

The Christian Comeback

Churches across Canada are flush with born-again converts, and awakening from a long political slumber. Why the Canadian left needs to dust off its Bible.

By Allan Gregg

LATELY, THE FORCES OF organized Christianity have been throwing their weight around in the political arena. Both Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin have been threatened from the pulpit with eternal damnation for supporting same-sex marriage. Other MPs have suffered more than mere threats, finding themselves cast out of their parishes. In early summer, headlines announced that Christian activists were capturing Conservative party nominations on both coasts and singled out a Presbyterian minister, Tristan Emmanuel, for recommending “Christian, pro-family people” as preferred candidates to his audiences. Emmanuel, the founder of the Equipping Christians for the Public Square Centre in southern Ontario, travels across Canada to spread the message that Jesus commands Christians to be politically engaged. These developments in Christian circles (to say nothing of those within other faiths) have many voters and pundits calling for reinforcements to the “great wall” separating church and state.

Christianity’s new ascendancy is a broad North American phenomenon, and anyone keeping score would have to conclude that, increasingly, the religious are thumping the secularists. In the United States, born-again President George W. Bush was re-elected in 2004 — at least in part — by setting out to register four million new evangelical Christian voters. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of The Christ*, derided by mainstream critics as everything from unwatchable to anti-Semitic, pulled in \$370 million at the box office, the same total as *Spider-Man 2*. Author Rick Warren’s quasi-evangelical *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here*

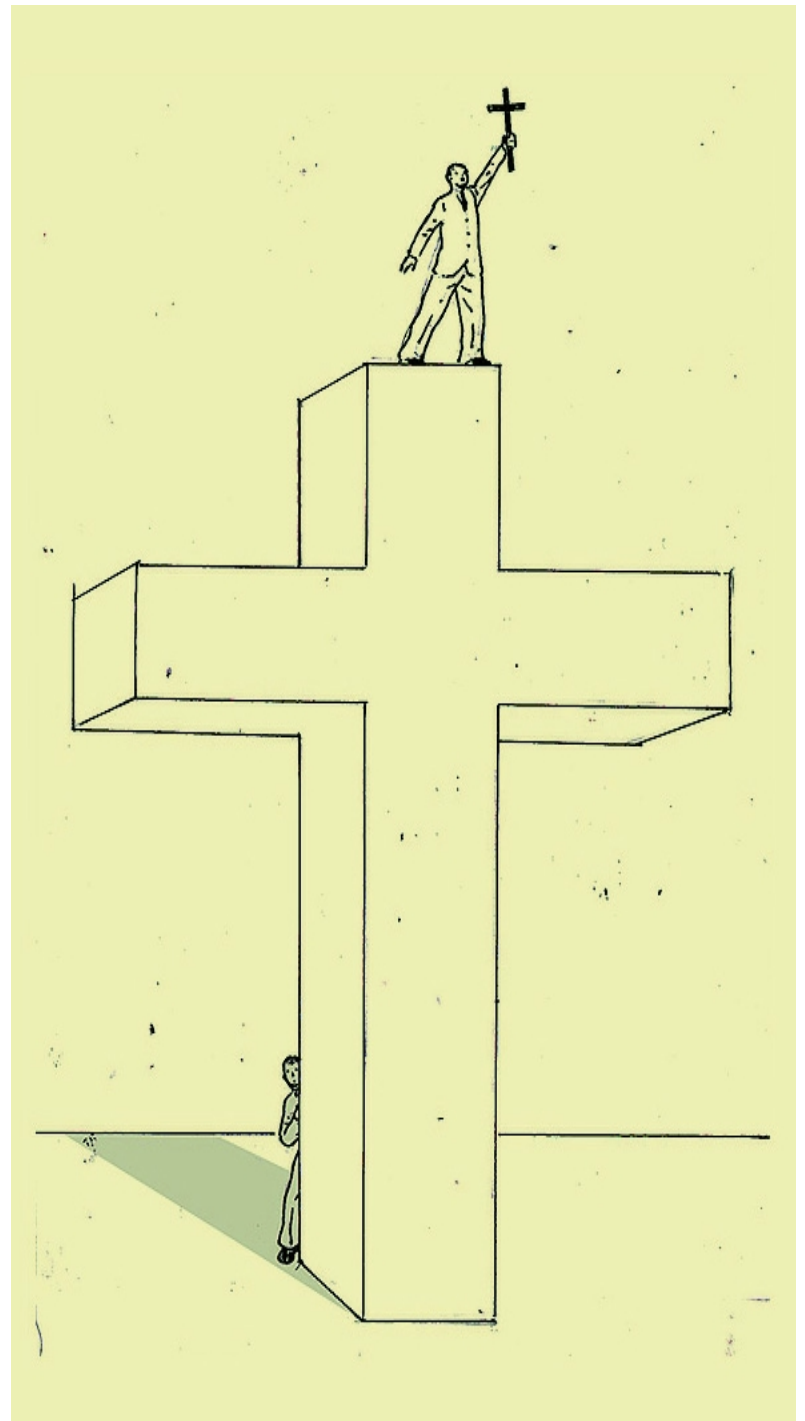
For? has racked up sales of more than 20 million copies worldwide and almost one million in Canada — though it was not even acknowledged on most bestseller lists.

Clearly the exhortations of the religious are falling on receptive ears on both sides of the border. Yet many secular-minded Canadians continue to write off the trend as an aberration, the utterances of fringe fanatics with sinister motivations. (*One Globe and Mail* headline linked the nomination battles with a Christian “hidden agenda,” though the story gave no real explanation of the phrase and quoted no one specific using it.) They couldn’t be more wrong.

Polls routinely demonstrate that upwards of 80 per cent of Canadians believe in God. Three-quarters of all Canadians say they pray at least occasionally, and more than two-thirds claim that religious beliefs and practices are important in their lives. While these figures are lower than those found in the United States, fully 31 per cent of Canadians describe themselves as “born-again” Christians. Notably, as many Ontarians as Albertans claim to have been reborn. And among the nation’s 18-to-24-year-olds — a demographic that, until recently, could rarely be spotted at a Sunday service — 40 per cent say they are born again. Church-based organizations are winning cultural and political battles because they tap into this rich vein of shared spiritual values.

They are also winning thanks, in no small measure, to their opponents’ weaknesses. Non-religious pluralists

Born-again Christians prefer to debate public policy through the prism of values—something the left would rather avoid



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and secularists — not to mention much of the Canadian left — seem unable to effectively articulate their positions based upon the values they hold dear. The debate on same-sex marriage is a perfect example: you never hear Paul Martin arguing, say, that loving families are the cornerstone of society, that the ritual of marriage creates a network of support for those who wed, and that this ritual is a benefit to society regardless of sexual orientation. Instead, they defend their stance on political, procedural and legalistic grounds: tolerance *demand*s that we embrace gay rights; the courts have ruled in favour of same-sex marriages in eight provinces; therefore this is a charter issue that *must* be applied to all, equally. True to form, the issue was put to rest in the House of Commons with a backroom procedural trick that shut down debate, avoiding the need to argue their case.

This retreat to procedure is itself a form of secular fundamentalism. Just as evangelicals cite scripture to support their views, their secular opponents turn to equally unassailable sources — the courts, political orthodoxy — in defence of theirs. Consider any issue on the current agenda: How shall we help working families care for their young children? How should we deploy our military in the fight against terrorism? Should we flatten the tax system, or should the wealthier shoulder a larger share of the burden? At their root, all these questions involve the expression of core values: Why are we here? What is our purpose? What are our obligations to others? It should surprise no one that Christian voters, led by organizations like Tristan Emmanuel's, are

entering the political fray and gaining an advantage in public debate.

And yet the trend is also characterized by a lack of stridency. From 1993 to 2003, even as the number of Canadians who claimed they had “committed my life to Christ” rose to 44 per cent from 29 per cent, church attendance actually declined to 19 per cent from 23 per cent. Moreover, 65 per cent believe that political leaders should “never” use their religious views to guide their actions. Canadian Christians are not caught up in liturgical fervour. Rather, in a post-9/11 world of uncertainty and threat, they are questing for meaning.

But they are not necessarily leaning to the political right, and small-l liberals ought to recall that conservatives do not have a monopoly on Christian values. The American civil rights movement and the fight against colonialism in India both benefited from the support of church teaching. There was a time when socially progressive Canadians thumped the Bible in their defence, arguing that compassion is a blessing, that greed is sin, and that we are our brothers' keepers. This was the social gospel of politicians like Tommy Douglas, and medicare — that cherished national institution — is one of its creations.

If liberals are looking for renewed inspiration at a time when they are losing hearts and minds, they might want to crack open the Bible anew. Instead, by shutting down reasonable debate on moral issues, they are alienating the moderate middle who otherwise might be receptive to more nuanced and balanced positions. We have nothing to fear from value-based arguments, even if they have their roots in scripture. □

