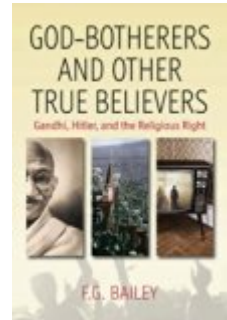


**F. G. Bailey.** *God-Botherers and Other True Believers: Gandhi, Hitler, and the Religious Right.* Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008. xi + 229 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84545-512-5.



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**Published on** H-German (June, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

"It is in the nature of politics, and often also of politicians, to be nasty. Politicians do not, of course, admit to their own vindictiveness, underhandedness, and general readiness to transgress the moral rules that (they claim) govern their behavior; the wrongdoers, always, are their opponents" (p. 43).

Religion has not been the dominant issue during the campaigns, but it has hardly been an irrelevant one. Contrary to what may be inferred from the passage cited above, the current political climate is far from the primary focus of F. G. Bailey's impressive study under consideration here. The volume *God-Botherers and Other True-Believers: Gandhi, Hitler, and the Religious Right* adds to a vast literature engaging with the relationship between faith and politics, in America and elsewhere. The title of Bailey's work is rendered somewhat banal when compared with the provocative titles of other recent volumes.[1] Nonetheless, if one was to adopt the common theme evidently being developed in these works,

one might think of Bailey's study as contending with the "hijacking of reason."

Obviously, drastic changes have taken place since Clyde Wilcox wrote that "in 1991, New Christian Right activity is almost invisible in American politics." [2] However, this major facet of political culture in the United States is only one preoccupation of Bailey's study, which also examines Adolf Hitler and Mohandas Gandhi as major case studies. Bailey makes it evident from his volume's opening pages that his focus is not "the truth of one religion and the falsity of another, but the consequences of dogmatism, of refusing to admit that one could ever be wrong, and of terminating inquiry into the natural and social world by asserting that God is the final cause of everything and that is all one needs to know" (p. 5). In thematically structured chapters, Bailey develops his argument throughout three main sections: "Faith and Politics," "Antagonistic Religions," and "A Religion of Love."

Part 1 serves to define key terms and set a conceptual framework through which Bailey examines his examples. He clarifies his own context, values, and judgments—what he terms his work's "presuppositional foundations" (p. 38)—and characterizes the shunning of rational processes in blunt terms: "Revealed Truth (God's Truth) is asserted without evidence, and to that extent, it is unauthentic; it has nothing to do with knowledge, it evades criticism, and it answers only to the emotional discomfort that accompanies feelings of uncertainty"; "[T]he intellect threatens faith because its function is to inquire and to demand evidence, which is *ipso facto* to put faith into question" (pp. 21, 23). Nonetheless, Bailey hastens to add that reason is necessary but not sufficient; it is a "methodology" or "tool" that must precede but cannot itself define nor describe "morality" (p. 25).

The second part of the book reveals the often destructive impact of a convergence of faith and politics through the activities of American televangelists and, in the most extreme case, the "secular religion" of National Socialism. cursory attention is given to the reliance of the G.O.P. not only on the vote of evangelical Christians, but also their volunteer work and financial support.[3] It must be noted that the volume's analysis could at times have been rendered more succinctly, with the use of up to twelve block quotations spanning only two pages, followed shortly afterwards by thirty-three over seven pages, being somewhat extravagant—particularly when the source of these passages are the irrational proclamations of Hitler. Much has already been written on Hitler's twin reliance on and perversion of Christian ideas, and at times Bailey might have situated his discussion within this well-traversed field.[4] On this and other subjects, Bailey provides an unfortunately limited bibliography, particularly given the number of publications on the issue of the religious right in the last several years.[5]

The most interesting section of the volume, part 3, provides a detailed case study of Gandhi,

whose "sincerity" provides a strong contrast to the widespread "hypocrisy" surveyed in preceding chapters. Bailey surveys the successes and failures of Gandhi's numerous well-intentioned political undertakings, the pervasive influence of his "human universalism" on his followers, and the continuous conflict of his ideas with more formalized, institutional religion, a conflict that eventually resulted in his violent end. The discussion of Gandhi, whose "ultimate goal" was "not political power, but moral regeneration" (p. 150), serves to underline a qualification noted in the volume's opening page: "Faith—of the appropriate kind—is not a social carcinoma; indeed, without faith [the] civilized world would be impossible" (p. 1). Nonetheless, Gandhi is not glorified by Bailey, who endeavors to point out contradictions between his religion and need for political action, as well as any areas of potential ambiguity: "Gandhi sometimes, it seems, had a blind spot for human suffering if that was the price to be paid for virtue" (p. 182).

Bailey himself concedes that scholars in the field may find his study unchallenging. Aimed at a general audience of "ordinary people" (p. 5), the volume is generally accessible to its intended readership, communicating its central ideas with clarity. Utilizing an interesting combination of scholarly writings and online material from popular Web sites, Bailey makes a persuasive case for the problems caused by a rejection of reason: "In all three examples—the Christian Right, National Socialists, and Gandhi's creed—the sustaining religion is not something to be investigated to find out if it is true or false; it is not open to examination, and therefore to possible correction" (p. 199). This informative volume has been made available at an intriguing time, when events will determine whether the "patchwork quilt" of American religion may be about to be re-stitched, or re-sewn.[6]

#### Notes

[1]. Susan George, *Hijacking America: How the Secular and Religious Right Changed What*

*Americans Think* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008); Robert S. McElvaine, *Grand Theft Jesus: The Hijacking of Religion in America* (New York: Crown, 2008); E. J. Dionne Jr., *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics after the Religious Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Merle Gors, *The Hijacking of America: How George W. Bush Commandeered the Country--and the World* (Monroe: Common Courage, 2005); Sheldon Culver, *Steeplejacking: How the Christian Right Is Hijacking Mainstream Religion* (Brooklyn: Ig, 2007); and Dan Wakefield, *The Hijacking of Jesus: How the Religion Right Distorts Christianity and Promotes Violence and Hate* (New York: Nation Books, 2006).

[2]. Clyde Wilcox, *God's Warriors: The Christian Right in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 223.

[3]. For further discussion, see Barbara Victor, *The Last Crusade: Religion and the Politics of Misdirection* (London: Constable, 2005); John C. Green, Mark J. Rozell, and Clyde Wilcox, eds., *The Values Campaign? The Christian Right and the 2004 Elections* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2006). One must be wary of blanket generalizations here, as demonstrated in the multiplicity of evangelical Christian views towards the relationship between faith and politics in Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 92-128.

[4]. For more on the relationship of Hitler's Nazism with Christian theology, see, among many others, Erwin W. Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross: The Revealing Story of How the Cross of Christ Was Used as a Symbol of the Nazi Agenda* (Chicago: Moody, 1995).

[5]. In addition to those cited in note 1, see Lee Marsden, *For God's Sake: The Christian Right and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Zed, 2008); Mark Ellingsen, *When Did Jesus Become Republican? Rescuing Our Country and Our Values from*

*the Right: Strategies for a Post-Bush America* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); Craig Unger, *The Fall of the House of Bush: The Untold Story of How a Band of True Believers Seized the Executive Branch, Started the Iraq War, and Still Imperils America's Future* (New York: Scribner, 2007); Clyde Wilcox, *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics* (Boulder: Westview, 2006); Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006); Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America: An Evangelical's Lament* (New York: Basic, 2006); Clint Willis and Nate Hardcastle, eds., *Jesus is Not a Republican: The Religious Right's War on America* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2005); and William C. Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway, 1996).

[6]. The metaphor "patchwork quilt" is taken from Andrew Kohut, John C. Green, Scott Keeter, and Robert C. Toth, *The Diminishing Divide: Religion's Changing Role in American Politics* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2000), 16.

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**Citation:** Adam Brown. Review of Bailey, F. G. *God-Botherers and Other True Believers: Gandhi, Hitler, and the Religious Right*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

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