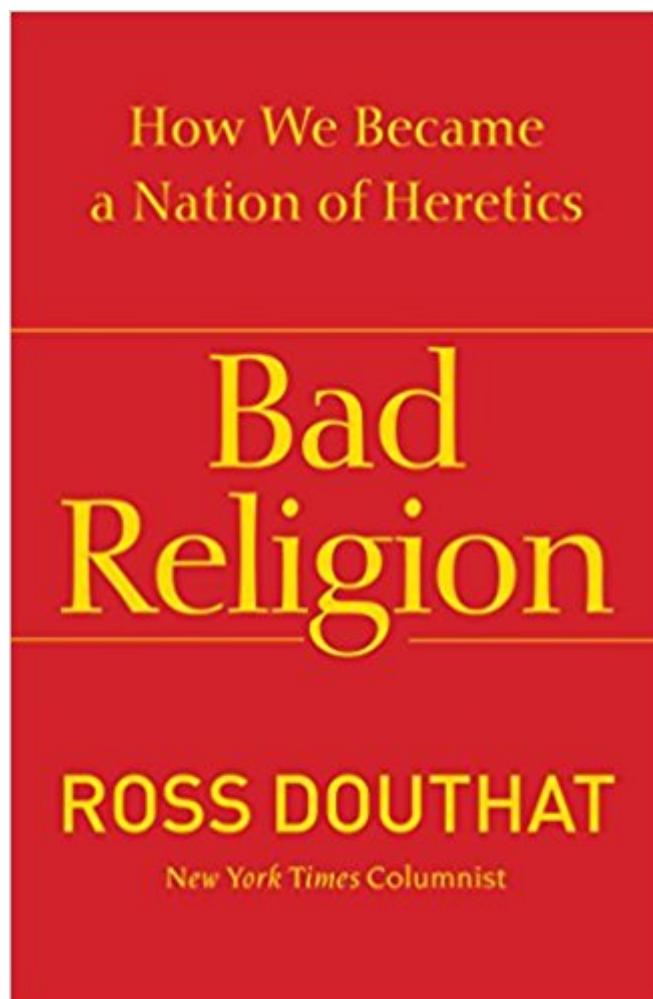


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Bad Religion: How We Became A Nation Of Heretics



Synopsis

The book that has sparked a vigorous national debate about the state of American religion, praised by Timothy Keller as “provocative” and “compelling,” while The New York Times says “Douthat attacks nonsense on both the cultural right and left” and the Washington Times raves “a superb documentation of America’s crisis of faith,” now in paperback. AS THE YOUNGEST-EVER OP-ED COLUMNIST FOR The New York Times, Ross Douthat has emerged as one of the most provocative and influential voices of his generation. In *Bad Religion* he offers a masterful and forceful account of how American Christianity has lost its way—and why it threatens to take American society with it. In a world populated by “pray and grow rich” gospels and Christian cults of self-esteem, Ross Douthat argues that America’s problem isn’t too much religion; nor is it intolerant secularism. Rather, it’s bad religion. Conservative and liberal, political and pop cultural, traditionally religious and fashionably “spiritual” Christianity’s place in American life has increasingly been taken over, not by atheism, but by heresy: debased versions of Christian faith that stroke our egos, indulge our follies, and encourage our worst impulses. In a brilliant and provocative story that moves from the 1950s to the age of Obama, Douthat explores how bad religion has crippled the country’s ability to confront our most pressing challenges and accelerated American decline.

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Customer Reviews

"Ross Douthat's thoughtful, articulate, wide-ranging, sometimes contrarian and always provocative new book asks a tough question: Why has Christianity been so misunderstood, and so misused, in the past few decades? From those who (foolishly) watered down the most basic Christian beliefs, to those who (falsely) promised worldly success to the followers of Jesus, the values of orthodoxy (literally, "right belief") have often been blithely set aside. With an impressive command of both history and contemporary social trends, Douthat shows not only how we ended up with a Christianity of our own making, but also how we can reclaim an adherence to the teachings of the real Jesus--not just the convenient one."--James Martin, SJ, author of "The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything""""Not only is Ross Douthat's account of orthodox Christianity's decline provocative, but his critique of today's ascendant heresies is compelling. This volume is a sustained proof of Chesterton's thesis that when people turn from God, 'they don't believe in nothing--they believe in anything.' Everyone who is interested in why the church is faring as it is in U.S. culture today needs to get this book."--Timothy Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City""Bad Religion "is nothing short of prophetic. In a time of religious, political, and cultural upheaval, Ross Douthat tells the American faithful--liberals, conservatives, and everybody in between--not what we want to hear, but what we desperately need to hear. With this provocative and challenging work that no thoughtful Christian can afford to ignore, Douthat assures his place in the first rank of his generation's public intellectuals."--Rod Dreher, author of "Crunchy Cons" and senior editor of "The American Conservative""""Bad Religion" is superb: sharply critical of the amazing variety of American religious pathologies, but fair; blunt in diagnosis, but just; telling a dark tale, but telling it hopefully. For those trying to understand the last half-century or more of American religion, and to strive for a better future, it is an indispensable book."--Alan Jacobs, author of "The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis""A brilliantly reasoned argument for orthodox Christianity and the need for vibrant faith in society. In this perceptive and timely work, Ross Douthat extolls the 'vital center' of belief while calling out the fashionable heretics among us. This is one 'Bad Religion' we can all believe in."--Raymond Arroyo, "New York Times" bestselling author, host of EWTN's "The World Over Live""Mr. Douthat offers a lively, convincing argument for what kind of religion we need."--Mark Oppenheimer "New York Times ""Bad Religion" is an important book. It brings a probing, perceptive analysis to bear on the tragic hollowing out of American Christianity. In Douthat, readers have a guide who explains how we ended up drinking at a narcissistic trough draped in spirituality that doesn't quench anybody's deepest thirst...."--G. Jeffrey MacDonald "Christian Science Monitor "

Ross Douthat is a columnist for The New York Times op-ed page. He is the author of *To Change The Church, Privilege, and Grand New Party*. Before joining the Times he was a senior editor for The Atlantic. He is the film critic for National Review, and he has appeared regularly on television, including Charlie Rose, PBS Newshour, and Real Time with Bill Maher.

"Bad Religion" is a tale of two epochs: the state of American Christianity in the years following World War II, and this millennium's subsequent pastoral attempts to religiously right the boat, no pun intended. If the name Ross Douthat is not familiar to the reader, the thirty-something journalist is the youngest permanent op-ed contributor of the New York Times. He arrived at Catholicism by way of mainstream Protestantism and later Pentecostalism. It is little surprise, then, the American religious scene is depicted in this work primarily in the Protestant/Evangelical/Catholic triad. All three cohorts are taken to the wood shed. As is often the case with adult converts to Catholicism, Douthat carries that particular hypervigilance regarding disintegration of something he has worked long and hard to attain, in this case a tradition of faith that brings order out of secular chaos. He is not a theocrat, but he does believe that some sixty years ago the major Christian Churches provided the backbone for a kind of good order and reform. The term "bad religion" used here is less a criticism of personal practice as it is a denunciation of polluted theology and religious philosophy that the author believes has wounded the churches since then. Douthat is a better journalist than he is historian. His designation of post-1945 American religion as a kind of high water mark rings of Adam and Eve in pre-serpent paradise; the Times' own review [April 18, 2012] calls the author to task over this arbitrary designation. This is a serious methodological flaw, because all of the frenetic religious activism of 1950-2000, most notably Vatican II [1962-65], is interpreted as a frivolous, dangerous dissipation of moral authority. Douthat is not the first observer to make this mistake, but as a journalist he is still on the hook for it. The moral horrors of Nazism and the death camps had originated in ostensibly Christian countries. That the Tridentine brand of Catholicism was toothless to prevent such sin was evident to thoughtful Catholics around the world. It was particularly evident to Angelo Roncalli, Papal Nuncio to Turkey and later to occupied France, greatly respected for his work on behalf of Jews. Roncalli was never the jolly, perhaps reckless, John XXIII that many would like to make him, perhaps even the author. Instead, John XXIII was the honest reformer who blessed the efforts of Catholics [and all Christians, to whom the Council Documents are addressed] to make things right. We forget that barely days after the Council began, the Cuban Missile Crisis threatened global annihilation. The author's absence of any sense of gravitas as the motivation of reform is lost, and it is hard for me to understand how any treatment of Christianity, a universal church, can be as

parochial or American-centered as this work. That Catholicism and its sister churches fumbled the reform through the balance of the twentieth century is beyond contestation. But the reasons are much more complex than Douthat would have us believe; he wastes considerable ink on Bishop James Pike, of all people, as an errant pied piper of the late 1960's. Douthat is on safer ground in discussing Harvey Cox and "The Secular City," for religious liberals of the time labored mightily to harmonize the Christian Church with "modern man," a notoriously empty concept. In Douthat's paradigm, a half century of experimentation with mixed results at best left Roman Catholics and Evangelicals still standing as the best hopes for a fresh start in the new millennium. But the sex abuse scandals of 2002 effectively sidelined American Catholicism, and the author turns a critical eye toward Evangelicals. Here Douthat is at his very best in his analysis of the Religious Right. Once something of the apocalyptic conscience of America, the Evangelical movement came to occupy the ground held by Billy Graham in Eisenhower's time as America's house religion. Theologically and strategically this was accomplished in two ways: [1] a merger of American exceptionalism with the Biblical symbol of the "City on the Hill;" and [2] an uncritical embrace of capitalism in a pragmatic theological message that "God wants you to be rich." In his chapter, "The City on the Hill," the author dismantles possibly the most pernicious form of "bad religion," that the success of God and the success of America are biblically and cosmically intertwined. I was concerned when he began this chapter with Glenn Beck, the Religious Right's contemporary answer to the long deceased Bishop Pike, both essentially media creations. But Beck simply serves up for the reader the heretical equation of America=the New Israel. Douthat observes that American presidents themselves--Washington, Lincoln, even Coolidge--labored to discourage such thinking. Their wisdom, however, was superseded by Woodrow Wilson [257ff], whose theologically driven political ideology of national righteousness begot a century of what amounts to international US crusading and buttressed military adventures as recently as the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. In his chapter "Pray and Grow Rich" Douthat scorns the theology of economics blessings preachers such as Joel Osteen. He illustrates the irony that the message of such cloth worn preaching appeals less to the rich themselves and more to those who wish to be affluent. He marvels that at the height of the Recession, March 2009, Osteen sold out Yankee Stadium. For the author such theology combines manipulation and gullibility. Having thus unburdened himself, Douthat is somewhat confused about what to do next. [Perhaps he now has more sympathy for the well intentioned reformers of the Vatican II era.] I think it is fair to say that the author would apply Gresham's Law to contemporary religious thought: disposing of bad coinage, the good currency of traditional faith and values might have renewed opportunity to provide an ecumenical renewal of the

personal heart and the communities of Christian faith.

This review also appears on my blog at [...] Ross Douthat's *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* is a triumph. It describes in great detail how the center of American cultural and political life was pulled apart by the divisiveness of the Vietnam War, the sexual 'revolution,' and a weakening of orthodox Christian practice and belief. Douthat, the youngest conservative voice on the editorial staff at the *New York Times*, is a convert to Catholicism. The book is broad. It has much to say about the intellectual antecedents of what Douthat calls accommodationism, the efforts to make Christianity fit in with American culture. He looks too at the strengths and limitations of the resistance to secularization, for example in Fr. Richard John Neuhaus' *First Things* journal and the attempt to bring prolife Evangelicals and Catholics together. What I admire about this book is the insights into the necessity of maintaining the tension of Gospel messages. Reading the chapter 'Lost in the Gospels' is most eye-opening. Douthat examines the long history of struggles with the temptation to resolve the disquieting and unsettling messages of the Gospel. I've seen evidence of succumbing to this temptation. Some Facebook pages announce unabashedly that 'Jesus was a socialist.' Other people seem to think Jesus is that that big ATM in the sky, or maybe just the best fitness guru ever. There is much in Mr. Douthat's book for social justice Catholics to think about. There is also much for free market advocates like me to reflect on. The passages on the prosperity gospel delusion are very helpful. There's a world of difference between approaching Jesus as life coach slash stock broker, and worshiping Him as the Lord of History and Savior of All Mankind. In an age very adept at diminishing Christ to the status of any other Facebook 'friend,' Douthat's book is perhaps a call to anchor faith in scripture, dogma, ritual, and community. Douthat offers four touchstones for a renewal of Christianity in America. It is a hope, not a blueprint. 1.) There's a post modern opportunity for Christianity to be political without being partisan. There's no such thing as a political 'home' for orthodox Christians. 2.) Renewed Christianity needs to be ecumenical and confessional. Avoid the 'deeds not creeds' copout. 3.) Renewal of faith needs to be both moralistic and holistic. Yes, affirm the traditional teachings on human sexuality, but do not ignore the extraordinary loneliness that characterizes our age. 4.) A renewed Christianity needs to be oriented toward sanctity and beauty. Douthat expresses this effectively with the words of Joseph Ratzinger, just before Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI: "The only really effective apologetics for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely, the saints the Church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb." The takeaway of this book for me is to be vigilant and humble. Don't cut ecclesiastical corners. The passion for social justice among my fellow Catholics is not without merit,

and is not necessarily a condemnation of supply and demand, or at least shouldn't be. Confront the challenges of the Gospels. Reflect on them. Live them. Avoid the temptation to remake Jesus in my own image and likeness. It is Jesus who chose me, not me who chose Him. He doesn't need to come to me; I need to come to Him. Reviewer: Acatharus Education President, Stephen Haessler

Douthat effectively argues that America's religious problem is one of bad religion rather than one of too much or too little religion. Rather than focusing on the declining numbers of those affiliated with religious denominations and traditions known for their orthodox beliefs, he opts to explore the rising number of heretics within a country that continues to be the "most religious country in the developed world" (p.4). These heretics are changing the religious landscape like never before because the orthodox response to and ability to control their heresies has waned dramatically in recent decades. Writing as a conservative Christian who was raised as a Pentecostal then converted to Catholicism, Douthat suggests that the best way forward is restoring orthodoxy as normative. He imagines institutional Christianity as having the ability to achieve this outcome. While one can find significant reasons to question the assumptions underlying the path he proposes leading toward the "recovery of Christianity," it should be noted that his historical analysis of how the American religious landscape has shifted as the result of increasingly diverse beliefs is among the finest and best researched.

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