

The Press and Patrick Henry College

By NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY

After nearly a third of Patrick Henry College's full-time professors resigned this spring, The Washington Post jumped on the story as evidence of the "recurring tension at many Christian colleges between adherence to articles of faith and the free-ranging spirit of academic inquiry."

While it is true that religious colleges do experience such tensions, incidents in which faculty members quit because of them are more the exception than the rule. Unfortunately, during the six years since this very small college of mostly home-schooled youngsters opened in Purcellville, Va., the news media have taken its atmosphere, its mission, and its founder's inflammatory statements as representative of evangelical schools everywhere.

Earlier this month, for example, The Guardian intoned that a recent documentary on the college — God's Next Army — "should be required viewing for anyone who reckons that right-wing God-bothering Americans aren't genuinely dangerous." Maybe such Americans are dangerous, and maybe they aren't, but with 900 religious colleges in the United States, and more than 100 members "of the evangelical Council for Christian Colleges & Universities in North America (institutions that offer an undergraduate curriculum committed to teaching Christian doctrine, hiring only professors who share the faith, and providing a Christian atmosphere outside the classroom), it seems a little silly to base judgment on Patrick Henry College.

Why have the 300 students at this unaccredited college received so much attention? The novelty of so many home-schooled students collected in one location probably has something to do with it. (Some initial reports marveled that the students were so well socialized, considering their sheltered upbringings.) And there is no doubt that the college has had success in placing its students and alumni in politically influential positions. (Seven of the almost 100 White House interns hailed from Patrick Henry in 2004.)

But the real reason the news media love Patrick Henry College is that it fits perfectly the image that most reporters have of evangelicals — people who believe they can directly translate the tenets of their faith into political action. And college officials play to that.

Patrick Henry students major in "vocational" subjects like public policy, strategic intelligence, and journalism, in addition to a few liberal-arts disciplines. The college Web site boasts the practical applications of that education: "You could find yourself tackling real-life problems, working alongside experts in and around our nation's capital, putting your knowledge to work in congressional offices, intelligence and law-enforcement agencies, think tanks, newspapers, publishing houses, private and home schools — even the White House."

I first visited Patrick Henry only a month after it opened in the fall of 2000. When I interviewed its founding president, Michael P. Farris, who had previously been the president of the Home School Legal Defense Fund, I asked him why he had started the college. He told me that it was "apparent that secular schools are at war with people of faith." He said that parents question, "Why should I pay \$100,000 to have someone attack me and my child for four years?"

At the time, I knew little about religious colleges, and it didn't occur to me to ask: Are there no other colleges already in existence where people of faith are not regularly attacked? I suspect the answer would have been revealing. In all of the interviews I have read with Farris, I have never seen him mention another religious college.

He seems to want people to believe that Patrick Henry is waging a battle of one against the rest of the world — and the news media are swallowing his message whole. When the college was denied accreditation by the American Academy for Liberal Education in 2002, Farris responded: "We simply cannot understand why the AALE has singled out our evangelical Christian viewpoint for particularized discrimination." While his complaint was widely reported, the fact that the association has granted accreditation to many institutions with strong religious identities, including evangelical ones, was largely ignored.

That makes for an easy story. When a Washington, D.C., reporter wakes up after an election and wants to find out who all of those "evangelicals" are, where they come from, how many more years they will be a factor in national politics, all he or she has to do is hop in the car and drive an hour to Patrick Henry.

There are millions of evangelical Christians in this country who may vote every four years, many of them Republican, but who are barely interested in politics. But from reading news-media coverage, it is difficult to discern what those people do with themselves when not in the voting booth. Even when a story appears about, for example, a humanitarian effort by evangelicals or a new megachurch being built, the article has to include political analysis. So it is little wonder that most journalists don't know what to do when covering evangelical colleges.

Fortunately, the liberal-education academy knows how to distinguish a good education, even a good religious education, from a bad one. The academy eventually granted Patrick Henry provisional accreditation, but apparently things didn't work out, because the administration ultimately withdrew its application for full accreditation. Now the college is awaiting a decision from the third accrediting organization it has applied to. All the institutions in the Council of Christian Colleges & Universities have managed to gain accreditation. The difference between institutions like those and Patrick Henry is obviously not their religious identity. Rather it is the type of education they offer.

In 2001 I sat in on a class at Patrick Henry on the Old Testament; the professor simply read passages and then repeated them in plainer English. What discussion took place seemed to center merely on what "we" (those who believe that Scripture is a God-given text) say in answer to "them" (secularists). That same year, a Washington Post reporter sat in on Farris's class on constitutional law. The class was discussing how students could help take back the U.S. Supreme Court. "You guys have to get in to the United States Senate — that's the solution," Farris was reported as saying. "Go take over. That's the answer."

Those are not liberal-arts classes; they are part of a political boot camp. Which brings us back to the recent exit of five of the college's professors. The controversy began over a lecture that a member of the faculty was going to give on Augustine. Farris, who has since announced he will move to the position of chancellor, objected that the lecture didn't contain any passages from the Bible and threatened to cancel it unless changes were made. The professor told *The Chronicle* that Farris explained to him and another faculty member that Augustine is in hell.

That is not a conversation that would happen at any of the other evangelical colleges I have visited. Those institutions teach the entire Christian intellectual tradition (even the Catholic parts). Though they may not agree doctrinally with everything that philosophers like Augustine and Aquinas wrote, their professors believe such thinkers have much to contribute to a theological and academic discussion.

The typical curriculum at an evangelical college is a liberal-arts curriculum. Students generally do have to take some theology classes, and their courses in other subjects usually include references to a religious perspective. But the students major in subjects like English or French or chemistry, and when they graduate, they are no more likely to go into politics than they are to become doctors or lawyers or professors. In fact, faculty members regularly emphasize that there are ways to serve God and to change American culture besides running for office or becoming a minister.

The second incident leading to the "mass" resignation at Patrick Henry involved a parent's complaining to Farris about a professor who described a "state of nature" situation to his students: Two people are floating on an inner tube in the middle of the ocean. It can only hold one of them. What might Hobbes and Locke say about that? A student quoted Scripture. When the teacher asked him to flesh that answer out, a parent who was sitting in class became outraged and wrote to Farris, who threatened to withhold the professor's contract for the following year while he waited for an explanation of the incident.

Again, that would not happen at most evangelical colleges. The administrators and faculty members at Calvin College, Gordon College in Massachusetts, and Westmont College, for example, all realize

that a liberal-arts education is not just an advanced version of Sunday school. Students are not merely supposed to recite lines from the New Testament in answer to difficult moral problems. They are supposed to think and question and, in this case, explain what other philosophers might have said. Of course, they are also supposed to have a strong biblical grounding, and they are encouraged to look at literature and philosophy and history through the lens of their faith. But the "integration of faith and learning," as religious colleges refer to that project, is not just a matter of filling in exam-question blanks with biblical passages. Two of the Patrick Henry professors who resigned said as much in an article for the campus paper: "Clearly there is no greater good than knowledge, for without knowledge, there can be no use of any other gift which God imparts."

Studying Machiavelli or Plato or Augustine (not simply calling them heretics), however, is a slow process. It takes time, and students and faculty members who are willing to engage those thinkers in sufficient depth on their own terms. And there are hundreds of Christian colleges that do just that. Unfortunately, Patrick Henry is looking for the quickest way to the White House.

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