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## Branding Obamessiah: The Rise of an American Idol (Book Review)

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twice, “Owen was a near-Antinomian; Baxter was an almost-Socinian” (211, 215). Both men were “heartsick at the turn of events” in 1659, when the Commonwealth of England began to collapse (253). Owen sensed danger before Baxter did (235-6), with the Presbyterian side only later shifting from comprehension towards toleration. Of course, to opt for toleration was to open the door to an eventual toleration of Catholicism (269-270). Baxter had sided with Parliament in 1640 because he supported the “old cause” of the ancient constitution of England, a cause he could later see as wrecked by the radicalism of Independency (291-2). In the post-1662 era, the rift between them was deep. They viewed each other as contributing to disaster. Baxter’s ponderous *Reliquiae Baxterianae* of 1696 was his shot from the grave in the direction of the pre-deceased Owen (300).

Cooper is careful to do justice to both men. Their flaws and deficiencies are accounted for with grace and dignity. This is an able and perceptive study and by far the most comprehensive discussion of the Owen-Baxter relationship available. It will be valued by all students of the period. Some concluding observations are in order. Baxter and Owen were not, of course, ever the sole

leaders of their respective sides of English Puritanism. The mild Jeremiah Burroughs (1600-46), on the Independent side, and the measured Thomas Manton (1620-77), among the Presbyterians, were also part of the picture, as Cooper acknowledges (249, 301). Moreover, we should not allow the perceptiveness of this study to cause us to *over*-estimate the role of Owen and Baxter in the affairs of their day. Furthermore, differing views of church government—all typically claiming biblical warrant—tend to generate and reflect different views of what civil society ought to be like. Finally, more needs to be said about precisely *how* Owen and Baxter understood the Bible to be authoritative in their day and age.

Tim Cooper’s book is a valuable contribution to the literature on seventeenth-century English Puritanism. Beyond this, it sheds light on the origins of the Protestant denominationalism that is now such a feature of worldwide evangelical Christianity. What happened then still affects us now. This work uncovers for us some of the roots of the divisions and divisiveness that have served to undermine the reformed Protestantism for which Baxter and Owen undoubtedly stood.

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Taylor, Mark Edward. *Branding Obamessiah: The Rise of an American Idol*. Grand Rapids: Edenridge Press, 2011. 373 pages. ISBN 9781937532918. Reviewed by Charles Veenstra, Professor of Communication, Dordt College.

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Many people seem to think that political campaigns hinge on issues. But images may be more important than issues, as Mark Edward Taylor makes clear in his book, *Branding Obamessiah: The Rise of an American Idol*. After extensive study of the campaign, Taylor claims that Obama was marketed as the leader of a movement that looked more like religion than politics.

In his *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*, Charles U. Larson describes the cultural myth titled “The Coming of a Messiah” that is popular in political campaigns. When society is perceived as “approaching disaster or is already in a terrible mess (economic, religious, or political) or we are in a period of great uncertainty and pessimism, . . . we want to be rescued from the chaos and danger of bankruptcy, unemployment, war, and other disasters by some great leader who projects a sense of confidence and who can turn things around.”<sup>21</sup> Taylor claims that the Obama campaign appropriated this myth to propel Obama to the White House.

Taylor writes, “Obama offered *himself* to America—

his person rather than any solid policies or proposals. The gospel *according to* Obama—really the gospel *of* Obama—captured much of the nation’s imagination as a mood of hope rather than a map for progress. Obama’s promised ‘change’ was himself. . . . In their heart of hearts, the truest believers were choosing to elect their Messiah, to participate in the rebirth of the nation and of their own American lives” (45). Even MSNBC’s Chris Matthews said, “This is New Testament” (45). Many other commentators, bloggers, and columnists began using the term “Obamessiah” or similar terms.

Chapter 5 contains a description of six elements that form what Taylor calls the “Devotional Code,” which he claims guided the campaign: the creation story, the sacred words, the sacred images, the sacred rituals, the true believers, and a messianic leader. Taken together, these six elements, Taylor suggests, help explain why Obama was so successful in pleasing crowds, getting votes, and generating euphoria. The author argues throughout the book that “Obama’s political persona strategically

intersected three worlds that had never before been so artfully combined on the American political scene—politics, advertising, and religion” (63). By examining in great detail, for example, the words used in the campaign, the images generated in advertising, special lighting techniques intended to give a halo-effect, etc., Taylor fleshes out each of the six elements. He builds the case that Obama was marketed as the one who could save America from its troubles.

Since Obama did not have a record of significant political accomplishments, the author claims that the Obama campaign could not be built on experience. Instead, the candidate had to focus on the future. He did this, according to Taylor, by focusing primarily on himself as a person who represented “change” and “hope.” The chant “Change! Hope! Believe!” drove the campaign forward. “Viewed through the lens of the Devotional Code, Obama personified presidential perfection. Millions of devoted Obamites venerated him as a kind of political savior” (327).

Extensive documentation, particularly from the news media, supports the author’s claims as he develops his case that the six elements were all present in abundance during the Obama ascendancy. Often the media chained into these fantasies and promoted them in ways that demonstrated they had forsaken the old adage that the media constitute the fourth branch of government in their role as critics of processes and programs.

The case Taylor makes for the campaign being marketed as religion is persuasive. It is an easy read with example piled upon example to support his thesis. One wonders, however, if he might have pulled in other rhetorical theory to provide insight into this huge rhetorical movement. For example, it would have been helpful to see how Bormann’s fantasy theme analysis could have demonstrated how these fantasies chained together to form a rhetorical vision.<sup>2</sup> Or, he could have used Burke’s ethical moments (negative, hierarchy, guilt, mortification, victimage, catharsis, redemption)<sup>3</sup> to show how symbols were used to construct a new

religion of rebirth (reducing the essentials of Christianity to language). Narrative theory might have been used to tighten the vision that propelled the campaign.<sup>4</sup> Application of insights from rhetorical theory would strengthen his case that these elements become powerful means of persuasion.

This book could serve as a case study in a political communication class, and it could also be a fine example of persuasion for courses in rhetorical criticism. And all who are willing to consider what may be behind powerful political campaigns should read this book. While Americans might want to deny that they see government as savior, the success of the Obama campaign suggests otherwise. This book clarifies how campaign managers, the media, and the candidates can manipulate the American public.

Politics as religion is not new, and clearly Obama’s campaign was not the first to use religious imagery. For example, a major theme of the Nixon campaign in 1968 was “Nixon’s the One.” Similar studies could be done to examine how campaigns market candidates to fit with cultural images and myths. This book helps us see how one significant American myth, the “coming of a messiah,” was implemented to drive a political campaign.

### Endnotes

1. C. U. Larson, *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*, 13th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 262-63.
2. E. G. Bormann, “Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality.” In *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 58 (December 1972): 396-407.
3. These terms are best explained by William H. Rueckert in Chapter 4 (“Dramatism: Language as the Ultimate Reduction”) of his book, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963).
4. W. R. Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm: An Elaboration.” In *Communication Monographs*, 52 (December 1985): 347-67.

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Stob, Leonard. *Mission-Directed Governance: Leading the Christian School with Vision, Unity, and Accountability*. Grand Rapids: Calvin Press, 2011. 203 pages. ISBN-978-1937555-01-6. Reviewed by Ryan G. Zonnefeld, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Education at Dordt College.

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Change. Some embrace it; others fear it. Some long for it; others yearn for things to remain the same. Regardless of how one feels about change, it is

undeniably rampant in our educational systems. Veteran teachers look back and wonder, even marvel, at how the teaching and learning environment has changed during