

Author Q&A



A WILDERNESS OF MIRRORS: TRUSTING AGAIN IN A CYNICAL WORLD

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By Mark Meynell

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For review copies, or to arrange
for excerpts or author interviews,
contact Emily Varner
evarner@academicps.com
330.461.9277



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Q&A with Mark Meynell, author of *A Wilderness of Mirrors*

This book turns a steady gaze to the development of our current culture of suspicion. Paint the development of this in broad brushstrokes. Why is remembering this cultural history valuable?

The manifestations of mistrust by themselves are ancient. What is new is *their convergence*. If we are to tackle these, we need to grapple with how we got here. First, we live with the legacy of the 20th Century with its industrialization of death and suffering on unprecedented scales. Second, the evolution and outworking of Enlightenment thinking has ingrained a hermeneutic of suspicion into everyday life questions. Doubt seems to have become the highest intellectual virtue, rather than a necessary element in the process to discovering truth and reality. Third, the frequency of political scandals (especially post-Watergate), the increasing sophistication of propaganda, combined with the unprecedented ease of disseminating dissenting views through the internet, makes us reluctant to believe anything we're told by officials.

Consequently, authority *per se* is now suspect – it is not seen as a necessary ingredient in human flourishing for the simple reason that it has been abused by so many for so long.

And this is related of course, to the title. To what does “a wilderness of mirrors” harken back? What captures you most about the image?

The phrase was coined by CIA co-founder James Angleton, referring to his experience of betrayal (and almost complete breakdown after his mentor Kim Philby's defection to the USSR). Angleton seems to me to be a useful if chilling lens for exploring the personal impact of suspicion, even if the majority of us have little to do with the dark arts of espionage.

A number of books have been written with this title because it is a telling phrase and because of who Angleton was. It is a brilliantly simple but evocative phrase – and manages to convey a sense of claustrophobia on a huge scale, confusion and entrapment.

So the Cold War looms large in this picture, correct? Why are you fascinated with this history, and do you find it to be new information for many?

Even if we are ignorant of history, we all live with the consequences of history (see the chilling illustration of Tony Blair in the prep of Iraq war). It is no surprise how quickly commentators have talked of a new ‘Cold War’ today with Putin's new threats to Eastern Europe. The Cold War is important because it provides windows into what happens when a culture

of suspicion becomes endemic. A totalitarian regime will bring that about – East Germany was a terrifying example. When you see some of the same manifestations (like paranoia, suspicion about authority, social fragmentation and alienation) in the democratic west (which is what Solzhenitsyn and Havel both sensed would happen), you know that something really is wrong. It shows that the capitalist west had more in common with the communist east than we might have dared admit – which is why the problems have not gone away.

The irony is that many people today assume we have become totally rootless and futureless – it is part of the current malaise – while actually even this malaise has its historical roots. And I suspect that a key escape root is to analyse what has brought this about, and once we go back to see where wrong turns were taken, we can perhaps find an alternative path. That is certainly what I was seeking to do in the final chapter with its potted worldview journey from premodernism to postmodernism and then the biblical worldview.

You also have a lot of experience in an African context. Tell us about that, and about how this focus applies there as well.

I taught in a small seminary in Kampala, Uganda for 4 years which I loved! Living in a foreign culture does wonders for one's sense of global perspective – it made me simultaneously appreciate my own country more, but also more nervous of nationalism and patriotic exceptionalism. Every culture has things to learn from and offer to every other culture, regardless of its political, religious or historical nature.

It also gave me some insight into how some of the world's poorest countries view the economic and military powerhouses on the global stage. Cynicism and hopelessness are perfectly understandable reactions – the Cold War again illustrates this. African dictatorships were propped up for decades by the west simply because they weren't Communist (like Mobutu in Congo/Zaire). And this affects the church's mission – I was asked more than once by Ugandan friends about the value of western churches sending teams – 'for whose benefit do they really come?' Or the donor culture – with large sums of cash come great power (however well-intentioned the donors might be) – how carefully and consciously do we wield that power? Are we prepared to trust the recipients? Or are we suspicious too? It's easy to see why that feeling might be mutual.

What responses have you received to your speaking and teaching about suspicion?

Many have been surprised that I'd even do a talk about conspiracy theories, for example – but it quickly becomes apparent that all this knits together with their experience. So ideally (and occasionally!), there are 'aha moments' as people see different pieces of the puzzle of contemporary life slot into place. I really hope that happens with this book.

Ultimately, *A Wilderness of Mirrors* is a hopeful message. What is unique about Christian community, about leadership and care? What is the basis of lasting trust, and what can Christians do to help demonstrate that to the world?

The issue at stake in all of this is POWER. The only means for countering the culture of suspicion is therefore to re-evaluate how power operates, both in the world and especially in the church (this is why the RC priest abuse has affected us all, catholic or not – the secular world makes few distinctions denominationally). And the Bible has been doing this from the very beginning – notice how God through Exodus treats the most vulnerable in society (the alien, the widow and the orphan) when they are usually those who suffer most (and first) when power is abused. Any hope for the world depends not ultimately in an intellectually robust apologetic (although that is certainly crucial) – but a deep appropriation of the bible's counter-cultural power models. And of course, Christ himself is the perfect expression of them. He is our model. And he is our hope.

Mark Meynell (MA, New College, Oxford; MA, Ridley Hall, Cambridge) is Associate Director (Europe) for the Langham Preaching arm of Langham Partnership. From 2005-2014, he was a Senior Minister at All Souls, Langham Place in London, and prior to that, Academic Dean and Acting Principal of Kampala Evangelical School of Theology in Uganda. He is a regular speaker at conferences and church retreats. He has written several books, including *Cross-Examined* and *The Resurrection: Encounters with the Risen Jesus*. Mark lives with his wife and two children in London. He blogs at MarkMeynell.net.