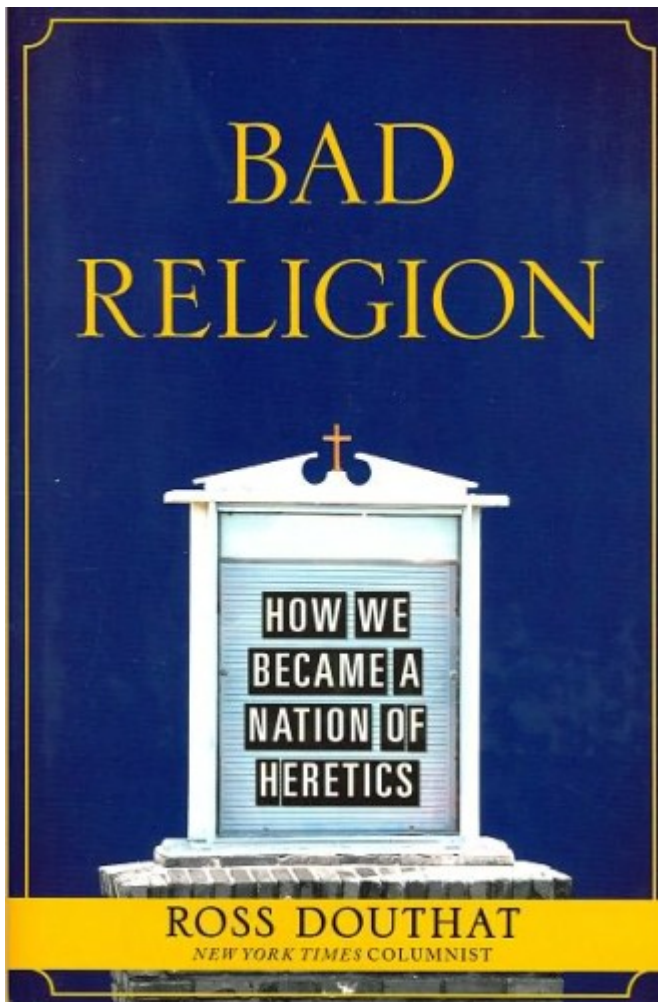


Religion in decline?

by [Grant Wacker](#) in the [September 5, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Bad Religion

By Ross Douthat

Free Press

Ross Douthat knows how to throw a punch. Readers accustomed to his regular *New York Times* op-ed column likely will expect *Bad Religion* to be a moderately conservative, carefully nuanced book. It is not. *Bad Religion* offers a deeply

conservative, hard-hitting examination of the devolution of American Christian culture from the high ground of the 1950s into the swamp of the 2000s. It calls modern Christians to return to the intellectual rigors and ethical demands of their historical tradition. Douthat does not frame his call in the roundly qualified locutions of the academy but in the straightforward, almost adversarial prose of a prosecutor's brief. Here's my case, he effectively says. Consider it, make a decision and think and live accordingly.

The book's argument is clear and simple. In the boom of economic and cultural confidence that followed World War II, the main or central or orthodox (he uses those terms interchangeably) stream of Christianity exercised commanding influence in the broader reaches of American life. Douthat supports this claim with an array of statistical data about church building and attendance, but the argument mainly rides on the rails of four case studies: the midcentury careers of the Reformed intellectual Reinhold Niebuhr, the evangelical preacher Billy Graham, the Catholic television personality Fulton J. Sheen and the Baptist social reformer Martin Luther King Jr. Though these men represented different traditions and outlooks, individually and together they exerted both extraordinary and extraordinarily constructive influence on the culture.

Enter the 1960s and things began to fall apart. Multiple influences flowed together, including the growth of political partisanship within the churches, the destabilizing (albeit liberating) effects of contraception, the relativizing impact of the new global consciousness, and the unprecedented surge of financial prosperity, which left traditional vocations less attractive and the three-day weekend more attractive. Seeking to accommodate rather than challenge those trends, uncounted Christians followed Harvey Cox and friends into the Secular City.

Those moves did not work. The mainstream churches lost members, and seminaries lost students. Yet American society, like most societies, shunned a void. And so it was that a river of heretical faiths flowed in to fill that gap—faiths oblivious to the great paradox of a God who became human, of humans who reached for perfectibility in the midst of depravity, and of a church that strove to live simultaneously inside and outside the world. Douthat summons G. K. Chesterton: "When people turn from God, 'they don't believe in nothing—they believe in anything.'" In the latter decades of the century, Americans saw biblical scholars wandering in a desert of "lost Christianities," prosperity preachers pandering to people's greediest instincts, Oprahified mystics adrift in a sea of self-discovery, and

pundits confusing the biblical city on a hill and its rigorous demands for justice and mercy with a nationalistic city on a hill and its smug sanctification of the American Way of Life.

Douthat acknowledges that he writes with pessimism about the future of American culture and the religious streams that nourished it, but like that of all real Jeremiahs, his pessimism is qualified. He hopes American Christians will return to the wellsprings of their tradition. Such a faith should be “political without being partisan,” “ecumenical but also confessional,” “moralistic but also holistic” and “oriented toward sanctity and beauty.” It can be done. Witness the enduring light of Catholic author Flannery O’Connor, of United Church of Christ member and author Marilynne Robinson, of evangelical Republican environmentalist and antiwar activist Mark Hatfield and of Democratic pro-life politician and activist Sargent Shriver. Still, nothing is uncertain. “For us,” Douthat quotes T. S. Eliot, “there is only the trying.” Neither civic nor Christian life promises happy endings.

Bad Religion can be challenged. Minor factual errors crop up here and there. Billy Graham’s parents worshiped in a Presbyterian, not a dispensationalist, church, and Eisenhower never said that democracy depended on “a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.” The slippery-slope thesis—that American religion declined from a Golden Age in the 1950s to an Iron Age in the 2000s—is overargued. Though Douthat candidly acknowledges that other readings of the postwar story are possible, he underplays the mainstream’s internal fractures and cultural limitations. Niebuhr harbored doubts about Graham’s revivalism, and Graham harbored doubts about the later King’s conflation of civil rights with antiwar protest.

And whether mainstream Christianity today is as impotent as he suggests is problematic too. After all, the majority of Supreme Court justices are practicing Catholics; the president of the United States is a member of the impeccably mainstream United Church of Christ; and the *Christian Century* and *Books and Culture* command respect in mid-town Manhattan. Beyond that, Douthat overstates the centrality of the center in the 20th century and understates the power of the secular critique of orthodox Christianity in the 21st.

That being said, Douthat’s work offers a brilliant and compelling analysis. It is crisply written and mercifully free of jargon, and it reflects an intimidating range of primary and secondary sources. Little wonder that he has served as a senior editor of the *Atlantic*, a film critic for *National Review*, the youngest-ever op-ed columnist for the

New York Times, a sparring partner for Bill Maher and a regular guest on *Charlie Rose*, *PBS NewsHour* and the *Colbert Report*. Most important, the book's main argument should prompt American Christians to stop and take stock. There really was a time, not so long ago, when a distinguished Harvard philosopher could (only half facetiously) call for an "Atheists for Niebuhr Club," when a Billy Graham sermon could be printed in full in the *New York Times*, when a Catholic priest could outpoint Milton Berle on prime-time television, and when a Baptist preacher from Georgia could win the Nobel Peace Prize. At the same time, when a major study of today's twentysomethings finds that the majority thinks that "nobody has any natural or general responsibility or obligation to help other people," we know we are in trouble.

It is not clear whether *Bad Religion* is history or sociology or theology or cultural criticism, but it is clear that it is a book that thoughtful believers should go through, not around. C. S. Lewis once said that the one prayer God never answers is "encore." Douthat's sobering work prompts fear that Lewis might be right. But it also prompts more than a little hope that he might be wrong.