

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ***The Cultural Disorder of America's "Fantasy-Industrial-Complex"***

Few would disagree that American civilization is at a point of confusion, chaos and dysfunction. We are a polarized nation where it is virtually impossible to have reasoned discussions, healthy debates or exercise civility. The family as the center of our civilization is clearly in crisis. Our national government is thoroughly dysfunctional and is more divided than it has been in generations. The threats to our national security are real and there is no consensus on how to handle these real threats. Even the broad American evangelical church's view of God is what Christian sociologist Christian Smith calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Instead of standing against the culture, mainline Protestant churches and many evangelical churches are flowing with the culture. How did we get into this mess?

In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, Kurt Andersen offers a helpful overview explaining "How America Lost its Mind." Several summary observations:

1. Andersen argues that it all began with the 1960s, that decade of rebellion and alternative lifestyles that emphasized drugs, sexual freedom and "dropping out." He gives focus to Esalen, the harbinger of the New Age. Esalen Institute "reinvented psychology, medicine and philosophy, driven by a suspicion of science and reason and an embrace of magical thinking . . . It was a headquarters for a new religion of no religion, and for "science" containing next to no science." Esalen's founders bought into the odd theses of R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz, both of whom re-defined mental illness and insanity as alternative ways of perceiving reality. Indeed, Laing argued that "madness is potentially liberation and renewal."
2. Also, the 1960s began to revolve around "young people, affirming their adolescent self-regard, making their fantasies of importance feel real and their fantasies of instant transformation and revolution feel plausible. Practically overnight, America turned its full attention to the young and everything they believed and imagined and wished." Californian professor Theodore Roszak (*The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*) and Yale Law School professor, Charles Reich (*The Greening of America*) laid the groundwork for pandering to the vanity and self-righteousness of the new youth. There were three types of "consciousness" in America: Consciousness I people were old-fashioned, self-reliant individualists, now rendered obsolete. Consciousness II people were the fearful and conformist organization men and women whose rationalism was a tyrannical trap set by their parents. Consciousness III made its first appearance among the youth of America and was spreading rapidly: "Simply by being young and casual and undisciplined, you were ushering in a new utopia . . ."

Consciousness III was just one early iteration of the anything-goes, post-reason, post-factual America . . .”

3. The 1960s began to attack the coercive “regime of truth.” French philosopher Michael Foucault was especially formidable in this attack. His “suspicion of reason became deeply and widely embedded in American academia.” So pervasive was this trend that social critic Paul Goodman concluded in 1969: “There was no knowledge, only the sociology of knowledge. [His students] had so well learned that . . . research is subsidized and conducted for the benefit of the ruling class that they did not believe there was such a thing as simple truth . . . Anything and everything became believable. Reason was chucked. Dystopian and utopian fantasies seemed plausible.” Such convictions produced the radical New Left, who became the “terrorists” of the 1970s—setting off thousands of bombs planted in the vulnerable domains of the Corporate State.
4. The 1970s added a new dimension to the irrationality of the 1960s—the legitimizing of conspiracy theories at the highest levels. Elaborate paranoia produced untold conspiracy theories about the 1963 assassination of JFK. Further, this decade saw an unprecedented explosion of UFO reports, which were given a tinge of legitimacy by the fanciful books of Erich von Daniken (e.g., *Chariots of the Gods*), which posited that the Egyptian pyramids, Stonehenge and the giant stone heads on Easter Island were all built by extraterrestrials.
5. The 1980s, according to Andersen, saw the institutionalization of subjectivity as a pure virtue: “Many Americans announced that they’d experienced fantastic horrors and adventures, abuse by Satanists, and abduction by extraterrestrials and their claims began to be taken seriously. Parts of the establishment—psychology and psychiatry, academia, religion, law enforcement—encouraged people to believe that all sorts of imaginary traumas were real.” Americans stopped noticing weirdness and craziness. For that reason, cultural critic Neil Postman argued in 1985 that TV was repelling meaningful public discourse with entertainment, so that Americas were in the process of amusing themselves to death.
6. By the 1990s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, technology accelerated the radical subjectivity and abandonment of truth and reason in American civilization. Andersen: “In the digital age, however, every tribe and fiefdom and principality and religion of Fantasyland—every screwball with a computer and an internet connection—suddenly had an unprecedented way to instruct and rile up and mobilize believers, and to recruit more. False beliefs were rendered both more real-seeming and more contagious, creating a kind of fantasy cascade in which millions of bedazzled Americans surfed and swam.” The cumulative effect of all this is what Andersen calls “The Triumph of the Fantasy-Industrial Complex.” Each person creates his/her own reality; truth has no meaning whatsoever; and there is a thorough-going distrust of all institutions and all “truths.” Truth is what you find on the internet and, since you can find any claim and any “truth” on the internet, there is indeed a “Fantasy Industrial Complex” of Twitter feeds, Facebook boasts and outrageous conspiracy theories

that someone always believes and passes on. We are a civilization of fantasy, firmly anchored in midair!

How then does genuine, biblical Christianity respond to the Fantasy-Industrial Complex? The Apostle Paul, in Colossians 2:8, issued a penetrating exhortation: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (NASB). The relevance of this admonition is clear. We live in a world where “the tradition of men” and of “empty deceptions” of the Fantasy-Industrial Complex are pervasive. Because Christianity posits exclusive truth, Christians must know how to build bridges to the postmodern world of Fantasy. Christians must understand their world; know how to make connections to that world, while maintaining the distinctives of Christianity. As Jesus counseled, we must “be in the world but not of the world” (John 17:13-18). Theologian Alister McGrath writes that the New Testament church is really a “colony of heaven . . . an outpost of heaven in a foreign land.” It speaks the language of that homeland and is governed by its laws. Yet, as Paul demonstrated in Acts 17:22-31, we seek common ground with citizens of earth, to be all things to all people that we might win some. Our task is to speak and live the truth of the gospel into the world and life view of others. Using 1 Peter 3:15, apologist Ken Boa suggests a pattern for building bridges:

- “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.” In other words, be certain Jesus is Lord of your life, affirm your utter dependence upon Him, and remember that when you are talking with someone of another worldview, you are in a spiritual battle. Your task is not to change the person; that is God’s business. Your task is to be faithful in proclaiming the truth.
- “Always be ready.” Among other things, this means to know God’s Word and to know how and when to use it. In doing so, you will be prepared to correct misconceptions about biblical Christianity and ready for the divine appointments God sends your way.
- “To make a defense.” Always keep the discussion on Jesus and His finished work on the cross. You want them to consider the claims of Christ. Stay away from minor issues and do your best to not allow the other person to focus on their misconceptions. Stay focused in a friendly, God-honoring manner, and do not be sidetracked by the other person’s unique claims or errors.
- “To everyone who asks you.” Pray that God will give you opportunities to share your faith in this pluralistic culture. Above all, be a good listener and ask their permission as you progress through your discussion. Do not be pushy or arrogant.
- “To give an account for the hope that is in you.” It is your personal relationship with the living God that is the source of your power and strength. Do not be afraid to share from personal experience all that God has done for you. He is your hope and strength.

- “Yet with gentleness and reverence.” Exude patience, respect and love as you talk. Always look for common ground and seek to develop a relationship of trust and confidence that God can use to bring that person to Himself.

There is such a thing as truth in this Fantasy-Industrial Complex world and only Christianity provides the path to that truth.

See Kurt Andersen in *The Atlantic* (September 2017), pp. 76-91 and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 1-16.