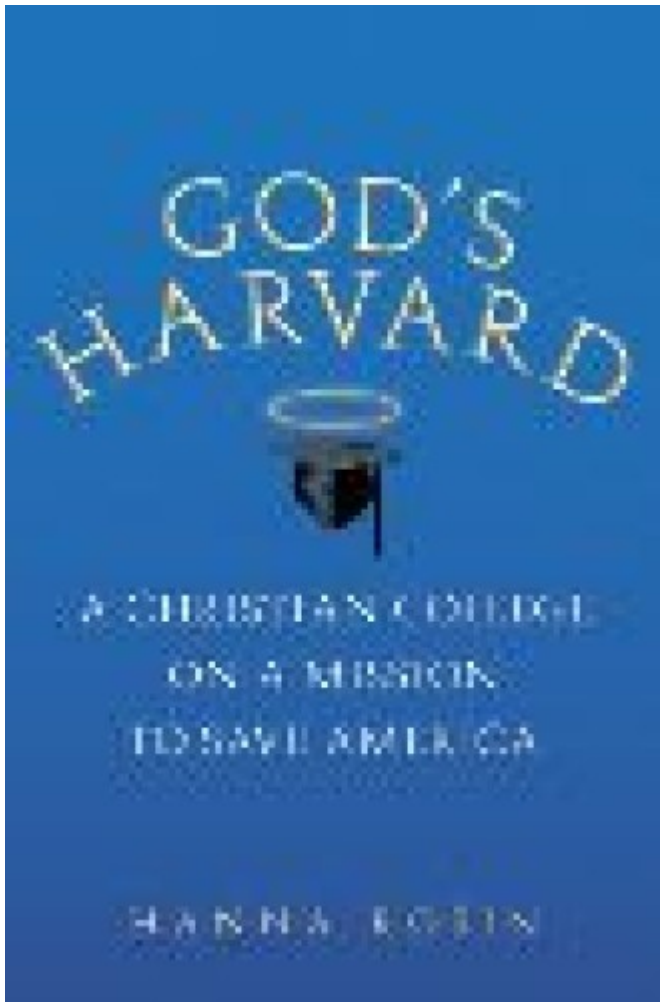


God's Harvard

reviewed by [Todd Shy](#) in the [October 30, 2007](#) issue

In Review



God's Harvard: A Christian College on a Mission to Save America

Hanna Rosin
Harcourt

In my personal evangelical heyday back in the Reagan 1980s, one measure of zeal for my college crowd was our willingness to do evangelism among total strangers.

We approached people in a student café, scattered two by two on Florida beaches during spring break and talked to peers on our main campus lawn and to townies at a nearby mall. We asked people if they would be willing to “talk about spiritual things.” The homeschooled evangelicals of Hanna Rosin’s new book measure their zeal in terms of participation in political campaigns—what one student calls “the ministry of political activism.” Instead of missionaries and ministers, these college students aspire to become senators and judges. And if Rosin is right, this union of political ambition and evangelical piety is here to stay.

To make her case and to write this compelling portrait, Rosin embedded herself in a unique subculture: Patrick Henry College in northern Virginia. The school was founded in 2000 by Michael Farris, a homeschooling activist and former candidate for lieutenant governor of Virginia. Patrick Henry’s stated mission is to raise up a “Joshua Generation” of Christians who will gain key political and cultural leadership positions and thus “take back the land.” The school immodestly presents itself as “God’s Harvard” and a “Harvard for Homeschoolers.” Like effective politicians and preachers everywhere, Farris pitches the school’s mission in a hypothetical narrative: One day an “Academy Award-winner will walk down the aisle. He’ll get a cell phone call congratulating him. It happens to be the President of the United States, his old roommate from Patrick Henry.”

In contrast to other recent books scolding the religious right, Rosin’s work offers journalistic portraiture rather than theological critique. Her purpose is to cut through normal caricatures and show a group of young, homeschooled evangelicals dealing with a very protected transition to autonomy in the world. To be sure, there are slips. Was a certain observation about a college freshman—“With no help from his mom, he had freshly combed hair, like a schoolboy’s, or a senator’s”—really necessary, for example? But overall the tone of the book is curious and respectful, and by allowing the subjects their integrity Rosin has produced a refreshing take on the much-discussed courtship of evangelicals and politics.

This point deserves emphasis: surely the only way to understand the growth of evangelicalism is to take the experience of evangelicals seriously. This doesn’t mean conceding their theological claims. It just means that the impulses that lead a person to embrace evangelicalism in the first place are recognizably human ones and not, in and of themselves, conspiratorial.

Rosin's method does more than soften rough caricatures; it also clarifies the dynamic of evangelicalism itself. In Rosin's hands, these college students seem at times wildly repressed, at other times determined and bold. At times they are zealous, at other times narrow. The contrasts and the pressures are revealing. One student, a decent and otherwise mannerly young man, can't hold back from calling Senator Edward Kennedy evil. Another student, Farahn, calls herself a "Christian nihilist"—a Christian nihilist, mind you, at this morally pristine utopia. In this context, Farahn's confession is especially moving: "I've come to the conclusion that people aren't really bad, after all. I think people are most essentially desperate . . . pathetic in the sense that life really is a tragedy, and even the most harsh people deserve a degree of sympathy. I still see being and humanity as a sort of tragedy, though."

Rosin captures this young woman's ambivalence with the lovely passing detail that instead of going to church she sometimes "would pull over, sit in the car alone, and listen to sermons on the radio." She seems disillusioned but not quite defeated, hard-pressed on every side but not destroyed. Her convictions are shifting, and she lets them move without simply cutting her losses.

In fact, while the leadership of Patrick Henry appears here as a shield wall of certainty, the school community is fraught with ambiguity. Rosin is good at describing the cognitive dissonance that results when homeschooled students embrace worldly power. She is particularly good at showing the dissonance for women at Patrick Henry, who are steered toward traditional gender ideals of motherhood and homemaking and yet encouraged to network for high-powered jobs in the meantime.

The book's central strain, however, belongs to the college itself. For its best professors—or certainly the most charismatic ones—push the envelope of orthodoxy just enough to rattle some students, and at the end of the book the most popular teacher of all is fired, an event dubbed by some students "9/11 here at PHC." The problem, as Rosin rightly points out, is that founder Farris's vision for the school is itself contradictory. In the end, the exiled professors are right: Farris breeds an environment "hostile to the teaching of Liberal Arts."

It is a familiar conundrum. Can you use the tools of the world to remake that world, or will participation in the world corrupt your own best efforts? Farris wants it all: evangelicals in the White House and evangelicals on red carpets, but also a family structure and dating habits untouched by the modern world. Rosin has humanized

the students at Patrick Henry, but Farris doesn't return the favor to those who don't share his vision. The problem of this tightly controlled brand of education is illustrated with great drama in an angry response by Farris: "I've read 70 pages of the *Iliad* this weekend, and it's rubbish; it's all about adultery. I can write better than that." Hemingway's famous line comes to mind: Isn't it pretty to think so?

Rosin's own ambivalence is more persuasive than both this silly bravado from Farris and the cartoons of evangelicals sketched by too many of their critics. In *God's Harvard* Rosin lets herself wonder, for example, if the moral-emotional constraints on Patrick Henry women aren't preferable to the fast-track maturation of innocent girls elsewhere. What parent of daughters hasn't wondered something similar? Rosin admires the seriousness of students at the school, their utter sense of purpose. And yet, at the end, she still can't bring herself to endorse their aims: "Much as I marveled at the Patrick Henry students, I doubted that any of them—not even the most rebellious of the campus rebels, not even the least conservative kid there—would ever moderate their views enough to win my vote—not for president, congressman, or even city councilman."

Homeschooling may still have momentum, but the subculture that Rosin explores here is not representative of all evangelicals. This is a small but interesting part of a group with hundreds of centers, not one. It will be interesting to see which evangelicals remain committed to the kind of political ministry this book describes and which will feel chastened. For Rosin is right to call evangelicals "chronically ambivalent"—not about their beliefs but about their relationship to the world. That combination of theological stubbornness and on-the-ground ambivalence is the hallmark of the evangelical. Take away ambivalence, and evangelicals are fundamentalists all over again.