

critics of born-again

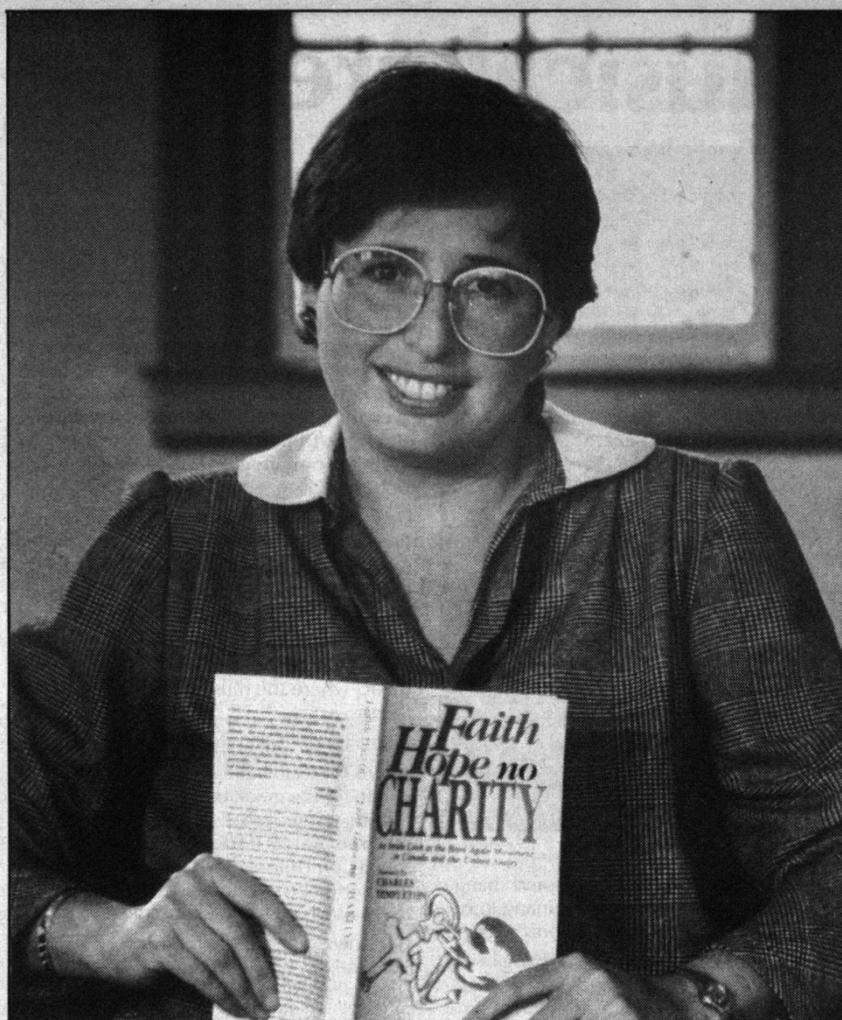


Photo Bill Doskocch

ple of years while she was in high school she found she only associated with these kinds of people. They were told not to read Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood novels because they were sexy and dirty. They were told never to talk to homosexuals, that anyone who wasn't a born-again Christian was a bad person and shouldn't be trusted, and that the only thing of value in life was praying and raising money for Campus Crusade for Christ. So they got really involved in fund-raising and doing various activities with the local Campus Crusade for Christ, which is an American organization in Canada. They lost sight of what it's like to be young and experimenting with things and trying to learn what the world has to offer.

Also, about 90 people from 100 Huntley Street and I went down on a rumbly bus to Washington for a big demonstration of about 400,000 in 1980. It was called "Washington for Jesus." And the interesting thing about Washington for Jesus was that, because I'm a Jew and because I was there as a reporter, these people were always trying to convert me. One of the people who tried to convert me was the head of IBM in some area of Washington. During the day he was a rough tough, businessman but at night he hit the streets, proselytizing. He was introduced to me in a bar. What he was doing in a bar, I don't know. These people aren't supposed to drink. But he wanted "to carve another notch in his Bible" he said, and convert me. His whole quest in life after work hours was to convert people to Christianity, and though the conversions would be instant he was sure they'd be lasting.

Why is it necessary for them to convert?

Christian evangelism has always been a converting kind of religion. They tried to convert people in tent meetings in the middle of the 1800's in southern Ontario and here. There's always been a certain amount of evangelizing in Christianity. Generally it hasn't affected too many people because on a one-to-one basis there's only so many people these people can affect. But with the advent of the television ministry and radio ministry, and with these people having huge computerized mailing lists and sending this material out to millions of people around the world, the world has gotten a lot smaller and a lot of people have been hit with the material from these Fundamentalist evangelists.

How do the computerized mailing lists work?

What happens is that they have a word processing situation, and as soon as you send in a letter or request—as long as it's not

negative—they put you on the mailing list. By negative I mean "Dear Jerry Falwell, I hate your guts. Never write to me again." As long as you write a positive letter Jerry Falwell will put your name on the mailing list. Then every month you'll be hit for some money with an offer of being in their Prayer Partnership or being in their Prayer Fellowship. So for as little as \$10.00 or \$12.00 you could get their newsletter every single month plus a trinket, a greeting card every now and again, and a schedule of when Jerry Falwell is going to make his next appearance in your community. The mailing list seems to build and build. Very few people are cut off the mailing list, and from what I've heard, it's very hard to get off the mailing list even if you want to. Generally if you want to get off the mailing list they'll send you a letter. This happened to me because I subscribed to all these things while I was doing research. I said I wanted to get off the mailing list and they sent me a letter saying "If you can't send in \$15.00 a month, what about \$5.00 a month?" They try and argue you down to an affordable position so you're still one of their contacts and still somebody they can hit for money when they appeals go out. Now the appeals aren't just monthly. They seem to come all the time.

Another evangelist is Jimmy Swaggert, who is one of the worst. He's from Baton Rouge, Louisiana and he's a very hard-hitting, born again fellow who runs a TV ministry on Sunday. It's called "The Jimmy Swaggert Hour of Power." He had his birthday not too long ago and I was watching television one morning and his wife came on and pleaded that she wanted to buy Jimmy a new sports coat for his birthday, and would the TV audience pray that he get a new sports coat and would they send some money in, because sports coats are expensive. Well, no matter how much a sports coat costs, this guy gets more money every single week than what a sports coat is worth, unless it's plated in solid gold. Even then, I think he could afford to buy it. So by turning on this personal business in saying Jimmy needs a new sports coat and as a preacher he doesn't have a lot of clothes, people feel sorry for him, and send in \$5.00. Then they're on the mailing list. It's absolutely untrue to think that the man who is on television every single week playing the piano, singing gospel hymns and preaching like there's no tomorrow, could not afford a sports coat.

How many people that you know of have tried to get off the mailing list and can't?

No one. Eventually you succeed. They

don't exactly want to rope you in. It's just that they don't take no for an answer right away. But if you write down that you hate Jimmy Swaggert, they'll take you off the list.

Don't people believe they're being taken advantage of?

It depends on the people. Some people's lives actually improve by having this kind of faith, but I'm sure that can be said of many faiths. If people have sufficient faith and they want to dedicate their lives to religion their lives can improve to some degree. Most converts find new friendships and they find that their fellow converts think the same way they do. They also find that their life choices are very limited and that their big payoff is going to be in the afterlife, not right now. So they don't have to worry that much about getting ahead or getting a good education or worry about the day to day drag of living. But although the religion itself and what these guys are trying to do is very suspect, the reasons people become involved in it are not bad.

One of my favorites is Chuck Colson, the Watergate hatchet man. Is the man sincere?

I don't think so. I would say that Colson is very much a demagogue. His first master was Richard Nixon, if anyone remembers back to the early 70s, and now his master is God. The guy always has somebody as his master. And I would say that Colson did learn something from his Watergate experiences. He probably learned how to turn a lot of money into a large ministry. The man is an independent millionaire. He's a very wealthy man. So he doesn't exactly work for a living. As I understand it, as a formerly famous lawyer, he lives off the interest that has accrued from his various accounts, and spending his time as an activist in the "Prison Ministry."

What exactly is the Prison Ministry?

It's an international organization, primarily Canadian and American, of born again Christians who go into the prisons and try to bring God to prisoners—particularly prisoners who are on death row and prisoners who have a long period of incarceration ahead of them. What they do is, through praying and through their kindness, get a number of these liars to accept Jesus Christ as their personal lord and saviour. It seems to have a lot of advantages to the prison officials because these guys don't make any trouble after that. They pray every Tuesday and Thursday night and are nice to their fellow prisoners.

You mentioned that Chuck Colson had a body guard. Why does he need a body guard?

He introduced him as his executive assistant but I'm convinced he was a bodyguard, because I've never seen an executive assistant that looked like a football player before. This man was huge. Because of the Watergate days, a lot of people have negative feelings towards the Watergate felons. I think there may be a real question as to whether Colson is safe in any particular situation. He's certainly got tight security. He knows he isn't well liked by everybody.

A bodyguard requires a great deal of money.

This man is part of the Prison Fellowship, so he may work for very little money, he may work for free, or he may even live in Charles Colson's basement. Prison Fellowship takes in quite a lot of money but they seem to spend a great deal on sending these preachers to travel around Canada and the United States and go into prisons. I don't mean to say that it goes into Colson's pocket because I don't think he personally benefits from it. He only benefits from the prestige, and the fact that he goes to prisons: talking to state official and to government leaders.

Another organization that interested me was Renaissance International. You mentioned it was a branch of the Moral Majority. Could you explain a bit further?

I don't think it's a branch of the Moral Majority. Renaissance International independent organization based in Milton, Ontario. Renaissance International is run by a preacher called Ken Campbell who has been an evangelist his whole life, and is very honest and true to evangelism. I don't think the man makes any money. Campbell doesn't want to talk about prayer. He wants to talk about the degeneration of our society and lack of morals in our society. So he's hopped on a number of different bandwagons. For instance, he's tried to get certain books

banned from the Ontario curriculum. He doesn't like homosexuals being involved in politics or running for political office in municipal or provincial elections, so he tries to target them. He's very much against the legalization of abortion. So with this Renaissance group, which is a political action group, he's able to bring these things to the public's attention. He publishes leaflets and documents and little books. He gets a certain status from the people who listen to him.

Why should religion not mix with politics?

Religion should mix with politics. There's no reason in the world that religious people shouldn't try and influence the political process. What I resent is someone like Jerry Falwell, who for 20 years as a preacher absolutely stayed away from political involvement. He refused to comment on aid in desegregating the southern United States. And he cautioned other preachers not to get involved in the civil rights movement. And now all of a sudden he's turned around and, because the president is someone he respects and has politics that he likes, he's in there and he wants to be part of the political process.

How do the American evangelists differ from the Canadians? Or is there a difference?

There's a slight difference in tactics. The most well known Canadian Evangelist is David Mainse of 100 Huntley Street. He seems to be an honest fellow who lives a modest lifestyle in a rented townhouse in the suburb of Toronto and the ministry seems to spend all the money it receives from viewers on buying airtime, which is very expensive. One of the reasons Mainse is backing the idea of a multi-religion station on the CRTC is because 100 Huntley Street can't afford to go on indefinitely buying the kind of airtime they're buying. They broadcast for an hour a day, seven days a week, across Canada. What David Mainse would like to do is set up a religious network where he would get a cut of the action, as would the Jews, the Mormons, and any other religion that has a certain number of adherents, each group would be allowed to preach their message on this network.

How feasible is this?

David Macdonald, our envoy to Ethiopia and a former United Church Minister, seems to think that it is very likely that these different religions could get together, sort out their differences and divide out the satellite pie. I'm not sure. The United Church, the Anglican Church—all of the mainline churches plus Huntley Street—have struck a committee to investigate the possibilities. But the committee, in the last two years, hasn't gotten very far. And the CRTC hasn't decided whom they're going to licence and how it's going to be done.

Is there any regulation in Canada prohibiting money being taken out of Canada that is collected in Canada?

Yes, there appears to be a regulation Revenue Canada says that if Jerry Falwell, as an American, wants to collect money here on Canadian airwaves, he has to set up an outlet of the Jerry Falwell empire here in Canada. The money he collects from Canadians is supposed to be used to buy airtime in Canada, or for Canadian purposes. Whether or not Jerry Falwell does take money out of the country, we don't know. But we know he collects a lot from Canadians. He won't say how much. Revenue Canada hasn't been able to pursue him and force him to make a declaration of how much money he gets from his Canadian viewers.

Why is that?

Because there are no teeth in the law in Revenue Canada. As soon as you're a charitable organization, you're supposed to file a tax return saying you're a charitable organization. 100 Huntley Street does this every year. They do it willingly. They say how much money they took in; how much they spent on broadcasting; how much they spent on overhead and so on. But Jerry Falwell is arrogant and, because he's an American, he says he has no responsibility in Canada to tell the Canadian government anything. So he'll just write across his tax form "non-applicable" and send it back. I don't even know if they can prosecute him. They haven't so far.

Anna Borowick's conversation with Judith Haiven continues next week. In the meanwhile, Haiven will be speaking and answering questions about Faith, Hope, and No Charity and other topics at the Gateway, rm 282 SUB at 12:30 p.m. Thursday, Mar. 21.