

Book Review

Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). 425 pp.

Reviewed by Douglas V. Morton

HOW DID THE WESTERN WORLD end up in a place where sexual norms are obsolete, and many consider it normal to detach gender from biological sex? At what point did an individual's inner conviction gain priority over biological realities? What has happened to bring us to the point where the statement "I am a woman trapped inside a man's body" (19) is accepted as coherent and meaningful by many people? The standard reply from many Christians would be *sin*. The author of *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* stresses that such an answer does not articulate *how* this radical thinking, which only a few years ago would have been considered abnormal and even psychologically dysfunctional, has ended up permeating the thought and culture of Western postmodern society.

Author Carl Trueman, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Grove City College, Pennsylvania, documents how this radical ideology penetrated the Western World. The ascendancy of transgenderism in Western society is due to a brew concocted by the ideas of radical nonconformist intellectuals over the past 400 years. The book is a travel guide through this history. It helps the reader comprehend how past revolutionary intellectuals and their ideas helped to bring Western society to its present state, where declaring one is a woman trapped inside a man's body is seen as perfectly rational. The author seeks to set Western society's current sexual revolution in a proper context of this history. For Trueman, what fuels the dissent against society's past sexual mores is a much more basic revolution—how society has come to view human selfhood. No one, according to Trueman, has been unaffected by this view of selfhood. To various degrees, it has affected us all, including the church.

The author is a biblically committed Christian who seeks to be objective and fair when dealing with ideas contrary to a biblically orthodox Christianity. The reader will not find the book to be an attack upon individuals or a caricature of positions with which the author disagrees. It is neither a lament nor a polemical statement. Instead, the reader will find an experienced historian examining history to demonstrate how the Western world came to the point where it adopted a radical ideology as something rational and normal.

Trueman describes how “intellectual shifts” (26) over the centuries helped cause the “radical and ongoing transformation” (21) of people’s attitudes towards sex itself and the resulting behaviors. His writing is engaging, and this reviewer found the book difficult to put down. Of great benefit to the reader is the author’s organizing the text into four parts, each building on the previous section.

Part One sets forth basic concepts to be used throughout the book as the historical narrative is explored. Trueman enlists three 20th-century philosophers to help guide this tour: Philip Rieff, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre. From Rieff comes the concepts of *the triumph of the therapeutic*, *psychological man*, *the anti-culture*, and *deathworks*. From Taylor, the author adopts the ideas of the *expressive self*, the *social imaginary*, and the *politics of recognition*. He uses MacIntyre to help the reader recognize that ethical discourse has broken down in modern society because the two narrative sides in the conversation do not work with the same narrative standard. They are “incommensurable narratives” (26). Another insight Trueman gains from MacIntyre is that moral truth claims today have become “*expressions of emotional preference*” (26), in other words, how one *feels* on the inside. By enlisting these philosophers’ insights, the author provides the reader with a way to understand why today’s debates concerning ethical issues use highly polarizing rhetoric and thus tend to be fruitless.

In Part Two, the reader tours the 18th and 19th Centuries. Here, the reader is shown how ideas in these centuries helped pave the way for today’s deviant views. The author begins with Rene Descartes’ separation of mind and body. This in turn leads to a more in-depth analysis of the life and writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and then moves on to Romanticism’s poets: William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelly, and William Blake. These men and their ideas helped shift the focus from society and its mores to the individual’s inner life. For these thinkers, society, particularly Christian society, is oppressive. Lifelong monogamous marriage and other Christian sexual codes are seen as inhibitive and overbearing. Next comes Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Through these men and their ideas, the world experiences a loss of any distinctive purpose. It ends up with no teleology. Human identity and morality are severed from any “metaphysical foundations” (27). By the end of the 19th Century, Trueman writes, “the groundwork” had been laid for traditional morality to be rejected by the masses.

Part Three of the book moves into the 20th Century. Sigmund Freud’s “sexualizing of psychology” (28) is engaged, along with the Marxist writers Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse. These men, by appropriating Freud’s thoughts, end up with a heady mix of sex and politics. This, in turn, births the New Left, which perceives oppression as essentially psychological. Sexual codes are seen as the main tools of this oppression. Words and ideas become repressive and inflict psychological damage on a person. Because it is the ruling class that tends to stress freedom of

speech, this must be curtailed so that psychological injury cannot be inflicted on those who have been oppressed by society. Institutions of higher education become bastions of politically correct speech, where the New Left can indoctrinate students into the politically correct ideology that fits this new view on the importance of the inner self as the master of one's life.

Part Four describes how the erotic, the therapeutic, and transgenderism are triumphs of today's sexual revolution. Here, the author examines surrealism in the art world and the mainstreaming of pornography, where sex is detached "from any kind of transcendent meaning" (299). Ultimately, Western society ends up being a place where societal norms are dethroned and the inner self rules the day, from one's views on abortion to sexuality, to where gender easily becomes separated from one's biological sex. The last several chapters of this section show how the rule of the inner self has worked its way into law, the academic community, and college and university campuses.

In his conclusion, the author stresses that the LGBTQ+ issues dominating our culture and politics today are not the problem so much as they are symptoms of something much deeper: the psychologizing view of the self that has developed throughout the past 400 years and brought us to where the inner self and its thinking has come to dominate the facts of the body and the body's biology. This is *expressive individualism* run amuck, where a biological male can say, "I am a woman trapped inside a man's body." Since Western society has become entangled in *expressive individualism*, it is no wonder why such aberrant psychological thinking is now seen as normal and rational, even by the medical community, educational community, and government bodies, including the Supreme Court.

The author gives three brief recommendations to the church. First, he calls for the church to seriously reflect on the danger of its beliefs and practices being affected by society's aesthetics that focus on personal narratives rather than biblical ones. Second, he calls for the church to embrace a doctrinal Christianity orientated around the church as a community. Third, the author notes that Protestants must recapture the importance of "natural law" and recover a proper and "*high view of the physical body*" (405).

The book closes with a plea that the Christian community takes to heart what the second-century church practiced. He chooses the second century for several reasons. Like the second-century church, today's church in the Western world is a marginal group existing in a dominant, pluralist society. Since the second-century church claimed total allegiance to Jesus as king, society around it saw it as subversive. Even its sacred practices were considered immoral by society. Today, ethical issues have been turned upside down, and thus, today's church is likely to run into similar problems faced by the second-century church. Yet, the second-century church laid the foundations for later successes in the third and fourth centuries. The author

believes the second-century church's game plan should be imitated by the church today. Today's Western church needs to exist as a fellowship, bound by its doctrine, living out its faith and life consistently, even as its members seek to be citizens of this world as far as they can remain faithful.

This reviewer might add that not only does the church need to take doctrine seriously, but it also needs to relearn and reemphasize God's two words of Law and Gospel. Without this, the church will quickly fall into a legalistic attitude on one side that will turn away many from its central message, or the church will fall into a Gospel reductionism that treats the Gospel as any good news to our individual felt needs and not as the forgiving, saving and empowering Christ-giving word that it is. While today's church can learn many things from the second-century church, it must go beyond much of the legalism embraced by this church. This can only be done by today's church properly distinguishing God's two words, Law and Gospel.

Having stressed the above caveat, this reviewer recommends the book for anyone who desires to understand the underlying historical forces that have brought the West to where it is today. It can be read by academics and intelligent non-specialists willing to wade through over 400 pages with numerous footnotes.

A shorter version of the book is the author's *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*, published in 2022 by Crossway. This shorter account can be a stand-alone book for individuals or college and university classes. The book may also be used with a 120-page study guide by the same name, or the study guide can be used by itself, along with a set of videos developed by the publisher.

In this reviewer's opinion, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* and *Strange New World* are highly recommended to anyone seeking to understand the historical background that ultimately brought Western society to where it is today in this fast-moving sexual transformation.

The 120-page study guide would be excellent for Bible studies led by someone familiar with *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* or *Strange New World*. Thus, Trueman has enabled readers to engage with this topic on several levels. The first level is an intellectually challenging engagement through *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. The second level is for a basic understanding of the history that brought society to where it is today through the shorter *Strange New World*. The third level is an introduction to the subject for church members through the Bible study booklet and videos. All in all, Trueman has produced a work that can significantly benefit the 21st-century church.

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