

# Mr. Pelagius Goes to Washington. A Book Review

Colleagues,

We're pleased this week to send along a gift from a new contributor, Pastor Matt Metevelis of Las Vegas. The Lord granted me the privilege of serving as Matt's pastor for a time, and I've watched his progression through high school, college, and Luther Seminary, where he learned from the likes of my old schoolmates, Gary Simpson and Pat Keifert. Matt reads voraciously. He thinks astutely. Last week he commented on Facebook about a book he had read and appreciated. It sounded like something that's right up our alley, so I asked him for a review. He graciously said yes. Here it is. Timely stuff, as you'll see. Enjoy.

May I say again that we welcome contributions? Think about it!

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics by Ross Douthat  
New York: Free Press, 2012

*New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat's latest book cuts through the morass of polemic and paranoia about religion and society to provide a profound and readable account of the American religious situation. Douthat is skeptical of those who fear the influence of Christianity and those who champion it. In the introduction he makes the following argument:

*"... America's problem isn't too much religion, or too little of it. It's bad religion: the slow-motion collapse of traditional Christianity and the rise of a variety of destructive pseudo-Christianities in its place."*

Douthat, applying arguments from Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Barth, and others, shows how religious energy does not dissipate under the collapsing behemoth of mainline churches but instead becomes transformed. Churches may dwindle but religion remains. And what religion becomes in the rubble of mainline Christianity is a phantasmagoric horror of cheap spiritualism, disastrous individualism, political hucksterism, and consumer trash with corrosive consequences for our republic.

Douthat's work is really two books. It presents both the decline of institutional churches and a critique of the "heresies" that took their place. The stage is set in the postwar era. Tracing the careers of Fulton Sheen, Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King Jr., Douthat shows the emerging outline of a Christianity that is dynamic, engaging, and genuinely traditional. The four men in Douthat's ecumenical cast of characters differ drastically from one another, but they also share a few traits in common. All four are public figures with wide-ranging cultural influence, and all were respected and admired by society at large. But, unlike their contemporary counterparts, each remained deeply steeped in his own religious traditions and maintained an intense Biblical and dogmatic core. They represent a postwar society which took Christianity seriously as evidenced by high church attendance, political influence, academic investigation, and even several popular films. This was a society where churches, united together, were seen as an integral part of national health and could work together on great causes like the Civil Rights movement. For Douthat this remains a paradise lost, where Christianity was not

dominant but influential, healthy, faithful and intellectually respectable. Christ and culture, church and society had found a harmonious and salutary balance beneficial to both parties.

In the years afterward that balance fell apart, and with it fell the stature and influence of the mainline Christian churches and the stabilizing power of Christian orthodoxy. Douthat chronicles the change in the religious landscape with great attention if not detail. He presents the factors that emptied out the churches in the decades following the 1950s as largely sociological realities and not the work of devious apostates. Douthat offers several hypotheses to explain the institutional storm and stress that drained the power and influence of the churches. The great changes of these decades left in their wake churches with dwindling members and coffers, growing out of touch and struggling in vain either to keep up with cultural trends or to resist them.

After his thorough autopsy of mainline churches, Douthat turns his considerable rhetorical firepower on what he considers to be the rise of four major heresies in American Christianity and the contributions each has made to our current problems. The Dan Brown–inspired “lost gospels” movement, prosperity theology, the “God Within” movement, and messianic nationalism are all singled out for criticism in the second part of the book. Douthat traces each movement in its historical development, demonstrates the reasons for their popular appeal, and then explains how each distorts the Christian witness. He singles out Dan Brown, Joel Osteen, Elizabeth Gilbert (the author of the spiritual travel memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*), and Glenn Beck as the exponent of each, and he subjects them to fair yet biting criticism.

Douthat depicts these “heresies” as simplifications which eschew the complicated and at times paradoxical ideas that have emerged over time to explain the vague witness to Jesus presented in

scripture. Prosperity theology displaces the paradox of a God who provides for his creation and yet warns about the danger of wealth, choosing instead a simplistic picture of God as a cosmic CEO who just wants to bless your right attitudes with success. "God Within" theology takes a God presented as both transcendent and intimate and replaces him with a God who, according to Gilbert, "dwells inside you as you," or comfortably hugs you from inside your own ego. And Glenn Beck's brand of religious nationalism replaces the God who chooses Israel and yet declares himself God of all nations with an American tribal deity that revealed himself most fully in 1776 and awaits the right public policy program to emerge again. The common error in all of these distortions is that they are all in some way simplistic distortions which detract from the full spectrum of Christian theology. Orthodox theology for Douthat exists tenuously as a careful balance of seemingly contradictory ideas from the historic councils and doctors of the church. For example, Jesus is both fully God and man, and heresy arises by emphasizing one nature at the expense of the other. Good theology is a balancing act. For this analysis Douthat cites Chesterton and draws heavily from his own professed Catholicism which sees proper theology as an Aristotelian exercise in locating a golden mean and trusting a proper magisterium to maintain it through subsequent ages.

But heresy does not come simply from a failure to keep a proper theological equilibrium. Indeed heresy is not ultimately a uniquely theological and intellectual shortcoming. Douthat assumes that his cast of heretical villains could be rehabilitated simply by reading the Bible with a wider lens. He misses that these heresies rise from the source of all heresies, the failure to distinguish between the law and the gospel. Heresy is not just a bad reading of some ancient texts; it is the fruit of a more fundamental human temptation to treat the

law as the gospel. Each of the heresies Douthat singles out presents the law to its hearers as the purer form of the gospel, or the way that God is made your ally by your own act and on your own terms. This can happen explicitly, as in Joel Osteen's preaching that God has to bless you if you do good things and think good thoughts; or as in Glenn Beck's grotesque dressing up of human laws and traditions like the constitution in attempt to pass them off as divine gifts, promises, and blessings. It also happens implicitly in Gilbert's "God Within" who won't judge you externally but condemns you with a never-ending and fruitless internal quest to know yourself and find your own meaning. When churches decide not to preach the gospel because of either willful ignorance or institutional decay, the law will always creep in to make the false promise of salvation with all its deadly demands. What is absent from all these heresies is not just good theological understanding but the cross of Jesus Christ itself.

For all its understandable failure to dig to the root of the problem, Douthat's work is useful to read. Douthat is conversant with major and minor figures in Christian thought and popular culture, and his book is a wonderful and opinionated tour through contemporary Christianity. He knows how to analyze society like a good journalist and delivers great one-liners with the succinct punch of a great columnist. The book gives a great sense of perspective to the challenges facing the church and the problems crippling our society, even if its prescriptions for the future are not fully developed. The only prescription I do agree with is Douthat's recommendation that Christian churches and theologians strive to be both ecumenical and confessional. (Most of my colleagues falsely find these terms mutually exclusive.) But whether you agree with each argument or not, the work is still worth a read. Douthat will give you a great sense of where we've been, a healthy sense of

disgust and chagrin for where we are, and a small glimmer of hope for where we might be despite the challenges and impostors that surround us.

Pastor Matt Metevelis

Chaplain for Nathan Adelson Hospice

Assistant Pastor for Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas Nevada

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*The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex*, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

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