

Tensions building between left and right-wing churches

Liberal churches: a new viability

by Gilbert Bouchard

The challenge before North America's liberal churches is to let the public know that they exist and are a viable option to the right wing fundamental approach said Rev. Michael O'Kelly, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Edmonton.

"William Schultz, the new president of the Unitarian Universalists of America, has made it part of his administration to go out and encounter the Jerry Faiwells and the far-right both on a political and religious ground," said O'Kelly.

"First we have to deal with the television representatives of the fundamentalist movement, then we have to deal with the political issue," said O'Kelly. "Fundamentalism has become socially active, but on almost all the issues they're active in, the liberal churches are typically on the other side. There's an increasing tension between liberals and fundamentals."

O'Kelly defines religious liberalism as a movement of individuals not bound by traditional concepts and strict observance of traditional dogma. "It's people seeking an original relationship with the universe through rational thought and debate," he said. "Fundamentalism, though, is the strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles, usually emphasizing the literal interpretation of the Bible as fundamental to Christian life and teaching."

O'Kelly also stresses that liberals "are not people who have divorced themselves from traditional values. In fact, the liberal rationalist approach to religious and morality in the United States grew up side by side with fundamentalism."

The only new wrinkle to this ancient liberal/fundamentalist standoff is the recent entrance of the fundamental factions into the political arena. "The liberals have always been on the forefront of political activism, it's a longstanding tradition," said O'Kelly. Prime examples of this political activism were the liberal churches' involvement in issues like Vietnam, abortion, and civil rights. "The fundamentalists for a long time did not do that. They did not mix church and politics, but now with the advent of Falwell and the Moral Majority they now say that they have to get political. They're lining up political power bases and affecting who get elected. One of the big television evangelicals might even run for president. They're not only taking and preaching, they're lobbying and changing votes to keep liberals and others



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opposed to their values out of office."

O'Kelly also believes that the attack on liberals isn't limited to the liberal churches but that "it's a frontal attack on all camps of liberals." O'Kelly mentioned that there are liberals in most protestant churches, and that the fundamentals are "tearing down the viability of the liberal perspective. Fundamentals are trying to deny liberals religious viability."

"We just can't sit back and let them take potshots at us," said O'Kelly. "We have to get

exposure in the major media arenas with the major figures."

According to O'Kelly the first task of the liberals will be to demonstrate how the liberal movement functions as a religion, what makes it viable, and what gives the liberal movement character in ways people can understand. "When people think of religion they think of God, and that God is always the traditional God of the Bible. People react with incomprehension when you come to them with the idea of a church and worship with people who are atheists and agnostics."

"The liberal mind allows itself to enter freely onto other sorts of ideas and events, open up to any idea with no dogma. The dogmatic person does not allow himself to open up to things that are not traditional," said O'Kelly. "Their dogmatic mind cannot

relate to the liberal mind."

O'Kelly believes that while people are still indoctrinated to see religion as one thing and one idea — "one-wayism" — there are signs of better public understanding. "The Random House dictionary has expanded the definition of religion to include 'search for truth', expanding religion to more than just the worship of God or belief in a certain scripture," said O'Kelly.

The liberal churches have also had to face internal challenges as well as external treats. "In the 70s there was a struggle between the religious side of the Unitarian Universalists and the social activist side.

After the 60s, with Vietnam and the civil rights activity, many liberal churches were weighted towards the political side, and not enough offers was put towards our identity as a religious unity. The debate in the church was between the political activists and those who wanted a greater religious atmosphere."

"Now the liberal churches are giving much more attention to the spiritual development of their movement while still staying politically active," said O'Kelly.

As for the sizes of liberal denominations, O'Kelly states that while they haven't shown the kind of growth that some of the right-wing churches have, most liberal churches are holding their own. "The liberal churches had a decade of struggling to hold their own in the 70s. We even dropped a bit in membership. But in the 80s we realized that this drop was happening and that we had to reverse that trend: Now we're showing some growth."

The growth of the fundamental movement is seen by O'Kelly as a product of America's reluctance to think. "People aren't thinking as much," he said. "There's so much stimuli that people don't know what to do. There are two ways to deal with this influx of information: through dogma, or through thought. People are avoiding the strain, the discipline and work needed to get the mind to function in a complex society. The more this happens the more you're going to get a dogmatic religious approach. Even if these people don't turn fundamental they won't turn liberal."

Part of the decline of liberalism is due to the falling standards of universities and the general fall in literacy says O'Kelly. "There's a real need for the U of A, in the face of this falling literacy, to work students and to teach them to think."

• Mr. Bouchard, former editor-in-chief of The Gateway, is also a member of the Unitarian Church of Edmonton

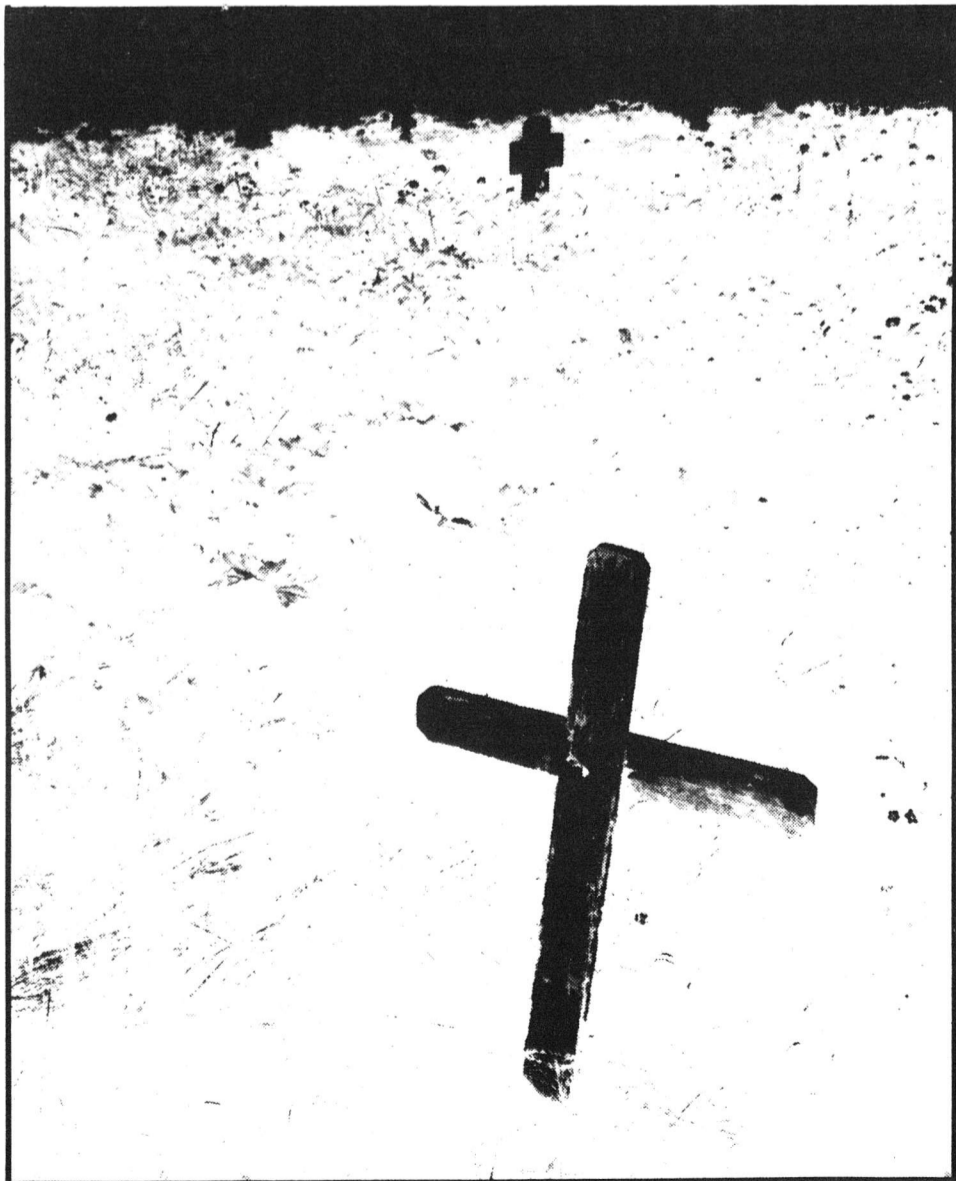


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