

Critical Dialogue

Embattled America: The Rise of Anti-Politics and America's Obsession with Religion. By Jason C. Bivins.

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Jason C. Bivins's new book, *Embattled America: The Rise of Anti-Politics and America's Obsession with Religion* (2022), questions the role of embattled religion in the United States' democratic decline. Embattled groups "claim to represent the majority while at the same time claiming the mantle of the persecuted" (p. 3). Bivins uses a social criticism approach to expose how the Right's exaggerated claims of religious persecution and the Left's reactionary trolling contribute to the decline of American democracy. He calls for citizens to commit to a deeper, more meaningful practice of participatory democracy, in which policy disagreements are viewed as inevitable and healthy rather than as illegitimate outcomes in a zero-sum game. *Embattled America* offers an alternative treatment to empirical studies of America's hyperpolarization and challenges the general conversation about the rise of Trumpism in the context of broader American political history.

Bivins's dissatisfaction with mainstream arguments explaining the decline of Americans' democratic norm adherence animates his writing. He argues against an emphasis on demographic shifts and religious traditionalism explanations. Instead, Bivins is more interested in excavating what he views as a more historically informed mechanism for understanding today's fearful and antagonistic politics. The answer, he believes, lies in Americans' ambivalent attachments to democracy itself (p. 8).

To understand this challenging moment in American democracy's history, Bivins presents an original framework based on the notion of "embattled" religion. He develops his own lexicon to define embattlement and its components so as to "avoid scholarly obfuscation" and place himself in a position to "name things accurately" (p. 16). The book identifies several mechanisms, archetypes, and related phenomena that together comprise the

interlocking dynamics that lead to embattlement and its effects.

The conceptual framework's crux is the gulf separating two competing camps of embattled Americans. Bivins argues that both groups disdain collaboration because of their relentless desire to win and their increasing fixation on religion. Members of the first group, whom he labels the "martyrs," frame themselves as victims of religious persecution (p. 5). Meanwhile, members of the opposing group, the "whistleblowers," proclaim publicly their contemptuous disdain for conservative religion (p. 6). The toxic battle between the martyrs and whistleblowers is the result of and contributes to the negative effects of "the whirl," which Bivins defines as the "repetition, volume, and technological force" that characterize the contemporary informational and data ecosystem. According to Bivins, the whirl exacerbates antidemocratic tendencies because it magnifies biases as individuals rely on filters to consume voluminous and constant flows of information (p. 4).

Bivins's most compelling argument is that whistleblowers and martyrs falsely equate a sense of unconditional freedom—doing whatever makes one feels good about oneself or one's group—with democratic freedom itself. True "democratic freedom" requires self-limiting engagement to facilitate collaboration. But today's politics is maximalist, and Bivins argues that neither side recognizes as legitimate any constraints on its desires. A key premise behind Bivins's argument is that, in liberal societies, citizens must consider the ramifications of their political discourse on democracy itself in a way that citizens' zero-sum discourse surrounding religion currently does not allow. Democracy requires work and, in practice, is uncomfortable and often unsatisfying because of the self-imposed limits that democrats accept as a price of maintaining this unique system of governance. The book's emphasis on self-reflection, restraint, and mutual accountability as nonnegotiable prerequisites for sustainable democracy is a novel point that merits more attention. Bivins's theoretical framework contributes to scholarship on hyperpolarization by conceptualizing an important mechanism of antidemocratic thinking.

Just as fascinating is the exposition by Bivins, a professor of religion, of how whistleblowers and martyrs talk publicly about religion and why they invariably end up

talking past each other. For example, Bivins highlights “Life as an Action Movie (LAAM),” which describes Americans’ attraction to politics that mirrors big-screen battles—specifically imagining themselves as the heroes of their own imaginary action movie. LAAM reappears throughout the chapters as more of its own worldview explains people’s preferences for emotional appeals and aggressive conflict. Also included is the “Long Con of Anti-Politics,” a learned distrust of shared politics and the common good that affects both martyrs and whistleblowers (p. 13), and “Gotcha! Epistemology,” which Bivins argues is employed (unsuccessfully) by whistleblowers to shame martyrs. The problem with the American public square is that everyone is talking, no one is listening, and, even worse, no one seems to care. When the game is to rack up likes and views—to score points by dunking on our political opponents—genuine democratic discourse is the loser.

To make his point, Bivins analyzes the histories, communication patterns, and reactions to well-known conservative commentator Glenn Beck; Republican leaders Sarah Palin and Rick Perry; the Tea Party’s emergence; conservative religious attempts to reshape educational policies; state-level anti-sharia legislation, and the link between guns and “birthers” in the United States. His cases are logical and include several spaces where prevailing wisdom tells us to expect embattled rhetoric to occur. His case selection therefore seems plausible enough but makes one wonder what other exemplars might be included in future research to build on the specific dimensions of embattlement that Bivins theorizes. For example, most of the book’s political actor exemplars are failed Republican martyrs: Why not focus on other, more successful martyrs, some of whom are currently serving in office? Additionally, what would an equivalent treatment of a popular whistleblower suggest? Is there an example of one who is as prolific as the martyrs analyzed? If a corresponding whistleblower exists, what might define their embattlement beyond their reactionary behaviors, their “martyr-gaze,” so to speak?

The book’s framework therefore illustrates that more research is needed to unpack the political Left’s reactionary responses that fuel the martyrs’ vocal (and effective) embattlement rhetoric. The discussion of whistleblowers further raises a conceptual question of whether embattlement’s conceptualization allows whistleblowers to be labeled “embattled” or whether there is a better concept to describe their reactionary behaviors. According to Bivins, embattlement requires some sense that “fairness has been violated, that the system is worthless, and that what is needed is not a reassessment of civic responsibility but a knockout victory” (p. 184). Bivins shows that whistleblowers react aggressively to impugn motives and assail martyrs as undereducated bigots. However, does the whistleblowers’ gratuitous

outgroup trolling follow the definition for embattlement? To do so would require not simply outraged “emotional” reactions but also an internalized sense of victimhood. There is no doubt that Bivins views the reaction to martyrdom as part of the overarching embattlement tendencies that explain democratic decline. However, the thornier conceptual framework of the embattled religious Left will require further conceptual work to understand precisely how persecution complexes might play into whistleblowers’ less democratically pleasing responses.

There is a related opportunity for further inquiry based on a question that the book leaves unanswered, which is whether there exists any space between the two embattled poles. This question seems particularly apt given the well-documented apathy most Americans show toward American politics. How do we reconcile this stylized fact with the book’s claims of an America where citizens seem to care enough about politics to allow their emotions and political allegiances to cause them to pull away from their democratic norm commitments? This big looming question provides an avenue for conceptual work on where apathetic moderates fit into this story.

Although the book provides ample examples of the contours of embattlement’s obstruction to meaningful democratic collaboration, Bivins does not shy away from proposing solutions. Illuminating what is wrong with the American discourse on religion is certainly useful. However, in suggesting solutions to the democratic problems he identifies, Bivins actively models the process of good citizenship he hopes others will attempt. Overall, he insists that we need to start thinking bigger—about what we think democracy should accomplish for us in our current political landscape and what responsibilities citizens are willing to take on to realize an evolved democratic political system. If democracy is worth saving, and we certainly agree that it is, then Bivins would remind us that the needed work begins by accepting that all who live within a country’s borders are legitimate actors whose interests and passions must be taken seriously, even when we disagree with them. Mocking and demonizing our opponents might help us go viral, but as we know all too well, some viruses kill.

Embattled America’s prescriptions should stimulate a larger conversation about how to facilitate collaboration and a recommitment to democratic politics. Whether Americans are too far embedded in their religiously laden ideological trenches or just too apathetic to make Bivins’s solutions realistic is a fair concern. However, that Bivins attempts to offer solutions provides a powerful demonstration of his point, which is that time is wasted when we try to win at a political opponent’s expense. Americans and American democracy are best served when we engage each other on the other’s terms, with self-reflection and self-limitation, with humility and grace, and with a lot of

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.