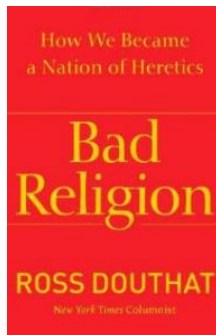


[A Recent History of American Heresy](#) Posted on [July 21, 2014](#) by [Fr. Ted](#)



Each year around our July 4th Independence Day holiday I try to read a book on American history. This year I read [BAD RELIGION: HOW WE BECAME A NATION OF HERETICS](#) by Ross Douthat, in which he examines recent history and religious trends in America over the past 70 years or so. I found the book's first half, a review of American religious history and trends from the mid-20th Century to be slow and not of great personal interest, though it is needed to help understand what happens to American religion in the 1970s and beyond. Douthat advocates for a reinvigoration of traditional Christian doctrine and adherence to traditional Christian moral values, especially in the face of the rapidly changing philosophical

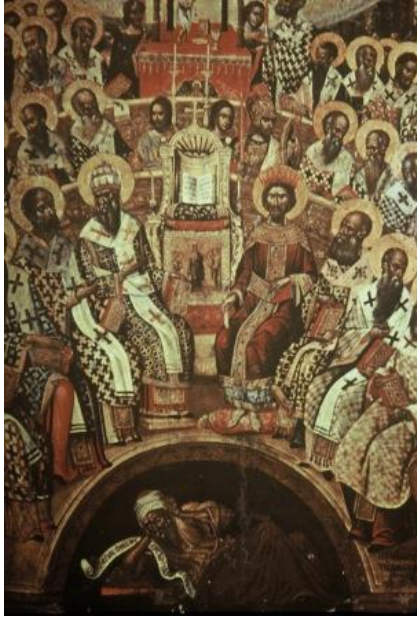
assumptions in American culture and the corresponding cultural ambivalence toward any kinds of ethical norms for the society as a whole. Individualism has so triumphed in American culture that the idea of "social norms" or cultural mores are commonly seen as completely antiquated and no longer relevant. Moral values have become so deeply personal that they can no longer be seen as shared values which can unite us together. Individualism undermines ideas of shared experience let alone a social ethics.

Douthat's subtitle is interesting: "*how we became a nation of heretics.*" For by Orthodox or Nicene Christian standards America has not just recently become heretical but was conceived and trained in heretical ideas of the 18th Century Enlightenment, individualism, deism and Unitarianism. Douthat sees America as moving away from some form of traditional Protestant Christianity, but Orthodox might see America as simply continuing on the path on which it started from the beginning as a nation when its adherence to Nicene Christianity was tenuous at best. How much America can be measured as having been founded as a Christian nation depends on how much one adheres to the ancient standard and definition of what it means to be Christian: the Nicene Creed, the Trinity and the incarnation of God in Christ.

Douthat summarizes the purpose of his book on the last page:

"This book has often made a more instrumental case for orthodoxy—defending its exacting moralism as a curb against worldly excess and corruption, praising its paradoxes and mysteries for respecting the complexities of human affairs in ways that more streamlined theologies do not, celebrating the role of its institutions in assimilating immigrants, sustaining families, and forging strong communities. My hope throughout has been to persuade even the most skeptical reader that traditional Christian faith might have more to offer this country than either its flawed defenders or its fashionable enemies would lead one to believe." (p 293)

He is concerned about the direction in which he sees the nation as a whole moving, but also about the direction in which Christianity is trending in America. He offers a very good definition of heresy and shows a good grasp of its effect on Christians.



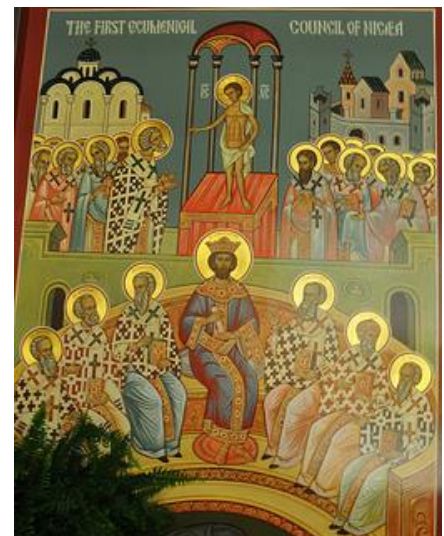
“Christian heresies vary wildly in their theological substance, but almost all have in common a desire to resolve Christianity’s contradictions, untie its knotty paradoxes, and produce a cleaner and more coherent faith. Heretics are often stereotyped as wild mystics, but they’re just as likely to be problem solvers and logic choppers, well-intentioned seekers after a more reasonable version of Christian faith than orthodoxy supplies. They tend to see themselves, not irrationally, as rescuers rather than enemies of Christianity—saving the faith from self-contradiction and cultural irrelevance.” (p 12)

“The goal of the great, heresies, on the other hand, has often been to extract from the tensions of the gospel narratives a more consistent, streamlined, and noncontradictory Jesus.” (p 153)

“The method is almost always heresy’s either/or, rejecting any attempt to resolve contradictions or honor paradoxes in favor of a ruthless narrowing designed to make the character of Jesus more consistent, even if this achievement comes at the expense of the tensions that make him fascinating. Either Jesus was divine or he was human. Either he was compassionate toward sinners or he preached a rigorous sexual morality. Either he preached in parables or he engaged in longer theological discourses. Either ‘all apocalyptic elements should be expunged from the Christian agenda,’ ... or else Jesus should be understood exclusively as an end-times prophet.

In the revisionist mind-set, synthesis is always suspect. We have to choose between Mark’s Jesus or John’s Christ, between the aphoristic Jesus and the messianic Jesus, between Jesus the Jew and Jesus the light to the Gentiles.” (pp 160-161)

Throughout history, heretics started off by trying to correct something they were uncomfortable with in Christian theology. Fearing excesses and contradictions, tensions, paradoxes, ambiguities, they tried to fix the problems by eliminating some elements of Christianity to make it more certain, rationally consistent, absolute and monolithic. They tried harmonizing the Gospels, eliminating the Old Testament, doing away with the troubles caused by the theology of the Trinity, the incarnation, and salvation through the God-man. They often endeavored to reach their goals by focusing on one idea at the exclusion of others found in Scripture and by rejecting that in the Scriptures sometimes more than one version of an event is presented which leaves us with possible contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguities. They always wanted to deal with the mystery of God by making the Scriptures completely humanly rational and consistent.



Douthat points out that this heretical tendency has continued down to present day Christianity in America, and has been the cause of much grief for the Church in the modern (or post-modern!) world. Heretics want to conform God and the Church to their ideas of what is rational or what serves their purposes.

In some ways the polarization of American politics reflects the problems which heresies in American religious thinking have caused. Or perhaps it is the other way around, American religious trends are simply mirroring or aping what is going on in American politics. In a media driven culture, all ideas of leadership or leaders whether religious or secular become not only shaped by but even more so driven by the media.

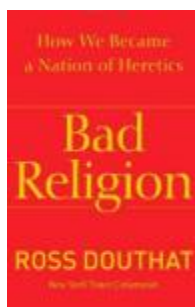
Douthat identifies two tendencies with heretical implications in American religious thinking: messianism and apocalypticism in which either America and its religious leaders are going to save the world by their grand ideas or bring it all to a decisive end.

“Instead of balancing each other out, the two heresies of nationalism have taken turns in the driver’s seat of both political coalitions, giving us messianism from the party in power and apocalypticism from the party out of power, regardless of which party is which.” (p 268)



So now both religious and political leaders see themselves as the messiah needed to save the nation and the world from destruction by bringing them to their own ideas of Paradise. Simultaneously they both see all others (especially the “other” political party) as surely leading the nation and the world straight to hell. But apocalyptic and messianic figures in Christian history have tended to end up badly, usually as heretics separated from the Church because their ideas were fringe, unbalanced and way too focused on a select few ideas.

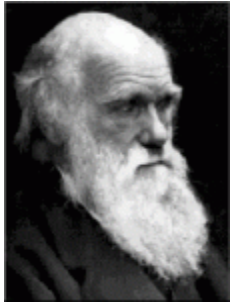
[Some American Heresies](#) Posted on [July 22, 2014](#) by [Fr. Ted](#)



Douthat describes a number of streams of thought in American religion that are distortions of Christianity. He carefully defined heresies, as we saw in the previous blog, as not opposing the truth, but distorting it, or narrowly focusing on one aspect of it in order to make Christianity more rationally consistent and to eliminate tensions which exist in the Bible between various texts. One such stream of thought he labels as modernism, an effort to make Christianity relevant by conforming it especially to scientific and historical facts.

“The modernists’ goal was to adapt Christianity to the new scientific and historical consensus, and to maintain the relevance of faith in an intellectual climate suddenly grown dismissive of the authority of Scripture. To this end, they stressed ethics rather than eschatology; social reform rather than confessional debate; symbolic and allegorical interpretations of the Bible rather than more literal readings. Their great project was the Social Gospel, which urged believers to embrace an ‘applied

Christianity' that would put Jesus' commandments into practice here and now, through legislation as well as conversion, law, as well as grace." (p 27)



← Charles Darwin

These ideas were embraced by a large number of mainstream Protestant denominations as well as by some in the Roman Catholic Church. This was a way to try to accommodate Christianity to the truths of science and became the basic thinking in what was to become liberal Protestantism. It became very popular in the mid-20th Century and at first seemed to result in a resurgence of Christianity in America as more biblical literalist ideas were pushed aside. It was an unusual moment in American religious history because it was an embrace of intellectualism which has often been spurned by American religionists.

But with this accommodation to science, there was also a growing abandonment of traditional Christian theology, especially in terms of morality related to marriage and sex. Douthat writes:

"In the 1960s and '70s, though, the heretics carried the day completely. America in those years became more religious but less traditionally Christian; more supernaturally minded but less churched; more spiritual in its sentiments but less pious in its practices. It was a golden age if you wanted to talk about UFOs or crystals, the Kama Sutra or the I Ching. It was a fertile period if you said 'Christianity' but meant fundamentalism or Marxism or the New Age, the gospel of the flower children or the gospel of health and wealth. But amid all of this enthusiasm, all of this hunger for the numinous and transcendent and revolutionary, the message of Christianity itself seemed to have suddenly lost its credibility." (p 64)

However, not all Christians favored the accommodationists approach to the changing world. Some tried to resist the changes that were occurring in American religious sentiments. In the mid-20th Century, Christianity experienced a resurgence and popularity, but as the 1960s and '70s came along, Christianity's influence began to decline. The changes in the Faith embraced by the accommodationists weren't sustaining the Church's strength and church membership and attendance went into a steep decline.

"Amid such sweeping challenges to their faith, there were two obvious paths that the Christian churches could take: accommodation or resistance. . . . Both approaches were invoked as solutions to Christianity's struggles, and both were blamed for Christianity's eclipse. With every drop in church attendance, vocations, or donations, accommodationists would blame the forces of reaction for preventing necessary adaptations, alienating the changing population of a changing country by refusing to change themselves. Resisters would retort that the collapse of Christian culture was a direct consequence of accommodationists' surrender to contemporary fashions." (p 83)



Christianity itself became more polarized between liberals and conservatives, no longer united in a common vision of the Church but antagonistic toward each other's beliefs, values and direction. What was happening politically in America was simultaneously happening in the Church. There was little difference between the culture wars of American secular society and the religious establishments. The Church was so integrated into society that it no longer was a prophetic voice or able to give people a perspective on politics or to bring to the discussion a viewpoint different than secular politics could offer. Those who tried to resist the Tsunami of social change sweeping America, turned to more conservative ideas, and yet Douthat points out they too embraced distorted views of Christianity: thus were promoting their own version of heresy.

*“Moreover, many of them remained doubtful custodians of Christian orthodoxy. They were havens for **political** conservatives, overall, and they tended to be more supernaturalist and stringent about sexual morality than some of their competitors. But the successes of the neo-evangelical project notwithstanding, their theological conservatism was often still the apocalypticism of the fundamentalist cul-de-sac, or else a mix of prosperity preaching and the gospel of self-help—the Evangelicalism of the Left Behind novels and Joel Osteen, one might say, rather than of Bill Graham or C.S. Lewis. Some of America’s Evangelical churches provided a rallying point for orthodox Christians in the difficult post-1960s landscape. But others provided fertile ground for the heresies that increasingly dominated American religion.”* (pp 61-62)

The conservative forms of Christianity confused nationalist tendencies with Christianity and so marched down other side roads. As Douthat describes it:

*“Like the accommodationists before them, the resistance project assumed that Christianity’s chief peril was growing unbelief, when the greater peril was really the **rival** religious beliefs – pseudo-Christian and heretical...”* (p 131)

Both Christian liberals and conservatives, cultural accommodationists and resisters, made the same mistake of assuming that the threat to Christianity was secular unbelief. Douthat however proposes that the real threat to Christianity was one growing in the Church: pseudo versions of Christian thinking. Heretical in the sense that they didn't deny Christianity, but rather focused on some small part of it and ignored the rest, thus distorting it and reshaping it into versions that suited each person's own criterion. Everyone could create their own Jesus, modeled in their personal image and likeness. Everyone could form their own church, a version of Christianity that suited their sensibilities and certainly didn't challenge their own values.



[Some More American Heresies](#) Posted on [July 24, 2014](#) by [Fr. Ted](#)



Faced with rapidly changing political, moral and religious values in the last half of the 20th Century, some American Christian leaders tried an accommodation to the emerging culture to help make the church seem relevant to the times, while others tried to resist what was becoming the new norm in American religious thinking. But for Ross Douthat both efforts to deal with declining church numbers and a changing culture in the 1960s and '70s failed to see that unbelief was not the greatest threat to Christianity, but rather that all forms of Christianity were embracing heretical ideas thus distorting Christianity by conforming it to American values rather than trying to be the salt of the earth and a light to the nation. A blurring between church and state occurred for some American Christians as they endeavored to defend a notion that this is a Christian nation. Conservative Christians embraced conservative politicians, and the conservative politicians looking for votes welcomed these Christians into their ranks. The benefit for the Church, Douthat points out, was not that clear cut as is obvious during the presidency of George W. Bush:

“Having a conservative Evangelical in the White House, it turned out, didn’t necessarily make it easier for conservative Christians to win converts or to gain ground in moral and cultural debates. Indeed, in certain ways it seemed to make it harder. The president’s very public piety made it easy for his detractors to lay the blame for the administration’s policy failures at the door of Evangelical Christianity itself, so that the more things soured for the Bush administration, the more they soured for Evangelicals as well. And the extent to which Bush’s religious style ultimately polarized the country rather than uniting it hinted at deeper problems facing the Evangelical community—problems that limited their ability to fill the space that the Mainline had once occupied and that placed sharp constraints on their influence and growth.” (pp 136-137)

And as the image of the conservative church became tainted, conservative Christians further embraced American methods and values to try to correct the church and lead the nation. The media driven culture favors extroverted expressives as far more attractive for the “news.” Controversy of any kind attracts viewers and so controversy and frenzy is favored over substance. So Douthat comments:



“Worse, no sooner had Barack Obama succeeded Bush in the White House than there was an immediate search for the next political hero or heroine, the next godly Evangelical come to save the republic from itself. Many of the candidates for this role (including Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, and Rick Perry) embodied Evangelical politics at its worst: the tendency toward purely sectarian appeals, the reliance on the language of outrage and resentment, the conflation of partisanship with Christian principle and the confusion of the American political system with the Church itself.” (p 141)

An over emphasis on seeing America as a Christian nation caused some to distort exactly what the Church is and is supposed to be. Media hype begins to determine who rises to leadership and even what the nature of leadership ought to be. A 'superstar' model of politician and televangelist emerges – not in the image of Jesus Christ but in the image of who are the most attractive kinds of people for the attention seeking American media. It all creates a christianity without humility which truly can carry the label: Made in America!

And while the American church and American Christians conformed themselves to the growing political partisanship, they failed to see that the interests of the Church were distinct from the interests of political parties, or that Christ had very ambivalent attitudes towards political power as seen in His proclaiming a kingdom not of this world. The Gospels in fact portray the power of the kingdoms of this world as really becoming to the Evil One (Luke 4:5). Satan made no exception for America in that claim. Regardless, many Christian began to feel the only real power of the Church is political power, a problem Christians in the 4th Century were not prepared to deal with when Constantine embraced Christianity. Byzantine emperors boasted that their armies could defeat Satan! And while many Americans would laugh at such a preposterous idea, American presidents also proclaimed that they could defeat evil. Distinctions between church and state, human hubris and godliness, or folly and evil all become blurred so that some imagine the state is doing what the church is supposed to do. They embrace the state as doing God's will until they realize the state is also approving things the Church cannot. So as Douhat described it the political party in power has messianic delusions while the party out of power is proclaiming the apocalyptic end of the nation. And, it doesn't matter which party is in and which is out for they easily change these 'religious' roles.

Meanwhile outside of American Christianity's enmeshment with America's political divide, other streams of thought within the theological world were also at work in the Church in America. A number of Christian scholars basically abandoned the Christian faith in favor of some supposedly neutral scholar position from which they could critique the Christianity. They rejected the "Jesus of faith" and pursued a search for a "historical Jesus." This was a Jesus based in pure rationalism, who turned out to look a lot like 20th Century materialists might create Him. They made Jesus in their own image and sold the idea to America through books and movies. They endeavored to abandon anything that seemed in their minds mystical or theological and replace it with a more human and rational Jesus.

"Understandably, few of the thinkers invested in the quest for a 'real Jesus' want to admit that their journey backward through the Christian past dead-ends somewhere in the early second century, generations shy of Nazareth and Calvary. But this refusal has led the whole project inexorably downward—from



scholarship into speculation, and from history into conspiracy theory.” (pp 170-171)

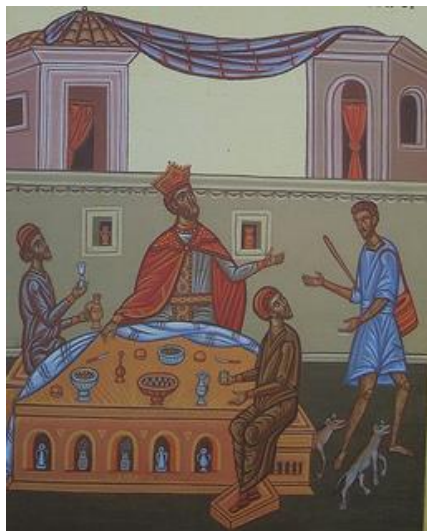
Despite claiming to be in search of the ‘historical Jesus’, these scholars have to ignore the historical fact that their Jesus was an invention of a later century than the one portrayed in the Gospels. This historical Jesus may have been more palatable to these scholars stripped of faith, but the Jesus they created was not the Christ proclaimed in the First Century and which Tradition had faithfully preserved and handed down through the centuries. Nevertheless many American Christians were eager to abandon Tradition which faithfully preserved the earliest images of Christ in order to embrace a Jesus they were inventing and investing with ideas of their own.

[The Heresy of God and Mammon](#) Posted on [July 25, 2014](#) by [Fr. Ted](#)



Perhaps the most obvious arena in which American Christians have had a different attitude than Christians historically have had is in relation to wealth. Christ, the itinerant preacher, Himself lived a rather impoverished life and never pursued wealth. He taught that one cannot serve God and mammon ([Matthew 6:19-](#)

[34](#); [Luke 16:13-31](#)). The New Testament has several warnings and woes for those who are rich or who pursue wealth (for examples, see [Luke 6:20-25](#); [1 Timothy 6:9-10](#); [James 1:10-11](#)). And the Epistle of James portrays the rich as those who persecute the Christians and who face a wrathful judgment from God ([James 2:6-7](#); [5:1-6](#)).



←Parable of the rich man and Lazarus

Some may argue that the New Testament’s negative attitude toward wealth may have something to do with how unevenly it was distributed in the ancient world and how those with wealth may have persecuted the Christians. America, on the other hand, they might argue, has been committed to a broader distribution of wealth (even if it only trickles down!). America has economically grown because of its banking policies including its lending policies and has created a middle class who share in the benefits of the

country’s wealth. As a nation America has none of the reservations about wealth that we find in the authors of the New Testament.

Douthat in his book describes one of the most prominent heresies active in American religion today as the “prosperity Gospel”, the theology of “God and Mammon” which says you don’t have to choose

between the two masters, but can in fact serve them both (or perhaps in American thinking, make them both serve you!). America has embraced completely prosperity as a sign of God's blessings and has ignored almost completely sins and temptations that the Bible associates with wealth including greed and idolatry (Colossians 3:5) and that prosperity (Mammon) is competing with God for our loyalty.

"The prosperity gospel ... is a message that's tailored less to the very rich than to the middle and working classes—to people who are hardworking but financially insecure, who feel that they have to think about money all the time because they're trying to make more of it, and who want to be reassured that their striving is in accordance with God's plan rather than a threat to their salvation. ... is just as likely to involve ministers who prosper by flattering their upwardly mobile, American Dreaming congregations, telling them to keep on striving and praying, because God wants them to keep up with the Joneses next door." (p 190)



While indeed wealth can be a blessing, it can also be a temptation, and it is possible for a man to lose his soul and gain the world ([Luke 9:23-27](#); [Matthew 16:24-26](#); [Mark 8:34-38](#)). Wealth comes for Christians with both spiritual risk and responsibility. The American Christian embrace of wealth is often completely uncritical and seems to assume wealth can only be a good. Americans can be very thankful for their prosperity, but when wealth is governed by selfish, self-centered behavior it becomes wanton and destructive.

"This is where the union of God and Mammon goes astray, ultimately: it succumbs to a naiveté about how riches are often accumulated and about the dark pull that money can exert over the human heart. And its sunny boosterism leads believers into temptation, equipping them for success without preparing them for setbacks—which in turn makes failure all the more devastating when it finally, inevitably arrives." (p 207)



← Judas betrays Christ

Whereas in early Christianity, greed was one of the seven deadly sins, in America greed is often glossed over or given more euphemistic titles of blessings, prosperity and wealth. Greed was seen as a deadly passion in Orthodox writings, but it becomes fashionable and desirable in American spiritual parlance. For Americans there seems to be little sense that enough is enough. And certainly wealth does not automatically produce virtue in anybody. Rather, wealth is no cure for greed, and can lead to jealousy, fear, hyper-vigilance and making self-preservation at all costs to be the greatest virtue. In

Orthodox Holy Week hymns it is the betrayer Judas Iscariot who is said to be a lover of money. He is the poster child for the notion that you cannot serve God and Mammon.

Douthat also sees the embrace of wealth by Christians to have another temptation: the idea that wealth can solve all the world's problems. This he suspects is what happens to liberal Christianity's embrace of taxes and big government: money leads to utopian ideals.

"But like many forms of liberal Christianity, the marriage of God and Mammon half-expects somehow to undo the Fall, through the beneficence of Providence and the magic of the free market. In its emphasis on the virtues of prosperity, it risks losing something essential to Christianity—skipping on to Easter, you might say, without lingering at the foot of the cross. . . . Christianity risks becoming an appendage to Americanism—a useful metaphysical thread for a capitalist society's social fabric, but a faith that's bound, perhaps fatally to the rise and fall of the gross domestic product." (p 205)

Wealth does come with some blessings. Christians welcomed the blessings as they turned to building churches and engaging in mission and ministry throughout the world. Douthat's concern is that prosperity can blind us to its temptations and even to understanding what is important, for fund raising can become a goal in itself by which we measure the success of the Church. Yet Christ never established fund raising as a measure of Christian success.

"[The prosperity Gospel] is particularly well suited to successful church-building, where it translated into what the sociologist Michael Hamilton has memorably described as a theology of 'more money, more ministry.' ... but from post-World War II era onward... a more entrepreneurial approach. As Hamilton writes, 'leaders of evangelical organizations scrambled to lay claim to as much of the new American wealth as they could' – not for their own enrichment (or not always), but for the sake of spreading the Gospel." (p 197)

The Church thus becomes more and more shaped by the methods, structures and models of American business, and becomes measured by those same standards as well. Success becomes numbers and especially financial success becomes the sole measure of whether God is blessing something.

"The one who pursues money will be led astray by it." (Sirach 31:5)

There is much wisdom in the adage that says, "Money is a good servant but a bad master." I interpret Douthat to be wondering aloud whether money is the servant or has become the master in much of American religion especially in those involved in the media market.

Douthat expresses another concern:

"... the marriage of god and Mammon is nothing more than Social Darwinism with a religious face." (p 203)

Survival of the fittest in the religious world: those survive that have or can obtain money. 'Thems that have, get more.' 'The oppressed are also to blame for their own condition.' But in that formula, where

is Christ the impoverished preacher of Galilee and where is the Gospel which calls us to deny ourselves in order to follow Christ?

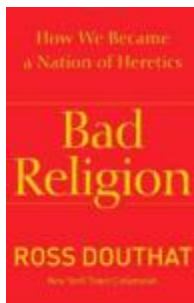
Then Jesus said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"



They answered, "The emperor's."

Jesus said to them, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (Mark 12:16-17)

[Narcissism and the God Within](#) Posted on [July 27, 2014](#) by [Fr. Ted](#)



In his book, Ross Douthat examines in great detail a number of ideas that have become broadly accepted in American Christianity, whether liberal or conservative. He examined two tendencies in American religious thinking – Messianism and apocalypticism – and how they have become part of both the political left and right in America, switching back and forth depending on which political party is in power. Thus politics and religious thinking have become enmeshed in odd ways in the daily life of Americans.



This has happened simultaneously with other developments in religious thinking in America including an intellectual search for a Jesus other than the one traditionally taught by Christianity – a Jesus more to the liking of some scholars as well as a number of Jesuses all created to satisfy the ideas held by various individuals. He also presents the role that money, Mammon, has come to play in American religion, and how it becomes a competing God from whom we hope to receive constant blessings of prosperity even if we do lose our souls. One of the noted developments in this way is what Douthat calls the theology of the God Within. Former Harvard Professor [Harvey Cox](#) said in the age just prior to this new theology:

“Religious man was born to be saved, but ‘psychological man is born to be pleased.’” (p 231)

Religion ceases to be the way in which we learn to please the Lord God, and instead becomes something that pleases “Me”. The religion focused on the self makes “Me” to be the real god whom I serve. The new heresy involves the complete acceptance of individualism with post-modern rejection of any narrative which can guide or unite all human beings. It is a completely consumerist theology – religion is there to please me, and I will shop for and shape religion until it does.

“But at the deepest level, the theology of the God Within ministers to a different set of spiritual needs, and tries to resolve a different set of contradictions, than the marriage of God and Mammon. Whereas the prosperity gospel suggests that material abundance is the main sign of God’s activity in this world, the apostles of the God Within focus on internal harmony—mental, psychological, spiritual – as the chief evidence of things unseen. Whereas the prosperity gospel talks about prayer primarily in terms of supplication, the theology of the God Within talks about it primarily in terms of meditation and communion. And while the prosperity gospel insists that evil and suffering can be mastered by prayer, the God Within theology suggests that true spiritual enlightenment will expose both as illusions. The prosperity gospel is a theology of striving and reaching demanding; the gospel of the God Within is a theology of letting go. The prosperity gospel makes the divine sound like your broker; the theology of the God Within makes him sound like your shrink.” (p 217)



Sociological studies of young people reveal the following about what young people shaped by the God Within Theology believe. They have labeled these beliefs as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. . . . the God of MTD ‘is not demanding,’ the authors note. ‘He actually can’t be, because his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. . . . Niceness is the highest ethical standard, popularity the most important goal, and high self-esteem the surest sign of sanctity.” (p 233) This new “creed” of the youth of America has five main tenets:

“1. ‘A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.’ 2. ‘God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.’ 3. ‘The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.’ 4. ‘God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.’ 5. ‘Good people go to heaven when they die.’” (p 233)



Additionally, the religious trend has been accompanied by a growing self-absorption and self-centeredness. The extreme individualism already present in American culture finds a powerful expression in religion which focuses on the needs and desires of the individual. (See also my blogs [Designer Religion](#) and [Which Christ Do We Believe In?](#))

“This growing narcissism has been a spur to excess on an epic scale. The narcissist may find it easy to say no to others, but he’s much less likely to say no to himself—and nothing defines the last decade of American life more than our inability to master our own impulses and desires. A nation of narcissists turns out to be a nation of gamblers and speculators, gluttons and gym obsessives, pornographers and Ponzi schemers, in which household debt rises alongside public debt, and bankers and pensioners and automakers and unions all compete to empty the public trough.” (p 235)

And as studies continue to show the increasing levels of narcissism in American youth, other virtues disappear.

“We found the biggest drop in empathy after the year 2000,’ one of the University of Michigan researchers noted—which is to say, just as My Space and then Facebook came online.” (p 236)

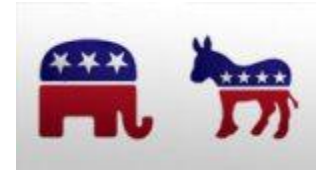
As Douthat reports American Christian youth come to look more and more like a product of American culture. In Genesis humans are created in the image and likeness of the Holy Trinity, in the American idea god and humanity become shaped in the image and likeness of “Me”. This is of course the heretical element he is concerned with – a watering down of traditional Christianity to better suit the times and values of 21st Century Americans – individualist, consumerist, prosperous and narcissist.

Dothat also sees this abandoning of traditional Christian teachings as also opening the door to a merger between some Christians, Mormons and conservative politicians. He particularly cites how Glenn Beck, a Mormon, has worked hard to make this merger work for his own political agenda by downplaying theological differences and making political convictions the priority in the spiritual realm. Mormonism is a religion invented in America that resonates well with the ethical values that Americans frequently approve.

*“To the extent that the chasm between Evangelicals and Mormons can be bridged, the heresy of God and country is the obvious place to fling out a rope bridge. This is exactly what Beck did during his **Fox News** run. From his boosterism for **The 5,000 Year Leap** to the blend of civic religion and*

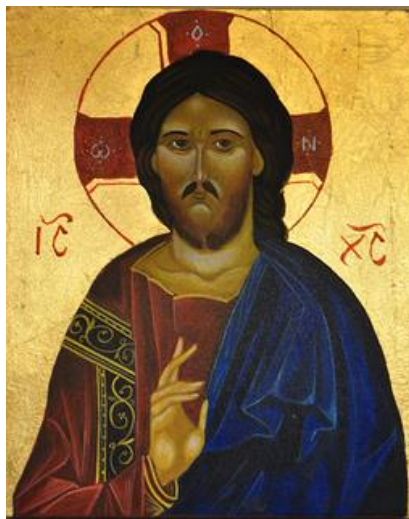
nondenominational Christianity on display at the Lincoln Memorial, the entire Beck project represented a subtle invitation to Evangelicals to get over their anxieties about Mormonism by finding common ground with the Latter-day Saints in a shared appreciation of the Father, Son and the Holy Constitution.” (p 263)

Douthat is not opposed to conservative values or success. Just the opposite – he favors a more traditional Christianity in America influencing American politics. His concern is that the religious trends in America continue to cast aside traditional Christian values and beliefs in order to create a more convenient marriage between “religious” Americans and conservative politics. [Douthat identifies himself with conservative thinking and politics](#) and is recognized as a



conservative by others. He also is clear that there is a difference between American political conservatism and traditional Christianity.

“The future of American religion depends on believers who can demonstrate, in word and deed alike, that the possibilities of the Christian life are not exhausted by TV preachers and self-help gurus, utopians, and demagogues. It depends on public examples of holiness, and public demonstrations of what the imitation of Christ can mean for a fallen world. . . . Only sanctity can justify Christianity’s existence; only sanctity can make the case for faith; only sanctity, or the hope thereof, can ultimately redeem the world.” (p 292)



Christianity in America has the difficult task of having to resist allowing the media to shape what it is and what it should be while at the same time witnessing to what the essential core meaning of who Jesus Christ is. God became flesh. God became human in Jesus Christ in order to make humanity all that God intends for humans to be. We are to share in the the divine love and life of the Holy Trinity. The media images of Christ and Christianity are all reductions of the truth, and thus are all heresies. Humans are created in the image and likeness of God, and Jesus Christ fully reveals what that means and how we can conform to that image. The hope for Christianity is not to try to conform to whatever image of religion the mass media thinks is most attractive, but for us Christians each individually and collectively as the Body of Christ to be the icon of Christ for the world.

An example of the difference between religion as God portrays it and religion as the media wants it to be is found in 1 Kings 19:11-13 where the Holy Prophet Elijah encounters God. The media would certainly want the encounter to be in all the hype, in the spectacular, in the bizarre, in the superstar, in the mighty forces of nature. God however reveals Himself in the still, small voice, something the media would ignore because it could not be portrayed in some attention grabbing way.

And he said, “Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the

LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

When we only read or pay attention to those parts of the Scripture with which we agree or which we like, we listen to ourselves not to God. It is how we depart from Christ and embrace heresy.