

## A Discussion of the book *The Unlikely Disciple* by Kevin Roose

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Frank is a 45 year-old literature professor at a community college. He is a married Evangelical Christian living in the largely secular northeast.

Bob is a 49 year-old retail manager. He is single, a confirmed atheist, a member of the ACLU, and lives in the largely Evangelical Christian south.

For the purposes of The Jonah Project, they are The God Couple (please mentally play the theme from the 70's TV series *The Odd Couple* after you read the following):

On June 24th, Bob was asked to participate in The Jonah Project; that request came from his Christian friend Frank. Deep down, he knew Frank's theology was wrong, but he also knew that--if he agreed--some day he would get a free book. With nothing else to do, he answered his friend's e-mail in the affirmative. Several days later, author Kevin Roose mailed out the books, requesting that they read them together. Can two spiritually dissonant men share a reading experience without driving each other crazy?

**Bob:**

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Frank,

After reading *The Unlikely Disciple*, I guess the foremost thoughts in my mind are my deep distrust of the institution and an equally ambivalent opinion of the students that go there. I do not agree with Falwell's attempts (all too successful) to politicize the evangelical movement. Allying with Conservative Republicans has helped to create the current poisonous political atmosphere and to political paralysis, but it hasn't attained any of the goals that Evangelicals had hoped that involvement in the political process would advance. Abortion is still legal and likely to remain so, homosexuals are gaining more rights, and Darwinism is still taught in schools (although Creationism is being given more attention, public schools are still secular). Political power for Evangelicals has not led to social change and hasn't even brought converts to the faith.

I was disturbed by the level of animosity towards homosexuals at the school. The students were bad enough, but to see anti-homosexual bigotry institutionalized by the school itself was disturbing. The animosity towards Darwinism and abortion were just as bad. The problem is that this school is not only imparting knowledge to these kids, they're also shaping their values, and promoting absolutist doctrines such as 'Abortion is murder', 'Evolution didn't happen', and 'Absolute truth exists' only serves to close the mind to any kind of reasoned arguments and makes it difficult to find middle ground with those with different religious beliefs or none at all.

However, I was heartened by the fact that the student body at Liberty was not as monolithic as the school board would like to believe. Most of the students that Kevin Roose met seemed to be decent people, and many of them expressed discomfort with the school's mission. It would be interesting to see how these people fare in life after graduation. Does their doubt enable them to entertain other points of view, or do they simply follow what their education has taught them? Remember, these are not just students; they're our future political and business leaders and will be occupying positions of power.

I have an issue with universities that prioritize spiritual needs over physical ones to the point where Falwell can say with a straight face that 'what the developing world needs is not food or water, but the word of God.' Combined with Liberty's goal of contributing to the political process, this can have far-reaching consequences for future public policy.

The book has in a way only intensified my ambiguous feelings about people of faith. I have always found it ironic that although I myself am an unapologetic atheist, my two best friends from childhood are Born-again Christians. I've made other friends who are also evangelicals, but I think you and my friend "X" are so different in your approaches to faith that it warrants a comparison.

I find your approach to religion to be an open-minded and intellectual one (correct me if I'm wrong about any of my assumptions or observations), even though you and I rarely talk about your beliefs. For my part, it's mainly because as an atheist I'm generally not excited about a discussion of faith. However, you almost never bring it up with me, and judging by your apologetic tone when you do I get the feeling that it's a conscious choice on your part. Although you belong to a branch of Christianity that is by definition evangelical, you've been respectful of my feelings and seem to apply your values to your own life and to those close to you without the need to proselytize. You also have a healthy dose of skepticism regarding the bible. You don't act as if you think that the bible is the literal word of God, and probably agree that it was written not by God but by followers of Jesus. You still put stock in scientific tenets such as evolution and the Big Bang theory. You don't condemn homosexuality (though I'm not aware of your stance on gay marriage, I suspect you don't fundamentally object). You've instilled faith to your children while giving them a healthy way to express and experience it. I have a great deal of respect for how you've applied your faith in your life. Oh, and I don't mind talking about it with you once in a while, so feel free to bring it up. Any conversation with you is interesting and your motives are never suspect.

My feelings regarding "X" and his beliefs are more complicated. For one thing, he's an out-and-out evangelical, and though he no longer tries to convert me, I find myself repulsed by his belief system. He *does* think that God is the literal author of the bible and that every word is the literal truth. He's indoctrinated his son in such a way that "Y" won't ever consider dating a girl who's not a Christian. He does compartmentalize quite a bit, though. He won't condemn a person for being gay and would even help him or her, but he still thinks that person will burn in hell forever. For that matter so will I, according to him. Here's an example as to why I think it's a hypocritical and self-serving viewpoint.

As we both know, "X" was not the best person when he was young. He engaged in violent behavior and was in quite a few fights (he once knocked out a bouncer). He was a serial fornicator who slept with many women. He was a pathological liar. He's admitted that his actions in the past hurt quite a few people. Worst of all (according to him), he was party to an abortion. He and his wife "Z" were quite young when she got pregnant, and they weren't ready for a child so the pregnancy was terminated (they weren't even married at the time - another sin). I don't consider any of his past behaviors to be terribly unforgivable; as a matter of fact, they're fairly common. Young people do stupid things, and he's acquitted himself admirably in the way he lives his life now. I, however, have done none of those things,

either then or now. And according to his beliefs, he is guilty of the sin of murder. Yet *he's* going to Heaven while *I'm* going to Hell. I've never brought up the abortion argument with him, but I once asked how a just and loving God could allow me to burn in Hell. His response was to tell me that it was *my* choice, not God's. How I am supposed to react to that? Not that I'm going to Hell, which I don't believe in, but that "*X*" thinks I will. I also asked what percentage of people who'd ever lived got to go to Heaven and he said 3%, which obviously means that 97% of humanity is doomed to suffer Hell's torments for eternity.

"*X*"'s beliefs are fairly typical of many in the evangelical community. How do we respond to that? What kind of consensus can we build when one side of the argument posits an absolutist doctrine that is not subject to compromise? How can we talk to a community that feels that we're going to Hell simply because we're not like them? Can it really be a coincidence that the level of evangelical influence within the Republican Party is rising at the same time that the ability and desire for political compromise is dropping?

Still, despite my reservations and - yes, disgust - with "*X*"'s religious beliefs, we can still be close friends. I'm still not sure how that works when one person is a Man of God and the other is clearly the Devil's cabana boy. Must be that compartmentalization thing again, on both our parts.

I think that if there's a way to find common ground for evangelicals and non-believers (not to mention people of other faiths), we need to de-politicize religion and make it less activist. Evangelicals can believe homosexuals are going to Hell, but shouldn't sponsor voting initiatives to ban gay marriage. They can consider abortion a sin, but unless medical science can prove that an aggregation of undifferentiated cells is a human being with a soul, they should allow compromise on the issue. (I for one would support unrestricted access to abortion in the first trimester and ban it in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, unless it would gravely affect the health of the mother. The 2<sup>nd</sup> trimester is the difficult one to assess, though I think the average woman should know whether or not she's pregnant after 12 weeks.) They can also believe what they want about Creationism but not demand that schools teach it. Make it a home schooling project if you feel that strongly about it. They can help the community without actively trying to coerce it. If your message is compelling enough, you won't need legislation to enforce your beliefs.

As you can see, my biggest problem with evangelicals is their desire to use the political process to spread and enforce their beliefs on others. I also seem to be placing the onus of change onto them and have said little about what others can do to facilitate that process. That might be my particular bias talking. But then again, I feel that my experience can show a way. After all, I've been friends with quite a few evangelicals despite our differences, although that might just be God playing a practical joke on me.

Frank:

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Bob,

Thank you for the length and depth of your first salvo and the expressions of friendship. Both are very much appreciated. I consider you my closest friend, although I must admit the incongruity of our worldviews makes me reluctant to discuss certain aspects of my life as fully as I might sometimes wish.

Your observations regarding the differences between “X” and myself are entirely correct. Although we embrace the same core worldview concerning the primacy of Jesus, the belief that God is responsible for the universe, etc., we seem to differ in certain significant ways involving the authorship of the Bible, parenting and the execution of Christ’s Great Commission.

Although I am not really surprised, I was saddened to learn *The Unlikely Disciple* has “only intensified (your) ambiguous feelings about people of faith.” Although I believe Kevin Roose presented an honest and balanced account of his experiences at Liberty, the very nature of the school requires the instructors and students be inclined toward a certain extreme form of belief. Most Christian parents do not send their offspring off to Christian colleges or universities. The ones who choose Liberty are obviously hoping to send their children into a cloistered environment where they will be protected against what they perceive as the postmodern and overtly secular (if not downright hostile) agenda and environment typical of most centers of higher education. As Kevin remarks at various points in the text, he was surprised to find his fellow students as normal as they were. The real surprise is that he did not find more instances of hate and bias amongst the students and faculty, considering the sequestered lives most of the Liberty population must have experienced.

Incidentally, I also must challenge your depiction of yourself as an atheist. I have known you for more than a quarter of a century, and while you are certainly not the sort of person who will readily place faith in an invisible and intangible God, you are too open-minded and curious to conclusively deny even the possibility that a conscious creative entity gave form to the universe. I see you as a particularly skeptical agnostic.

Perhaps it is Christian charity on my part, but I see the underlying motives behind some of Jerry Falwell’s seemingly outlandish comments as generally well-intentioned. Let us use the one you mention, for example, “what the developing world needs is not food or water, but the word of God.” On the surface, I agree this makes little sense. When people are dying of thirst and starvation, someone preaching at them is a spectacularly poor solution. But is that what Falwell meant by “the word of God”? The Bible instructs people to freely give to those in need, to adopt a philosophy where all people are a vast brotherhood and children are particularly to be prized, cared for and instructed wisely. Treating others as you would be treated is the ideal of Christian thought. The underlying political corruption of some governments, institutions and organizations makes the distribution of aid supplies uneven in these

impoverished areas. Greed and favoritism run rampant and people starve. Some of our church missionaries have seen this firsthand. If only these people, both the leaders and the starving, truly lived by “the word of God” this would not be the case. Falwell was almost certainly calling for social and moral reform, not speaking out of callous bigotry in this instance. I find myself in the unlikely and probably untenable position of a Falwell apologist, but I believe his oratory and media savvy led him to often speak in a verbal shorthand that was meant to convey his underlying Christian worldview in pithy, sound bite-sized morsels. Where he often got into trouble was misjudging his audience. The secular world did not know what was implicit in his words from a Christian perspective. That world saw a blustery and hateful individual who wanted to drop planeloads of inedible Bibles on befuddled hungry masses. The reaction to his rhetoric probably surprised and saddened him.

Regarding your experiences with “X” and his family:

The New Testament states that the only way to God is through Jesus and the truly repentant are forgiven their sins. These two ideas are what seem to underlie most of the friction you experience.

The former is a theological minefield. If the line is to be taken literally, then, as “X” says, a large percentage of humanity is destined for a time of torment and eventual disposition in a lake of fire. This seems grossly unfair, as a secular philanthropist will suffer while a selfish Christian miser lives on through eternity, but that is the literal interpretation of the written words. But is that their intent? For the sake of brevity this is a gross over simplification, but Jesus primarily wanted people to turn their lives around, to stop being self-centered and caring about the wrong things. He also wanted them to stop paying lip-service to God on the Sabbath and living selfishly and sinfully the rest of the week. Through his teachings people were to find the simple truths of how God wanted them to live minus all the frills. This meant not necessarily following the numerous rites and rules dictated by the priestly caste, but instead finding the original intent behind them. In addition, to be holy does not mean to discriminate. It merely means to keep oneself spiritually separate from the sins and earthiness of secularism. In this view, Jesus would weep over the sin of homosexuality but never throw stones at the sinner. Yes, following Jesus is ultimately accepting Him as the lord and savior of your life, but what that really means is accepting his view of the universe and human and divine relations. Pushing the metaphysical aspects aside for the moment, that is what it really comes down to. Accepting the idea of a created universe, are we prepared to live as our creator intended? Does it make sense that He would want us to live this way, in caring harmony with one another? As “X” says, each person has to make his or her own choice. If this worldview is correct, and to me it makes a lot of practical sense, living for yourself instead of prayerfully living for others is the supreme act of rebellion. I have seen spectacular feats of caring and kindness during the ten years I have been a Christian—too many to mention here. I have seen lives enriched by the love of others and lives end in peace and hope rather than in pain and fear.

I am certain that “X” and “Z” are sincerely repentant over what they see as the murder of their unborn child. It likely haunts them on many levels. By turning their moral and spiritual lives around they are trying to live repentant lives. Being human, they will not always succeed 100%—but they are doing their best to try, raising (their children) to hopefully avoid what they see as the horrible decisions and

behavior in their past. Their children will obviously make their own paths through life, making many missteps (as we all do) and living with the consequences. “X” and “Z” are just trying to give them the best foundation they can, but I suspect in shielding them from all the “tempting apples” of a secular world they may be doing them a disservice. Some of the best conversations I have with my children are those in which they come to me looking for advice and explanations rather than judgment. I will never start and end my answers with “Well the Bible says...”, but will rather pray for the compassion, patience and understanding to guide them wisely. So far, thank God, it has worked out.

I do not agree with Evangelicals forcing their beliefs on others, via political means or otherwise. Although these activists may believe they are acting for others’ own good, people should ultimately have the right to live and believe as they choose. To echo a certain famous document, these are among the inalienable rights bestowed by their Creator.

Frank

**Bob:**

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Frank,

I have to say that I’m quite impressed with your response. You presented your points in a very even-handed and scholarly method, and I had a rare glimpse of how you apply your beliefs to your world view.

I’m surprised that you were saddened by my comment about how *The Unlikely Disciple* intensified my ambiguous feelings about people of faith. I didn’t say it to mean that my *animosity* towards people of faith was intensified; I chose ‘ambiguous’ as in ‘causing uncertainty’. While reading the book, I was heartened to see that quite a few students questioned some of the more rigid aspects and dogma of their schooling experience, with some of them even questioning Reverend Falwell himself. I genuinely liked many of the people Kevin Roose met (I had a particular affinity for Jersey Joey and was touched by his relationship with Anna. I also liked Zipper, but for some reason I kept picturing him as *Doonesbury*’s resident hippie/slacker Zonker Harris. This may be because Zonker’s nephew is also named Zipper.) As you say, many of them were normal kids struggling with everyday issues that affect all young adults. However, despite your observation that most parents don’t send their children to Liberty, I saw many examples of absolutist doctrine, inflexibility, and religious/political activism that seem to be representative of much of the Christian community as it is constituted today. Will these students that Kevin Roose met at Liberty subject their teachings to a critical analysis and form their own viewpoints, or will they mimic Reverend Falwell’s? I just don’t know. After all, he founded Liberty as an institution that would be “as far to the right as Harvard is to the left”, promoted “strong commitment to political conservatism”, and considered America’s colleges and universities as “anti-Christian and often Anti-American”.

I thought your interpretation of Reverend Falwell's intent behind his remarks (*"What the developing world needs is not food or water, but the word of God"*) to be persuasive. It makes sense, both from a moral and a spiritual viewpoint. But it's hard to reconcile this interpretation with the many occasions in his life in which he's made similar - or worse - remarks that cannot be so easily dismissed as misunderstood. Here are a few:

- "AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals; it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals"
- "The ACLU is to Christians what the American Nazi party is to Jews"
- "If you're not a born-again Christian, you're a failure as a human being"
- "[homosexuals are] brute beasts...part of a vile and satanic system [that] will be utterly annihilated, and there will be a celebration in heaven."
- "The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way -- all of them who have tried to secularize America -- I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'" (on the 9/11 attacks)

I personally don't believe that these are the words of a man who would feel "surprised and saddened" at the thought that they could be taken at face value.

Your statement challenging my depiction of myself as an atheist was an intriguing one and really made me think. I've always prided myself on being skeptical towards religious beliefs in general (and of God in particular), and it was interesting for me to consider whether or not I *could* believe that a conscious creative entity gave form to the universe to be another act of skepticism. As they say, 'Evidence of absence is not absence of evidence'. Still, I find the scientific view of the universe to be more compelling and awe-inspiring than any God could ever be. The fact that nearly every atom in my body was once a part of the nuclear furnace of a supernova is more thrilling to me than the concept of a God that created me from dust, and the scientific evidence backing it up appeals to my sense of order and design.

I think you're right in suggesting that the friction I'm experiencing in my relationships with evangelical Christians is primarily due to how they interpret - and implement - the part of the New Testament that you mentioned. It's true that I think many of the particulars of religious beliefs are outright nuts (creationism, Noah's ark, the concept of 'rapture'), but I have no problem with the beliefs per se or the people who believe them. It's the evangelical part that disturbs me - the systemic intolerance for others with opposing viewpoints, the vilification and marginalization of homosexuals, and the insistence of using the state's resources (laws, textbook revisions, voting initiatives, political office) to enforce their particular beliefs to the nation as a whole. This may sound like a one-sided opinion, but I don't see atheists, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, or anyone else for that matter attempting to restrict the rights of Christians or to disenfranchise them in any way, despite what Reverend Falwell said. In many ways, this state of affairs is quite recent in our nation's history, as evangelical Christianity in the past dealt more

with spiritual matters than with the body politic. Unfortunately, we can thank individuals such as Jerry Falwell with creating the current poisonous situation by using political means to advance spiritual causes.

And yet still, despite all that, I find that I have quite a few evangelical friends. So, how do we bridge the divide? You've admitted that our differences have made you reluctant to discuss matters of faith with me. I can admit that I've not actively sought out any discussions on the topic with you, either. I'm not quite sure why. I don't think it's because I think we'll get into a heated discussion - that's not your style. You referred to me as 'curious and open-minded', but I have to admit that when it comes to religious teachings I'm not terribly attentive. My interest only perks up when matters of faith and politics collide. But you've implied that you'd like for me to be more receptive to such discussions, and if it's important to you then it's important to me as well. I think that this particular project may be the start of that process, which is ironic considering I really only did this in the first place for the free book.

I'm enjoying our discussion and hope you are as well.

Bob

**Frank:**

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Bob,

I am also impressed with your side of the exchange, but this certainly did not come as a surprise. It is quite refreshing after a semester of grading papers largely characterized by the absence of critical thought and logical reasoning to read an argument exhibiting both.

I am saddened that your ambiguous feelings toward people of faith were intensified by reading *The Unlikely Disciple* because I hoped Kevin's book would provide definition and clarity. His depiction of his experiences researching the book allows you, as an agnostic interested in the evangelical subculture, to vicariously experience the same journey. As Kevin came to understand the purpose and value of prayer, as just one example, I hoped you would see the value in what I recall you once referred to as kind thoughts pointlessly directed into the ether. Our recent telephone conversation left me hopeful this was so. Although I certainly did not expect Kevin's work to have an evangelical effect on you, I hoped it would lead to a more tolerant and informed view of Christian culture. Most atheists and agnostics only emphasize the fringe elements, stereotyping the entire subculture by its most extreme examples. It kind of reminds me of the days when you and I would attend *Star Trek* conventions. The people cavorting around in the costumes and greasepaint would attract the news crews, not the majority of fans wearing street clothing and behaving normally.

By attempting to illuminate the possible underlying meaning of his quotation in my last e-mail I said I put myself in the "untenable position of a Falwell apologist." The extreme and unmitigated bluntness of

some of his remarks only proves how untenable such positions may be from a secular perspective. Although I do not feel a Christian worldview should influence the political arena, which should be ecumenical in its respect for all, I understand Falwell's "perfect world" thinking. He hoped for a world without homosexuals because the Bible clearly deems such behavior as an abomination. He believed AIDS to be a sexually transmitted disease that would be curtailed in a prudent and monogamous society. Because he held life as a divine gift, he also believed abortion was the forcible taking of life--murder. Lastly, he hoped for a heavenly kingdom on earth where there would be no need for an ACLU because everyone shared the same worldview and there would be no violations of civil liberties.

He attempted to bring this heavenly kingdom about every way he could, by marshalling every force in his power and utilizing any available media sources. He no doubt wanted every college to be a Liberty University and to nurture this heavenly kingdom with its leading and decision-making graduates. To use a biblical metaphor, he wanted to plant the seeds of his beliefs in the good soil where they would take root and grow. I still feel he was "surprised and saddened" that what he saw as the Godly truth of his words was a source of mockery and condemnation. If only those Falwell bobbleheads Kevin mentions could look sad and move their heads from side to side, then they might be closer to the real man beneath the public face.

How do I conclude our exchange without stating the obvious truth? We have a world and a country peopled with citizens of disparate beliefs on many issues of faith. As long as people have different worldviews they will always clash at certain stress points. For all of our lip service regarding individual rights and freedoms for all, somewhere deep down I suspect we each believe our view is the best and wish the world worked that way. Your world would operate only according to the fixed criteria of demonstrable physical laws and accepted science. Mine would add the elements of hope, praise and gratitude for the truly infinite wonders created by a unified creative force. And those yet to come.

Someday we will each have an answer. Until then, my prayer for humanity is that we learn to tolerate each other as best we can, find interest in the kaleidoscopic diversity, constantly challenge and refine the reasoning behind our own beliefs, and respect each other's right to live fully and harmoniously on this mutual journey of exploration. In other words, do the best we can.

Frank