

patience and optimism about the future of our “beloved community.”

**Response to Allyson F. Shortle, Irfan Nooruddin, and Eric L. McDaniel’s Review of *Embattled America: The Rise of Anti-Politics and America’s Obsession with Religion***

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— Jason C. Bivins

I am deeply grateful to Professors Shortle, Nooruddin, and McDaniel for their lively, generous, and thoughtful response to *Embattled America*. Having read their book carefully, and with admiration, I have a better understanding and appreciation of their remarks and queries. I appreciate chiefly that they identify our two books’ urgent concern for the precarious fate of American democracy. In very different ways, we aim to call attention to structural and attitudinal fault lines that have been steadily deepening and widening.

In their reading of *Embattled America*, my interlocutors have given me much to think about. Some of their queries and observations focus on issues I have long wrestled with, and others provide fresh, helpful insight. In terms of the former, I agree with their observation that my focus on conservatism occupies far more of my time and energy than what they identify as “the Left’s reactionary trolling.” I wrestled a fair deal with this concern and, because the book was already fairly well stuffed, decided that I would focus on the conservatism that has largely driven anti-politics and related conversations about religious persecution. My hope was that this imbalance was more or less justifiable, given that American politics since at least 1980 has been driven by the claims trumpeted by those I call martyrs.

As for their high-minded detractors, in addition to seeing them as reactionary I tried to characterize them as indignant and shocked by the continued appeal of conservative religion. This constellation of attitudes, I claim, is fuel for the entire range of persecution complexes and thus preserves the awful status quo. Beyond this, however, my interlocutors prompt me to think more broadly about where the “religious Left” is in this religio-political landscape.

I would observe that, in contrast to the Twitter/talk-show critics I identify as whistleblowers, the religious Left in America is flinty, focused, and comparatively quiet. Despite highly visible figures like Reverend William Barber, the religious Left is, like the Left more broadly, open and polymorphous and therefore still struggling to achieve a shared purpose and momentum.

The authors also ask me to reconsider and expand my analysis of martyr conservatives by naming other exemplars and also some who are more successful than those I

discuss in the book. I would complicate the latter consideration by noting that narratives of failure are a condition of embattlement for those seeking to carve out the persecutionist path. Nonetheless, I might name Marjorie Taylor Greene (the pugnacious, Q-Anon-avowing representative from Georgia), Tucker Carlson, Matt Gaetz, or even Kid Rock as potential candidates for further scrutiny. The influence of this mode of anti-politics is, sadly, only increasing.

It was with the aim of carving out a different politics that I wrote the book, focusing on constructive reappraisals of key categories in each chapter and more robustly in the conclusion. Yet as my interlocutors deftly document in their book and in their response to mine, no assessment of American problems can avoid reckoning with the weight and brokenness of our outdated political institutions, the rigorous analysis of which is beyond my book’s purview. I certainly agree with them that an emboldening of genuine democratic discourse and civic associations might allow for the kinds of collaborative thinking that can transform institutions.

This strikes me as possibly the only way in which to address the authors’ question about where apathetic moderates sit in my story. Knowing that well over one hundred million Americans do not vote, there is reason to believe that change is possible in America. But if these same Americans are overworked, distracted, and enraged, I too fear that too many citizens may be too far gone to invest in the work the country needs.

**The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics.** By Eric L. McDaniel, Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson F. Shortle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 272p. \$34.99 paper.

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During the last two decades, and increasingly as we approach the present moment, scholarship dealing with contemporary events has struggled to keep pace with the depth and rapidity of change. It is a difficult task to write about history as it is happening. For this and other reasons, Eric L. McDaniel, Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson F. Shortle’s *The Everyday Crusade* is an impressive and necessary addition to work on the contested phenomenon of “Christian nationalism.” Grounded in a range of empirical methodologies (including particularly rigorous surveying) and with a broad historical sensibility, the authors identify a three-tier group of identities that they believe captures the range of religio-political dispositions at work today. The result is a very specific interpretive model for a particular form of social and political imagination.

The structure of the book moves from chapters outlining the methodology and the social-historical purview to a sequence of case studies, such as attitudes on foreign policy or immigration, which are used to delineate often quite fine-grained portraits of American religious attitudes about contentious matters. The authors acknowledge the toxicity underlying many of these attitudes, and they note correctly that such religious enthusiasm is deeply woven into all phases of American history. In general, the book is deeply learned and accomplished. Some may find fault with it for relying heavily on comparative models and polling analysis. However, in my view this is precisely the book's strength. There are important questions to be raised about some of the authors' historical observations, as well as elsewhere, but given the scope and intentions of the book, such questioning is part of the larger project of analysis so clearly necessary among scholars and citizens alike.

Given the scope of the authors' intentions, the book seeks consistently to analyze contemporary religio-political formations within a broad historical context. In conversation with the large literature on mythology (e.g., Claude Lévi-Strauss) and civil religion (e.g., Robert Bellah and Philip Gorski), the authors identify what they contend is an irony in contemporary Christian nationalism: that it should flare up alongside other, more progressive developments in American life (p. xiv). I would contend that the bellicosity of far-right Protestantism has deepened precisely because of these trends and that it fuels the belief among Christian nationalists that they are an embattled class. Indeed, if myth is—as they suggest—an “instrument of identity transfer” (p. 7), this implies that it is precisely when this instrument is perceived to be buckling that political life can become violent in response. As the authors note, the worldview they analyze is heavily invested in the idea that “we” are righteous, an observation that helps clarify the deep emotional outrage around various “wokeness” spectacles, at the center of which is often an analysis of America's flaws.

Although the opening chapter omits a few crucial historical pieces (notably absent are the Puritan commonwealths that shaped so much of America's religious exceptionalism), on the whole it represents admirably thick and grounded scholarship. The opening chapter is, of course, not meant to be exhaustive (that would be difficult even in a book with entirely different purposes) but to provide texture for the analyses at *The Everyday Crusade's* heart. At the center of these analyses is the authors' distinction between three groups of “believers,” who have different levels of investment in mythic self-understanding, participation in religious institutions, and avowals of religious belief. They are identified as disciples, those “who wholeheartedly believe the nation is divinely favored”; dissidents, who “reject the idea of a special connection between the nation and a higher power”; and the laity,

who “embrace some elements [of American religious exceptionalism] but reject others” (p. 51). These categories are harvested from multiple national surveys on religio-political attitudes and from the sociological literature. Through an abundance of both graphs and text, the authors arrive at several conclusions concerning Christian nationalism: its followers are anxious about declining religiosity (p. 45), they believe their religion should be manifest rather than private (p. 60), and, interestingly, they demonstrate clear evidence of both narcissism and a social dominance orientation (p. 65).

The bulk of the book, rooted in this analytical scheme, explores in greater detail a range of concerns that Christian nationalists publicly possess. These include concerns about membership and ethnoculturalism, immigration policy, foreign policy, representation and governance, and race. The focus on who is properly understood as an American is a nebulous one in the hands of many authors, and *The Everyday Crusade* provides a crisp, helpful analysis of some of the implicit understandings at work in contemporary America. Recognizing that most Christian nationalists do not stipulate clear criteria for belonging so much as descend into mood, the authors identify a clear continuum that ranges from identity, pride, and hubris to uncritical patriotism (p. 81). Clearly, the centrality of religion to good citizenship is the sine qua non of Christian nationalism, yet what is most useful about the analysis here is the detail that results from interrogating viewpoint alignment across this survey data. For example, when the data are harvested in detail, we discover interesting nuance (much of it racialized) on the question of whether anti-government protest is valuable (p. 75) or whether other countries would be better off if they were more like America (p. 79).

Similarly, with regard to immigration, the authors' analysis of the data reveals a range of opinion not only on border policy and naturalization processes but also on which persons are best suited to be Americans and what is necessary for them to believe. The attitudes are rigorously documented, and the authors historicize long-standing debates (looking to NAFTA, for example) while also attending to how attitudes are shaped in part by talking points and social media. Their history is more expansive in their chapter on American evangelizing on the world stage, which statistically unpacks the religious justification for various foreign policy ventures over time. And they are helpful in establishing, contra much sensationalist journalism of late, that a sense of mission is not of necessity grounded in belligerence (p. 161).

The two concluding case studies—“Governing the Temple” and “View from the Back Pews”—seem most relevant to how Christian nationalism actually operates on the ground and in people's imaginations. In particular, examining the conservative use of civil religion categories in jeremiads such as Pat Robertson's, the authors note the

shift from a historical moment in which the conspiratorial energies of the John Birch Society were marginalized to our moment, when a loose populism has brought such energies into the mainstream (pp. 168–74). Importantly, they establish that those attracted to this shift are less inclined to actual political engagement, preferring symbolic victories over substantive policy (p. 183). The concluding chapter on race generates some unexpected nuance beyond the boilerplate observation that religious hubris is overwhelmingly white in America. They note that a variety of patriotic attitudes are present among racial minorities—for example, culturally conservative African American disciples can support liberal policies—that those in the “back of the pews” must nonetheless contend with a broader Christian nationalist sense of urgency, and that a religious legacy must be defended under duress (p. 215).

The contributions of *The Everyday Crusade* are considerable, both to a range of academic literatures and to general readers going forward. That said, from my perspective as a scholar of religion I would raise several questions as I think along with the authors. Broadly speaking, their rigor in documenting a range of attitudes leaves me with questions about the story behind these attitudes. Although their historicization is welcome, my own concerns as a scholar and citizen have to do with the how and the where of such attitudes; for example, I would ask which media, which persons of influence, and which institutional forces are cultivating and manipulating such attitudes. I also had questions throughout about whether religion, in all its complexity, can be properly understood as simply attitudinal. I was often left unsatisfied with descriptions of religious beliefs as “value systems” (145) or as imbuing believers with a sense of purpose. To me, this is more than a quibble because the communal, ritual, and disciplinary aspects of religion seem so central to the public, confrontational face of Christian nationalism. Acknowledging the importance of religion to participants in these surveys did not always adequately capture the reasons for the weaponization of religious attitudes.


I was also struck by an occasional elision of American religious exceptionalism and Christian nationalism. These phenomena are, of course, closely interwoven, historically and at present; and it is one of the authors’ main claims that the latter represents a sharpening of the former (p. 28). However, the gravity of the phenomenon Americans currently face—with its disinformation, its regular contempt for democratic procedure, its militant whiteness—represents something quite distinct from dreamings of a New Israel or a conviction that the United States is the indispensable nation.

These questions in my judgment do not diminish the many accomplishments of this fine book. Indeed, the authors are to be commended for providing a broad contextual account of a category so often lazily circulated among journalists. What is more, *The Everyday Crusade*

is not shy about its own political convictions, making its contributions even more important in these fractious times.

### Response to Jason C. Bivins’s Review of *The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics*

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— Allyson F. Shortle  
— Irfan Nooruddin   
— Eric L. McDaniel

Jason Bivins’s generous review of *The Everyday Crusade* affirms that critical dialogue across disciplines and methodology can be collegial, challenging, and productive. We do not disagree with any of his thoughtful observations and critiques. Rather we seek here—to use his delightful phrase—to “think along” with him about how scholars from political science to religious studies can harness their collective theoretical and empirical prowess to tackle the challenge to American democracy posed by Christian nationalism.

Three points made by Bivins especially merit comment. First, we need sustained attention to the “who” and “where” of the articulation, dissemination, and amplification of Christian nationalism. Our book is an unapologetically survey-based accounting of the prevalence and impact of attitudes we classify as Christian nationalist; we leave unanswered the questions of how these ideas come to be lodged in some people’s hearts and minds but not others and why the same attachments to God and nation can lead some “disciples” to espouse belligerent, xenophobic policies while others understand the same commitments to call for social justice and the embrace of all our neighbors. A partial explanation for such variation, as Bivins documents in *Embattled America*, are the individuals, media persons, and politicians who shape the content of these ideas, package them for mass consumption, and champion them on all available platforms. Media and communication studies of these ecosystems are critical to illuminate the mechanisms that inject Christian nationalism into the body politics.

Second, Bivins correctly challenges our treatment of the role of religion in people’s everyday lives. Religion is not just a set of attitudes but is also a coherent, deeply held worldview used by human beings to understand their place in the universe. We appreciate his gentle chiding, even as we reaffirm the value of surveys with their relatively impoverished indicators for capturing such a complex and personal construct. But the larger point is that, if public opinion scholars are to make sense of why Christian nationalism has come to dominate contemporary commentary on American politics, we must incorporate the