Acad. Quest. (2013) 26:366–370
DOI 10.1007/s12129-013-9370-7

REVIEW

Letters to a Young Progressive: How to Avoid Wasting Your Life Protesting Things You Don't Understand, by Mike S. Adams. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2013, 256 pp., $24.95 paperback.

Guiding toward the Good

Michael Toscano

Published online: 26 July 2013

Mike S. Adams, National Association of Scholars member, has at least two identities. During the day, as professor of criminology at the University of North Carolina–Wilmington, he teaches courses such as "Criminal Procedure" and "The First Amendment and Crime." In the evening, Adams plays political and cultural provocateur. For example, his latest *Townhall.com* column (as of the writing of this review), "My Apology to Mormon Readers," responds to demands from critics that he apologize for his characterization of Mormonism as "non-Christian." His apology is probably not what they had in mind:

> I am sorry that so many of my Mormon readers have brazenly accused me of ignorance of their religion and suggested that I read the Book of Mormon. I am sorry that they were unaware that I read the Book of Mormon back in 2006.

Adams's "apology" continued with twenty-two similar concessions.[1]

Adams is a gadfly to the progressives in higher education, whom he has observed at close range since his appointment at UNC in 1993. His last two books, *Welcome to the Ivory Tower of Babel* (2004) and *Feminists Say the Darndest Things* (2008), won him few friends among his colleagues.

Those he lampoons often dismiss Adams as unworthy of serious attention. But his new book will make that more difficult. Adams apparently has a third identity, kept secret until now: the helpful guide shepherding American youth into knowledge of truth and love of virtue. Here Adams largely abandons his *Townhall*-style tone in favor of a

Michael Toscano is director of research projects, National Association of Scholars, 8 West 38th Street, Suite 503, New York, NY 10018-6229; toscano@nas.org.

[1] Mike S. Adams, "My Apology to Mormon Readers," *Townhall.com*, June 5, 2013, http://townhall.com/columnists/mikeadams/2013/06/05/my-apology-to-mormon-readers-n1612799.

far more earnest and personal approach.

In *Letters to a Young Progressive: How to Avoid Wasting Your Life Protesting Things You Don't Understand*, Adams writes to "Zach," a student in his Criminology 425 course, "Trials of the Century." Zach is fictitious, though "inspired" by a student with whom Adams corresponded. Impressed by the ur-Zach's intelligence, Adams was also troubled by some of his in-class comments. In the book, Adams begins by recounting a class lecture he gave on Charles Manson during which Zach took an off-topic potshot at radio personality Glenn Beck, suggesting that Beck, like Manson, "had exploited his followers through fear." Adams doesn't bother to defend Beck, but recognizes that something more than a false analogy is afoot. Zach is smart, but seemingly unable to discern the differences between a deranged killer and a hyperbolic entertainer. His judgment is malformed. Adams feels called to intervene.

What follows are thirty-five letters to Zach in which Adams vexes him on all sorts of issues: global warming, abortion, Marxism, feminism, diversity, religion, and personal integrity. The general movement is from ideological issues to faith and character. At its heart, *Letters* is a book about the younger man's conversion, to Christianity and to conservative politics. Adams intends the letters to show how a person starting out in life must learn continually to reorient himself toward the good. As he puts it, "The destination requires a journey."

Much of the road in *Letters* is a serpentine critique of the ideological commitments of progressives. The sudden changes of direction will disconcert a reader looking for a more sustained argument, but the scattered style may be right for the unfocused teenagers Adams seeks to address. (*Academic Questions* readers presumably include few teenage readers, but the book merits our attention anyway.) Adams critiques Zach's Manson-Beck analogy, for example, in a six-page hopscotch through moral relativism, Marxist economics, Marxist ethics, egalitarian grading policies, equal opportunity versus equal outcome, meritocracy, ethnocentrism, Third World prison conditions, anti-Christian bigotry, and the corruption of anthropology and sociology departments.

Letters 8 through 11, however, provide more cohesive examinations of pro-abortion arguments. For Adams, "Abortion is *the* issue where all progressives' noblest claims—to be fighting for racial equality, to care sincerely about the

weakest among us, to have beliefs grounded in reason and science—are shown up for the sham they really are" (emphasis in the original). His reflections take on a particular sharpness here. To the oft-argued position that "Back-alley abortions will increase if abortion is illegal," Adams retorts that this "simply assumes that the unborn are not persons." And, of course, the personhood of the unborn is the foundational point of disagreement. "If they were persons," Adams points out, "then the abortion choice advocates would be in the awkward position of arguing that someone has a right to commit murder in a safe and sterile environment." The claim thus has no place in the initial question over whether abortion is a universal "right" (a metaphysical question). It is a second-order argument.

The book ends with Zach, under Adams's guidance, having converted to Christianity, with personal designs to be a good man ready to enter the world as salt and light. Some readers may be hesitant to crack open a book with such a religious emphasis. But *Letters* can also be read as a demonstration of how intellectual friendship can reorient a student's life and mind toward the good.

Such friendship was once a central goal of university education, but the barriers today are not just generational. The professoriate is reticent to initiate such relationships because of increased apprehension over sexual harassment, and because of the increased focus on specialized research at the expense of developing students' characters. Students themselves have withdrawn from receiving such guidance from their professors, because moral cultivation under the counsel of a moral authority cuts against the prevailing "student-centered" pedagogy.

Students today are told that they are mature enough to craft their own moral identities. They spend their undergraduate years "exploring" and "discovering" their sexuality. They choose their own course sequences (within a few general parameters), develop their own individualized research projects, and are often free to design their own majors. In a student-centered scheme, professors are "guides on the side"—any fuller role is deemed authoritarian and stifling to student autonomy. Not surprisingly, most faculty wholly welcome this marginalization—and relegate the responsibility of moral cultivation to the "experts" in residential and student life—because they too greatly enjoy the freedom it affords. The language itself for professor-student friendship has been cheapened—"mentorship" is

the prevailing substitute—and needs to be reimagined. *Letters* can be understood as a lesson in this reimagining.

"Conversion" is a key conceptual frame in *Letters* because Zach has not had an education since early youth that aimed to cultivate his virtue and self-mastery. Truth, goodness, and beauty are not second nature to Zach. He is a conflicted character, who, having turned toward the good later in life, will find his path full of bad habits and difficulty. Zach is not, for example, Aristotle's virtuous citizen reared on a "diet abounding in milk," and educated as a youth in the arts of "reading and writing, physical training, and music." The central development in *Letters*, therefore, is Adams guiding Zach to recognize his shortcomings and pursue greater intellectual and moral substance.

This movement of the mind and the will to new coordinates becomes possible only if the student can look up from the mire and see that self-reformation is within reach. It is equally important for professors to glimpse the possibility and the appropriateness of attempting to lead the morally malformed student to higher ground. Adams provides an image of both. Just as Adams hopes that Zach will personify this movement for his readers, he first personifies this movement for Zach. Adams, too, is a convert:

> I was passionate about being an atheist….I adopted leftist politics to go with my atheism….I believed that we could create a utopia through politics.

Here stands Adams, a new man—one convert begetting another.

Conversion, of course, is complicated. People convert to atheism as well as to Christianity, and religious commitments among college students are famously fluid. Students "try out" and discard identities as quickly as BFFs. Adams's invitation to the professoriate to take a more active role in shaping students could thus have mischievous consequences. Does it license the feminist instructor to attempt to "convert" a young woman who adheres to a traditional concept of femininity? Adams's answer is no. The road divides for him at the point we choose between perfectibility—"utopia"—and virtue. The former is cast mainly as "liberation" from the trammels of society; the latter finds freedom through self-mastery, which, in Adams's case, takes on a uniquely

Christian form. The liberating approach, oddly, seems to yield only illiberal education, i.e., education that is doctrinaire and ill-disposed to actual human flourishing. But it is what most of American higher education has settled for. Only rarely does a Zach happen upon a faculty member who suggests or embodies a different path.

In the role of experienced friend, Adams is especially good at marking the point where paths divide and decisions must be made.