

Review Article

From Marginal to Central: Carl Trueman's Analysis of Self and Society

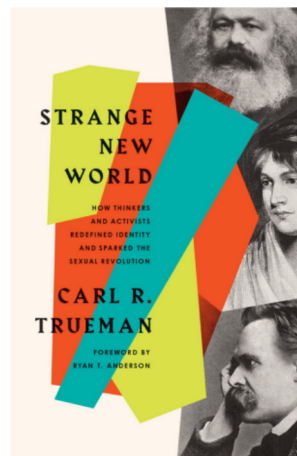
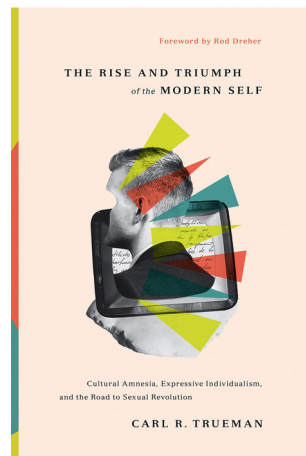
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Carl Trueman,
The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020. pp. 432. ISBN 978-1-4335-5633-3.

Carl Trueman,
Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022. pp. 208. ISBN 978-1-4335-7930-1.

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| Culture | Worldview | Philosophy |
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1. INTRODUCTION

Modern Western culture has seen radical change in recent years, from technological advancement to the complete transformation of what sexual ethics are considered acceptable. Some of these shifts can seem to have materialized overnight, leaving many to wonder how society arrived at this point, where things will go in the future, and what these changes mean for Christians whose resistance of the cultural tide has often been ineffective. Carl Trueman's *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, and its more recent, abridged, popular-level

revision, *Strange New World*, seeks to address these questions, showing that such changes have predictable and recognizable trajectories that can be linked to broader, long-term shifts in how people have understood the concept of selfhood. By “self,” Trueman means “where the ‘real me’ is to be found, how that shapes my view of life, and in what the fulfillment or happiness of that ‘real me’ consists” (*Strange*, pp. 21-22). Consequently, the core of his approach is that social and cultural attitudes toward behaviors and mores have followed deeper shifts in how

personal identity is understood. This review will primarily evaluate the first and longer work (*Triumph*), and will periodically reference the second, shorter work (*Strange*) as necessary.

From the initial pages (*Triumph*, pp. 19-31), Trueman notes that the impetus for the book came from a desire to understand the modern acceptance of transgender identities, when previous generations would not have considered such expressions acceptable. One of Trueman's core ideas is that the normalization of a wider variety of sexual and gender expression "cannot be properly understood until it is set within the context of a much broader transformation in how society understands the nature of human selfhood ... the sexual revolution is simply one manifestation of the larger revolution of the self that has taken place in the West. And it is only as we come to understand that wider context that we can truly understand the dynamics of the sexual politics that now dominate our culture" (*Triumph*, p. 20). The "sexual revolution" that Trueman mentions refers to the steady movement and eventual dissolution of traditional sexual mores and boundaries from the 1960s until today, where the mores of previous generations are not only transgressed but are characterized as stupid and dangerous. Trueman's analysis proceeds in four parts, delineated below.

2. PART ONE: ARCHITECTURE OF THE REVOLUTION

Trueman begins the first major part of his work (*Triumph*, pp. 35-102; *Strange*, pp. 19-30) with an exploration of the idea of selfhood, and how

notions of identity have changed in Western culture. The self is Trueman's starting point in both books because the rest of his conclusions are derived from it. The main idea is that the modern sexual revolution can only be contextualized as a part of a series of gradual changes in how sexuality is connected to modern notions of personhood and identity. The primary way he analyzes these shifts is by examining perspectives on selfhood held by some of the most influential thinkers and shapers of Western culture since the Enlightenment. From the earliest pages, Trueman relies heavily on the language and observations of the philosopher Charles Taylor, specifically Taylor's ideas of the "social imaginary" (the way people think about the world, imagine it to be, and act intuitively and unconsciously in relation to it, making up a cultural framework for what ideas are acceptable), the cultural movement from "mimesis" to "poiesis" (the former being a view that sees the world as having a given order and meaning for humans to discover, and the latter as seeing the world as raw material out of which meaning and purpose can be crafted by the individual), and "expressive individualism" (a label for Western culture which refers to how people find meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires in the quest for authenticity) (*Triumph*, pp. 36-42).

In addition to his frequent references to Taylor, Trueman's analysis borrows significantly from the work of the sociologist Philip Rieff and the ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre. Throughout his work, Trueman applies Rieff's work to his own argument, specifically to his contention that a culture's abandonment of a sacred order leaves them without a foundation and ensures that previously accepted hierarchies of authority will

collapse. The collapse of these authorities leads to a change in fundamental ideas like the nature of personhood (*Triumph*, pp. 42-50). Trueman likewise applies MacIntyre's contention that the social assumptions of Western culture are based on "emotivism" (the idea that all judgments are only expressions of preference, attitude, or feeling) in order to explain how modern discourse about moral concepts and moralistic language is filtered through the broader lens of expressive individualism (*Triumph*, pp. 82-88). Trueman's point in synthesizing the ideas of these thinkers is to establish a basis for understanding how contemporary discourse about ethics has become increasingly subjective due to inner happiness and psychological well-being now being the core values of the modern age.

3. PART TWO: FOUNDATIONS OF THE REVOLUTION

The next part of Trueman's work begins a more thorough exploration of what he sees as the main roots of contemporary views of personal identity and sexual expression (*Triumph*, pp. 105-197). For Trueman, the impetus of modern cultural ideas about personal authenticity and self-expression are most clearly traceable to the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who considered the individual to be the most authentic version of themselves before being shaped and corrupted by social influences. Authenticity here refers to one's expression of their own self-determined way of life; an authentic person to Rousseau would be one who can think and act without the imposition of external social boundaries or moral guidelines.

In Trueman's words, authenticity is achieved by "acting outwardly in accordance with one's inward feelings" (*Strange*, p. 23). Trueman sees a movement from Rousseau toward an exclusively internal locus of legitimation for an authentic identity, and associates Rousseau with the idea that ethical decisions should primarily arise from sentiment (*Triumph*, pp. 116-124). From Rousseau, Trueman highlights several other important thinkers who have contributed to cultural change over time, first highlighting the Romantic-era poets William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, and William Blake (*Triumph*, pp. 129-161). What is important about the Romantics is their emphasis on the power of aesthetics to unlock the truths of human nature and the fullness of human experience in a way that reason or religion could not. Trueman notes that Percy Shelley was the most radical and perhaps the most important of Romantics who can be associated with the idea that institutional religion is oppressive, and that sexual liberation is the key to political liberation (*Triumph*, pp. 148-158).

Following the Romantics, Trueman moves to the turn of the twentieth century and analyzes the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin (*Triumph*, pp. 163-192). For Trueman, these three made possible a new way of imagining human nature, rejecting the prior understanding of human nature with a fixed identity, granting plausibility to the idea that humans are "plastic" and have no intrinsic identity or essence. Nietzsche critiqued the idea that the universe has an objective, discoverable meaning or that a moral law exists within nature, and after declaring the death of God, Nietzsche proposed the humans must create

themselves and their own world, crafting meaning based on the fulfillment of personal satisfaction without recourse to objective or transcendent justification (*Triumph*, pp. 171-176). Marx likewise minimized an objective or transcendent reference point for human nature, conceptualizing persons as caught in a fundamentally material struggle against oppression (*Triumph*, pp. 176-184). Lastly, Darwin provided a framework in which atheistic materialism could be considered viable, and in proposing natural selection he excluded the idea that there is anything special or purposeful about human existence (*Triumph*, pp. 185-188).

4. PART THREE: SEXUALIZATION OF THE REVOLUTION

In his final exploration of important thought and figures in the twentieth century (*Triumph*, pp. 201-268), Trueman spends a significant amount of time analyzing Sigmund Freud. Trueman considers Freud the key figure in his narrative, largely because of Freud's proposition that sex and sexuality lies at the core of what is most important about human development and experience. For Trueman, the discrediting of most of Freud's ideas is irrelevant; what matters is that Freud "provided a compelling rationale for putting sex and sexual expression at the center of human existence and all its related cultural and political components in a way that now grips the social imaginary of the Western world" (*Triumph*, p. 204). In Freud we see the fullest expression of the idea that sexual fulfillment is what it means to be human, which is increasingly an axiomatic assumption

in twenty-first century Western culture. For Trueman, Freud represents a third movement in the development of modern thought and culture, with the first movement represented by Rousseau, the second by the Romantics, and Freud as capstone (*Triumph*, p. 203; 265-268).

Following his discussion of Freud, Trueman explores the rise of modern critical theory and the more widespread application of ideas that were only nascent in the work of Marx, namely that society oppresses the individual and that economic and social relationships must be radically reorganized and redefined for individuals to flourish (*Triumph*, pp. 226-264). Through the lens of critical theory, psychological categories dominate discussions, and Marx's language of oppression is applied to the non-recognition of one's expressed identity. As part of the move toward the turn of twentieth century, Trueman also credits the feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir with being a precursor to modern perspectives of transgender identities, as she asserted that to feel like a woman (or to experience oneself emotionally or psychologically as such) is to be a woman (*Triumph*, pp. 259-260). Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir repudiated the idea that reproduction is essential to female identity and that both the effort to control this, and the limitations of the family structure, were inherently oppressive to women (*Triumph*, p. 263). Trueman connects these developments with the move from expressive individualism to sexually expressive individualism, where freedom is inseparable from sexual liberation and true happiness and fulfillment is to be affirmed in that liberation (*Triumph*, pp. 254-264).

5. PART FOUR: TRIUMPHS OF THE REVOLUTION

Trueman concludes with an exploration of three ways that the sexual revolution has “triumphed” (*Triumph*, pp. 271-382). He begins noting how the recent proliferation and widespread acceptance of pornography has also signified a shift in ideas about sexual expression from the margins of society to the center of the public sphere (*Triumph*, pp. 280-285). In the normalization of pornography, sex is depersonalized, disconnected from relationship, and becomes about personal satisfaction without responsibility. Trueman contends that the end result of pornography’s desacralization of sex is that people become devalued and debased, and the increasing ubiquity of pornography represents for Trueman the “triumph of the erotic” (*Triumph*, pp. 297-300). Second, Trueman argues that changes in public attitudes toward abortion and marriage serve as evidence of the “psychologizing” of the person, and represent the “triumph of the therapeutic” (*Triumph*, pp. 301-336) Third, Trueman argues that the psychological subjectivizing of the self leads natural to modern views of transgender identities. He calls this “the triumph of the T” which is made possible when individual self-consciousness has no fixed or objective reference point and thus there is no hierarchy or authority by which one should retain old categories like the gender binary (*Triumph*, pp. 340-378).

The final pages of both books provide (albeit briefly) some suggestions for ways that believers can move forward and respond in a fruitful and



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positive way to the manifold changes in how society understands what it means to be a self (*Triumph*, pp. 383-407; *Strange*, pp. 169-185). First, he suggests that the church should reflect on the connection between aesthetics, beliefs, and practices, understanding the (undervalued) importance of aesthetics to the communication of the Christian message. Second, he argues that there should not be a distancing from historic, orthodox doctrine but instead the church should refocus on what it means to live as a community in such an individualistic milieu. Lastly, he argues that the church needs to recover “both natural law and a high view of the physical body” (*Triumph*, p. 406). In *Strange New World*, he reiterates these same suggestions but focuses slightly more pointedly on the need for the church to repent from compromising the gospel and embracing the spirit of the age, which should lead to a position of humility toward those with whom we disagree.

6. MERITS AND SHORTCOMINGS OF TRUEMAN'S APPROACH

Trueman's work is timely and thoughtful. His analysis is meticulous and well-researched, and it bears the marks of many years of engaging with these issues at a profound level. A complaint that readers may have while reading *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* is that it is highly philosophical and, at times, quite academic, and can therefore be difficult for lay readers to navigate. However, in writing *Strange New World*, Trueman has answered this problem and provided a more accessible presentation of the same core ideas. If Christians are to understand how to respond appropriately and wisely to the current cultural moment, it must begin with coming to an understanding of what has shaped and led to the current cultural moment. Inasmuch as Trueman seeks to provide a lens through which leaders can come to that understanding, he succeeds.

In most cases, Trueman's tone is refreshingly neutral, and his writing does not carry a sense of moral indignation or self-righteousness. However, there are occasional places in both books where his language sounded somewhat acerbic or polemical, even while he states that he intends to avoid writing that way. For example, in one instance he characterizes a particular perspective on pornography as "sheer stupidity" (*Triumph*, p. 286), and described modern society in the language of "crudity" and "vulgarity" (*Triumph*, p. 300). Even so, his overwhelming efforts at objectivity in nearly every other instance are commendable, and his treatment of even the most sensitive and controversial issues tends to be gentle.

Additionally, some of Trueman's genealogical connections (like his presumption of a link between the Romantic poets and Friedrich Nietzsche, for example) may have plausibility but they are disputable, nonetheless. One can find connections between the thoughts of these figures and contemporary movements, but it is difficult to be sure if someone like Percy Shelley was really as influential as Freud or Darwin.

Trueman's work could be improved with a lengthier or broader exploration of possible responses or actual next steps for Christians and churches, rather than the minimal words of advice at the end of each book. The lack of focus on application or future guidance is not necessarily inconsistent with Trueman's purpose in writing since he seeks to offer something of a prolegomenon to further discussion more than a guide for future action. However, since he does intentionally include a series of suggestions at the end, readers may be left wishing they had more clarity on what to do next, even if they (almost certainly) better understand their cultural moment. Regardless, it is honestly difficult to find many faults with his work; Trueman has done the church and academy a service in providing these tools and it is difficult to imagine any readers, irrespective of belief or background, who would not benefit through engaging with either of these books. The work is obviously limited in that it only engages with developments of Western culture and does not consider non-Western views of identity and sexuality. However, Trueman's purpose in writing necessarily implies and requires this limitation. In terms of the best audience for each work, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* is best suited for graduate

students or highly educated laymen, while *Strange New World* would be most appropriate for the general layman or also for church group settings, as it includes discussion questions at the end of each chapter.

7. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON CHRISTIANITY IN AN ERA OF EXPRESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM

Any astute observer of society and culture will see that the West has reached a tipping point. If expressive individualism is the cultural tide that Christians must navigate, then evangelism, discipleship, and the experience of community will need to adapt. It would be naïve to expect that there will be a swing of the cultural pendulum to a position more favorable to Christianity or to its ideas of selfhood and sexuality. Instead, it seems that the best use of Trueman's work is as a basis or foundation for

believers to develop a coherent and thoughtful roadmap for maintaining a faithful presence within this culture, rather than to separate from society or to be inimical toward culture. The clearest places for a faithful witness are the areas of greatest weakness for expressive individualism. As Trueman hinted at, but did not fully develop, one of the most obvious areas is community. Modern culture breeds division, loneliness, and despair. Therefore, one of the clearest steps forward will be a vision for a unified and loving community that walks together in a common mission, which may be the most effective evangelistic tool of the twenty-first century church.

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