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January 29, 2008: Randall Balmer on Fresh Air

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: Randall Balmer on Fresh Air

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1/29/2008--I hope people had a chance to hear Randall Balmer, the author of *God in the White House*, Monday on Fresh Air on NPR. Balmer presented a pro-separation of church and state position from a left-wing evangelical perspective. You can listen to the broadcast on the Fresh Air website. Balmer was critical of the religious right and made several claims suggesting a degree of political opportunism, if not worse, in the movement. For example, he claimed that abortion had little or nothing to do with the rise of the religious right. Instead, he said, the political organization of evangelicals took place as a response to IRS challenges to the tax-exempt status of educational institutions that practiced racial discrimination, particularly Bob Jones University. This of course is a much less morally compelling account than would be an emerging pro-life position. Balmer said that even in the late 1970's, abortion was not a major issue for evangelicals and did not become such until the Presidential candidacy of Ronald Reagan in 1980. In regard to Reagan, Balmer pointed out that condemnation of divorce had been an important issue in the evangelical community, but as soon as the divorced-Reagan assumed the Presidency, such religious criticisms disappeared or were greatly reduced. This again suggested a degree of disingenuousness by at least the leaders of the religious right. This kind of opportunism supported Balmer's larger view that the entanglement of religion in politics corrupts both institutions, but especially religion, which loses its prophetic edge. Balmer is a strong proponent of the separation of church and state and has been an expert witness in cases involving the Ten Commandments on public property and evolution issues in the public schools. Balmer ended the broadcast with an impassioned defense of separation, saying that religion—faith—had flourished in America because of the separation of church and state and he plainly wants to see that continue. Balmer is certainly a reasoned and informed voice, but I cannot understand his interpretation of the Establishment Clause. The practices that he condemns, such as the use of the Ten Commandments and prayer in the public schools, were common during the period in which he says religion flourished and a separation was maintained. He certainly knows that prior to WWII, public expression of religion, particularly Protestant religion, was quite ordinary. So, if history is to be our guide, and I'm not sure it should be, there would not be the kind of separation of church and state that he champions.