

Carl Trueman's new book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Crossway, 2020) is a gift to the church. Trueman applies his skill and effort in analyzing and documenting the leading intellectual figures who contributed to re-imagining the self and culture. He offers an accessible account of Western philosophical history and the leading figures who gave rise to the critical theories and conclusions drawn by Philip Rieff, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Each scholar's thesis on modern selfhood, Rieff's psychological man and the inward focus of the modern self, Taylor's modern social imaginary and the fluid nature of self-understanding, and MacIntyre's emotive ethics based on personal preference, find their intellectual roots in the masters of suspicion and revolution.

Trueman bears the scholar's burden and serves the reader by exploring Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, and Freud. These anti-Christian masters of anti-culture contributed to the revolution of the modern self and the triumphs of the Erotic, the Therapeutic, and of the T, as in LGBTQ+. I am thankful for Trueman's careful study of numerous works on pornography, abortion, radical feminism, homosexuality, and transgenderism. I have read in these areas as well, but Trueman has done so with greater depth and breadth. The Christian can benefit from his analysis and get on with ministering to the modern self. In the late 70s I offered an undergrad course in *Christianity and Western Thought*. I used Colin Brown's *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (1969) and *The Universe Next Door* by James Sire (1976). If I taught such a course today I'd use Trueman's book along with James K. A. Smith's *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (2014) and *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* (2017), edited by Colin Hansen.

Trueman begins the story of the modern self with Rousseau's noble savage, untainted by Western moral codes and Christianity. "The real identity of an individual is to be found in the inner psychological autobiography" (129). Wordsworth, Shelley, and Blake advocate for aesthetic expressivism and contribute to the artistic movement of Romanticism. The essence of the human person is inward emotion severed from any notion of metaphysical reality and the moral dictates of society. Trueman writes, "In a world of empathy-based ethics, the moral sense is ultimately the aesthetic sense. And this means that when the sacred order collapses, morality is simply a matter of taste, not truth" (161).

The modern self was conceived in a world shaped by Nietzsche's dogmatic insistence on self-creation out of nothing and the will to power, and by Marx's thorough-going materialism and the theory of human nature based on social and economic conditions, and by Darwin's dismissal in the name of nature of all metaphysical and theological claims. Nature was left with no teleology, no meaning, no purpose, and no calling. The plasticity of the modern self became inherent in the willed-self, the economic class struggle, and the nature of life. Freud's compelling myth that sex is the key to what it means to be human (204) added the final contributing factor. Freud believed that religion was childish (222) and all motives and aspirations were sexualized.

Trueman discusses critical theory and the politicization of sex as it relates to feminism, the gay and lesbian movements, and transgenderism. He argues that expressive individualism is all about

sex. Trueman writes, “The expressive individual is now the sexually expressive individual. And education and socialization are to be marked not by the cultivation of traditional sexual interdicts and taboos but rather by the abolition of such and the enabling of pansexual expression even among children.” For Trueman this “reflects the logic of expressive individualism in the sexualized world” (268). He concludes with chapters on the “pathologies of our culture,” pornography, feminism, gay marriage, lesbianism, and transgenderism. He concludes, “This book is neither a lament nor a polemic. It is rather an attempt to explain how the revolution of the self came to take the form it has in the West and why that is so culturally significant” (382).

Trueman’s “Concluding Unscientific Prologue” serves as a call for Christians, whose “natural state” leaves them “out of joint” with the world, to seriously and thoughtfully engage these cultural pathologies with prayer and biblical wisdom (383). Trueman’s last line, “. . . *I hope the narratives and analyses I have offered here might form a helpful prolegomenon*” (407). I am grateful for the scholarship, the patient research, and the years of hard work reflected in this excellent volume, but I’d say we are way beyond “prologue” and “prolegomenon.” We’ve been immersed in this subject and dealing with these cultural pathologies for some time.

Here are a few observations:

1. I read *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* while I was leading a Bible study in Genesis at our church. The litany of sexual depravity right at the outset of the human story calls in question the modernity of sexualized expressive individualism. It seems we meet the Romantics, the Nihilists, the Marxists, the Darwinists, and the Freudians before their time. I’m inclined to go with the observation of the Teacher, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9). Romans 1 has never been more relevant and Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth covers a lot of the same bases. We have been dealing with this for a long time – from the beginning.

2. It is helpful to remember that we are still dealing with people made in God’s image. Romans 2:15 is still true. No matter how pagan, no matter how secular, “the requirements of the law are written on [our] hearts” and the human conscience, which evolution has no explanation for, continues to bear witness, accusing and defending. Modern revolutionaries can aid and abet the proclivities of sinful humanity but they cannot obliterate the conscience. The hardwired soul has issues Darwin and Nietzsche cannot explain. We should not despair of being able to communicate the truth of the gospel. The outer shell of the human psyche may seem impenetrable but the inner recesses of the heart resonate with the gospel.

3. The church offers a bold and gracious alternative to the trauma and burden of creating one’s own essence. Trueman is right. We need to understand the seriousness of society’s sexual pathologies but we also need to explain and commend biblical sexuality. Trueman warns that “our social imaginaries as Christians are often too little different from that of the culture around us” (390). Undoubtedly that is true, but that is no excuse for silence and evasion. We have been given great material for dealing with this subject but we will have to apply ourselves. The Lord has provided the people and resources for today’s church. Harry Blamires wrote *The Christian*

*Mind* in 1963. He said this about the sacramental cast of life:

*“A living Christian mind would elucidate for the young a finely articulated Christian sacramentalism which would make sense of, and give value to, the adolescent’s cravings towards the grandeur of natural scenery, towards the potent emotionalism of music and art, and towards the opposite sex. A living Christian mind will not be content to refer to these things only in cold abstract terms which annihilate wonder and transmute them into bloodless modes of experience, unrecognizable as the stuff of passion and exaltation. Nor will the Christian mind allow these riches of life to be vaguely identified with sins of the flesh, or even with a life of the body which it is the Christian’s duty to transcend”* (Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, 175).

4. Trueman rightly claims, “Gay marriage has all the potent therapeutic rhetoric and images on its side. It is about love. It is about happiness. It is about allowing two people to commit to each other. It is about acceptance. It is about inclusivity. And to oppose it is to be against all those things. . .it is to act out of irrational bigotry akin to that which motivates racists” (396).

I agree. Only someone who believes that there is a deeper truth and a more beautiful aesthetic would continue to uphold God’s will on the matter of sexuality. In 1993 our southern California congregation split over the gay issue. We were pressed to publicly affirm gay partnerships and the church leadership voted 26 to 3 to hold to a biblical view of sexuality. We sought to articulate this truth humbly with conviction and compassion. Even so, we were accused by church members of bigotry and Nazism. Our church took a biblical stand in love.

We honor the marriage union in covenant love between a man and a woman even as we celebrate God’s redemptive love for the Church (Genesis 2:24). Marriage is not a self-made relational arrangement but an exclusive, permanent union ordained and protected by God (Genesis 2:18-25; Matthew 5:31-32; 19:4-6; Ephesians 5:31-32). The Bible makes clear that sexual activity within marriage is a great gift intended for procreation and companionship. The Bible also teaches that sexual activity outside this union rejects God’s will and is harmful. This includes extra-marital sex and same-sex sex (Romans 1:18-2:4; 1 Corinthians 6:9-18; 1 Timothy 1:10).

5. Christendom (nominal Christianity) identifies with the spirit of the age and embraces expressive individualism. By contrast, the Household of God is defined by God’s word and the Holy Spirit. The fellowship of Jesus finds itself on the pages of the New Testament. The counter-cultural Body of Christ identifies with First Peter’s Christ for culture strategy. The followers of Christ become “resident aliens” and “chosen exiles” living as foreigners in their home culture. This is not a new phenomenon and North American Christians are learning what it means to be part of the global church. Our vision is not to re-establish Christendom, but to be a gospel-centered, Christ-honoring fellowship of disciples. By preaching and living according to the whole counsel of God the church lives in the Spirit and draws on God’s resources.

6. Sex is a big deal. Trueman insists that it has been weaponized. He reminds us that sexuality

“lies at the heart of what it means to be an authentic person” (35). Life is all about “finding individual sexual satisfaction” and “that one’s sexual appetites lie at the very center of who one actually is” (164). “Sex as identity” Trueman claims, “grips the popular social imaginary” (202). “From art to politics, sex is omnipresent. And thinking of human beings as fundamentally defined by their sexual desire is now virtually intuitive for us all” (204). Sex is everything. Genital eroticism is the central point of life (205). Happiness is solely conceived sexually. “The expressive individual is now the sexually expressive individual” (268). Trueman quotes Augusto Del Noce, “. . .The decisive battle against Christianity could be fought only at the level of the sexual revolution” (279). Self-perceived sexual identity replaces the soulful sense that one is made in the image of God, at least in theory.

I agree with Trueman that sexuality has been politicized and weaponized. But knowing what we know of the human person we know that sexual identity doesn’t really make the person. The quest for identity through sex *for anyone no matter what variation* is bound to fail absolutely. That is what makes this modern search so desperately sad. Sex cannot fill the void.

Nor is sexuality the devil’s only weapon in the war against the gospel. Money, power, ego, and a host of ideologies are also in the devil’s arsenal. The fact that children in elementary public school are forced to deal with the LGBTQ+ agenda is deeply disturbing, but the challenges come in many forms (sports, social media, models of success, false religions, video games, etc.).