DR. RANDALL BALMER ON HIS BOOK, *BAD FAITH: RACE AND THE RISE OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT*

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FRANCIS BREMER: Welcome to a new episode in the Congregational Library & Archives history talk series.

I'm Dr. Frank Bremer. I am a member of the Board of the Congregational Library. And with me today is Dr. Randall Balmer, who is the John Phillips Professor of American Religion at Dartmouth College and the author of over a dozen books on various aspects of American religion, particularly American evangelicalism.

He recently published *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right*, which we're gonna be talking about today.

And Dr. Balmer, I'd appreciate it if maybe you could get our viewers started by telling us a little bit about what the book is about and why you felt it important to write it.

RANDALL BALMER: Yeah, the book... it's a very good question and probably a fairly long answer, so I'll try to keep it rather brief. But it began with my interest in the mobilization of evangelicals into politics in the 1970s. And I was, at that time I was a student at an evangelical college and actually went on to work at an evangelical seminary and was also doing a master's degree in church history simultaneously.

And so my point in saying that was that I was very much embedded in what I call the evangelical subculture in North America. And so I, and I was aware of kind of the burning interest on the part of evangelicals in politics. But I don't remember that abortion was part of that conversation in the 1970s.

And so when I began to hear leaders of the religious right talk about how abortion was the issue that got them involved in politics in the 1970s, I was certainly a bit skeptical about that.

As it happens, I was... when I went off to graduate school in 1980, I was very interested and studied to do my dissertation in colonial history as you know, and your work certainly was very important to my understanding of that world.

But in my first job at Columbia in the late 1980s is when all the televangelist scandals were breaking. And that is what got me interested, simply because I come out of that world, but also because I was really the only expert in New York City at the time on and on that topic.

And even I wasn't much of an expert. But that kind of signaled my shift toward a study of evangelicalism, I wrote a couple of books on the topic.

And I... over the last few years that I've become very interested, actually several decades in the issue of what I call the abortion myth, that is the fiction that abortion was the catalyst for bringing evangelicals into politics in the 1970s.

And so this book, it's a short book, but it represents my research on that topic and my conclusion that abortion in fact had nothing to do with the mobilization of the religious right in the 1970s.

FRANK: So what do you see as the key issue that, well I guess the title to some extent telegraphs it and that is the importance of race?

RANDALL: It is. And the way I got onto this issue is that in November of 1990, I was invited to a gathering of religious right leaders in Washington, D.C., a small group, probably maybe 30 people in a hotel conference room.

And there I was in the room with people like Paul Weyrich, who's really the architect of the religious right; Richard Viguerie, the conservative direct mail guru; and Ed Dobson, who was one of Jerry Falwell's acolytes at Moral Majority; Ralph Reed, head of the Christian Coalition; Donald Wildmon, the founder of the American Family Association. And, you know, it was just a who's who of religious right luminaries.

And actually, the occasion I discovered after I got there was a ten-year anniversary observance of the election of Ronald Reagan ten years earlier. And I hadn't celebrated the election ten years earlier. I was in no mood to celebrate a ten-year anniversary. But here I was in this room with these religious right moguls.

And in the first session, Paul Weyrich, who's really the architect behind the whole movement, made an impassioned statement. He said, let's remember, abortion had nothing to do with this movement getting started. What got us started as a political movement was a defense of racial segregation at so-called segregation academies, and also, of course, Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina.

And during the break, right after that session, I went up to him and I said, I want to make sure I heard you correctly. And he said, absolutely not. He said, I've been trying since the Goldwater campaign in 1964 to get these people interested in politics, because I recognized, he recognized that they would be a major political force if they ever got mobilized.

And he said, I tried the abortion issue. I tried the school prayer issue. I tried the women's rights issue and opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment. I tried the pornography issue. Nothing got their interest until the issue of racial segregation came along in the 1970s.

So that's what kind of put me on that trajectory, trying to understand exactly what happened.

And I, you know, the book represents the summation of my findings, but I can say without any equivocation, and I'm sure with no, no thread of contradiction, that abortion was not the catalyst for the religious right. It wasn't. And instead, the defense of racial segregation at these segregation academies.

FRANK: You know, one of the things in the book that struck me was the distinction you make between the traditional, I think you call it "progressive evangelicalism," which, of course, I see signs of in the 17th century, and then, of course, continues through the Great Awakening and so forth.

And then modern evangelicalism, with its focus on the born-again experience. And could you say a little bit about how that comes about?

RANDALL: Sure. I think the real flowering of that social conscience occurs with the Second Great Awakening, which takes place, as you know, in the decade straddling the turn of the 19th century.

And at that time, and Charles Finney, I don't think there's any debate that Charles Finney is by far the most consequential, influential evangelical of the 19th century. And he is merely the leader among many evangelicals who are seeking to transform society by remaking it in the, in the... according to the norms of godliness.

And so there is, you know, again, as you know very well, there's this extraordinary outpouring of social reform activity coming out of the Second Great Awakening. Prison reform is one of the issues that these evangelicals are interested in, women's rights, women's equality, even voting rights, which was considered a rather radical cause in the 19th century.

Now, various peace crusades, temperance, we view temperance today as kind of an overweening, paternalistic movement, but again, as you know, alcohol abuse was rampant in the early decades of the 19th century. And with it, of course, those attendant complications of spousal abuse, and child abuse, and so forth. So evangelicals took that up as a cause as well.

Lyman Beecher's campaign against dueling would be another example.

The whole common school movement, what we call public education or public schools today, evangelicals were very active in that. They weren't the only ones, but they were very active in that as well, because they understood that education was the key, particularly for the sons and daughters of those who were less fortunate so that they could become upwardly mobile and join the middle class, essentially.

And on the issue of slavery, obviously, you have a North-South divide on that issue. But northern evangelicals were certainly pushing for the abolition of slavery.

I'm not going to deny that southern evangelicals, some theologians, James Henry... Henley Thornwell, I guess it's his name, if I remember correctly, and several others were arguing theological defenses of slavery. And I won't deny that.

But if you look at the overall record, the overall agenda of evangelical social reform in the 19th century, which really in many ways set the agenda for the entire nation, it was, it was bent toward those on the margins of society, those that Jesus called the least of these when he asked his followers to care for the least of these. If you would chart evangelical political activity in the 19th century on a kind of contemporary political spectrum—and I know there's always, that's a, that's a fraught enterprise, I understand that—but they would unmistakably lean toward the left of the political spectrum.

And, and I guess I want to put another caveat in there to say that some of their efforts were ham-handed, and probably paternalistic, or even colonialist by today's standards. But again, if you look at the overall record, it's very different from the agenda of the religious right in the 20th and 21st centuries.

FRANK: Yeah. How do you deal with the sort of sense that I know I sort of encounter that when you want to talk about these people going back to the puritans, and the groups in the First Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening, and you, you use the term evangelical, so much of the contemporary understanding of evangelicalism alters the way people are going to react to those earlier figures?

RANDALL: Sure. No, there's no question about that.

And I think that, in many ways, you know, much of my work, I suppose, over the last several years or even decades, has been trying to correct that misimpression. Today, as you say, you hear, people hear the term evangelical and they immediately think religious right. Well, that's, you know, that's certainly part of it, and I have to, have to acknowledge that. There's no denying it.

But it's, you have a much different picture if you look at it through a historical lens, rather than looking through it, looking at it through contemporary eyes. And that's part of the argument that I'm trying to make, at least indirectly, is that here you have a movement that really is quite distinguished in, throughout American history, again, as you know very well. And to see it contorted into a, a political incarnation that really represents, I think, an utterly, utter denial, not only of this noble legacy of 19th century evangelical activism, but also, I would argue, of the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus was pretty clear in Matthew 25 about how his followers would enter the kingdom of heaven. And they had to do certain things. And those things were directed toward the plight of those on the margins of society.

FRANK: I was struck by your discussion of the election of 1980 in the book, and of course, it calls to mind some of what you've written about Jimmy Carter in a separate work, which I think is grossly underrated or underappreciated.

I think it's a wonderful book. But in some ways, you know, this is a man who represented sort of a progressive evangelicalism and yet was largely rejected by evangelicals in that election. Could you elaborate on that a little?

RANDALL: Sure. That was one of the great puzzles that I was trying to figure out. And actually, I remember at the time, I mentioned earlier that I was very much embedded within evangelicalism, the evangelical subculture, in the 1970s. And at the time, I couldn't quite figure this out.

Now, we all have to acknowledge that Jimmy Carter's presidency was fraught. I mean, inflation was 20% or thereabouts. You had the Arab oil embargo that just devastated the U.S. economy in the 1970s. You had the taking of hostages in Iran and so forth. So, I mean, things were... there were other reasons that Americans and voters generally were disenchanted with Jimmy Carter. And I don't want to, I don't want to minimize that.

But for evangelicals themselves to turn their back on a born again Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher in 1980 who I would argue, and I'm prepared to argue, governed according to the principles of progressive evangelicalism. Although he was very careful not to, not to traverse that line of separation between church and state. He was a good Baptist after all, right? That's where, that's where we get this notion of the separation of church and state, at least in part from the Baptists. He was very careful about that.

But for evangelicals to turn their back so decisively against Jimmy Carter in favor of a divorced and remarried former Hollywood actor—Hollywood was not exactly known as a province of piety to evangelicals—somebody who, as governor of California in 1967, had signed into law the most liberal abortion bill in the nation. And somebody who, as I really discovered in writing this book, really had much more of a racist pedigree than I had realized previously before writing this book.

And that... at the time it was, it was a, it was a puzzle to me. And it's remained a puzzle to me in many respects until you begin to look into the real origins of the religious right, the gravitation toward Reagan with his racism.

I think we have to say it plainly. I mean, you know, there are, there are more polite ways to say that, I suppose. But when you come down to it... this was a, this man was a racist. As, again...

juxtaposing that with the real origins of the religious right, that leap becomes, I think, a lot more decipherable than it was for me previously.

FRANK: Right. Could you elaborate a bit on how, in many ways, Black evangelicalism remains sort of separate, obviously, from the issue of race, but there really isn't evangelical unity across the races?

RANDALL: No, that's absolutely right.

And I think that has to do with, you know, the long and history of racism in American society. And so you have this odd situation where you have white evangelicals holding certain theology, theological beliefs, and Black evangelicals holding pretty much the same evangelical theology. But in part because of racism, they really grew and developed along parallel tracks rather than intersecting tracks.

So, for example, within the, within the Black church—and this goes back, of course, to the days of slavery—the notion of social activism or political activism was never an issue of contestation. Whereas for white evangelicals in the 20th century, up until the formation of the religious right in the late 1970s, it was an issue of contestation.

Again, I'll be self-referential here for a moment, but I remember very clearly in my small evangelical college in the early 1970s having these dorm room discussions about why evangelicals weren't involved in politics. And I was arguing for them to become involved in politics. And, you know, everybody else said, ah no, Jesus is coming back at any time, let's not worry about it, and that sort of thing.

Little did I know, of course, pathetically, that when they did become involved in politics, they went in the wrong direction.

But, coming back to the point about white and Black, you know, the notion that a preacher, a Black preacher, for example, would, you know, stand aloof from the political scene or the political process was just... for the Black church it'd be ludicrous.

I mean, the slave preacher was the person who not only looked after the, the spiritual and religious well-being of his household and his congregation, he had to look out for their physical needs as well. I mean, that was part of the process. And that, that tradition, that of activism, you know, continues, of course, to the present. So, that would be one of the major differences.

But also, again, what happened, I think, in the 40,000-foot view is that, again, I see the election of 1980 as being the real turning point. And at that point, white evangelicals went rather dramatically toward the toward the right and, and really disappeared into the maw of far-right Republican politics.

FRANK: Maybe we can end with a, one general question, one I mean, I know I wrestle with.

It's a difficult one, but... what, what do you see as the importance of history, and particularly religious history, in our times and in times when authority is being challenged, and truth is being denied, and everything else?

RANDALL: Oh, that's a great question. We could probably, we could probably talk about this for hours, the two of us.

But I think in this particular instance, if I may kind of ground that, my answer in the book. I want to be careful to say I'm not arguing in this book that all evangelicals, all white evangelicals are all, everybody associated with the religious right is racist. I'm not saying that. I don't think it's true, frankly.

But I also think history is important because we have to come to terms with the true origins of this movement. And there's no way to say it... to whitewash it. Maybe that's not the, not the right verb to use here, but... but this is a movement that was born in racism. And it emerged out of racism. And you can now look at the religious right and say, well, they have all these other issues, including abortion, that they want to talk about. But the fact remains that this is a movement that has its roots in racism.

And the analogy I use in the book is that you could build this beautiful building with all sorts of fancy appointments, and filigrees, and so forth. But if it's resting on rotten timbers, the integrity of the entire structure is compromised.

And so what I want to say in terms of the importance of history is that it's very important to come to terms with our past. All of us. I mean, that's I mean, it's not just in this particular instance. The past is very important. I don't need to tell a historian that. And in this case, I think it's vitally important to understanding the, the course that the movement has taken, and also any possibilities for its redemption.