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July 25, 2012: Why Hasn't Ross Douthat Ignited More Debate Among Religious Liberals?

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Title: Why Hasn't Ross Douthat Ignited More Debate Among Religious Liberals?

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7/25/2012—The reaction that I have seen so far to Ross Douthat's book, *Bad Religion*, and to his column about the weakness of liberal religion (*Can Liberal Christianity Be Saved?*), suggest that we non-Christians are incapable of self-examination. Douthat's basic thesis is that orthodox Christianity is better religion—or spirituality, or atheism, or whatever we mean by religion—than is anything else around. He proceeds to dissect all the alternatives to orthodox Christianity and shows what is wrong with them. His effort is great. I'm even inclined to say very helpful. It can show us—and obviously I include my own efforts and thoughts here—where we have fallen short and where liberal religion needs to go (it needs a new word, for one thing, since not all of the people who have left orthodox Christianity consider themselves religious). The reactions to Douthat seem to divide into two groups. First, the Episcopal Church—at which his column was primarily aimed—tries to engage him (see response by Bruce Epperly). And this is also true of other liberal Christians—like Evan Derkacz, the editor of *Religion Dispatches*. But others at *Religion Dispatches*, as an example, dismissed Douthat as pining after a world gone by. That criticism is quite right. Douthat believes we should all do what he did and become Roman Catholics. But that is not an option for most of us. Not only is Roman Catholicism unjust in some ways—not ordaining women and opposing gay marriage—its ontology is not plausible. Science has demonstrated that reality is based in the material. So, for example, consciousness is what the brain does. Without the brain, no me. But orthodox Christianity teaches that I as recognizably me can transcend my brain. Since I don't believe this, I cannot be a Christian. End of story. This reality is in part why we have become a nation of heretics—not accepting the entire orthodox Christian message. But this should not be the end of our consideration of Douthat's book, but only the beginning. Douthat's criticism is not primarily aimed at liberal Christianity, which he rightly views as culturally beside the point. His criticism really is of the nonchurched and of religious nationalists. The former are the Eat Pray Love Type. I am one of these. Is his critique of us true? Douthat says we are narcissistic and undemanding. So, what are we going to do about it?