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Patrick Q. Mason

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Naomi Schaefer Riley. *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America.*

New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005

Reviewed by Patrick Q. Mason

In the current polarized political and cultural climate, it seems that Americans are governed less by the motto of “E Pluribus Unum” and have adopted something of an “E Pluribus Duo” philosophy instead. The 2000 and 2004 presidential elections heightened this division with incessant talk of Blue and Red States and the cultural and ideological rifts between them. Bush voters circulated maps disdainfully labeling both coasts and New England as the “United States of Canada.” For their part, Blue Americans often portray their conservative opponents as unenlightened dupes and rubes, and consider virtually everything between the coasts as “flyover country.”

Fortunately, some authors such as Naomi Schaefer Riley are trying to bridge the gap. One of the purposes of her highly readable and informative book *God on the Quad* is to make Red Americans a bit more comprehensible to Blue Americans through a specific focus on religious colleges and universities. In an academic culture that is pervaded with secularism, liberalism, and postmodernism, religious schools and those who attend or teach at them are often dismissed or belittled. While Riley does identify some, such as Patrick Henry College, that do not compare favorably with secular colleges in terms of overall quality of education, for the most part she finds that the schools she visited are ambitious and successful institutions of higher learning that in many ways are on par with their secular counterparts. Although her impressions are largely anecdotal and therefore somewhat arbitrary, in making her judgments she considers such aspects as matriculating students' high school grades and test scores, postgraduation careers and placements, and the overall academic caliber of students and professors she encountered during her visits. Riley's primary argument is that as administrators and professors at religious colleges “navigate between the dangers of secularization and isolation,” their students will emerge as leaders in next-generation America

“by contributing thoughtful and community-minded citizens, whose religious beliefs strengthen the causes of civic commitment, moral decency, and family stability” (260). *God on the Quad*, therefore, simultaneously works as a call for Blue America to take religious higher education more seriously and as a roadmap of some of the potential pitfalls that religious schools face as they seek to put their stamp not just on their students but on American society as a whole.

In all, Riley visited twenty schools during the course of her research. Her sample consisted of representatives from a variety of religious traditions, including Catholic, nondenominational evangelical, Baptist, Reformed Protestants, fundamentalist Protestant, Latter-day Saint, Jewish, and even Buddhist. Her focus is on colleges and universities and not seminaries, although religious education constitutes a core element of the curriculum at most of the schools. This study is tilted toward the strongest institutions within each tradition. Doing so essentially inflates the average, so to speak, and gives something of a false impression that every evangelical school, for instance, is a Wheaton or a Baylor, when this is clearly not the case. Riley does acknowledge that religious schools range in rigor just as secular ones do, but her focus is primarily on the best that religious higher education has to offer, a valid if not necessarily comprehensive approach.

The first half of the book comprises chapter-length profiles of six of the most noteworthy religious colleges and universities: Brigham Young (which at one point is compared to Harvard), Bob Jones, Notre Dame, Thomas Aquinas, Yeshiva, and Baylor. As an alumnus of two of the six (BYU and Notre Dame), I was impressed by Riley’s good ear for the language and key issues that are particular to each. Those who are intimately familiar with any of these profiled schools may not necessarily learn anything new from what they read, but the fact that Riley gets it right in familiar cases instills confidence when readers are presented with schools they know less about. The second half of the book is organized thematically, covering issues of feminism, race, student life, minority religious groups, the integration of faith and learning, and political activism.

As I began *God on the Quad*, I had a suspicion that it might be in the tradition of nineteenth-century travel narratives, in which someone from the enlightened Occident visits the benighted Orient (from China to Africa to polygamous Utah). In detailing their travels, writers alternate between giving backhanded compliments, patronizing pats on the head, and condescending judgments of backwardness. Such travelers may bring a few relics back to hang on their walls, but invariably they return to the modern world smug in their cultural superiority. *God on the Quad* thankfully has

none of this arrogance. Riley is sensitive to the inside dynamics of each school and moves deftly among the many ideologies, theologies, and cultures that differentiate them one from another. She does not hesitate to criticize, but she does so constructively rather than sarcastically, trying to fit her critiques within the boundaries that each school has drawn for itself. She appreciates the idea of religious higher education, recognizing it as a valid option for people who are both faithful and thoughtful—after all, she repeatedly insists, many of the students and faculty at Brigham Young and Thomas Aquinas and even Bob Jones had Ivy League offers but decided on religious schools instead.

Importantly, in her analysis Riley does not bind herself to the golden calves of multiculturalism, diversity, and postmodernism, and shows how the vision of faith-based education exposes some of the shortcomings of these contemporary mantras while at the same time striving to incorporate their better aspects (such as overcoming racism, sexism, and homophobia). For instance, she affirms that “there is an educational benefit to be gained in an environment where people are coming from a similar intellectual and spiritual standpoint,” and also notes that “where there is no common ground in a conversation to begin with, the conversation tends to go nowhere” (202). In addition, providing students with strong roots in a particular faith tradition gives them a foundation for “moral and political reflection considerably deeper than the cafeteria-style offerings of most secular schools” (252). More practically, when a religious college educates its students about the application of a moral and ethical code that does not hold relativism as an absolute, they are helping form “ethically aware professionals” (236) who can help guide the American marketplace away from Enron and back toward the path of virtue. Whether she went into the project with these notions or discovered them along the way, Riley has written a book that is more valuable than either a straight apologetic or jeremiad, as it speaks to both the merits and handicaps of religious, and indeed American, higher education as presently constituted.

The best example of Riley’s approach is chapter 7, which considers the impact of feminism on religious colleges (“while they weren’t looking,” she wryly notes). She lays out the debate over whether religious colleges have a sheltering or secularizing impact on the women who attend them. Relying on data about freshmen women from the American Council on Education, she shows that “even if women at religious colleges are not well versed in the tenets of feminist theory, they clearly understand the options open to women in the twenty-first century and are considering a wide range of them” (148). In short, feminists have won the day without even knowing it, and reactionary fears that feminism would unduly undermine

faith appear ungrounded. Rather than falling away from the churches in droves, women at religious colleges and universities are appropriating higher education according to their own particular theological and cultural impulses, thus demonstrating “a sophisticated accommodation to modernity” while holding on to and even strengthening their faith (148). Theirs is not the political feminism of the 1970s, but rather a new sensibility that is uniquely feminist and genuinely religious.

The book’s conclusion is an excellent reprisal of some of its main findings and arguments and considers briefly the dim (according to Riley) possibilities of Islamic higher education. What Riley truly focuses on, she does admirably. In the end, however, I am unconvinced by two of her concluding claims: first, that today’s graduates from religious universities will mount any substantial challenge to America’s individualist and materialist culture; and second, that this “missionary generation” will help bridge the gap between Red and Blue. After reading *God on the Quad*, I have no doubt that religious higher education will play an important role in the ongoing transformation of America, but I am not so certain that Blue America will be converting to Red anytime soon.

Patrick Q. Mason (pmason1@nd.edu) is Visiting Assistant Professor of American Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He earned a BA in history at Brigham Young University (1999); MA degrees in history and international peace studies at Notre Dame (both 2003); and a PhD in history at Notre Dame (2005). He has been thoroughly converted to Fighting Irish football.

Errata

- David Ericson and William Whitaker’s names were misspelled in “Setting a Standard in LDS Art: Four Illustrators of the Mid-Twentieth Century,” by Robert T. Barrett and Susan Easton Black, *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 24–95.
- The article “Love and Intimacy in Family, Kinship, Friendship, and Community,” *BYU Studies* 42, no. 2 (2003): 138–70, should have listed Mark H. Butler as first author and Allen E. Bergin as second author.