

Review of Randall Balmer's *THY KINGDOM COME: An Evangelical's Lament* from Chr. Science Monitor. Balmer teaches religion at Columbia U.

[Books](#)

from the August 08, 2006 edition

When did the kingdom of heaven become a red state?

From within the Evangelical movement, an academic decries the religious right's hold on US churches.

By [Jane Lampman](#)

Randall Balmer is a lifelong Evangelical, and he feels his faith has been hijacked. In his latest book, *Thy Kingdom Come: An Evangelical's Lament*, the historian of American religion at Columbia University's Barnard College takes direct aim at the perpetrator: the religious right.

THY KINGDOM COME: An Evangelical's Lament

By Randall Balmer

Basic Books

242 pp., \$24.95

In the Monitor

Wednesday, 08/09/06

An insider in the Evangelical subculture - and a long-time editor for *Christianity Today* - Balmer has had a ringside seat on the rising clout of Christian conservatives. He has sat in on meetings of leaders of the right. He's traveled the country listening to preachers in the pulpit. He's researched the links between conservative initiatives and theocratic ideology.

And he has determined that the thrust of that movement is both a betrayal of his beloved faith and a threat to the democratic nature of America.

In this admittedly emotional work - he calls himself "a jilted lover" - the author doesn't mince words.

"[R]ight-wing zealots have distorted the gospel of Jesus Christ, defaulted on the noble legacy of 19th-century evangelical activism, and failed to appreciate the genius of the First Amendment," he says. What the Religious Right hankers for is "the kind of homogeneous theocracy that the Puritans tried to establish."

Balmer yearns for progressive 19th-century activism, which pursued the abolition of slavery and other societal ills and - most important - did not seek political power. Suggesting his dismay is shared by many other Evangelicals, the author is upfront about being a Democrat and a liberal. He defends liberalism and its contributions to American society. Such leanings may lead some readers to dismiss the book as a disgruntled polemic from the left.

Yet his credentials as a person of faith and a historian are more to the point here. (One of his

acclaimed books, "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory," a history of Evangelicalism, was made into a three-part documentary for PBS.)

Balmer provides a short historical sketch of the faith before analyzing the religious right and its chosen issues through the lenses of religious conviction and deep love for America. He warns that much more is at stake than meets the eye.

In a trip through east Texas - where it's been said there are more Baptists than people - he brings poignant humor to a discussion of the way conservatives have upended historical Baptist teachings.

Baptist devotion to freedom of conscience, starting with Roger Williams in the 17th century, has long been credited with laying the groundwork for religious liberty and separation of church and state in America. Yet today, Balmer points out, some Baptists are battling the First Amendment in a bid to make America "a Christian nation."

Traveling from the Houston airport to a rally in Longview, he reels off the names of dozens of Baptist churches he passes en route. "Given all of these churches, given all of these angry voices defending the faith on my car radio," he writes, "imagine my surprise that evening when I attended a huge Religious Right rally ... and learned that, despite all appearance to the contrary, East Texas is actually in the grip of Satan."

Balmer often argues as passionately as an Old Testament prophet. As only a fellow Evangelical could do, he criticizes "the ruse of selective literalism," by which those who insist on an inerrant Bible obsess over certain issues while deemphasizing others, such as divorce.

Given their fervent stances on abortion and homosexuality, he says, "My question to the Religious Right is this: If you are serious about your professed commitment to biblical literalism, why are you not working to outlaw divorce? ... To make it illegal, except in cases of marital infidelity."

"Thy Kingdom Come" illumines the debates over creationism and intelligent design and discusses Evangelical attitudes on the environment. But perhaps the most thought-provoking chapter is that on "Deconstructing Democracy."

Several recent books address theocratic tendencies within the religious right. Balmer links prominent leaders to Reconstructionist thinking - which advocates restructuring society according to strict Old Testament law. "Reconstructionists especially detest the notion of toleration," he says.

Yet pluralism and toleration are essential to making (and keeping) America what it is, Balmer says, and those values, are best learned in the public schools. He describes the various elements of a strategy of the religious right, along with other conservatives, to wage a war against public education.

Though a committed believer, the author emphasizes that America's genius lies in the separation of religion from political power, from any one group being in a position to impose a particular moral vision on others.

Balmer's stature is unlikely to protect him from the wrath of some conservatives, but it should encourage people to ponder this heartfelt book and its implications.

- *Jane Lampman is a Monitor staff writer.*