



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

*Joseph Bottum*

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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*

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