



**Randall Balmer.** *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021.

Randall Balmer's *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* is a lucid, focused look at how the Religious Right's political activism was not in fact a result of anti-abortion activism after the *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973, as they continually claim, but instead a defense of policies of racial segregation after the 1971 case *Green v. Connally*, which challenged the tax-exempt status of racially discriminatory institutions. Developed from his 2014 *Politico* article "The Real Origins of the Religious Right," Balmer gives a detailed but narrow historical account of the circumstances regarding the development of evangelicalism in the United States and their movement from apolitical separatism to highly charged political activism. In focusing on the historical account without moving to a theoretical analysis, Balmer misses one major opportunity: the title, *Bad Faith*, is used solely as a pun, and without reference to the philosophical concept of *la mauvaise foi*. This is unfortunate, as bad faith is the perfect lens through which to view the actions of the Religious Right as Balmer describes them.

Balmer begins his historical analysis by describing the origins of the evangelical movement in the United States, highlighting their focus on social reform. The evangelicals of the nineteenth century took on projects of public education, prison reform, advocacy for the poor, and the rights of women (6). But when the dispensational premillennialism of John Nelson Darby replaced the postmillennialism of the Second Great Awakening, the evangelical drive to create a millennium of peace and righteousness that would bring back the second coming of Christ was replaced with a conviction that Christ was coming at any moment, and the millennium of peace would not come until he did (9–11). The consequence of this ideological change was to allow evangelicals to throw their hands up in despair at the world's ills; they were no longer their problems to fix. Highlighting this change allows Balmer to remind readers of where the evangelical movement started—and to use it as a reference point to see just how far evangelicals have fallen from their original mission of helping make the world a better place for everyone and not just for themselves and their interests.

Balmer then describes how the U.S. "evangelical subculture" began to develop in the 1920s and 30s. The intent of the subculture—which Balmer defines as an interconnected network not just of churches, but of camps, col-

leges, and more—allowed evangelicals to retreat in large part from U.S. society by enabling them to spend both their leisure time and their children's entire education solely within the bounds of their own policed religion. This retreat was prompted in part by the 1920s era of jazz, speakeasies, and flappers that left conservative Christians feeling as if U.S. culture had turned against them and their values (17). However, the more immediate impetus for this retreat is identified by Balmer as the Scopes “monkey” trial of 1925, when evangelicals were ridiculed for their stance and “lost decisively” in the court of public opinion (17).

As we know, evangelicals did not stay isolated, and the next subculture move that Balmer tracks is how they began to reenter political activism. As Balmer describes it, the Religious Right's most cherished and durable myth is that they were “shaken out of their political complacency” by the *Roe v. Wade* decision of January 22, 1973 (31). But as Balmer details, this myth collapses under scrutiny. Throughout the 1970s, evangelicals either considered abortion a “Catholic issue” and ignored it completely or held surprisingly accepting views. The Southern Baptist Convention, not currently known for its progressive stances, first passed a resolution calling for legislation allowing the possibility of abortion under certain conditions in 1971 and reaffirmed that position in 1974 after *Roe v. Wade* and again in 1976 (33–34).

The court decision that Balmer does identify as the impetus for the Religious Right's formation is a lesser-known 1971 case in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia: *Green v. Connally*. In this decision, the court ruled that any organization that engaged in racial segregation or discrimination could not by definition be a charitable institution. The Supreme Court upheld this decision in *Coit v. Green* and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) began making inquiries into the racial policies of so-called “segregation academies” as well as the fundamentalist Bob Jones University (38). This, Balmer writes, is where the Religious Right architect Paul Weyrich saw his opening. For two decades, Weyrich had been trying out different issues to pique evangelical interest: pornography, prayer in schools, the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, even abortion—but all failed to marshal evangelicals into the conservative voting bloc he sought (41–42). But after *Green v. Connally*, when Bob Jones University's feeble attempts to placate the IRS failed, they lost their tax exemption and Weyrich found his cause in defending racial segregation.

As Balmer pointedly notes, the architects of the Religious Right attempted to frame this move not as a defense of segregation, but rather in terms of religious freedom—despite the commonsense interpretation that takes their actions at face value (44). Balmer writes that Weyrich and the other leaders of the

Religious Right knew that they would need something other than the defense of racial segregation to rally the voting bloc they desired. So when pro-life Republicans defeated the favored Democratic candidates in the 1978 midterm elections in Iowa, Minnesota, and New Hampshire, Weyrich was finally persuaded that abortion could be his populist issue after all (53). As Balmer sees it, the real turning point in realizing Weyrich's vision of a conservative evangelical voting bloc came with the 1980 Presidential Election, when Republican Ronald Reagan defeated the incumbent Democrat Jimmy Carter—in part, on the backs of evangelicals mobilized by Weyrich's new Religious Right. Balmer gives extensive evidence of the bad faith or self-deception involved in turning former Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan into an evangelical icon and the first candidate to amass conservative Christians as a voting bloc.

Balmer suspects that something about Reagan may have prefigured the racism of the Religious Right. As he details in his final chapter, Reagan entered California politics in 1964 to support the repeal of the Rumford Fair Housing Act, which sought to eliminate racial discrimination in the rental and sale of residential properties (69). Reagan opposed both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (69), and openly supported South African apartheid (71). Reagan also made liberal use of racist dog whistles, campaigning for Governor of California in 1966 on “law and order,” and inventing the racist “welfare queen” stereotype (69–71). As described by Balmer, Reagan becomes the precursor to the openly racist politics of Donald Trump in the contemporary era.

As Balmer writes in his finale, “a building can feature all sorts of dazzling baubles and filigree, but if the timbers that make up its foundation are rotten, the entire structure is compromised” (80). The foundations of the Religious Right's movement are not simply rotten, but as Balmer has convincingly shown us, they were designed to be. Balmer has given us ample evidence that the movement's founders were entirely conscious they were building a movement on the rotten notion of racial hierarchy and have actively worked to hide that fact not only from the public, but from their own followers. Balmer's book is not only an invaluable addition to historical accounts of the contemporary Religious Right, but a highly accessible and persuasive tool for understanding the origins and impetus of an urgent political problem the U.S. faces today.

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