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## AN INTERVIEW WITH RANDALL BALMER

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Randall Balmer is a professor of American religious history at Barnard College, Columbia University in New York City. As a visiting professor, Balmer has taught at a number of schools including Dartmouth College and Northwestern University. Balmer's articles on religion and the effect of religion on culture, history and politics have appeared in periodicals across the United States such as the *New York Times* and the *Nation*. An editor for *Christianity Today* since 1999, Dr. Balmer has also authored several books including *Protestantism in America* (2002). He wrote and hosted the Emmy-nominated television documentary series on religion and politics, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (2006). *NeoAmericanist's* Interviewing Correspondent, Mark Phillipowich, conducted the following interview with Balmer after his lecture, "So Help Me God: Religion and the American Presidency since John F. Kennedy," which he delivered at the Centre for American Studies' Speakers Series hosted by the University of Western Ontario in March, 2009.

**NEOAMERICANIST (NA):** Based on your most recent book, *God in the Whitehouse* (2008), which explores the influence religion had on presidents from Kennedy to the younger Bush, how is it that religion has gone from a silent issue in the years of Kennedy to George W. Bush arguing that Jesus was his favourite political philosopher?

**BALMER:** If I had to give you a short answer I'd have to say Richard Nixon. I think Nixon's corruptions opened the door for a political outsider like Jimmy Carter to come in and use the language of faith and piety to assure Americans that he was not going to be morally bankrupt the way that Richard Nixon was. That's the short answer.

**NA:** So it would be fair to say that the move towards overt religiosity in American national politics hasn't been a linear progression but more of a case-by-case process?

**BALMER:** It has been case-by-case, but I think that since 1976 it has been mostly linear in that we Americans have this expectation that presidential candidates will be forthcoming about their faith and their religious affiliations. And anybody who isn't [forthcoming about their faith] is somehow suspect. I'll cite this example that the democratic nominee in 1988—Michael Dukakis, the Governor of Massachusetts—was, as far as I can tell, a true secularist at his core. And, he ran a lousy campaign in many ways, but I think that one of the contributing factors to his defeat was that he was not comfortable speaking about faith.

**NA:** Do you see parallels between this sort failure to admit the religious into politics and the approach taken in John McCain's recent campaign?

**BALMER:** McCain, yes. McCain was clearly not comfortable speaking that language and refused to do so. And especially in a party whose primary constituency for the last couple of decades has been the religious right, I think that was politically costly to him.

**NA:** Some have argued that Barack Obama was able to carry a new generation of Christian democrats by using much more subtle religious rhetoric. Would you say that that was the case in the last election?

**BALMER:** I would. I'm not sure how subtle it was, actually. In some ways, I think he was pretty clear about talking about how his faith formed the way he formulated policies, the way he sought to live. I think the take-away for the Democratic Party at the 2004 election is that democrats realized that they needed to speak the language of faith and piety; they had to somehow learn that vocabulary. And I think the Democrats, even through the primaries, did a reasonably good job of doing that. It was a high stakes gamble for them because if they, in any way, came off as being insincere or calculating about doing that, it would have blown up in their face.

But I think that most of the contenders in this last election, and certainly Obama, were fairly persuasive about how their faith guided their lives. And [the Democratic candidates] certainly did a better job than McCain did.

**NA:** In the essay, "Jesus is not a Republican" written in *Thy Kingdom Come* (2006), you claim that religion in America flourished in part because of pluralism and not because it was forced on the population. How does the return of religion as a tool for campaigning affect pluralism and the success of religion in America?

**BALMER:** I think that Americans eventually rise to their better selves. When they do that they recognize the beauty of racial and ethnic as well as religious diversity, so that you have, I think, a growing openness or receptivity to a broader spectrum of religious life, including—as President Obama said in his inaugural address—the nonbelievers. So I think that Americans eventually recognize the importance of minorities and acknowledge them.

Not perfectly, not as early as we should, not as soon as we should, but eventually we come around, it seems to me: on the issue of race on, the issue of women, on the issue of religious diversity. Eventually we come around. Far too slowly, but we do. If anything makes me patriotic, that's what makes me patriotic.

**NA:** So the use of religion as a political weapon, as you mentioned, can't be an effective long-term political strategy because of Americans continually and cyclically "coming around" to diversity.

**BALMER:** I think that's right. I think you see the cessation of religion as a political weapon with what I am persuaded is the enervation of the religious right. I think the 2008 presidential election dealt a mortal blow to the Religious Right. It's still going to thrash around for a while, there's no question about that, but I think that its days are over.

**NA:** Do you have any interest in making a *God in the Whitehouse* documentary?

**BALMER:** I haven't thought much about it to be honest. The problem with television—and I love doing television—is that it's very costly and it takes so much time to raise the money to do it. I'd rather do a track log into Canada's religious life.