

More on Douthat

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Still haven't read Ross Douthat's book, which I [anticipate having some problems with](#). I have, however, been following with interest his [conversation](#) with William Saletan. Saletan, skeptical about some but not all of Douthat's views, asks good questions, and Douthat gives thoughtful replies. I think [this comment from Douthat](#) is generally a wise one:

A quick word on your “if it feels good, don’t do it” distillation of my message. We can dig into this more as we go, but for now I’d just point out that at various times, Christianity—and particularly my own Catholicism, the faith of carousing Irishmen, hedonistic Italians, and “give me chastity, Lord, but Lord not yet” sinners in every time and place—has been scolded for being altogether too worldly, too pleasure-loving, too forgiving of the weaknesses of the flesh. If orthodoxy seems puritanical to you today, maybe it’s less because it’s inherently anti-fun and anti-feelgood than because we live in a society distinguished by such *extraordinary* excess—gluttonous, libidinous, avaricious—that what a different era might recognize as a healthy balance between asceticism and indulgence looks like hopeless prudishness instead.

I might not agree with all the ways Douthat would parse what counts as libidinous excess in particular, nor with the solutions he might prescribe in general. But the overall point is an important one: there have been times and places when Christianity has been known, and not just in some of its minority expressions, for being a life- and body-affirming thing. The question for me, though, is what combination of recalibrations--in a culture that is indeed filled with excess but certainly not consistently life- and body-affirming--it would take to faithfully play this role again.

[Here](#), however, I don't think Douthat is too helpful:

Finally, the point of Christianity is ultimately salvation, not a more utopian political order, and the welfare state can become a kind of idol as easily as

anything else.

The second part is true in theory, though it's a pretty remote possibility in the present-day U.S. More importantly: the point of Christianity is the reign of Christ, on earth as in heaven. Yes, there's of course a big old debate as to what that means, but while I wouldn't summarize it as "a more utopian political order," I also don't think "salvation"--at least not in anything like its common recent usage--gets much closer.