

# Life outside the bubble:

## How a secular university completed my Rosedale education

by Andrew Sharp

It didn't take long for the stark differences between Rosedale Bible College and The Ohio State University to stand out. I was on campus for new student orientation a few weeks before my first quarter, feeling small, overwhelmed, and out of place. As I walked across the Oval behind two real students, I happened to catch their conversation. This wasn't hard because they were holding it loudly.

"God, you were trashed last night," said one of the guys, laughing at his buddy.

"Dude, I don't remember anything after like 10 o'clock," the other student said. He didn't sound particularly unhappy about it.

"They found Zach passed out in the bathroom,"

the first guy said. "He had vomited all over the place and was just lying on the floor in it."

Given the fuss made at Rosedale when I was there over issues like listening to secular music, any students involved in a stunt like this would probably have been taken out to the bus barn and never heard from again. In contrast, the Ohio State guys talked as if it were a minor excess, nothing to be deeply ashamed of.

I was there listening to that conversation in righteous shock

because a year after I graduated from Rosedale, I decided to transfer to Ohio State. That led to a challenging time in my life, but one that I'm glad for. My time at Rosedale helped me at Ohio State, and Ohio State put some finishing touches on my Rosedale education.

One of the reasons the transition was challenging was the culture shock. That conversation I overheard on my orientation day made quite an impression on me, and in many ways it was a true impression. The world of Ohio State, while far from being all debauchery and drinking, was quite simply a different world than that of Rosedale and the Mennonite community I grew up in.

I had to get used to everything at once—the immense size of the place, city life, and a different and more complex academic system. Perhaps most jarring, though, was the confusing hash of worldviews, most of them glaringly different from the one I held.

At Ohio State, there is a cacophony of voices vying for the attention of students. There are angry atheists and angry street preachers. There are con-

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servatives, liberals, libertarians, and communists. There are Muslims, Christians, and followers of a multitude of other religions. Permeating everything is a profound secularism, whose god is science and whose scripture is academic research. With my analytical mind I felt at times like I was drowning in this atmosphere.

I was afraid that I would buy into some kind of heresy, or lose my faith, or become a liberal, or something terrible like that. (Not all my fears were as important as others, in retrospect.) I probably worry about things more than most people, but I suspect I'm not alone in this either.

My experiences at Rosedale helped me to deal with all the conflicting things I was hearing and new things I was thinking about. One of the most helpful parts of that experience was my exposure to a lot of knowledge about my faith that I could use to form my views. From the classes, to the chapels, to the intense theological discussions among my friends over a cup of coffee in the cafeteria, I did a lot of learning and thinking. And learning to think, as well. At Ohio State, when I was faced with ideas in the classroom or in conversation that challenged my faith, I had knowledge and background that helped me think about the issues in an informed way and avoid believing things about my faith that weren't true.

Another thing that helped me was the example of the Rosedale professors. They lived consistent lives. They were thoughtful about what they believed, and they were willing to honestly discuss hard issues in Christianity. They were intelligent and well-educated.

At Ohio State, I faced negative perceptions of Christians. They were sometimes portrayed as poorly educated, stubbornly self-deceptive, politically manipulative, or blind to science and fact. I had to admit that many Christians fit this mold pretty well. For a different model, though, I could always look back at my professors at Rosedale. While far from perfect they were in my mind genuine followers of Jesus who thought intelligently about their beliefs. They didn't fit the stereotype. I didn't always come to the same conclusions they did, but their example helped me hang on.

I should also note that my education at Rosedale didn't completely prepare me. There was what has been called the "greenhouse" effect at the college, or "the Rosedale bubble." Students were immersed in a small Christian community, studying Christian theology and

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ideas, resulting in an almost monastic atmosphere of separation. On paper, this might seem like a great way to get people grounded in their faith and deeper in their walk with God. But when it comes to preparing them for interaction with society at large, this method is lacking.

I'd compare the situation with a science class. In class, you learn lots of facts and data. Then in the lab, you try to test the knowledge you've gained. When questions come up as a result of experiments, you can ask about them in class.

Rosedale was like a class with no lab. We learned a lot, but there were deeper questions we couldn't ask because we hadn't found out what happened when we experimented with it in the world.

That's why I'm glad I had the chance to attend a secular college soon after I went to Rosedale. It was my lab, even though I was no longer in the class. It forced me to think hard about what I believed and ask



questions. I think it made me a lot stronger than if I had simply gone home after Rosedale, gotten a job, and settled down, even though there would have been nothing wrong with that.

There were several ways that I got stronger at Ohio State. One was that I began to see Christianity in a different light, in a way that I couldn't when I was surrounded by it at a place like Rosedale, or my home community. I discovered first-hand how people actually see Christians. I'd pick up the school paper and read a rant about how Christians hate gays (and everyone else who disagrees with them). I'd hear students complain about the crazy preachers who stood on the sidewalks and shouted out to students that they were going to hell. Or, I'd hear a professor talk about the way Christians try to

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influence politics. Sometimes the criticisms were unfair or exaggerated. But they exposed some flaws in Christianity, the American version at least, that I hadn't been able to see as clearly before.

At first I felt threatened by the negative stereotypes. I still don't enjoy them. But I've learned not to take things so personally. In fact, I've come to think

the criticism can be a good thing. The church should listen closely to the world's criticisms—not to conform, but to truly understand how they are perceived and to be able to communicate in an informed way. Even, perhaps, to humbly learn about and admit mistakes.

Another thing that began to change in my attitude was that I became less judgmental. I'm still quite judgmental, but there was improvement. I slowly began to see the people behind the faults, and the hypocrisy in my judgments. I had often assumed the worst about people who disagreed with me, and about their motives. As I have spent time with more of these people, I've started to realize that I was misjudging them and overestimating my own good qualities.

Like me, the nonbelievers on campus are deeply flawed by sin. But I've seen God's reflection in their actions. There are many there who care about justice for refugees, saving the environment, racial equality, honesty in government, and the needs of the poor. I might disagree with them on the best way to fix the world's problems, but I can admire the way they strive for good, and feel convicted by their passion.

It would have been harder for me to learn these things if I had simply reinserted myself into my community. As I look back on my time at Ohio State, which will be ending soon, and my time at Rosedale, I'm glad I went to both. They both helped me grow. Rosedale gave me a chance to mature and become more sure in my beliefs before I got to Ohio State. And Ohio State helped me put my time at Rosedale in perspective and made me think more deeply about the things I believed and the person I was. **BB**



*Andrew Sharp lives in Columbus, Ohio. He plans to graduate from Ohio State in June with a bachelor's in journalism and a minor in Spanish. Just because he's graduating doesn't mean he knows what he's doing with his life, but he hopes it involves having a garden and a dog.*

*Note on photos: All photos are of The Ohio State University campus and were taken by Andrew Sharp.*