

Why Ross Douthat thinks we're 'a nation of heretics'

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat doesn't mince words in his new book *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*.

Since the 1960s, Douthat argues, institutional Christianity has suffered a slow-motion collapse, leaving the country without the moral core that carried it through foreign wars, economic depressions and roiling internal debates.

In its place heresies have cropped up -- from the "God-within" theology of Oprah to the Mammon-obsessed missionaries of the prosperity gospel, says Douthat, a Roman Catholic.

In an interview with Religion News Service, Douthat explains his definition of heresy, why he thinks Mitt Romney and President Obama are both heretics, and why more Americans should argue about religion.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Why did you write this book?

A: The idea for the book came to me late in the Bush presidency, when the debate over religion in America was generally dominated by the clash between the New Atheists -- Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett -- and conservative Christians. In many ways, the debate over the existence of God is the most important debate there is, but I thought it would be useful to step back and consider what kind of shape American religion is taking.

Q: And what did you see?

A: In some ways, depending on what kinds of measurements you use -- such as belief in God or spiritual experiences -- the country might be more religious than ever. But that doesn't mean that there are more traditional, orthodox Christians. Instead you have heresy: religions that draw on Christianity and yet are still miles away from the historic core of the Christian faith.

Q: How do you define heresy?

A: Looking at Catholics, Protestants and Eastern Orthodox Christians, there is an intellectual core in the Christian faith. Sometimes that core gets blurry in various places, but you have the Nicene Creed, the belief that the Bible is the inspired word of God, that the four Gospels are the best sources of information about Jesus of Nazareth. There are a lot of religious movements and ideas that diverge from that core enough to be heretical but not to be a different religion entirely.

All of this is totally debatable, and people can look at the same landscape and disagree about who a heretic is. But the term is still quite useful in describing the reality of a country that is neither traditionally Christian nor post-Christian in any meaningful way. We are in a zone between those two things.

Q: You're not going to start another Inquisition are you?

A: (Laughs) Well, controversy is good for book sales. Obviously the hunt for heretics has a long and horrible history. An orthodoxy that doesn't leave any room for heresy is dangerous and destructive; and a world that is all heresy and leaves no room for orthodoxy is dangerous as well. But I don't see any particular danger in using the term to describe America today.

Q: I've read that you think both Mitt Romney and President Obama are heretics.

A: A lot of evangelicals and conservative Catholics will say straight out that they don't think Mormons are Christians. If you flip that around, you find that Mormons themselves think that all evangelicals and Catholics are in a state of apostasy, that Mormons have the true Christianity. It can be an endless and pointless argument. They both claim ownership of the same religious tradition.

Q: What makes Obama a heretic in your view?

A: Obama's personal religious beliefs are a little more opaque than Romney's. He's not part of a church or specific denomination. But the church (Trinity United Church

of Christ in Chicago) where he basically converted, or reconverted, back from agnosticism, is a church whose theology diverges and stands in judgment over the traditional Christian churches. The theology of Jeremiah Wright's sermons is radical -- and that's the whole point. Black liberation theology is much more explicitly political and revolutionary than traditional Christianity.

Q: But is it heretical?

A: I think using the word just clarifies the distance -- the very real theological distinctions -- between Jeremiah Wright's vision of Christianity and what a lot of traditional churches consider Christianity.

Q: Even if heretics are no longer burned at the stake, it seems that many Americans have an aversion to labeling others heretical, no?

A: And I would disagree with that very strongly. The promise of a liberal society is that we agree to a kind of truce where nobody will impose their religion on anyone else and the government will not set up an established church, or the Spanish Inquisition. But part of religious freedom is the freedom to have arguments about religious beliefs. People who take religion seriously should have serious public arguments.

Q: You quote Philip Rieff's idea of a modern prophet who denounces the rise of a therapeutic, ego-driven faith. Do you see yourself in that role?

A: (Laughs) I don't think I'm comfortable calling myself a prophet. I'm more comfortable calling myself a critic. Even though I use pretty strong language to criticize trends in contemporary theology, I also want to get at what it is about *Eat Pray Love*, for example, that so many people respond to. It's very easy to be mocking and dismissive from a more highbrow perspective. But there is a coherent theological core at the heart of the prosperity gospel and the "God-within" schools, and I take them seriously.

Q: Why do you say this book was written in a spirit of pessimism?

A: As a practicing Catholic, I have an obvious bias in favor of institutional religion. But if you look at Christian history, the belief that everyone can follow Jesus on their own is not a particularly realistic approach to religious faith. It is a faith best practiced in community with doctrine passed down through generations. What makes me pessimistic is that all the trends in contemporary American life are toward

deinstitutionalization, not just in religion but across the board.