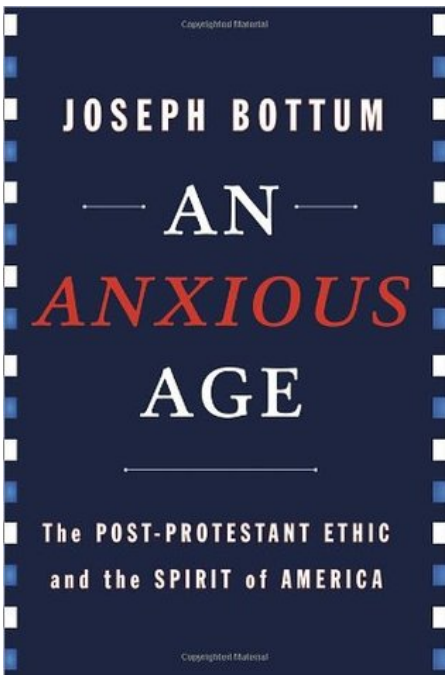

An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America

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We live in a profoundly spiritual age, but not in any good way. Huge swaths of American culture are driven by manic spiritual anxiety and relentless supernatural worry. Radicals and traditionalists, liberals and conservatives, together with politicians, artists, environmentalists, followers of food fads, and the chattering classes of television commentators: America is filled with people frantically seeking confirmation of their own essential goodness. We are a nation desperate to stand of the side of morality--to know that we are righteous and dwell in the light.

In *An Anxious Age*, Joseph Bottum offers an account of modern America, presented as a morality tale formed by a collision of spiritual disturbances. And the cause, he claims, is the most significant and least noticed historical fact of the last fifty years: the collapse of the mainline Protestant churches that were the source of social consensus and cultural unity. Our dangerous spiritual anxieties, broken loose from the churches that once contained them, now madden everything in American life.

Updating *The Protestant Ethic and the Sprit of Capitalism*, Max Weber's sociological classic, *An Anxious Age* undertakes two case studies of contemporary social classes adrift in a nation without the religious understandings that gave them meaning. Looking at the college-educated elite he calls "the Poster Children," Bottum sees the post-Protestant heirs of the old mainline Protestant domination of culture: dutiful descendants who claim the high social position of their Christian ancestors even while they reject their ancestors' Christianity. Turning to the Swallows of Capistrano, the Catholics formed by the pontificate of John Paul II, Bottum evaluates the early victories--and later defeats--of the attempt to substitute Catholicism for the dying mainline voice in public life.

Sweeping across American intellectual and cultural history, *An Anxious Age* traces the course of national religion and warns about the strange angels and even stranger demons with which we now wrestle. Insightful and contrarian, wise and unexpected, *An Anxious Age* ranks among the great modern accounts of American culture.

An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America Details

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From Reader Review An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America for online ebook

Avery says

An attempt to analyze the rise and fall of Mainline Protestantism and the impact it's had on Catholics. Some insightful moments, but not by any means the final word on the complicated subject. The idea of focusing on pivotal moments in American theology is a really excellent one and bears meaningful fruit. However, the author's idea to trace the meandering trails of Protestants who left the church is not realized past the anecdotal level. Getting a handle on this is the key for understanding the growing divide between America's faithful and intellectual classes.

Pete Davis says

Interesting thesis that the Protestant Social Gospelers became the non-active liberal class in America today: same Protestant sin-avoidance (but not individual sins, but social sins like bigotry) and same lack of need for active Good Works for salvation (you just need to be separated from the Evils of the world and you don't need to fight them to be saved.).

The authors self-assured conservatism was a bit of a wall for someone who wasn't baked in that world, so some of the references and assumptions were inaccessible and some of the judgments were lacking empathy.

But, definitely an interesting connection between the Social Gospel movement and "spiritual but not religious" liberals today. A good book in an under appreciated topic today: the effects of the decline of Mainline Protestantism. Was useful for my "What the Heck Happened?" Project exploring the origins of our current political/cultural malaise/confusion/anxiety.

Kenneth says

The author in this book analyzes how the social, political and religious cultures of the United States interact and reinforce one another. America has been a predominantly Protestant nation since its founding, and so for most of that time a Protestant consensus about social and political behavior provided the common language for our national discourse. Since the 1970's the old "Mainline" Protestant denominations (Presbyterian, Methodists, Episcopalians, United Church of Christ, etc. - the denominations that have been the main membership of the National Council of Churches) have been in steep decline, losing large percentages of their memberships, and also the political and cultural influence they once had. The rise of the "Nones" - the people who claim no religious affiliation - has gone way up, although many of them will claim to be "spiritual but not religious". These people he describes as "Post-Protestants" since they tend to come from families that were once in the Mainline Protestant denominations.

This decline thus produced a vacuum into which came a strange alliance of Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. The second half of the book discusses the evolution of Catholicism over the past half century, both as an institution and as a set of ideas. The alliance of Catholics and Evangelicals has not been particularly successful in creating a new political and moral consensus. Witness the current divisiveness in our politics.

There is so much more that could be said here, but all I will say is that this is a book that should be read by anyone seeking an understanding of the internal challenges our nation faces.

Mark Miller says

I can't give a complete review, since I only read the first half of the book, which was on how Protestantism changed into post-Protestantism, and the concluding chapter. The other half was on what's happened to Catholicism in our national life, but I was less interested in that.

I liked this book, because it addressed something I've been seeing for years, but couldn't fully explain: Why people who are politically active (though I should say liberals in particular) are so adamant about supporting a political position without seeming to have the ability to back it with anything substantial, other than a seeming faith that they're right. They are unwilling to listen to a substantial argument about why they may be addressing societal problems in a way that's counterproductive, preferring instead to essentially call anyone who disagrees evil, and in some cases take punitive actions against them for their views. It occurred to me that this seemed like religious behavior--a "secular religion." It seemed puritanical as well.

Bottum's analysis agreed with mine: It is religious behavior, but without an identified religion. Bottum calls it "post-Protestantism." He explains from a historical and sociological perspective how this came about, that it came out of Mainline Protestantism, through a few different theologians, philosophers, and religious leaders.

The main subject of this part of his book is a man named Walter Rauschenbusch, a Protestant theologian who created a social religious movement in the early 20th century. Bottum says if you read Rauschenbusch's books, "A Theology for the Social Gospel," and "Christianity and the Social Crisis," you will see the character of today's post-Protestants. The key difference between what Rauschenbusch advocated and the post-Protestants is that Rauschenbusch believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ, but today's post-Protestants don't even think about Jesus. They are the people who say of themselves that they're "spiritual, but not religious." In their minds they've left the "religious tommyrot" behind. Bottum says they maintain the same religious character as their Protestant ancestors, but regarding public social issues, rather than regarding their own souls. They reject their ancestors' self-consciousness, and faith in Christianity. Instead they insist they have a public consciousness, and what they fight against and attack is all the historical evils they perceive in this world, including Christianity. Yet still, they seek a kind of spiritual salvation, as their ancestors did, but by advocating for social causes in the political process. They have a sense of themselves that they have been redeemed by transforming their personality, and through a recognition of society's historical social evils. "Sin" to them exists as "demons and ghosts," as Bottum characterize it, in an odd sort of way. If you talk to them, they won't describe themselves as "redeemed," nor will they profess a belief in "demons and ghosts," but it's hard to characterize their beliefs about themselves and the world any other way, because there is no rational explanation for it. They have no justification for their behavior other than their recognition of these social evils, and the peer support they receive from their politically ideological community.

Bottum could be criticized for imposing a religious label on what he sees, but he uses a historical, and sociological perspective (I would argue he assumes some anthropological knowledge as well) to justify it. In my mind, it's difficult to argue with it, because I came to the same conclusion before I read his book. However, one could charge me with engaging in confirmation bias, because Bottum does not support his argument well. He gave me background I did not know, and perhaps others could provide a more accurate account that contradicts his, or fills in details he missed.

Bottum seems to propose that this was a natural process of modernization, but in his conception this contradicts the "founding forces" that formed this country. He explores the Secularization Hypothesis, that as societies modernize they naturally become more secular, and religion falls by the wayside. In the final chapter, he argues that this move toward "secular religion" is troubling, because it's not organized religion in the sense that that term used to mean, and may imperil the entire American project. He accepts as axiomatic that America was founded on a "three-legged stool" of religion, democracy, and capitalism, each creating tension on the other two. He says if (organized) religion is removed, then all we have is democracy and economics fighting it out, and there is nothing moderating them other than each other. In a strange sort of way he uses the growth of religiously extremist movements in the developing world as a "hopeful" sign that the Secularization Hypothesis may be flawed, but he doesn't offer an alternative hypothesis for why Protestantism collapsed, other than a few theories on social forces. As I read, I kept wondering whether this secularization was encouraged by political forces inside and outside our country, but he doesn't address that idea.

A couple large criticisms I have is he talks about five or so people who are his examples of post-Protestants. He gives them fictional names, and talks briefly about their backgrounds, but he doesn't really tie them in to the historical narrative he's talking about. He just assumes you'll trust him that the connection exists. He doesn't let the reader in on the conversations he had with them, except by his own paraphrasing, so that we can get a sense of who these people are as individuals. They may as well be archetypes, which is not very satisfying, since he was trying to write a work of non-fiction.

The historical and sociological perspective he offers is interesting and persuasive, but I think that's as far as it goes. Sociology is not regarded as a hard science, and you do not get hard science here. He wrote it almost as if the reader would recognize many of the points he makes from reading prior background material, or having experienced the history he talks about, but he doesn't give the reader the means to fill in that background in all its detail.

He could've made his argument more substantial, I think, if he had explained the anthropological perspective on religion, and then tied it into the interviews he had with the people he cited, and then his historical narrative, giving lots of footnotes along the way that would help fill in the background detail. Instead one is simply expected to trust that the author's analysis is sound, and that you will agree with him if you look at the same few historical sources he cites. It's an easy read, not a scholarly work, but I think that leaves him open to a lot of criticism, and may cause people to dismiss his argument altogether.

Richard says

"The most significant historical fact of the last fifty years is the collapse of Mainline Protestantism".

A convincing argument by a Catholic intellectual who explains how so much of American politics today is driven by people driven by the same moral angst of Protestantism, but without Christ to center them. Everything from environmentalism, obsessions with food, feminism, etc. -- so many people have adopted Protestant ideas of the Social Gospel while wholly rejecting the central idea of Christ within that gospel.

John says

I first became acquainted with Joseph Bottum as the editor of First Things, a conservative journal dealing with religion in the public square. In his brief reign as editor, he brought flair, elegance, and extravagance to the journal—qualities that brought about his editorial demise, as First Things has a rather serious audience that does not appreciate full-color photographs (an innovation of his) interrupting pages of lengthy prose. Flair and elegance are also on display in An Anxious Age, as Bottum renders a serious (and sociological) book into a light and lovely reflection on religion in America.

Bottum focuses on two topics. Firstly, Bottum posits the transformation of 'mainline' Protestantism into a new secular ethos. He persuasively argues that today's 'elite' liberals are in cultural continuity with the mainline Protestants (e.g. liberal but religious; not fundamentalist) that once dominated the American scene. The new 'elite' retain the old Protestant sense of superiority and righteousness, but have simply dropped Christianity along the way. Secondly, Bottum examines how Catholicism attempted to fill the void left by mainline Protestantism and ultimately failed in so doing. He argues that Catholicism supplied America a new political rhetoric—based on the ideas of natural law and human dignity—that Evangelicals embraced. However, he finds that Catholicism did not and perhaps cannot replace traditional Protestantism in America, as the country is Protestant at its core.

This is only a small snapshot of An Anxious Age. Bottum fiddles with numerous ideas and observations, all of which show how significant and how strange American religion is. (But what of the rise of Mormonism? This is a pertinent topic that Bottum fails to address.) Unfortunately, Bottum frequently digresses, in particular by writing beautiful but inapposite biographies of major figures in America. These digressions make the book feel like a collection of essays loosely tied together by a not quite overarching theme. Whatever faults this book may have, Bottum's elegant style makes it worth reading. And oddly enough, because intellectuals are almost always cynics, I finished this book with the impression that Bottum is a man who genuinely cares for both religion and America.

Eric says

The book comes in two parts, which are not as closely related as one might expect. The first part deals with the devolution of the Mainline Churches into post-Christian individuals who are not moored to any acknowledged transcendental values, but who nonetheless espouse political views from a religiously held viewpoint. The first half of the book would have been much stronger is supported by more data (some data was given).

The second half of the book seemed a shorthand defense of Catholic intervention in the politics of morality in the past half century, coupled with a description of the fading effects of such intervention. There were also short hagiographies of John Paul II and William F. Buckley, Jr.

Looking at the book as a whole, it is somewhat despairing in that the collapse of Protestant cultural cohesion is credibly put forth, along with the failure of Catholicism to fill the void, leaving the U.S. with a divided electorate at deep levels and no common vocabulary, or shared ideals, to keep the nation centered.

The book is worth reading as background or general information on the De-Christianization of current American culture, but only in conjunction with other, more scholarly works on the subject.

Cora says

I don't often find myself reading explicitly right-wing books. However, An Anxious Age had an interesting thesis, and I'm fascinated both with the long-term decline of religious authority in the United States and the ghostly echo of Christian ideas among otherwise secular people. Bottum's basic argument that you can see the essence of modern-day liberal thinking in the early 20th century Social Gospel, only in secular form, strikes me as basically true. (And An Anxious Age isn't a narrowly partisan book, even though it seems basically geared to a conservative religious audience.)

I am grateful to The Anxious Age for being introduced to the writings of Walter Rauschensbach, whom I'd never really read much about. Rauschensbach's insistence that instances of injustice aren't aberrations in a basically decent country, but speak to a deep-seated corruption at the heart of society, has its echoes in liberal discussions about Ferguson or the harassment of Anita Sarkeesian. His list of social sins that caused the death of Christ ("religious bigotry, the combination of graft and political power, the corruption of justice, the mob spirit (being "the social group gone mad") and mob action, militarism, and class contempt") are all live concerns, although these days you'd probably add the patriarchy and white supremacy to the list. And Rauschensbach's emphasis on living free of these social sins as a form of redemption reminds me of any number of 'How To Be An Ally' posts on Facebook.

What's interesting about this is how Protestant it all seems, even in its modern-day incarnation. Rauchensbach's formulation of the moral corruption at the core society owes a lot to the traditional idea of original sin. Bottum calls modern-day social liberals 'the elect', and there's something to that too--this is an oppositional notion, that you're standing a little apart from society, able to see it whole and entire and live free of its historical forces. There are echoes of the mentality I saw in my (heavily Calvinist) childhood, that we were sinners living in Sodom and Gomorrah.

Having said that, I think Bottum (perhaps as both a right-wing Catholic and a figure in the conservative movement) suffers from major blind spots. The second half of the book focuses on the alliance between conservative Catholics and evangelicals in America since the 1970s, which has basically meant evangelical votes for Catholic ideas. The irony of this--which Bottum misses--is that this is just a right-wing Social Gospel, as vaguely ecumenical and interested in social activism over maintaining traditional doctrine. The Religious Right has done more than any other organization to reconcile evangelicals with Catholics and Mormons, two traditional enemies of right-wing Protestants.

Bottum also takes it for granted that the ambition of the First Things-style Catholics was to speak in a universal way for the nation, as the mainline Protestants once did. The Religious Right even at its height never had the kind of following that mainline Protestant churches once commanded, and never could so long as their religious message was married to a partisan political agenda. That style of Catholic social teaching is only 'universal' in the sense that it appeals to all kinds of Republicans.

Bottum also frets that the decline of religions means it will cease to 'unify' America and modulate social conflicts, but I'm skeptical that American religion has ever served such a purpose. There's a reason why we have Southern Baptists, or for that matter a Presbyterian Church of America and a Presbyterian Church (USA)--religious divisions that were created in the run up to the Civil War. Most of the time, religion in America reinforced social divisions, as illustrated by the H. L. Mencken joke that the Episcopalian church was "the Republican Party at prayer." Even today, religion is a deeply segregated enterprise.

Reading An Anxious Age, it's hard not to marvel at the marked decline in organized religion over the past

fifty years. In 1965, for example, the churches that made up mainline Protestantism accounted for more than 50% of America by themselves--not including evangelicals or fundamentalists, who numbered tens of millions more. Given current trends, America will cease to be a majority Protestant country in the next few years. The evangelical churches are not only shrinking, they're graying as wel1; among millennials, 33% claim no religious affiliation at all.

I'm a little conflicted about An Anxious Age. On the one hand, I found it deeply fascinating, as evidenced by the fact that I read it in basically one sitting yesterday. On the other hand, I think Bottum is limited by his position in the conservative movement, both in terms of his arguments as outlined above and also in the occasional, unmotivated sneer at liberals that belied the high-minded tone he was trying to cultivate. In general I'm glad I read it, and it gave me a lot to think about.

Kevin says

A rather discursive approach to sorting out the impact of religion in America and the way it informs politics and culture. An interesting argument about the impact of the collapse of the mainline protestant churches and the attempt by Catholics to fill that void.

Thomas L. says

Did not finish. The first half concerns the roots of the social justice movement in the circa-1900 Social Gospel movement, and how it mutated into post-Christian, post-Protestant, church-Progressivism. All very illuminating. The second half begins with the resurgence of traditional Catholicism, and peters out pretty quickly (no pun intended).

Can't say anything more about the second half, but the first half alone is worth reading as a history lesson.

Patrick says

Superb. The first half of this book is about how today's secular culture in America arose from liberal mainstream Protestantism, and the second half is about developments in Roman Catholicism and its relationship to American culture over the past half-century. I almost skipped the second half because I thought it would be less relevant (since I'm not Roman Catholic), but it turned out to be as important and insightful as the first half of the book.

A good supplement to the book is Bottum's essay on "The Spiritual Shape of Political Ideas," published by the Weekly Standard: http://www.weeklystandard.com/article....

Trevor says

An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America is tough to categorize. The primary thesis is that the old mainline Protestant denominations (Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists),

who used to be a conservative, unifying force across all swathes of social class and geography, lost their influence. Early in in the 20th century, those mainline denominations embraced the "social gospel," turning Christ from being evangelism-focused to being focused on making the world a better place. This shift led to the hollowing out of cultural pillars that had anchored American society for centuries.

In their stead arose several groups: the fundamentalist Evangelicals (though this book is only incidentally about the rise of Evangelicals); the intellectual and morally retrenching Catholics; and the culturally and socially judgmental albeit unchurched "nones."

The thesis is provocative, but I'm not terribly convinced by the argument. Bottum writes in overheated prose littered with allusions to Durkheim, Weber, etc., but he has to do more to carry his argument.

In sum, fascinating read, somewhat long, fairly academic, interesting but not persuasive.

Peter B. says

An insightful book, especially in the first section where Bottum describes the decline of the Mainline churches and its impact on American culture. He also explains how Catholics and Evangelicals have sought to provide what the Mainline once offered, but have thus far failed. America has benefited from churches that are distinctly and authentically religious, giving a place from which to both support and critique the culture. Making social concerns the primary issue in the church, as the social gospel did, destroys this arrangement.

Greg says

This is essentially two books in one. In the first part, the author explains the decline of American protestantism and the rise of secular spiritualism (oxymoron, I know, but how else do you describe those who see political and environmental causes as religion?). The second half is about the rise (and fall?) of the new evangelism among American catholics. It is a worthy read even for just the first part. The second part is really "inside baseball" and may be difficult for non-catholics to understand.

Kjirstin says

I found this analysis of the current state of America to be very interesting. The author follows two groups of prototype Americans -- the "Poster Children" cultural descendents of Mainline Protestants, and the "Swallows of Capistrano," the new flavor of American Catholics. For both the historical underpinnings of the current trends are deeply researched, and he makes some very interesting points about the fact that we are still living in a strongly spiritual age -- it's simply post-Christian in many ways.

I would have liked some sort of wrap up along the lines of, "Then where does this leave us? Where do we go from here?" but the book as a whole serves more as a descriptive, not a prescriptive analysis of trends of religiosity within the public sphere in the United States. Very interesting, very insightful.