Brown, a few years ahead of Roose, I made it my business to learn how to mix my dual compulsions of writing and religiosity. A fit of divine grace had turned me into a baptized Catholic by the Spring of my freshman year, but I clung to secular social and intellectual habits alongside intense, private piety. Like Roose at Liberty, my time at Brown was between two worlds, and I valued them both.

In those days, religious "values voters" were swinging the 2004 election in favor of George W. Bush. Everything going wrong in politics, from the invasion of Iraq, to the sidelining of climate science, to the obsession with Terri Schiavo, seemed to come down to theological delusion. Much of the best religion writing I could find was out to expose the troubling truths about the religious right. Jeff Sharlet was infiltrating "[America's secret theocrats](#)" in my hometown of Arlington, Virginia and [Ted Haggard's New Life Church](#) in Colorado Springs. Laurie Goodstein and David Kirkpatrick of the *New York Times* [came to Brown](#) to expose the evangelical organizations targeting the Ivy League.

During my breaks from school, I set off to follow suit. I took off on road trips that mixed pilgrimage with participant observation. By the end, I had spent time at major megachurches, including New Life, Rick Warren's Saddleback, the Crystal Cathedral, and McLean Bible Church (outside of Washington DC). I became practically a regular at Salt Lake City's Temple Square and dabbled in every pesky little denomination and congregation and prophecy conference I could find. But I was no good at exposé. The more I saw to expose, the more of the other I could appreciate and make my own. While Sharlet and Goodstein saw a theocratic beast in their midst, I found only crippling ambivalence. In the end, I didn't write much about those adventures. The red/blue political vocabulary just those few years ago

felt unequal to my aspirations for empathy.

When Sharlet's *The Family* came out last year, I reviewed it in these pages. It was undeniably an important, penetrating, page-turner of a book, but my essay also ventured into disappointment with the 'us vs. them' language that the cultural Left had taken on for talking about religious conservatives. Who was the "we" Sharlet kept using, that I kept trying to use? Were we really so different from them? The ambivalence of my truncated travels got in the way.

Breezing through *The Unlikely Disciple*, it felt like the language I was searching for at Brown (in the desolate middle of the Bush years) had suddenly arrived. By the time of Roose's semester and his writing, the president's approval ratings were in permanent free fall, his nefarious theocratic designs evidently vanquished. In that climate, Roose found ready at hand the language for *common ground* and the gradient of *hope*. Sound familiar?

A New Era of Responsibility

Throughout Barack Obama's presidential campaign and into his administration, he has tried to work his words around the culture wars. He speaks of "abortion reduction" rather than "choice" or "life." A supposedly new-and-improved faith-based initiatives office stands at the center of the domestic agenda. We press on in Afghanistan and Iraq, even as the president heads to Muslim countries in search of dialogue. Meanwhile, *Newsweek* has proclaimed "The End of Christian America"; with the Bush administration gone and churchgoing on the decline, perhaps the great, religion-infused culture wars of recent decades are over.

For all my complaints about particular policies, I can understand what sociologist Robert Bellah meant when he wrote of Obama's inauguration, "This is our moment, this is our time." Bellah is an old man, but his sentiments resonate in a lot of Millennial-generation hearts. *The Unlikely Disciple*, then, comes to seem like the expression of a brave new world and, in it, a new way of writing about religion in this country. It's not the first book of the kind, but it struck me as the first to fall so comfortably into the time and place.

We no longer need (since we are all "we" now) to muckrake and expose the other. Now, the necessary work is understanding, compromise, and shared humanity. These cozy themes have always worked their way into my writing, despite any pretense at restraint. Reading Roose made me wonder, *Why not embrace it?* Time to put aside the earlier, battle-stations posture of the Bush years and welcome the new, harmonious era of Obama.

The news has stopped me in my tracks. Despite all the fanfare for a new liberal —pardon me, "progressive"—religious movement, the old-guard conservatives are mainly unimpressed by Obama's new jargon. Not only did his reception at Notre Dame last month enrage pro-life Catholics, it threatened to shatter the fragile truce

between conservative bishops and the more freewheeling universities and laity in the Church. Last month, too, Liberty was back in the news for refusing to let the Young Democrats organize on campus. If the culture wars are over, their greatest citadel didn't get the memo.

Back on his home turf, Roose met with the intransigence of conflict. Letters in the *Brown Alumni Magazine* expressed "shock" at his sympathy for homophobic Liberty and suggested that, "by the time he gets to be thirty-five or forty, he might know enough to have interesting ideas and be able to express them."

One way or another, the old battle lines are changing; *The Unlikely Disciple* is a sign of it. And I'm glad that they are, never having felt I had much of anywhere to stand before. They couldn't account for Roose's gratefulness to both Brown and Liberty. But nor will sunny hopes for harmony, which both Roose and I both tend toward, suffice either. The truth, the writer in me hopes, will turn out to be much more interesting.

Nathan Schneider is a writer who lives in Brooklyn, New York. He holds a master's degree in religious studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and a bachelor's in the same subject from Brown University. Nathan blogs at The Row Boat.

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