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OPINIONS

Lecture a Facade for Christian Evangelism

I had heard that religious evangelism was widespread on the Dalhousie campus, but until the night of Friday, Mar. 5, I had not realized just how religiously widespread it really is.

On that night, I attended a lecture sponsored by the Dalhousie Christian Fellowship which purported to examine the historical reliability of the Bible, but which actually turned out to be religious evangelism wearing the disguise of objective historical inquiry.

The speaker was Mr. Ragnar Oborn, a man from the University of New Brunswick who teaches a class in forestry (though he is not a professor). As far as I could tell, Mr. Oborn has had no formal education in biblical scholarship or historiography. What he did was promote a biased, pro-Christian "examination" of the text and a theo-centric, superstitious view of history which concludes that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is more likely than not a historical fact.

Mr. Oborn's pro-Christian bias, which was very offensive since he pretended to present an "objective" view of the evidence, was obvious from the beginning and continued to surface throughout the lecture. He declared that the lecture would focus not on the Bible as a whole (which was the impression given by the lecture title, "The Bible: Is It...Reliable?"), but would deal only with the New Testament. Throughout the talk, he said things which clearly revealed a one-sided Christian view of history.

"The Jews killed Jesus," "Nero burned Rome," "the [Roman] world was very corrupt at [the time of Jesus and his apostles]."

Most scholars realize that these sorts of statements are politically loaded and are not historical facts, but Christian constructions and interpretations of history (to which Mr. Oborn seems to subscribe wholeheartedly).

Mr. Oborn used a number of transparently rhetorical techniques to try to sway the audience to his biased point of view. In the first part of the lecture, he demonstrated how intact the surviving text of the New Testament is. He compared it to

other ancient texts written by classical authors, which have huge chronological gaps between the time the author lived and the date when the earliest surviving manuscript was written, and are mostly represented by a limited range of existing manuscripts.

The New Testament, as he pointed out, has much smaller time gaps between its authors and earliest surviving manuscripts, as well as a huge number of surviving manuscripts (according to Mr. Oborn, over 24,000).

However, none of this data can be used to prove anything about the New Testament's historical accuracy or reliability; it only serves to indicate a particularly intact text. I don't understand why Mr. Oborn wasted time telling us these facts, except that it was a distraction technique to persuade the bewildered and naive, giving them the impression that the Bible is a highly dependable book.

Another technique he used was to pose rhetorical questions to the audience when he reached areas where the text could not be tested

against outside sources or archaeological evidence. When discussing the "truth" of Christian doctrine and New Testament narratives about Jesus' life, he asked, "Why would people [early Christian martyrs] suffer and die for something they knew to be false?"

He correlated this "argument" with the assertion that the early Christians could have "tested" their faith at any time they wished by simply going to Jesus' tomb (a mere 10-minute stroll from the Temple!) and seeing if there was a corpse inside. Never mind that the Romans almost never buried the bodies of crucified victims, that the New Testament itself is the only source of evidence for Jesus' burial, that the location of Jesus' tomb is still uncertain today.

His failure to mention things like the internal contradictions in the Gospels, or the fact that the "Bible" as such was not codified and canonized as a book until centuries after the events it describes occurred (and was almost certainly edited regarding which details of Jesus' life it included). He

made no mention of the fact that non-canonical gospels have been discovered which describe, among other things, a young Jesus using his powers to kill other children (perhaps Mr. Oborn is blissfully unaware of these documents).

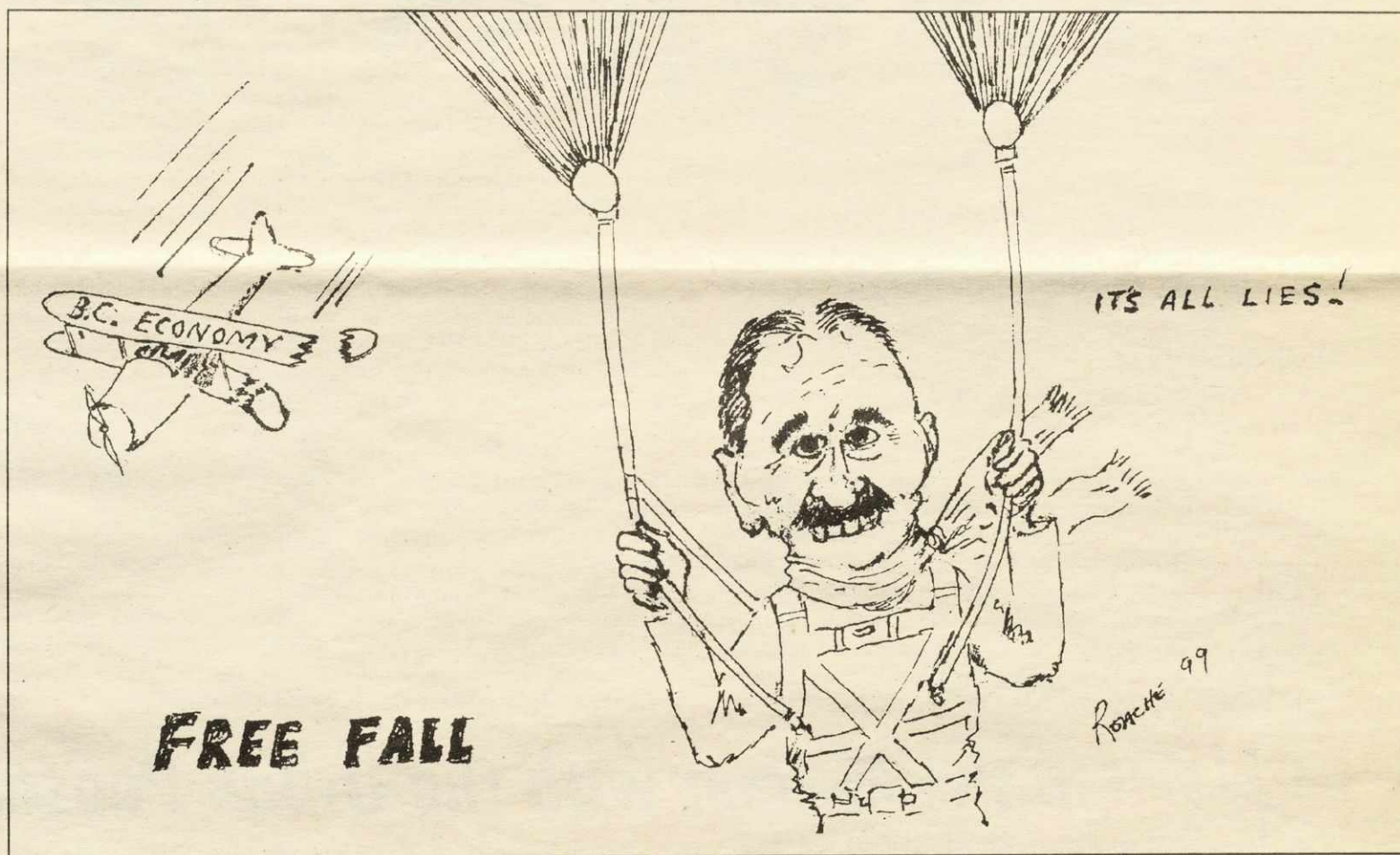
He also made some statements which were simply untrue, such as his assertion that no archaeological evidence has ever been discovered which contradicts the Bible; in fact much of the archaeological evidence uncovered over the past few decades has contradicted statements in the Old Testament and has forced biblical scholars to seriously reconsider previously firm suppositions, such as the existence of the "United Monarchy" of David and Solomon.

What really angered and disturbed me was the way Mr. Oborn used the lecture, a supposedly objective historical inquiry, to promote and spread his own religion. He distributed free pro-Christian literature after his talk was finished. These are hardly acts that an objective historian would commit at a public lecture! To me,

it represented another example of how evangelical Christians are unable to be impartial when discussing their religion, and how they can never resist an opportunity to attempt to gain converts and "witness their faith". The whole thing had the atmosphere of an indoctrination seminar or a catechism rather than a history lecture! Mr. Oborn's purpose was not to present an impartial, objective inquiry into the Bible's historical reliability, but to convince his audience of certain conclusions that he had decided from the beginning were true.

Mr. Oborn and those responsible for organizing this lecture should be ashamed to have promoted such a blatant attempt at Christian evangelism as an objective historical inquiry. Biblically-related lectures at a university setting should be presented by those with a genuine scholarly interest in the book and its context, not by those whose only goal is to evangelize.

John Gerald David Holton



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