

On the shelf: The Unlikely Disciple, by Kevin Roose

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

July 16, 2009

"I'm aware that a tree-hugging Brown student isn't supposed to be able to talk to a Bible-thumping Liberty student," writes Kevin Roose. "But why not? Aren't we all part of the Millennial generation? Don't we all carry the same iPhones and suffer from the same entitlement complex?"

Roose's sentiment echoes Mark Pinsky in [A Jew Among the Evangelicals](#). [The Unlikely Disciple](#)

chronicles a project similar to that book's: understanding and humanizing conservative evangelicals for the benefit of left-leaning secular folks (see my [review](#) of Pinsky's book). Roose's approach is to go undercover: he leaves his Ivy League campus to spend a semester at Liberty University.

His

account of the experience is nuanced, respectful and personal. Roose details the painless and painful aspects of adapting to his new climate, the pleasant and unpleasant ways in which his new classmates surprise him and the helpful and unhelpful responses from his liberal family and friends. He continually renegotiates the ethics of going undercover, of acting out rather than trying out conservative evangelicalism.

This,

too, proves complicated. Roose finds himself drawn into the life he's leading, internalizing its attitudes without buying into the larger implications. Drawing from anthropologist Susan Harding, he notes that religious conversion is in part the acquisition of a particular language—and he finds himself partly converted.

This self-aware enculturation makes for provocative reading. Roose is struck by how much easier it is to enjoy a conversation with a female student when he knows that a sexual encounter is not on the agenda. When his lesbian aunts express concern over students' homophobia, he observes that his Liberty friends are no more walking stereotypes than his aunts are, and when he tells his Liberty friends that he's returning to Brown, most infer a crisis of faith and offer to pray with him: "It's the most passive-aggressive Inquisition trial in history."

The book's weaknesses are minor, typically mistakes reflecting Roose's newness to the evangelical world. He indicates that rapture theology wasn't in the evangelical mainstream until the [Left Behind](#) books. I wish this were true—I might have been spared many nightmares and anxiety episodes courtesy of [Larry Norman](#) and [Russell S. Doughten](#).

More significantly, as a Wheaton graduate I puzzled at Roose's suggestion that in the early '70s a "fully accredited, academically rigorous" school was "novel in the world of conservative evangelicalism." Of course, conservatism is relative, and Wheaton, Calvin and Westmont were never rigid enough for Liberty founder Jerry Falwell.

Still, I was struck by how much of Roose's description echoes my own experience at Wheaton. Liberty's academic life is dominated by a tension between serious inquiry and *a priori* commitments. Come spring, someone posts a note asking women to take responsibility for male sexuality by dressing more modestly. Students take dates to formal banquets but don't dance; one student arrives at Liberty carrying business cards for potential suitors. While outright aggression toward gays and lesbians is rare, low-grade homophobia is ubiquitous. So are alternate swear words (e.g., "flipping"), "G-rated mischief" and [Joshua Harris](#). All this is familiar to me.

The book's saddest episode is a spring break trip to Daytona Beach to do some confrontational evangelism. In a prayer time between day and

evening outreach excursions, we see both the misguidedness of such an approach and the startling hostility of those it targets:

"I
pray, Lord, for the old man who spit on me," says Charlotte, a blonde from Arkansas. "Satan had such a strong grip on him, and I just want to see him know you, Lord."

Claire is the last to pray: "Lord, let them be nicer to us tonight."

It's
a conflict between two very different groups of young people, though with equally depressing spring break plans. Perhaps Roose's book will help to bridge this gap.

(An [excerpt](#)
of Roose's book, in which he tells of getting and conducting the last print interview with Falwell before he died, is posted on *Relevant* magazine's site. The resulting article, written for Liberty's student paper, is [here](#).)