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Author goes undercover

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why, I said something strictly true, like "I wanted to see what Christian college was like." It probably wouldn't pass muster in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee, but it's how I slept at night.

A major topic is the style of teaching at Liberty: mostly filling in blanks in workbooks that are given out, with little room for discussion or debate. Is that true of all classes or just the introductory ones that you took as a transfer?

Part of my experience, I'm sure, had to do with the size of the introductory classes I took — almost all of them had more than 100 students — and the content matter, which tends to be pretty dogmatic in the lower-level religion courses. So, yeah, the information flow in those classes went almost entirely in one direction and I did end up answering exam questions like, "True or false: Noah's ark was large enough to accommodate various kinds of dinosaurs." Since I left, however, a number of Liberty professors and students have assured me that the upper-level classes are taught in a much more traditional style, with all the discussion and debate you'd expect at a liberal arts college.

The summary on "The Unlikely Disciple" book jacket loudly proclaims some of Liberty's rules: no drinking, no smoking, etc. Which of the rules did you find the hardest to follow? Were there any you thought would be tough but weren't?

The hardest, without question, was the no-cursing rule. I don't smoke or drink heavily, but I do enjoy a good four-letter word once in a while, so I had a real problem going to Liberty, where curses are punishable with up to 18 reprimands. (For comparison, 30 reprimands is enough to get you expelled.) I actually bought a Christian self-help book called "30 Days to Taming Your Tongue," and as a result, I spent a few days saying things like "Glory!" and "Mercy me!" I sounded a little like Beaver Cleaver, but at least I avoided getting reprimands.

Most, if not all, of your close friendships at Liberty seemed to be with men and specifically with the residents of your dorm. How much did gender segregation in the dorms shape your social relationships at Liberty?

Gender plays a huge part in Liberty's social dynamics and my experiences there were inextricably dependent on me being a guy.

If I'd been a girl, I'm sure I would have seen a completely different side of Liberty, especially with respect to Liberty's theological teachings on female submission. A female Brown student should go to Lynchburg and write the girls' version! **At one point, you compare your study away at Liberty to many students' study abroad experiences in other nations and wonder if the divide may be greater even though you spoke the same language as Liberty students. In the end, how different did you find the culture at Liberty from the progressive secular culture you're more accustomed to? Are we as divided as the culture warriors would have us believe?**

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, I found that the "God divide" was nowhere near as big as people tend to think it is. There are legitimate differences between the two sides of the culture wars, of course, and those differences are likely to continue for quite a while. But, I don't think this particular religious conflict is built around a hundred-foot brick wall. If anything, it's built around a flimsy piece of cardboard, held in place on both sides by paranoia and lack of exposure. If someone like me can go to Liberty and find things to like about it, the God divide can't possibly be all that forbidding. **What's the one thing that you would want to tell students at Liberty (or any evangelical Christian) to help them better understand progressive secular culture?**

I don't think there's any one maxim that will do the trick. I think the key is just to spend time with people on the other side, learning why they believe the things they do. I know it's not likely to happen, but I genuinely think the world would be a better place if every secular progressive spent time getting to know evangelical Christians and vice versa. It's hard to demonize people when you learn to see things from their perspective. ▀

— Bradley Portnoy is a senior at Brown University. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island. Find Kevin Roose's book, "The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University," at Amazon.com. This article was originally published March 25 at CampusProgress.org, a project of the Center for American Progress.

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