



The Enlightenment



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How America Went Haywire

“How America Went *Haywire*” is the subtitle of a recently published book entitled *FANTASYLAND* by Kurt Andersen. In this book Andersen documents events occurring during the past 500 years that led up to the disorder existing today in the United States. He explains why the U.S. is markedly different from most other Western democratic secular societies where religiosity has waned, where adequate social safety nets are in place and where separation of Church and State is paramount. The U.S., in contrast, remains highly religious with one third of the population believing the earth is only 6000 years old, social safety nets are inadequate, and the country is no longer a real democracy having become an oligarchy with big business, big money, and big lobbies like the NRA exerting an undue influence on governments.

And it is getting worse! Trump continues to tweet untrue facts in order to divert attention from his possible collusion with the Russians by issuing his latest tirade against whoever or whatever displeases him at the moment. Observers from abroad just can't fathom how the American people could have elected this most un-presidential, egotistical, thin-skinned buffoon, who could unwisely unleash a nuclear holocaust. It is the events leading up to and causing this almost unbelievable chaotic situation that are detailed in Andersen's book.

The Early Years

*In fourteen hundred and ninety-two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue*

This rhyming couplet has enabled history students to always remember the year Europeans discovered America. (Even though to be more accurate, the Vikings discovered it several centuries earlier.) During the 1500s, explorers from Western European countries began to claim land for their sovereigns in various areas of the new-found continents. The Spanish in what became Central and South America; the British and French in what became Canada; and the Dutch (for a brief period) and the English in what became the American colonies and eventually the United States of America.

One might expect that Andersen would begin his book in England where most of the early settlers in America originated. But instead he starts in Germany with an account of Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation that began in 1517. This was a watershed moment because, from this time onward, the influence of the Catholic Church began to wane in northern Europe. In contrast to Catholic belief, Luther believed salvation was achieved through faith, not by participating in sacraments. Luther encouraged his

followers to read the Bible for themselves and pray directly to God without the intermediary of a priest. He also encouraged Lutheran ministers to marry.

England and Scotland had religious reformations as well. In 1534 Henry VIII formed the Anglican Church with himself as head, and around 1560 John Knox helped found the Presbyterian Church in Scotland. The Anglican and Presbyterian Churches were more liberal than the Catholic Church, but not liberal enough for a small Protestant sect called the Puritans, who were looked down upon in England. These people would soon become a significant factor in American history with their landing at Plymouth Rock in the *Mayflower* in 1620, because as Andersen puts it, "America was founded by a nutty religious cult."

And there were other minority sects such as the Quakers in Pennsylvania and later the Shakers in upstate New York. The Shakers died out, but there are still small congregations of Quakers known for their quiet services of worship and their pacifism, among other good things. Another early religious movement that is very much alive today was the Methodists, co-founded in England by John Wesley (1703-1791) and George Whitfield (1714-1770). They both came to America to promote this new denomination. Wesley stayed only a couple of years, but Whitfield remained and became one of the most famous preachers of his day, expounding an evangelical message of salvation. Today there are at least 12 million Methodists in the United States.

Benjamin Franklin became acquainted with Whitfield in Philadelphia and published some of his journals and sermons. Franklin and his fellow Founders were not particularly religious and many were Deists. Deists are people who believe God created the world and then left. Deists have little use for the dogma and ritual of Christianity and, when writing the Constitution, the Founding Fathers went out of their way to ensure the new democracy would not be a religious nation. Thomas Paine was an atheist, George Washington was an unbeliever, John Adams insisted the United States would not be founded on the Christian faith, Thomas Jefferson questioned the existence of God, James Madison noted the rivers of blood that result from religious competition, and when Alexander Hamilton was asked why God was not mentioned in the Constitution, his answer was deadpan hilarious: "We forgot."

Thomas Jefferson is reputed to have forecast that, with the United States Constitution being a secular document, most Americans would tend over time to become Unitarians. How wrong he was! The evangelical-style preaching of George Whitfield appealed to many and never went away. Today about a third of Americans are evangelicals, and their ranks are at least holding their own if not expanding. And regrettably they are influencing governments. Many conservative politicians believe it helps them get elected if they garner evangelical votes by acknowledging they do not support practices such as gay marriage or abortion.

As mentioned earlier, most Western democracies have become less religious and more secular, so why is the United States, whose Founding Fathers went out of their way to hopefully establish a secular country, an exception? Perhaps Andersen has the answer when he states: "As we let a hundred dogmatic iterations bloom, the eventual result was an anything-goes relativism that extends beyond religion to almost any kind of passionate belief: *If I think it's true, no matter why or how I think it's true, then it's true and nobody can tell me otherwise.* That's the real-life *reductio ad absurdum* (reduction to absurdity) of American individualism. And it would become a credo of Fantasyland."

United States of Amazing: The 1800s

Great things happened in the United States during the 1800s. The new democracy, built from scratch by a group of wise Founding Fathers, blossomed into a modern country unequalled anywhere in the world. Slavery was abolished and modern science begat new technology, including the telegraph, high speed printing presses, railroads, steamships, vaccination, anesthesia and more. Education became free and compulsory, while the literacy rate climbed to 90%. By 1896 there were 45 states and 3 territories in the Union. (By 1912 there were 48 states and by 1950 there were 50).

There were those in Europe who observed the rapid progress that occurred in America in just 125 years and sought to seek an explanation as to why it came about. Even as early as the 1830s the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) noted in his book *Democracy in America*: "There is no country in the whole world in which the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America." Another European interested in American progress was the German economics professor Max Weber (1864-1920), the father of modern sociology. From a young age Weber was interested in the relationship between religion and capitalism, and he began to wonder why the United States was more dynamic than even industrial Germany. To find out, he set sail to attend the Conference of Arts and Sciences at the 1904 St. Louis World Fair. He was dazzled by the shining lights of the Palace of Electricity; Thomas Edison himself was on hand. The place was brimming with marvels of modern technology, from telephones to motion pictures. He remarked:

This kind of place (St. Louis) is really an incredible thing: tent camps of the workers, especially section hands for the numerous railroads under construction; streets in a natural state, doused with oil to prevent dust, wooden churches of at least 4-5 denominations...Add to this the usual tangle of telephone wires, and electrical streetcar lines under construction, for the 'town' extends into the unbounded distance.

Weber traveled westward, passing through the town of St. James, 100 miles west of St. Louis. He was amazed by the town's huge number of churches and chapels of every stripe. With the industrial extravaganza of the World Fair still fresh in his memory, he began to discern a kind of holy alliance between America's material success and its vibrant religious life. In other words, the Protestant work ethic, combined with the spirit of capitalism, was in place. It was clear to him that economic dynamism was an unintended consequence of the Protestant Reformation. Whereas Catholics associated holiness with the renunciation of worldly things – monks in cloisters, hermits in caves – the Protestants saw industry and thrift as an expression of a new kind of hard-working godliness. Others had to work to live, but the Protestants lived to work.

Assisting to keep the Christian spirit alive were three Great Awakenings. One in the 1730s when America was still a British colony, another in the 1830s, and a third in the 1890s. These revival meetings, often held in tents, drew large crowds who came to hear messages of salvation delivered by charismatic preachers, usually forecasting the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

In addition to the activities of the mainline churches that included Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists, and Congregationalists, there were oddball cults. One of these cults that eventually developed into a significant denomination was the Mormons. Andersen devotes a whole chapter to this group entitled, "The All-American Fan Fiction of Joseph Smith, Prophet."

The Mormon story unfolds like this. In the early 1800s, Joseph Smith was a charismatic preacher in upper New York State who duped a number of people into believing that the angel Moroni directed him to a nearby hill where he unearthed a stash of gold plates on which, he claimed, was written a book. Miraculously, Smith was somehow inspired to translate the contents of the plates into English and dictate the details to an accomplice. He then arranged for publication of a 500-plus-page volume that came to be known as The Book of Mormon. This book chronicles the following unlikely story.

Around 600 BCE, at the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord commanded another prophet named Lehi to leave Jerusalem with a small band and proceed to the seacoast to build a ship. In this ship, Lehi's family and a few others sailed to the west coast of South America. After landing safely, the band grew and prospered. As they moved northward, the story of their experiences and travels was recorded on the gold plates that Smith claimed he found buried in a nearby hill.

After publishing The Book of Mormon in 1830, Smith declared himself to be a latter-day prophet and organized the Church of Christ, a polygamous sect, saying he was chosen by God to restore the early Christian church. Church members were called Latter Day Saints or Mormons. He attempted to establish churches in Kirkland, Ohio, and also in Missouri. But settlers in Missouri, fearing the rapid growth of Mormon polygamous communities, fought and defeated them in 1838. Smith was imprisoned, but escaped and then set up a Mormon community at Nauvoo, Illinois. There he was again accused of the practice of polygamy and eventually put on trial. While awaiting trial he was murdered in 1844. After Smith's death there was a power struggle before Brigham Young was chosen President in 1847. He had been leading his group westward, and they arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in August 1847. From that time on, the church grew and prospered as Salt Lake City developed and as Mormonism became a recognized religion that today boasts 15 million members worldwide.

The purpose of relating the Mormon story is to illustrate how the impostor Joseph Smith was able to form a cult that later, through the efforts of Brigham Young and others, developed into a full-scale religion with millions of followers who believe what is essentially irrational nonsense. This is a perfect illustration of how ordinary people can be duped into believing in fantasies, and this of course is the main theme of Andersen's book. And for some reason, Americans in general have been more susceptible to believing in fantasies than the people of any other Western nation.

And not just religious fantasies: there were also secular shysters traveling around America in the 1800s, promoting snake oil elixirs in medicine shows. The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company was one of the most significant of these shows. But the greatest promoter of fantasies was P.T. Barnum, America's first great secular blurrer of truth and make-believe who is reputed to have declared, "there is a sucker born every minute." Another propagandist was Buffalo Bill Cody, promotor of the myths of the wild west. Yes, by the beginning of the 20th century, American was indeed a magnificent country, but also in many respects, a Fantasyland.

A Long Arc Bending Toward Reason

And great things continued to happen in the early years of the twentieth century. Houdini debunked the spiritual séances of the last century, and nearly all the big spiritual communities that had sprung up during the late 1800s disappeared. In the northern part of the country, Protestant denominations became respectable and liberal congregations began to question some of the supernatural tenets of Christianity.

They believed the Bible to be a human construct, not the literal word of God. Going to church was as much a social activity as it was a centre for indoctrinating religious beliefs. In the secular realm, amazing progress began to continue, as cars and electrification became more common. The Wright brothers flew in 1903 and Einstein published his four famous papers in 1905. Medical science advanced and quackery significantly declined. American troops fought with honour in WWI.

But the hardcore Christian evangelicalism did not go away entirely. There were evangelical preachers including Dwight Moody, Cyrus Scofield, Billy Sunday, and Aimee Semple McPherson. (Later beginning in the 1950s there was Billy Graham). And around the time of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, another religious movement called Pentecostalism emerged in California and grew until today there are at least 30 million Pentecostals in the U.S. These are the people that speak in tongues which is essentially gibberish.

The southeastern states developed into what became known as the Bible Belt, which was the locus of the famous "Monkey Trial" in Dayton Tennessee in 1925. John Scopes was accused of teaching evolution in a high school science class and was put on trial. A jury found him guilty, but the judge wisely fined him just one dollar. Today I think it is safe to say that evolution is freely taught in science classes in all Western democracies except the United States, where opposition still exists. As stated above, about a third of Americans still believe the earth is 6000 years old.

Leaving religion aside for the moment, we move on to other fantasies described in a chapter entitled "The Business of America is Showbusiness." Early in the 20th century, a quantum change occurred with the appearance of movie production in Hollywood and a proliferation of movie theatres throughout the country. Movies made it easy for almost anyone anywhere to enter a magical realm where people were transported everywhere to see anything. Talkies arrived in 1927 and technicolour arrived in the 1930s. Andersen describes this new phenomenon as a "far flung fantasy industrial complex." In the 1920s radio entered the home with news and free entertainment, but listeners were forced to put up with annoying advertising. And of course television became ubiquitous after WWII.

Another phenomenon appearing in the first half of the 20th century was the development of suburbs. Many middle-class people worked in city centres, but longed to live in a more pastoral setting with detached houses, manicured lawns, and picturesque gardens. Cars and commuter trains made this possible. Also occurring during this period was a move away from snowy winters to warmer climes, causing a significant growth of cities in southern states.

Other notable events occurring in the period in question included the growth of Las Vegas, the introduction of Playboy, Disneyland, Scientology, pioneer villages like Williamsburg and Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, expansion of national parks, and McCarthyism.

Back to religion: two occurrences during the Eisenhower years must be noted. One was the addition of "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance and the other was adding the motto "In God We Trust" onto the currency. These steps backwards must have had the Founding Fathers rolling over in their graves.

By the 1960s attendance at liberal mainline Protestant churches had increased by a third since WWII, and supernatural fantasies were in the background. Most of these congregations appeared to be thriving, but as things turned out, the liberal denominations were at their peak. But the evangelicals had not gone

away. While church attendance was declining in most Western countries, the U.S. remained a religious nation thanks to the evangelicals.

Big Bang: The 1960s and '70s

The sixties and seventies witnessed the coming and going of five presidents in the U.S. They were Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter. Notable events were the assassination of Kennedy, the Viet Nam war, the oil crisis, and the resignation of Nixon over the Watergate affair. The needless and senseless Viet Nam war proved to be a colossal failure, with over 58,000 Americans killed. (Ironically, the U.S. with the mightiest military in the world has not won a war since WWII. Korea was a partial victory, and Viet Nam, Afghanistan, and Iraq were costly disasters). The oil crisis in the '70s resulted in shortages and rising oil prices that caused a stagnant economy and inflation, thus the term stagflation. From this point on, real incomes for the middle-class ceased to rise. The so-called Golden Age after WWII began to disappear.

Turning from the political and economic to the cultural, the Beatles became famous in the music scene and, in 1969, 400,000 young people attended a festival near Woodstock, N.Y. Topics of the era were women's rights, gay rights, ecology, sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, natural foods, New Age, and meditation. These subjects are well known, but lesser realized at the time was the increase in extreme Christianity, libertarianism, and unembarrassed greed. "Anything goes" was the motto. And what Steven Colbert later described as "truthiness" began to appear: *What I believe is true because I want it to be true* – individualism turned into rampant solipsism. Noticing this trend, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan remarked, "People are entitled to their own opinions but not to their own facts."

Rather than go into more detail, I will simply list the titles of the chapters in this section, which I believe will convey the gist of the period. They are: The Hippies, The Intellectuals, The Christians, Politics and Government Conspiracies, and Living in a Land of Entertainment.

Fantasyland Scales: From the 1980s Through the Turn of the Century

But did it matter whether it was authentic or not? Hadn't this country been built on the promise of avoiding this very question?

Karl Ove Knausgard in The New York Times (2015)

Three presidents presided in this era: Reagan, Bush I, and Clinton. Reagan was a foe of big governments and regulation. One of his famous quotes was: "Government is not the solution to our problem; government *is* the problem." Under Reagan's watch, Roosevelt's New Deal, which was at least partially responsible for the prosperity after WWII, continued to unravel. Trickle-down economics, which was supposed to strengthen the middle-class, simply became a process for the rich to get richer. Regulations needed to constrain rampant greed were removed. Under Bush I, economic conditions continued to falter, but Clinton managed to eventually balance the budget. With the help of his wife Hillary, he attempted to introduce improved health care for everyone, but was vigorously opposed by the Republicans.

On the cultural scene, extreme religious and quasi-religious beliefs and practices continued. Christian and New Age activities also continued to thrive, and came to seem unexceptional. And in the 1980s and '90s, the country became an amazing coast-to-coast theme park. The boundaries between entertainment and the rest

of life disappeared as a fantasy of remaining ever young emerged. For example, breast augmentation for women tripled in five years so they could appear younger, among other things.

Back to religion. The 1980s and '90s continued to be a boom time for all evangelicals, as "Megachurches" began to appear and quickly proliferate. And supernatural beliefs continued. About 80% of Americans say they never doubt the existence of God. About 50% say they believe in a personal God who answers their prayers and that a heaven actually exists. Some extremist Protestants believe Catholics are going to hell. Millions of Americans are counting on the end times and the return of Christ to be imminent. No need to worry about global warming, because the world as we know it will soon end.

Here again, rather than go into extensive details, I am naming the titles of the numerous chapters in this section in order to outline the topics Andersen covers. They are: Making Make-Believe More Realistic and Real Life More Make-Believe, Forever Young, Kids "R" Us Syndrome, The Reagan Era and the Start of the Digital Age, American Religion From the Turn of the Millennium, Our Wilder Christianities: Beliefs and Practices, America Versus the Godless Civilized World: Why are we So Exceptional?, Magic But Not Necessarily Christian: Spiritual But Not Religious, Blue Chip Witch Doctors: The Reenchantment of Medicine, How the Mainstream Enabled Fantasyland, Cynics and Believers, and Anything Goes Unless It Picks My Pocket and Breaks My Leg. In essence, Andersen is relating his thoughts on why America is uniquely religious and justifying his use of the designation "Fantasyland."

The Problem with Fantasyland: From the 1980s to the Present and Beyond

This last section is the longest and essentially furthers Andersen's contention that the reason America elected an incompetent, unqualified, egotistical, boastful, and ignorant President Donald Trump is to no small extent because of America's high degree of religiosity.

Over two centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson asserted, "our particular superstition, Christianity, is made up of the deliria of crazy imagination." On another occasion he stated, "reason and free enquiry are the only effectual agents against error." It seems that many Americans have not heeded Jefferson's wisdom about reason and free enquiry and instead have accepted the deliria and crazy imagination of Christianity.

Chapter 40 in the book is entitled. "When the GOP Went Off the Rails." Andersen states that, "in the 1990s, America's unhinged right became much larger and more influential than its unhinged left. While the grown-ups and designated drivers on the left managed to remain more-or-less in control of their followers, the reality-based right lost control to its fantasy-prone true believers." He believes one reason is religion. The GOP is now quite explicitly Christian. Ironically, this has happened at the time America is led by one of the least religious presidents in modern times.

The Christian takeover in government happened gradually. In 2008, three-quarters of the GOP presidential candidates said they believed in evolution, but in 2012 it was down to a third and in 2016 only one believed in evolution (Jeb Bush, but he kept it suppressed). And today two-thirds of Republicans admit they would not be likely to vote for a president who does not believe in God. Eight of the fifty states' constitutions prohibit atheists from holding public office, and two, Pennsylvania and Tennessee, require office holders to believe in heaven and hell. How backward can you get? And think about this: half of Republicans and two-thirds of Trump supporters remain convinced Barak Obama is a Muslim.

Corresponding to an upsurge in the religiosity of the GOP were political swings to the far right, with the Tea Party and more prominent libertarianism being examples. Among the libertarians were extremely rich people like the Koch brothers who could finance its spread. Their motto: let business do whatever it wants, but don't spoil poor people with government handouts. Prohibit abortions and gay marriage and never mention Ayn Rand's atheism. House speaker Paul Ryan is a disciple of Ayn Rand, and former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's favourite book is Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Another dubious claim of the far-right, as well as that of Donald Trump, is that global warming is a fiction.

Chapter 42 is entitled, "Gun Crazy." Andersen says that during his lifetime the love of guns has become a fetish, "it is picking our pockets and definitely breaking our legs." Every fourth American owns one or more guns. And not just revolvers, shotguns and rifles, but military-style multi-shot weapons that can kill many people in a very short time. This has partly come about because the wealthy NRA finances political candidates, ever citing the second amendment which gave citizens the right to bear arms. The second amendment was introduced in 1791 in order to form a militia in case the regular army needed extra support in the event of war. At that time single shot muskets and pistols were the basic weapons. The revolver and rifle, much less the machine gun, had not yet been invented. The NRA has cleverly distorted the second amendment to mean every citizen is entitled to own a weapon, ostensibly for self defence. The result is that America has become the most murderous country in the West. The NRA is so powerful that few politicians are willing to push for reform. But perhaps there is hope. After 17 students were killed in a Parkland, Florida high school, students all over America have organized walks demanding reform. Will they be able to maintain the momentum and get results? Let's hope so. Thoughts and prayers just don't cut it any more.

In the last chapter, entitled "As Fantasy Land Goes, So Goes America," Andersen sums up his case that America is a Fantasyland like no other due, to its high level of religiosity, a far-right GOP, and what he calls the fantasy industrial entertainment complex.

On the GOP he opines, "During the first fifteen years of the 21st century, the GOP turned into the Fantasy Party with a beleaguered reality-based wing. A far-right counterculture empowered millions of followers and took over the American right, in the same way their extremist predecessors succeeded in doing to evangelicalism and the gun lobby three decades earlier."

He touches on current economic conditions, noting that the meltdown of 2008 resulted from too much deregulation, too many arcane Wall Street innovations, and some fraud. And how the rich are getting richer while the middle-class is shrinking, and that people in economic jeopardy are prone to look to religion for comfort and assistance. He also mentions surveys showing that devout believers tend to be less educated than non-believers. But encouragingly, surveys also reveal that the number of non-believers is growing. In 1972 only 5% of Americans were disbelievers or doubters. This category is now 23%, and the percentage is higher among the young. About a third of millennials say they are atheist, agnostic, or nothing-in-particular.

On Trump, he quotes a Washington Post line stating, "after he became president he issued an average of four falsehoods or misleading claims a day." And in spite of Trump's irreligiosity, evangelicals approve of him overwhelmingly. Amazing!!

Interestingly, Andersen touches on the subject of atheism versus agnosticism. He calls himself an agnostic and cites a quote by famous Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson who I think puts agnosticism in the right perspective. "I'm not an atheist. I'm a scientist. Atheism is the belief there is no god and you declare there is

no god. 'Come my fellow atheists, let us march together and conquer those idiots who think there is a god – all these other tribes. We're going to prevail.' I would even say I'm agnostic *because* I'm a scientist." Andersen also cites Einstein's famous quote on this subject. It has appeared in previous Enlightenments, but it merits repeating. "In my opinion the idea of a personal God is a childlike one, but I do not share the crusading spirit of the professional atheist. I prefer an attitude of humility corresponding to the weakness of our intellectual understanding of our nature and our own being."

The book concludes by questioning whether or not America's greatness will return, or whether its best days are over. Andersen notes that the much earlier golden ages of intellectual clarity and rigor and brilliance, in both ancient Rome and ancient Greece, lasted less than two centuries. He wonders if America's classical period has also lasted just two centuries, 1800 to 2000, give or take a few decades on each end. Nevertheless, he says he remains more of an optimist than a pessimist. But he admits he does not have an actionable agenda that can save America from its craziness and stop things from getting worse. It will require a struggle to make America reality-based again. A good fight is needed in the public sphere to contain the worst tendencies of Trumpism and prevent further decline.

It seems to me that hope lies mainly in the youth of America. The movement of young people to bring about restrictions in the sale of guns is an encouraging sign. Also encouraging is the statistic that a third of millennials are rejecting supernatural phenomena and are becoming more secular. Will they be able to convince a significant majority that religious beliefs are a fantasy that should be rejected, as has happened in other countries, particularly in Protestant northern Europe? The reality is that it will take time to occur, but it must occur if America is to be great again. As long as Trump is president, things will only get worse. A new leader with the stature of a Franklin Roosevelt, who led America out of the Great Depression with his New Deal, needs to emerge. It is the dismantling of the New Deal that is at least partly responsible for the current mess in America.

Andersen ends the book on a note of optimism. The last three sentences read: "Nations and societies have survived and recovered from far more terrible swerves, eras that felt cataclysmic as they were happening. The good news, in other words, is that America may be at peak Fantasyland. We can hope." I will not hold my breath. (DAH).

The Absurdness of Supernatural Beliefs - Recently I came across an article describing Kierkegaard's Absolute Paradox in which he realized that Christian beliefs present a paradox. Yes indeed, they are a paradox, so why do so many people not realize this and reject them? The paradox is described below.

The Absolute Paradox

Sometime during the first half of the 19th century, the Danish theologian, philosopher, and author Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) commented on what he considered to be the "Absolute Paradox." There are many paradoxes so what could the absolute or ultimate one be? Well, it turns out to be the basis or foundation of Christianity. Which is: the contention that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah, the incarnate son of God, born of a virgin, lived, and then died on the cross to atone for the sins of believers who would be guaranteed a place in an idyllic everlasting heaven after death. Kierkegaard struggled with this paradox but, being a devout believer in the existence of God, he summoned up the *faith* necessary to believe the basis of Christianity to be true, even though reason and common sense would dictate that this supernatural construct was, to say the least, preposterous, impossible and absurd.

But of course, Kierkegaard was not the only one to acquire the faith necessary to become a true Christian. Over the last 20 centuries, billions of people have become practising Christians either by being born into the faith or by conversion. And today Christianity claims over two billion members or adherents, the largest religion on earth. The obvious questions are why and how. Why do some people believe in the absurd, and how did the Christian Church convince so many people over the centuries to accept these questionable beliefs?

As important and intriguing as they are, I will not attempt to suggest answers to these two questions because this is history. What is important now is the future. Although religions may have had some positive attributes in the past, I suggest the time has come for them to be phased out, because if wars are ever going to cease, religion and tribalism must be minimized.

Regarding Christianity, the decline is happening. Adherence to mainline churches is in retreat as more and more young people are rejecting the questionable supernatural tenets of the Christian faith, realizing they defy reason and common sense. The problem is the evangelicals, especially in the United States. How in this scientific age can it be that a third of Americans believe the earth is 6000 years old? More importantly, how can they be convinced not to be so naive and realize they have been misled? A huge challenge!

As if one Christian paradox is not enough, there is another, sometimes called the theodicy argument. If there exists a loving, all knowing, all powerful God, why does he or she allow so much human suffering in the world? The traditional Christian argument is "God is testing our faith, or God moves in mysterious ways." This does not cut it! Conclusion: God does not exist, and by extension neither does the Jewish Yahweh, or the Islamic Allah.

Speaking of Allah, as challenging as it may be to convince evangelical Christians of the error of their ways, the challenge for Islam is gargantuan. The foundation for Islam, based on an Allah that does not exist and on Mohammad's supposed instructions from the Angel Gabriel, is just as preposterous as Christianity's foundation. And there is the added problem of Sunni/Shia animosity that can cause wars.

Yes, there are still billions who call on blind faith in the supernatural and ignore the problems with the "Absolute Paradox" and theodicy. But surely humanity's future will be brighter if this blind faith fades away and disappears. In other words, a society which centres on the flourishing and well-being of human individuals, rather than worshiping a God that does not exist, will be preferable to any alternative. (DAH).

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