

Go to a Section

Site Search:

Inspired by the human side of data. **HITACHI** Inspire the Next [HitachiYourData.com](#)

[NYTimes.com](#) > [Magazine](#)

All God's Children

By SAMANTHA M. SHAPIRO

Published: September 5, 2004

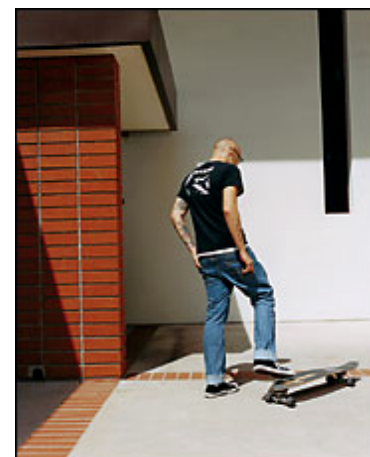
In a cinder-block classroom at the edge of Biola University's manicured campus in a Los Angeles suburb, Craig Detweiler was blasting the music of Nick Cave at his Intro to Mass Media class. Two dozen students were arranged in a horseshoe of swivel chairs, and they were looking blankly at a photo of Cave, a sullen goth-rocker, which Detweiler's laptop was projecting onto a pull-down screen.

Intro to Mass Media is a required class for every mass-communications major at Biola. Each week of the course is devoted to a different type of media. This week, in late March, was music. Lesson 1, on Monday, was the history of music; Lesson 2, today's class, focused on contemporary music.

"Soooo . . . any Nick Cave fans?" Detweiler asked, pacing the room. No one answered.

Detweiler has spiky silver hair and exuberant blue eyes, and he was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and trendy shoes. He brings a kind of affable sarcasm to a complicated job; he is the chairman of a mass-media department at a university that until 1977 banned all films. "This stuff is pretty hard and dark," he offered, as Cave growled and howled through the speakers of his laptop. "But did you know that Nick Cave wrote an introduction to the Gospel of Mark for a special edition of the Bible published in the U.K.? What do we think of that?" Students spun their chairs and gnawed pen tops.

Like a lot of Christian colleges in the United States, Biola has in recent years made serious efforts to compete academically with secular and more mainstream religiously affiliated colleges. That hasn't meant a reduced emphasis on religious teachings. If anything, the school has intensified its commitment to cultivating devout Christians. But



Catherine Ledner for The New York Times
Joshua Warren came to Biola via the Christian hard-core music scene.

Advertisement

We're inspired by the human side of data.

See for yourself at [HitachiYourData.com](#)

Data Storage from Hitachi **HITACHI** Inspire the Next

ARTICLE TOOLS

- [E-Mail This Article](#)
- [Printer-Friendly Format](#)
- [Most E-Mailed Articles](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS [i ♥ huckabees](#)
SPONSORED BY **IN SELECT CITIES OCT. 1**

READERS' OPINIONS

- [Forum: Join a Discussion on Ideas on Contemporary Education](#)

TIMES NEWS TRACKER

Topics	Alerts
Colleges and Universities	<input type="button" value="Create"/>
Christians and Christianity	<input type="button" value="Create"/>
Education and Schools	<input type="button" value="Create"/>
<input type="button" value="Create Your Own"/> <input type="button" value="Manage"/>	
<input type="button" value="Most Popular Alerts"/> <input type="button" value="Take a Tour"/>	
<input type="button" value="CLICK HERE TO SUBSCRIBE"/>	

it does mean that the school has expanded its curriculum in areas of study like psychology, bioethics and popular culture, and that it is encouraging a new level of engagement with the secular world. Detweiler, a screenwriter who is something of a maverick on campus and in the evangelical Christian community, is on the front lines of that effort at Biola.

Detweiler fiddled with his laptop, and an image of Bjork appeared on the projection screen. The music switched to a soothing Bjork ballad called "All Is Full of Love." He turned up the volume.

"What do we think of this?" he asked. "Is God in it?"

"To be honest, I have a hard time with that," a student offered tentatively.

Adam Hopkins, a skinny mass-communications major with dark, shaggy hair, said: "I like the music. It's ethereal and beautiful."

"What's that she's singing?" Detweiler asked. "All is full of . . . ? All is full of . . . ? All is full of *what*?"

No answer.

"Love!" he shouted triumphantly. "All is full of love! Anybody in this room with that?"

Tracy Woodworth, a polished journalism major in the back of the room, shot up her hand and asked, a little indignantly, "Isn't that just back to the everything-is-love fun, happy relativism?"

Then Christina Young spoke up. She agreed with Tracy. She allowed that the Bjork song reflects "the concept of common grace -- that everyone has a taste of God's goodness," but she pointed out that common grace "is not enough for salvation."

Detweiler had an hour's worth of songs and slides stored on his laptop. He clicked through the Klezmer Conservatory Band and "The Best of Tito Puente." He suggested that a recent concert in Los Angeles by Sigur Ros, the Icelandic postrock band, created a "sacred space of beauty" that might be a contemporary "site of general revelation."

The students, all evangelical Christians, were skeptical. "It's hard to think the artist is completely in the right if they don't say the truth -- that Christ is the only way," one remarked.

"This music leads to more music, not to people finding Christ," another said.

Detweiler seemed agitated. He kept raising the volume louder and louder. He banged his eraser against the dry-erase board, where he had written "truth" and "beauty." He told the students that creative people who start with a message are propagandists, not artists. The teachings of Jesus, he said, weren't straightforward moral lessons. "People had a hard time following Jesus," he said.

At the end of class, Detweiler sighed. "What's the point of today, guys?"

No one had an answer.



Catherine Ledner for The New York Times
Timothy Carroll, whose parents were missionaries in Latin America, grew up not wearing shoes and maintains the habit.



Catherine Ledner for The New York Times
Brittany Vanderveer, left, and Krista Walthall regularly head to a coffeehouse near campus in the hope of making friends and winning converts.

NYT Store



A Nation Challenged: Young Reader's Edition
Price: \$18.95. [Learn More.](#)

AUTOS



"The spread of indigenous cultural music is pushing hard against exclusivism," he said. "Christ is going to be a tough sell in this world, and I think you're not ready for it. I think you might need to figure out where God is in this music crossing the globe."

Biola, whose 95-acre campus is in La Mirada, 20 miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles, is part of the fast-expanding movement of "Christ centered" colleges -- schools that are not loosely affiliated with a church, like Notre Dame or Southern Methodist University, but that integrate Christianity into all aspects of the curriculum and require faculty members, and sometimes students, to sign a pledge of faith in Jesus Christ. The 102 American schools in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (many of which, like Biola, are nondenominational) represent just 1.5 percent of the country's total college population, but in the last decade their enrollment has increased 67 percent, compared with an average increase of just 2 percent for American colleges and universities as a whole.

Biola's history is entwined with that of evangelical Christianity in the United States. Almost a hundred years ago, the school sponsored a series of pamphlets called "The Fundamentals," which laid out the principles of the fundamentalist movement. "The Fundamentals" were a reaction against Darwinism, modernism and liberal strains in Protestantism, all of which were seen as challenges to the authority of the Bible as a literal historic account of reality. Biola, then called the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, saw its mission as training laypeople to preach the Gospel, and later began providing them with tools -- like "scientific" arguments that proved the existence of a creator -- to do battle with other faiths and with secular ideas.

When I spoke with Clyde Cook, Biola's genial president, he explained that the university is as committed as ever to the principles articulated in "The Fundamentals," although, he said, "we've found different and more effective ways to deliver those truths." For one thing, Cook said, while "indoctrination" is "still valuable," the school thinks it is preferable to have students internalize Christian truths through a process of questioning. Cook said he still sees the school's mission as preparing its 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students to spread the Gospel, to argue for Christianity against the tenets of secularism and of other religions. But graduates are no longer necessarily supposed to preach from the pulpit. Instead, Cook said, Biola now aspires "to incarnate those truths in the professions -- in business, nursing, movies, government." Students take seminars in which they discuss how to integrate their academic studies with a "Christian worldview." Where Biola once considered certain disciplines, like philosophy, to be irrelevant to Christians, these days it places graduates in top philosophy Ph.D. programs, hoping they will learn to argue in sophisticated secular terms, for example, on behalf of the rights of fetuses.

Over the last 50 years, evangelical Christianity in the United States has moved away from fundamentalism, which is still dedicated to the idea of separation from an ungodly world. Evangelicals believe that the way to change culture is to participate in it, albeit with caution. Particularly in the last decade, as the movement has matured, intellectual institutions -- journals, scholarly presses and advanced academic work -- have quietly budded within evangelical circles. Biola's evolution from a Bible college to an accredited liberal-arts university offering advanced degrees is just one manifestation of this change.

There are still some schools whose climates remain closer to Biola's fundamentalist origins. Hyles-Anderson College in Crown Point, Ind., forbids male students to have

The new Mercedes SLK350 goes on sale this month.



- [What does this sporty two-seater offer?](#)
- [Compare similar vehicles.](#)

long hair and female students to wear "shorts or slacks." There are also more liberal Christ-centered colleges, like nearby Azusa Pacific University, which (unlike Biola) accepts nonbelievers and allows men and women to mingle more often in the dorms. Older, more elite Christian colleges, like Wheaton in Illinois, whose foundations predated the fundamentalist revolt against the modern world, have always offered a liberal-arts education, though one guided by Christian principles.

Ted Olsen, an editor at the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, said that Biola, as an institution, "pretty much falls dead center in the middle of the evangelical movement." Many influential evangelicals have chosen to send their children to Biola. Ryan Dobson, the son of James Dobson, the president of the conservative Christian group Focus on the Family, graduated with the class of 1995, and Amy Warren-Hilliker, the daughter of Rick Warren, the author of the inspirational best seller "The Purpose-Driven Life," attended a few years ago.

Evangelical Christianity's dance with secular culture has always been a complicated one. Whereas Biola once trained students to use modernism's devices, like the scientific method and rational argument, to undercut modernism, today, in a more postmodern era, it educates its students about the diversity of ideas and cultures and experiences in order to equip them to bring the world a single unchangeable truth. In almost every area of study at Biola, there is some tension between that goal and the academic ideal of free inquiry. But it is in Craig Detweiler's mass-communications department that that tension seems most raw. When the school started a film department 27 years ago, it focused exclusively on making movies for proselytizing purposes. But more recently at the college, and throughout the evangelical movement, there has been a growing interest in the power and influence of Hollywood. And so last year, the school appointed Detweiler, who was born again in college and still keeps a foot planted in the secular world, as the head of the mass-communications department. Detweiler stocked the school's film library with mainstream movies, worked with the administration to draft a policy permitting the viewing of R-rated movies in classrooms and helped recruit Christian executives from Hollywood studios onto a board to finance and advise the department. That board, which includes the producers of the sitcom "Family Matters" and the movie "X-Men," paid for a TV studio on campus and helps place Biola students in internships at major studios.

In a recent book, "A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture," Detweiler argued that God is literally revealing himself in mainstream Hollywood movies like "Magnolia" and "The Matrix." Detweiler said he thinks Christian films should be able, like those movies, to address dark topics and contain ambiguity, something unresolved or not fully understood. But as he found that day in the classroom, that is a hard quality to combine with the certitudes of evangelical Christianity.

Except for a slightly ominous-looking 60-foot-high photographic-style mural of Jesus painted on the side of a campus building, or the occasional student carrying a large wooden cross from the gymnasium to the student center, the Biola campus appears unremarkable. When I visited last spring, the students looked like typical college kids: there were boys with mod haircuts and girls with eyebrow rings, wearing outfits from Hot Topic and thrift stores. Anywhere that young men and women were allowed to hang out together -- dorm lobbies, the local Denny's, parked cars -- they did, staying up late flicking pennies at one another, trading laborious massages by the hall microwave.

But the code of conduct each student is required to sign creates a tone on campus that is different from that of most colleges. The code prohibits drinking, dancing at Biola

functions, smoking, premarital sex and visiting the dorm rooms of the opposite sex outside of designated hours -- and even then, only with open doors. Students take the code seriously. On the whole, Biola is a preternaturally calm place. The root-beer keg parties can get hyper, but never out of control.

The emotion that is most strongly manifested on campus is longing. The worship music at the Thursday night coffeehouse and at chapel often sounds like an angsty Top 40 guitar ballad. Students sing along to lyrics like "Lover, love me" with eyes closed, arms raised, shoes off. One student I met, Nathan Pearsey, who had been exposed to more effusive worship styles during missionary trips to Mexico and Antigua, liked to prostrate himself on the floor during chapel and kick his feet like flippers.

Walking across campus at night, I often had the feeling of stumbling upon something too intimate: small groups of students hunched together, arms laid on one another in prayer, or the occasional pair in a romantic embrace, looking furtively around. Although there are familiar cliques -- "Star Wars" dorks, student-government types, surfers -- the typical collegiate social hierarchy does not apply. There are no cheerleaders or frat boys. Students aren't drawn from different economic brackets: tuition alone runs more than \$20,000 a year. Campus politics tend to be reflexively conservative.

The sharpest distinction I noticed on campus was the one between the more worldly students and the more sheltered ones. At one end of this spectrum are the born-again. Joshua Warren, 22, was a neo-Nazi when he was a young teenager, and after he recanted those beliefs, he found his way to Biola through the Christian hard-core scene. He now plays with a few other Biola students in Phineas, a hard-core band. The band takes its name from a priest who, in the Book of Numbers, stabs an Israelite and a Midianite when he sees them having sex in public. Joshua lives the Biola life: like many students, he has an annual pass to Disneyland and spends free afternoons strolling Downtown Disney with a home-schooled friend. But like a lot of Biola students who did not come from a Christian home -- who may have fended for themselves in the corridors of public schools, who may have used condoms or drunk margaritas at T.G.I. Friday's before being saved -- Joshua has an ease of social interaction and a kind of restless energy that set him apart from some of his peers.

At the other end of the spectrum are the kids who were raised in the Christian-school system -- at private schools, through home-schooling or a combination of the two. They are certain of the advantages of their upbringings, but a little defensive about them too. The home-schooled kids I met often made a point of telling me that they weren't weird or antisocial, like other home-schooled kids. Ashley Romero, 21, a home-schooled biblical-studies major, broke down the stereotypes for me: "First semester, everyone would make this 'H' hand signal" -- she held up the first two fingers of one hand and crossed them with the index finger of the other -- "when you did something dorky. The idea is: 'That's so home-school, so nerdy. You can't cut it; you can't integrate.'" On the other hand, Ashley continued, a sure-fire way to land a "godly Christian guy" is to tell him you want to home-school your children. "He'll be smitten," she said confidently.

Defying categorization are students whose parents are missionaries and who grew up overseas, cut off from American culture. They're known as missionary kids, or "third-culture kids." Timothy Carroll, who grew up in Latin America, sometimes wears a colorful Bolivian hat and rarely wears shoes. He says he goes barefoot because that's what he grew up doing and because he wants to remind himself that some people don't have shoes.

One day I was chatting with a communications-studies major named Phil Kilpatrick

when a lanky white guy with a crew cut pedaled furiously past us on a dirt bike. "He's from Nigeria," Phil said. "He has killed two possums and a raccoon on campus, with a stick, I think. Some kids saw him doing it once and were traumatized and called campus police. But I think you have to be understanding that some people didn't grow up in America, you know?"

I ate lunch in the cafeteria one afternoon with Laura Walker, a 20-year-old woman with a nose ring, pigtails and a tattoo on the top of her foot that said "God knows" in Greek. Between bites of her meal, she looked both ways and then whispered that she was helping a friend make a movie about "being gay." Later in the week, we met at the off-campus apartment where the film was being shot. "This is the producer's house," Laura explained as we climbed over duffel bags of clothes and studio lights into a room decorated with framed puzzles, scented candles and a Garfield phone. The director, John Huntington LaDue Jr., a gregarious, muscular, blond 22-year-old, bustled around, duct-taping cables and cords to the carpet, hiking his jeans up over the waistband of Calvin Klein underwear.

John is a film major at Biola, and the movie he was shooting, "Becoming Peter Pan," was his senior thesis. It is the story of his struggles with homosexuality. About a year ago, John came out to his friends and a few teachers. Homosexual activity is strictly forbidden at Biola, but John is not the only gay student there. One gay student dropped out last year. Another, deep in the closet, sought out a secret meeting with me at Biola's back gates just to make sure I didn't leave without realizing he existed. Driving across campus, John pointed out a male student he kissed freshman year. The student had decided to be celibate, John said, an option he said he often considered.

Since John came out, his friends told me, he had been "heavily monitored" by the school. He was placed in mandatory counseling, which, he said, aimed to teach him that his sexuality is the correctable byproduct of growing up the son of missionaries, a third-culture kid who never knew a real home. John takes his counseling seriously and hopes it will work. "My gay friends are like, 'Oh, you poor thing, you have to get out of that crazy counseling,'" he said. "But I am not so sure they're right. Meanwhile, my Christian friends will tell me: 'Don't go to that gay bar. Don't meet that guy.'"

John is charming and relentlessly enthusiastic on nearly every topic he brings up, from an artsy West Hollywood coffeehouse he recently visited to a six-month-long program he enrolled himself in at a nearby church to cure his gayness. He has made three films during his career at Biola, all of which were considered too outre to be shown at the school film festival. In the first, John personified anorexia as a succubus lesbian demon: a scene in which the succubus licked a girl's ear seductively was deemed inappropriate by the judges. His second film, about a girl who, after a freak car accident, can see people's souls outside their bodies, was too long. "Becoming Peter Pan" would not be shown at the film festival, either, because, John said, "it's too long, and it would offend a lot of people." He was nervous about even showing me the movie in the Biola film department, and when we sat down to watch it, he anxiously fast-forwarded over a scene of two men in bed. "This would make the school die," he whispered. "In Christianity, homosexuality is as bad as murder."

A number of the student films I watched at Biola relied heavily on imagined or dreamlike sequences to fuel the narrative. In one, the plot (girl battles pirate) was driven by a hallucination induced by Dr Pepper and cold medication. In another, a group of students believe they are trapped in a Biola building because a gunman is on campus; in fact, they are deluded because they have consumed too much caffeine. "Becoming Peter

Pan" is an especially telling example of the practice: in the movie, homosexuality is portrayed as an alternate universe -- literally Never-Never Land. The actor who plays the boyfriend of John's character sometimes appears in a Captain Hook costume, for example.

When I asked John if he planned to look for work as a director after graduation, he grew uncharacteristically wistful: "I used to be really gung-ho about being a director, but over my time at Biola, I feel less that way."

I asked him why, and he looked away. "An artist is supposed to have a voice," he said. "I just don't really think I have a voice."

One morning during my visit, I woke to find that the campus had been transformed into a scene that seemed straight out of a student-film dream sequence. Patches of grass were covered in cardboard and trash. Students wearing torn, dirty clothes pushed shopping carts on loan from the local Albertson's supermarket. There was a pen of goats set up in front of the library, and next to the pen students dressed as Gypsies were selling jewelry.

This was the start of the annual three-day Missions Conference, which brought missionary organizations, recruiters and speakers to Biola. In many ways, the event looked like a multicultural consciousness-raising event on any American campus. One school building was renamed Global Awareness, and students were invited to take off their shoes and walk through rooms covered in dirt, where bamboo curtains blocked the bright California sunshine. Each room was based on a country in need of missionary help; Biola students enacted scenes with Indian untouchables or prisoners in a Yemenite jail. A room based on the United States criticized consumerism and promoted shade-grown "Fair Trade" coffee. At the end of the journey through the Global Awareness building, students were encouraged to pray on Muslim prayer rugs or yoga mats and to wash the dirt off one another's feet in a spare room where New Age music played quietly.

In 1983, Biola changed the name of its missionary-studies department to "intercultural studies." It was more than just a name change; the school's approach to the question of missionary work shifted, too. The goal is still to convert non-Christians around the world, but now the program emphasizes respecting and preserving indigenous cultures, even protecting their land.

These ideas about understanding the value of other cultures coexist a little uneasily with the idea that there is only one truth and that most of those groovy cultures are missing it. One of the breakout sessions at the Missions Conference, led by Prof. Joshua Lingel, was a teaser for Apologetics to Islam, a class that gives students the tools to convert Muslims and also takes them on field trips to halal restaurants in the area to practice. Lingel, a tall, burly, red-haired Biola grad, addressed a packed room, alternating between a friendly cultural lesson and a fire-and-brimstone sermon. "Muslims wear white robes when they go on pilgrimage," he began, carefully explaining Islamic customs. But when a slide showing masses of robe-clad Muslims at Mecca clicked onto the screen, Lingel's measured tone dissolved, and he shouted: "Behold the fields of white! The great seed of the lost! Behold, the time for the harvest is nearing!"

Evangelizing is not an abstract ideal at Biola, or a mission restricted to a few days out of the year. Phineas, the campus hard-core band, sees itself as reaching out to "they that are sick," as described in the Book of Mark, and invites audience members to come up and

speak to them about Jesus after the show. Laura Walker told me that she and her friends go to gay dance clubs partly because that's what Jesus would have done. "Jesus spent time with lepers," she said. Many students I met prayed out loud that Jesus Christ would soon "collide" with me and that my reporting would be a vehicle for spreading the Gospel. Students took me to "The Passion of the Christ," the Mel Gibson movie, and offered to pay for my ticket. In the middle of one interview, a teacher told me that he and his students loved me and explained that that was why they hoped I would realize that my "core beliefs" are wrong.

When I attended church with Biola students, they offered prayers for the salvation of gay neighborhoods in other states, public-school districts near and far, entire Muslim-populated latitudes and longitudes. In church, the students' feelings about the world beyond evangelical Christianity seemed pretty clear-cut; it was going to hell unless it accepted Jesus. But outside church, that relationship seemed more complicated.

In the dorm where I stayed, I lived across the hall from a 19-year-old woman with long blond hair named Brittany Vanderveer. She was shy and serious; her face turned the color of a pomegranate when a friend invited her on a group date. Every Thursday, she and Krista Walthall, 19, a friend from home, went to a coffee shop to meet new people and bring them to Jesus Christ, carrying Bibles in their shoulder bags. They described their trips as daring adventures during which anything could happen, and their faces lighted up as they talked about them. There was the time they met an ex-con sitting in the parking lot and bought him coffee. And there was the evening when Brittany, after praying for boldness for 15 minutes, approached a group of bikers parked outside Starbucks. "My legs were shaking, but I could think perfectly clearly," she said. Although she and Krista have not converted anyone yet, they clearly cherish every encounter.

I went with them one Thursday to the Java Co., a coffee shop a mile from campus where they have made one steady friend: Nicole, a chatty 21-year-old from Brooklyn with an 11-month-old daughter. Nicole works behind the counter. Her tone was breezy and casual, and Brittany and Krista could not quite match it. The women always give great consideration to their interactions with Nicole. They had prayed about the trip to the Java Co. together at breakfast and, separately, the evening before. Frequently, they also pray in the parking lot before entering the coffee shop.

Brittany and Krista hung on Nicole's every word as if they were lucky to be talking to her at all. They interrupted a story about her daughter's birthday party to ask exactly what kind of cake Nicole ordered. Although their purpose in getting to know Nicole was to save her soul, part of their motivation appeared more mundane: Nicole is simply different from anyone they know. The women's interest in her stories, the way they lingered over the details, seemed to express something about the world -- the unredeemed, unsaved, unchurched part -- that was not evident in their public prayers in church. Going off campus, even just a mile away, was interesting because it was unpredictable. Talking to the Starbucks bikers or Nicole was compelling on its own terms; Brittany and Krista, like many of the Biola students I met, enjoyed not knowing what would happen. On some level, they seemed already to know what Craig Detweiler is trying to teach, and what is evident in the often open-ended, messy tales of the Bible: that the most compelling stories unfold when you don't start out with the answer.

Samantha M. Shapiro last wrote for the magazine about the young supporters of Howard Dean.