

STAND UP FOR TRUTH AND REALITY!

Handout 2 of 4 10/15/17

Helping Restore a Strong Truth/Reality-Based Majority in America

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II. America: Fantasy Trumps Truth and Reality (pun intended)

The Issue: Why do such large percentages of our population fervently believe things which are demonstratively false?

Primary Resource: *(B) "How America Lost Its Mind" by Kurt Andersen (14-page article in the September 2017 issue of *Atlantic Magazine* - a summary of his 2017 book *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire--A 500-Year History*)

(1) The Bad News: It's Not New with Trump and It Won't End with Him

The opening words of Kurt Andersen's magazine article are: "The election of Donald Trump revealed that a critical mass of Americans has become untethered from reality." (B, p. 77, my emphasis)*

When he sought the root causes of this dangerous phenomenon and when they began, he was driven all the way back to the founding of our republic. "Little by little for centuries, then more and more and faster and faster during the past half century, we Americans have given ourselves over to all kinds of magical thinking, anything-goes relativism, and belief in fanciful explanation--small and large fantasies that console or thrill or terrify us. And most of us haven't realized how far-reaching our strange new normal has become...We have passed through the looking glass and down the rabbit hole. America has mutated into Fantasyland." (B, p. 78, my emphasis)

"How widespread is this promiscuous devotion to the untrue?" He reckons that among us, "the solidly reality-based are a minority, maybe a third of us but almost certainly fewer than half." (B, p. 78, my emphasis) He provides some statistical examples, e.g. two-thirds of Americans believe that angels and demons are active in the world, a quarter that vaccines cause autism, two-thirds that the creation story in Genesis is literal history, a quarter that Trump won the majority of the popular vote and that Barack Obama "maybe or definitely was (or is?) the anti-Christ." (B, p. 79)

For Andersen, the descent into full Fantasyland was the product of two momentous changes: (1) from the left, "a profound shift in thinking that swelled up in the '60s...Do your own thing, find your own reality, it's all relative." and (2) from technology, "the onset of the new era of information...Before the internet, crackpots were mostly isolated, and surely had a harder time remaining convinced of their alternative realities. Now their devoutly believed opinions are all over the airways and the web, just like actual news. Now all of the fantasies look real." (B, p. 79, my emphasis)

Andersen casts a wide net--perhaps too wide for many, he admits--in what he sees as America's fantasy-industrial complex: e.g. Salem's witch trails, P.T. Barnum, speaking in tongues, Hollywood, Scientology, conspiracy theories, Walt Disney, Billy Graham, Ronald Reagan, Oprah Winfrey and Trump. He states his position most succinctly this way: "**Mix epic individualism with extreme religion; mix show business with everything else; let all that ferment for a few centuries; then run it through the anything-goes '60s and the internet age. The result is the America we inhabit today, with reality and fantasy weirdly and dangerously blurred and commingled.**" (B, pp. 79-80, my emphasis)

Note: For PDFs of the handouts as they become available as well as the dates for the discussions of them see <http://www.centristfaithandpolitics.com/610-thompson-2017.html>. The presentation and discussion of this handout will be 10/15/17, 12:00-1:00 pm, First United Methodist Church, Boulder, CO.

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Andersen focused on two main areas. He says, (1) “Extreme religious and quasi-religious beliefs and practices, Christian and New Age and otherwise, didn’t subside, but grew and thrived and came to seem unexceptional.” (2) “Relativism became entrenched in academia;” influential postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard claimed “truth does not exist.” (B, p. 86)

I need to say at this point that I have different points of view on these two topics. For me, Andersen doesn’t seem to realize that postmodern progressive religion and non-relativistic postmodern philosophy exist and are allies in his cause. This calls for these brief theological and philosophical interludes:

(2) You Can’t Equate All Religion with Christian Fundamentalism/Evangelicalism

This danger of fantasy trumping truth has also been evident to religious progressives for some time. In 1999 I attended a Jesus Seminar conference in which John Dominic Crossan, who some call the most significant New Testament scholar of our time, gave a lecture forecasting this era-reorienting paradigm shift. He had two presuppositions: (1) “that the clash between science and religion, reason and revelation, history and faith, or secularism and fundamentalism is not the dominant background against which to imagine Christianity’s future” and (2) “that the Entertainment Era is the future’s immediate background and that the dominant clash will now be between fantasy and religion...Yeats said somewhere that a heart grown up on fantasy, grows old on brutality.” (B1, pp. 110, 114)^

(3) Postmodern Truth is Plural and There’s No Such Thing as an Uninterpreted Fact.

In what’s called “the modern era”--from the 17th to the mid-20th centuries--it was an article of faith that universally accepted reason should seek, and theoretically could find, **the truth**. The only alternative was relativism--every truth claim is as good as any other truth claim. In the postmodern era (see B2, pp. 4-18),^ truth claims “cannot be conclusively proven or demonstrated.” (B2, p. 12) However, this does not mean that postmodernism espouses “relativism’ as its critics claim. Rather, it calls for **a redefinition of knowledge** that displaces the relative/absolute dichotomy...” (B2, p. 8) **Truth (not the truth anymore) is plural and rather than universal reason we have a “situated reason that nevertheless allows for argument and critique...”** (B2, p. 14) This means that there’s no such thing as an uninterpreted fact. For example, there are thousands of historians who describe Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, and their interpretive truth claims are peer evaluated as to which are better than others, with most being judged true to some degree. However, if one or more would state that Lincoln gave an entirely different speech than usually reported, they would be judged to be definitively untrue.

(4) How the Right Became More Unhinged Than the Left, Resulting in Trump--Resist!!

Back to Andersen. He says, “People on the left are by no means all scrupulously reasonable...But fantastical politics have become highly asymmetrical. Starting in the 1990s, America’s unhinged right became much larger and more influential than its unhinged left...Only the American right has had a large and organized faction based on paranoid conspiracism for the past six decades...For a while, Republican leaders effectively encouraged and exploited the predispositions of their variously fantastical and extreme partisans...But over the past few decades, a lot of the rabble they roused came to believe all the untruths.” (B, pp. 87-88) Eventually they usurped the party that had pandered to them to win elections. The time became ripe for Trump in the 2016 election. He did and still gets away with all his untruths “as he wouldn’t have in the 1980s or ‘90s, when he first talked about running for president, because now factual truth really is just one option.” Andersen ends by calling all of us to “make America reality-based again” by standing up, privately and publicly, for Truth and Reality. (B, p. 91) **Are you ready to resist?**

^Other Resources: (B1) “A Future for the Christian Faith?” by John Dominic Crossan in *The Once and Future Jesus* (2000); (B2) *Theology After Ricoeur* by Dan R. Stiver (2001)