

Our Culture is Dead

A new book is coming out this month bearing the arresting title [*Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*](#). It is by Anthony Esolen, a professor of English at Providence College and a prominent cultural commentator. Esolen argues that what we used to think of as American culture has been utterly destroyed (principally by Marxist ideology).

We are duty-bound to resurrect it from the ashes, says Esolen, who presents a comprehensive rebuilding program in every sphere: education, politics, aesthetics, economics, family life, and more.

The book's subject matter is in the same vein as the themes Esolen discussed in a lecture featured on Youtube, provocatively titled: "Culture? *What Culture?*"

What Esolen is arguing is not that our culture is vulgar, shoddy or debased—plenty of others have argued this. Rather, Esolen is saying that culture, as such, no longer exists. We don't celebrate the same feasts any more—or if we do, they are depleted of meaning, just excuses to enjoy a day off from work and have a barbecue. We don't know the same poems, stories and songs. Our lives are no longer built around enlightened leisure, the basis of all true culture, but instead around *busyness*, as manifested in our addiction to work. We have less meaningful social interaction and more virtual interaction. The vast fund of common cultural knowledge that the people of the West used to carry around with them has been replaced with what Esolen calls "anti-culture," a conglomeration of "mass media, mass technology and mass education."

Yes, we are surrounded by media of all kinds. We still have movies (poor ones, mostly) and music (ditto), we have ready access to every movie and song ever created in the past, and books are more plentiful than ever. Some of us still have

religious commitments. But all this does not equate to *culture*: a cohesive, distinctive set of attitudes, beliefs and values that characterize a society. If there is any unifying spirit in society today, it consists of a commitment to pluralism and “diversity.” But this does not in itself constitute a culture.

What Esolen has to say about these matters is of particular interest to me, as I have become fascinated by the subject of cultural decay. Being a natural pessimist about such things, I am inclined to believe that Western civilization has reached its inevitable dissolution. The causes are too complex to go into here, but perhaps the chief culprits are philosophical relativism and the fact that Western culture has simply run its course.

Esolen, in his lecture, expresses a certain agony: “I want culture. But I don’t believe I will live to see it.” What do you think? Is Esolen correct that there is no such thing as a common culture anymore? Is our civilization utterly finished, or is there a chance of reviving it?