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THE NEW CHRISTIAN CONSERVATISM
AN ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL MOVEMENT 1970-1997

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the social and political mobilisation of groups of conservative Christians in the period 1970 to 1997, via a theory of cultural articulation. Previous ways of accounting for moments of conservative Christian activism, such as the secularisation thesis, are critiqued for their inability to account for the periodic resurgence of such activism in New Zealand, particularly in the period since 1988. Alternatively, cultural articulation theory forces an analysis of the multi-dimensional determinants of mobilisation, by taking advantage of the subjective, structural, dramaturgical, and institutional approaches to cultural analysis, and by placing a focus on how a social movement interacts with changes in the social/cultural/political environment. By tracing several key moments in New Zealand's recent history, the mobilisation of conservative Christians is therefore explained in terms of the opportunities these moments gave for the formation, development, and continuing articulation of a conservative Christian ideology. This "exploration" revealed a critical moment around 1988 when, although many factors were predictive of a busy period of activism, the mobilising ideology of Christian Conservatism became hindered by a lingering tradition of church-state separation. The solution for conservative Christians, in the form of a New Christian Conservatism, was the result of an ideological innovation which re-mobilised the movement, by claiming that all spaces were political and hence contestable. This re-narration of their core ideology was matched with a greater flexibility, and professionalism, in the movement's articulations with its environment in the 1990s. Two examples of the New Christian Conservatism are highlighted as evidence of the movement's potential with this new ideology, as the identity of conservative Christians was re-moulded to suit the political culture in the 1990s. The New Christian Conservatism is finally posited as a movement that challenges the prevailing legitimacy of political pluralism in New Zealand, and which has the potential, if properly organised, to gain entry into the formal political sphere under MMP. However, this can only be achieved if the movement overcomes the fundamental problems of accommodation and compromise, issues which have prevented the movement from expanding in influence to date.

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