

Born-again politicians: a dying breed?

by James Hamilton

Over the past decade, Americans have seen a resurgence of religious values in politics unprecedented in American history. Presidential candidates Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, and the rise of right-wing religious coalitions are all examples of "born-again politics".

Dr. Lonni Kliever from the Southern Methodist University addressed this issue in an open lecture last Thursday. Dr. Kliever's lecture was part of the course "In the Name of God: Politics and Religion" being held now at the Halifax Main Library.

Kliever began by sketching the history of religion and politics in America. He said the first real rise of religious figures in politics occurred during the 1920s. Evolution and prohibition were the newest and hottest social issues. Religious leaders found themselves involved in some of the decade's largest social problems. After prohibition was repealed and the theory of evolution gained wide acceptance across the country, religious leaders returned to more spiritual mat-

ters for a while.

Kliever said religion became a key element in politics again in the 1970s with the election of Jimmy Carter, a born-again Christian. The religious right, inspired by Carter's election, pressed for social reform. They continued their attack on evolution, opposed gay rights, and mobilized to stop the equal rights amendment. Out of this religious right, Jerry Falwell emerged to push religious right-wing doctrine and form the Moral Majority, a right-wing religious lobby group. The religious right pushes such issues as outlawing abortion, restoration of capital punishment, school prayer, anti-communism, and increased defence spending. Falwell was soon supported by thousands of religious coalitions across the United States. With this rapid rise to power, the religious right were predicted to dominate the 1980s.

In the early '80s, they held up to that expectation. In 1982, 60 per cent of American adults considered themselves to be born-again Christians. The Moral Majority had won the backing of Ronald Reagan, and the religious right

was elected to his second term, winning every state but one. Reagan had become the spear carrier for the powerful religious right.

Kliever stated that the last half of the decade has seen almost a complete turn-around of events. The Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals have tainted most of the activities of the religious right. Jackson's and Robertson's failures to become presidential candidates and Bush and Dukakis's refusal to affiliate themselves with any religious organization have also aided the demise of the religious right. It appears as if religion is stepping out of the public spotlight, and concentrating on spiritual matters once again. But what about the future?

Kliever predicted that because evangelicals share so few political similarities, they could never form a strong enough coalition to elect a president. He said that regional issues, economic issues and the ecology are all points on which religious authorities can not agree. Kliever concluded his lecture by saying it's hard for a religion to be political as well as keep the faith.



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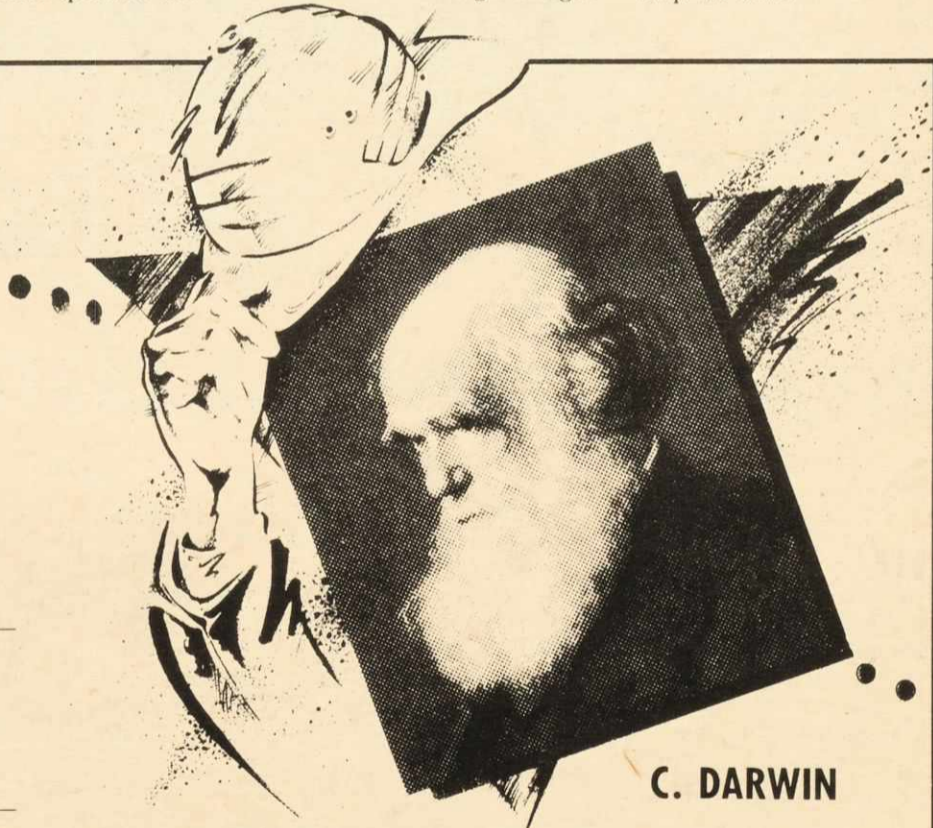
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