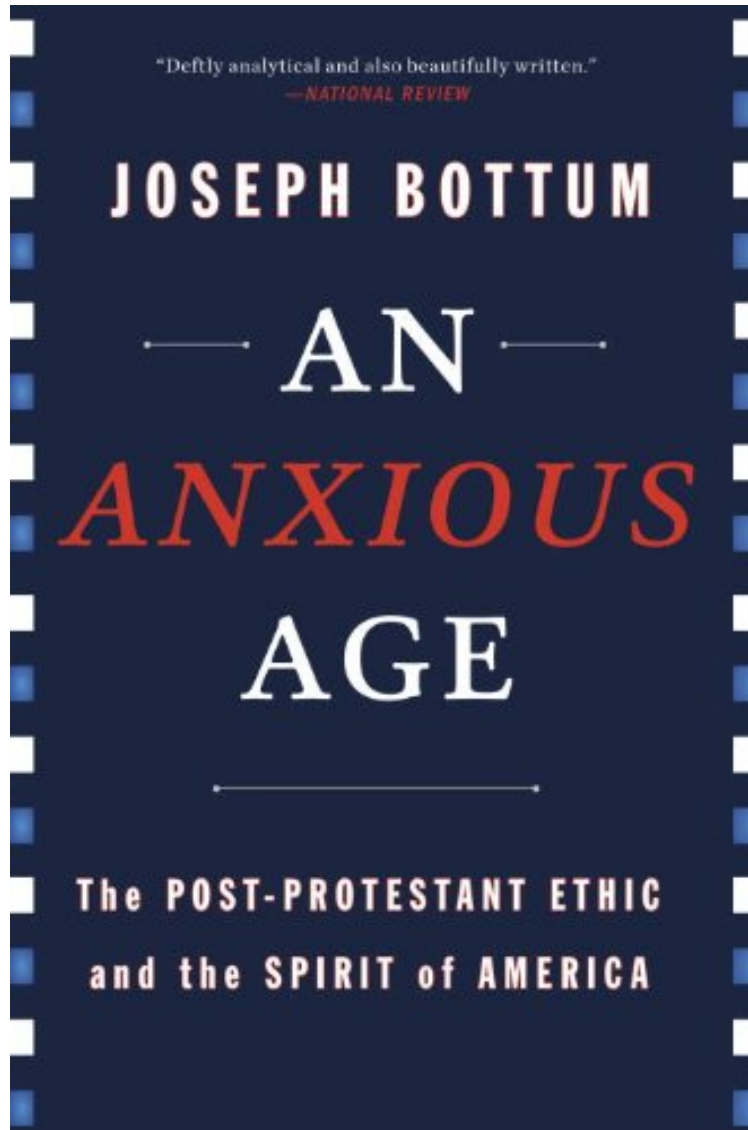


(Library ebook) An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America

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

*Joseph Bottum*

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**Joseph Bottum : An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America:

23 of 23 people found the following review helpful. Anxious to Find a Room at the InnBy Wayne LusvardiJoseph Bottum has a memorable joke in his book "An Anxious Age: The Post Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America" that

reflects the book's unique genre. Bottum writes: "...in any phrase the word social should be read as meaning basically not. Social scientist, for example, more or less equals not a scientist. "Bottum's book is not mere social science, even though it might be the best book on the sociology of religion in America since Max Weber and Peter Berger. What Bottum's book is, is a sort of throwback to an age, circa pre-1900, when social science and religion was written about from a value-full perspective. In actual life the two are inseparable, except in modern social science. Bottum pulls off one of the most accurate sociological portraits of the decline of Protestantism in America while commenting as a Christian believer and without sacrificing sociological accuracy. Bottum's methodology uses qualitative sociology to paint four biographical portraits of members of what Bottum calls members of The New Class that has supplanted the Protestant Business Class in America. The portraits are fictional but apparently a composite of actual people - something the famous German sociologist Max Weber would call an "ideal type." Bottum's quote of T.S. Eliot is one of the most accurate about the definition of The New Class: "The elites" consist "solely of individuals whose only common bond will be their professional interest; with no social cohesion, with no social continuity." Although Bottum doesn't put it in these words, The New Class is those who have married their professions in the knowledge industries: academia, media, entertainment, and government. What Bottum's book chronicles in the life of four fictional persons is the decline of the Protestant Work Ethic and the Old Business Class that made up Protestant Christianity. Today, it is the member of the New Professional Knowledge Class that has taken over Protestantism to its demise. Where nominal Protestantism still exists it mainly does so in service to New Class Elites who have infiltrated and taken over the leadership positions in mainline churches. This takeover has resulted in schisms as conservative Protestants have fled for Evangelical and Catholic churches or declining remnants of older churches. The surnames Bottum gives his four characters are: Paisley (Scottish), Jones (British), Winslow (Old English), and Doorn (Dutch). By profession they are a psychologist, American history professor, a hippie guitar repairman, and a retired woman activist. By former church affiliation they respectively were Presbyterian, Methodist, Unitarian-Quaker, Dutch Reformed. Today they all fall into the category of the "Nones." They have no religious affiliation and no connection with the business class, which they despise. If they have a religion it is the social gospel without the Gospel says Bottum. Bottum calls them "The Poster Children": adult children afflicted with a social disease whose portraits are used to advance a cause. "All that is necessary for self-esteem, for the certainty of individual salvation, is possession of the class markers of social suspicion that indicate one belongs to the fellowship of the redeemed" writes Bottum. The traits of those in the New Class is that they "rent seek" and form fiefdoms, hoard privilege, self-righteously congratulate themselves, need to feel superior, assert relativism in an absolutist way, and they arrogantly despise other classes and strict religion (particularly the Business Class and fundamentalist religion). They are post-modernists who have a romantic view of primitive life. They are assured that science is on their side and confident that morality can be socially engineered by the New Knowledge Class. The test that he puts to his half fictional-half real characters is a field test: he simply asks them to name something they thought was beautiful. The typical response to this question Bottum writes is relativistic: "different cultures think different things are beautiful," as if they parroted something they learned by rote from a textbook. Very few answer that they found beauty in a classic piece of art, music, or even in nature because nature is despoiled by modern industrialism. To the New Class there is nothing that is solidly true, good, or beautiful (and by extension nothing evil except other classes). Bottum also calls them "tourists without homes," reminiscent of sociologist Peter Berger's term "Homeless Minds." Borrowing from pragmatic philosopher William James, Bottum says the members of the New Class live in the metaphorical corridors of their homes and have never entered any of the rooms to make a home. Because they have no spiritual home they have high spiritual and social anxiety that becomes instantly defensive and outraged, intuitively feeling that is only their self-assertion, collective political power, and feeling of being right that makes them right. Again, although Bottum does not use this term they are infused with "cognitive dissonance" where the moment they are exposed or confronted to contrary evidence or views, their own views get stronger in defense. Because of this there is no way to dialogue with those in the New Class, a conclusion that Bottum does not make however. The second half of the book is about how Catholicism is the only vestige of Christianity left and what its role might be in a Post Protestant culture where what is left of mainline Protestant Churches has been appropriated as modern temples for the New Class. This is a great book but I doubt it will be read by many in the un-self critical and self righteous New Class which he describes. The victors of culture wars will write their interpretation of history but this book is a self-critical examination of the history of the decline of Protestantism and rise of the New Class written by one of their own members. Bottum is a poet, memoirist, philosopher, American and classical historian with a sociologist's understanding who nonetheless is a religious believer. However, Bottum is not a social scientist by training. If he were a social scientist he may have written a somewhat different book than a sequel to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Instead, he might have relied on another of Weber's classic books to help understand why the New Class has ascended to supplant and appropriate Protestant Christianity for itself: Weber's book on Bureaucracy.<sup>31</sup> of 34 people found the following review helpful. Insightful and Well Written Look at Religion and Spirituality in Modern America By Kevin M. Derby Joseph Bottum had his work cut out for him in *An Anxious Age*. Trying to offer a revised take on Max Weber's look at how religion shaped American life from 50 years ago, Bottum argues that religion and spirituality continue to shape culture, politics and

daily life. Bottum offers a fascinating look at how Mainline Protestantism became sidelined in the last half of the twentieth century and how Catholics, mostly influenced by John Paul II, tried to take their place in the public square with some, but certainly not complete, successes. In one of the more unique arguments I've come across in some time, Bottum shows how the heirs of Mainline Protestants continue to embrace the tracings of that tradition while abandoning the core of it, namely traditional Christianity. Despite his old perch at First Things and his long association with *The Weekly Standard*, Bottum is not, by any means, primarily concerned with politics. While Bottum leans right, he's certainly not a knee-jerk partisan and some conservatives still haven't forgiven him for calling for an end to their efforts against government recognition same-sex marriage. Bottum is not looking to reinforce his side or bash the other. There is a great deal in *An Anxious Age* that will offer insights to liberals, conservatives and moderates while parts of the book will make all of them frown. Bottum is more concerned with presenting his case than trying to fire his side up--a rare and wonderful thing in an age where too many pundits and public figures are more concerned with being cheerleaders for their base. While I am familiar with Bottum's work, the amount of learning he presents from various fields continues to impress. Best of all, Bottum is a supremely gifted writer and there were passages that show why he is a fairly accomplished poet as well as the author of warm tributes to his childhood holidays in the Dakotas. *An Anxious Age* is important, insightful and well-written. Highly recommended. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. *Spiritual But Not Religious* By Kurt Gross

Joseph Bottum does an expert job chronicling mainline Protestantism's transition from the dominant moral force in America to a virtual philosophical afterthought. He argues that the Social Gospel movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries caused mainline Protestantism to shift its adherents' focus from their personal moral failings to the sins of society at large (war, bigotry, inequality etc.) Over time, many people came to the conclusion that they could crusade against these evils without the supernatural elements of Christianity. Bottum contends that during the latter part of the 20th century, it appeared as though Catholicism might be poised to fill the void left by the mainline churches. Ultimately however, he argues that the cultural erosion resulting from the excesses of Vatican II and the loss of moral authority coming out of the sexual abuse scandal dashed the Catholic Church's chances of becoming the new dominant moral force. Regardless of what you think about the virtues of organized religion, Bottum's book will cause you to think deeply about what it means to live in a society which has lost the paradigm that provided it with social cohesion for centuries.

We live in a profoundly spiritual age--but in a very strange way, different from every other moment of our history. 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 on the side of morality--to know that we are righteous and dwell in the light. Or so Joseph Bottum argues in *An Anxious Age*, an account of modern America as a morality tale, formed by its 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 Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber's sociological classic, *An Anxious Age* undertakes two case studies in contemporary social class, adrift in a nation without the religious understandings that gave it 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. Praise for Joseph Bottum and *An Anxious Age*: "An *Anxious Age* is bound to be viewed as a classic of American sociology--not only because of its vast knowledge of historical facts and personalities, its depth and multiple layers of meaning, but also because of its literary elegance and imaginative structure. Bottum offers a wholly new way of understanding religion in public life today. The magical trick Bottum works when he asks 'Where did the Protestant ethic go?' is nearly breathtaking." --Michael Novak "A poet and critic and essayist with a sideline in history and philosophy," Joseph Bottum is attempting "to wrench the true complexity of faith back from the complexity-destroying context of contemporary political debates." --New York Times "Joseph Bottum is the poetic voice of modern Catholic intellectual life. His work . . . shaped the minds of a generation." --National Review "One of America's most gifted writers, with a perfect ear and a matchless style." --Andrew Ferguson "A fierce critical intelligence and a terrific sense of the comedy of errors we call the human condition." --Paul Mariani

.com QA with Joseph Bottum Q. How did you come up with the idea for *An Anxious Age*? In some ways, An

Anxious Age really began when I was sent out to report on the protestors at Occupy Wall Street and couldn't finish the assignment. I could feel a spiritual anxiety about modern civilization radiating from nearly all of them, but I could find no easy way to explain it. Now, two years later, this book is my answer: Not just those protestors, but nearly everyone today is driven by supernatural concerns, however much or little they realize it. 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 of individuals desperate to stand on the side of morality anxious to know that we are righteous and dwell in the light. The trouble, of course, is that we've lost any shared cultural notion of what exactly that goodness might entail.

Q. The crux of the book is your claim that the most significant and underappreciated fact about all of contemporary America is the collapse of the Mainline Protestant churches over the last fifty years. How did you come to view the decline of Mainline Protestantism as such an influential factor in the shaping of America's cultural landscape? The reasons for the Mainline churches' decline are interesting in themselves. Science, capitalism, liberal Protestant religion, the bureaucratic needs of a rising nation state—all those changes that Max Weber called the elective affinities that created the modern world resulted in a pretty thin metaphysical order. By the late 1800s, most educated Americans probably had no strong belief in any supernatural entities beyond the bare Christian minimum of the individual soul, below, and God, above. Maybe as a result, a hunger for a thicker world, for a supernatural infusion, is written across America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the table-rapping ghosts heard by spiritualists in the 1840s to the popularizing of the Ouija board in the 1910s, and on to our own time. Denied much sustenance in the central rooms of American religion, this spiritual hunger would eventually drain the Mainline churches down to their present cultural weakness. And here's where it really starts to get interesting. Because American history has led us to expect our national spirituality to be explicitly religious, tied to the nation's churches, we often fail to recognize other effects as spiritual. But strange beings were set free to enter the social and political realms by the decay of the churches that were once a primary source of the cultural unity and social manners that we now lack in the United States. I've gone back more than a century to Max Weber's classic sociological study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to resurrect the notion of spiritual anxiety in an effort to explain what escaped into the public life with the collapse of Mainline Protestantism. What once were religious concerns have fled the churches to become political and social agitations. And across the nation, in liberals and conservatives alike, there lurks a disturbing sense that how we vote is how our souls are saved. Our dangerous spiritual anxieties, in other words, have broken loose from the churches that used to contain them, and they now madden everything in American life. These new supernatural entities or, at least, these new social and political manifestations of the enduring human desire to perceive something supernatural in the world seem to me omnipresent. Think of our willingness to believe that our political opponents are not just wrong but actually evil. Think of the ways we talk about food, weight, and cigarettes, the way we use such concepts as gender, race, and the environment. In politics, culture, art in everything, spirits and demons, angels and demigods, flitter through American public life, ferrying back and forth across our social and political interactions the burdens of our spiritual anxieties.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish with the book? What do you hope readers will glean from it? I hope that *An Anxious Age* will remind the social groups I called the post-Protestant Poster Children and the Catholic Swallows of Capistrano will remind, in fact, all Americans that we are not as far from the traditional forms of American history as we sometimes imagine ourselves. Spiritual concerns still motivate us, and our historical situation is still set by the condition of American Protestantism at any given moment. More, I would like readers to see that Max Weber's kind of sociological awareness of spiritual causes gives a fuller account of human culture than Karl Marx's hard materialism. Purely material causes (economics, geography, even genetics, as some argue) undoubtedly have strong effects, but the spiritual anxieties of an age, together with the available spiritual rewards, have at least as much influence and probably more on the political, moral, and intellectual culture of a society.