

Carl R. Trueman

**Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity**

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“For traditional Christians, the narrative of this book is inevitably a somewhat depressing one, as it points both to past transformations in the notion of selfhood that challenge our views at every level and indicates that the world in which we now live is hostile to expression of our beliefs on these matters” (p. 169). This is how Dr. Trueman starts his last chapter of the book. I am citing this at the beginning of this review because that is exactly what I was feeling when I was reading this book. Somehow the reader is tempted to think that we have already lost a cultural battle. But have we lost it? Carl Trueman does not leave us in despair in the end. To understand in what world we live and where the “modern sexual revolution” came from, one needs to understand the past ideas coming from the centuries before. And Trueman does his work diligently.

Carl R. Trueman (PhD, University of Aberdeen) is a professor of biblical and religious studies at Grove City College. He is an editor at *First Things*, and a respected historian and theologian in church and academic circles. He is the writer of many books, including the important scholarly work, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. *Strange New World* is just a shorter version of the book. It is a “shorter, more accessible version of the basic argument for nonspecialists who would benefit from the essential narrative, to better understand the historical moment in which they find themselves, and to inform the work they do in ministry, culture, politics, business, and, most importantly, raising the next generation” (p. 12). *Strange New World* is a book written for those who want to understand the times in which we live, the times where the LGBTQ+ culture is rising and its power comes in the political spheres of our modern Western societies. This book is for those who want to know what is going on in the world now, and why there is a crisis of sexual identity among the Western population. To provide the answers and thesis, Trueman wrote nine chapters and made a perfect work of tracing ideas back to the past and connecting them with the present situation.

In the first chapter of the book, “Welcome to This Strange New World,” Trueman introduces us to the situation, “Welcome to this strange new world. You may not like it. But it is where you live, and therefore it is important that you try to understand it” (p. 21). There is confusion in this world and cultural flux that is hard to understand. Society is changing so fast, with its emphasis on sex, gender, and identity. Trueman names a few terms that will help us grasp the moment of this culture. The first thing to mention is the notion of the *self*, connected to *expressive individualism*, *the sexual revolution*, and *the social imaginary*. *Self* is, as the writer provides for us, “the deeper notion of 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" (pp. 21-22). Trueman concludes with this important definition, "The modern self assumes the authority of inner feelings and sees authenticity as defined by the ability to give social expression to the same. The modern self also assumes that society at large will recognize and affirm this behavior. Such a self is defined by what is called expressive individualism" (p. 22). *Expressive individualism* is the term that describes the behavior of the modern self where authenticity is realized only by expressing your inner feelings so that you can live your life whoever you wish to be. That kind of individualism is connected with *the sexual revolution* which is a rising sexual culture that praises the use of pornography, and gay sex and no longer marks any of these and similar things as stigma. This leads to expressing your sexual identity in a way that demands cultural and public affirmation and acceptance of it. But why do we think in the way we think about these things? Trueman here uses the term used by Samuel Taylor called *social imaginary*, "...the way we think about the world is not primarily by way of rational arguments based on first principles. It is much more intuitive than that. And that means that the story of the modern self is not simply the story of big ideas thought by profound thinkers. It is the story of how the way we intuit or image the world has come to be" (p. 29). With these terms being explained now we can explore more about ideas that we trace back to Descartes and Rousseau.

The second chapter is named "Romantic Roots" and it deals with ideas coming from Romantic thinkers, René Descartes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The first one, Descartes, puts authority on the inner life and inner feelings in the first place, while Rousseau goes further explaining in his works how we are our true selves only when we are aware of our inner life and the voice of nature. For him, we are born without original sin, sin is in society. To be free, we need to find our true selves, our inner person. Authors, writers, and thinkers of Romanticism wanted to connect with nature (society is already spoiled), to find true humanity. They would look into nature to find true morals. Trueman summarizes it, "In short, the Romantics grant authority to feelings, to that inner psychological space, that all human beings possess. And those feelings are first and foremost genuine, pristine, and true guides to who human beings are. It is only society, with its petty rivalries, its competitiveness, and its artificial sophistication, that twists, perverts, and distorts those feelings" (p. 46).

The writer moves on to focus on both Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. Chapter three named "Prometheus Unbound" focuses on Marx's and Nietzsche's views on religion. Karl Marx, the materialist in comparison with Hegel who is an idealist, views economic relations as decisive regarding our view on our understanding of reality, and how we think may be different from time to time, just because of economic situation. He also builds on Feuerbach's critique of religion where "he sees religion as deriving from economic conditions. As a result, reli-

gious teachings must be understood in terms of those economic conditions” (p. 56). His understanding of religion is that it is a human creation, it prevents people from rebellion (here he talks against factory bosses and owners), and for people to be free to act - they need to see it as a false thing, and take action into their own hands. Nietzsche goes further, he wants to break free of the metaphysical myths, from moral boundaries, to have true freedom. For him, morality is about taste or aesthetics, and not about right and wrong. This probably sounds familiar to a modern man. Proof of Nietzsche’s philosophy is found in the works of Oscar Wilde.

Chapter four named “Sexualizing Psychology, Politicizing Sex” focuses on Sigmund Freud who sees sex as the greatest happiness. The true realization of self, that is without morals, is in sexual pleasure. For Reich, “the existence of moral principles indicates that sexual needs are not being met. And in a world where sexual needs are foundational to identity, that means identities are being suppressed or denied. The game, therefore, is not to change those principles or merely loosen them. It is to abolish them in their entirety” (p. 85). Trueman says that sex become a political issue. Our identity is focused on its sexual part, which becomes the main thing of who we are. And if it is such an important thing, then it becomes politically normative. We no longer talk about sex and gender in natural terms and views but as part of our political battle, stance, and identity. This sounds even more familiar to us living in the post-modern context.

But have people been reading those philosophers and thinkers? When did these ideas become our reality and how? Trueman explains how we can trace ideas from thought to action in the fifth chapter, “The Revolt of the Masses.” Trueman explores how technology helped us to become masters of power. He continues by exploring the revolt against traditional authority, such as the Church, family, and nation, and leads us to the topic of the loss of sacred order and the rise of personal opinions not constructed on rationality and authority. He also writes about the rise of contraception, pornography, and sex where sexual freedom is the idea and action that leads to true happiness, which then drives us home to elites, political, educational, and other spheres that hold power and provide a stage for expressive self.

In the sixth chapter named “Plastic People, Liquid World,” Trueman continues with the explanation of selfhood in today’s culture. He defines three general concepts that help us understand what is a human. These are the nature of personhood, politics of recognition, and the power of imagined communities. In the first one, the nature of personhood, the author explains sociological anthropology and how we act as individuals in society. As humans, we tend to be recognized, as belonging to some group, which leads us to the politics of recognition. He writes more than on the topic of imagined communities. We all tend to belong somewhere and to identify ourselves with something. With the coming of technology,

a lot of types of communities are on offer. We no longer identify with family and nation, but we create our communities where we have a chance to express ourselves and create our own identities. “Today, the self is entirely plastic, and the external world—right down to our bodies—is liquid, something that offers no firm ground upon which to build an identity” (p. 126). In this way, by making us see their victimhood as moral, the LGBTQ+ community becomes a loud dominant voice and narrative.

Trueman continues with the explanation of today’s sexual revolution in the seventh chapter named “Sexual Revolution of LGBTQ+.” Not everything in this community is perfect. Lesbians and gay people do not always stand with transgenerism. These groups do not share the same opinion about biological sex and gender explanation. Further, the author explains, how these things entered into politics with the document from 2006, named *The Yogyakarta Principles*, which are human rights protection rules about sex and gender for the world governments.

In the eighth chapter “Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness,” the author explains the way how expressive individualism has led to the new definitions of freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Sexual scandals are not stigmas anymore but are often praised. And because the sexual revolution has gone so wild and open, it is in direct opposition to the religion, in fact to Christianity and Judaism in the West. The problem is that tolerance will never be enough for the LGBTQ+ community, but the issue of equality. The psychological self-pattern of their identity shapes their political position in today’s society. Freedom of speech (criticism) is lost, and it is viewed as hatred. This is best seen in the cancel culture movement, where people are being silenced if they are not in the same group as LGBTQ+ or other radical left-wing communities. Trueman states, “Freedom of speech and academic freedom are simply licenses to oppress and marginalize the weak. True freedom is found in closing down such traditional virtues and replacing them with a victim-centered authoritarianism” (p. 166). How to live in such a world? The author tries to encourage us as Christians in the last chapter.

*Strangers in This Strange New World* is a letter to Christians, to the pilgrims in this new society. First, we need to understand ourselves. We have our part in expressive individualism, our faith is personal, and our responsibility to the gospel message is personal. There is a Christian notion of expressive individualism connected with human dignity in God’s order of things. Trueman teaches us to stay humble while examining ourselves and our beliefs while being cultivators of humility while we engage with those we do not have common ground. We can learn this from the ancient church and its difficult situation where the community and fellowship together with the development of theology played a significant part. He encourages us to look to older confessions of faith and to teach our churches and families the whole counsel of God while worshiping God and studying the Scriptures (we can turn to Psalms, which are expressive with emotions

and theology). Trueman also points out that we may find help in natural law and theology of the body. In the end, we do not despair, and neither we are optimistic. Things will get worse, for some time, but let's stay realistic, in the end, God wins, "... let the lamentation be the context for sharpening our identity as the people of God and our hunger for the great consummation that awaits at the marriage feast of the Lamb" (p. 187).

In conclusion, the book leaves a concise and very deep impact on the reader. Many times we do not think why some things in our societies are as they are. We do not think very often about the notion that ideas indeed have consequences. This book is full of proofs that leave us in wonder - where are we going with all the new selfhood concepts of humans and what consequences are we yet going to see? Carl Trueman does a perfect analysis for a normal reader to understand the times in which we live. His writing is very simple, and his style of bringing the discussion into the text at times may cause people to take notes and make book-marks at many places in the book. Indeed, every word of this book is helpful for a Christian, or traditional person living in today's society.

*Strange New World* is a book that every leader should have a chance to read, especially European Christian leaders who are waiting for all the trends from the West to come to Europe in larger form. This book can help you understand and navigate how to find the way to be salt in this strange new world. Christians are confused, they do not know how to prepare for the coming trends and how to protect their families from the influence of the things mentioned above. My recommendation is, to get this book, read it, and share it with others, whoever you are, pastor or worker. This work is scholarly, but people should not be afraid. It is not written on a level that a layperson might always have a hard time reading. The book does point you to certain bibliographical references and these are worth checking. Readers might only sometimes stop and check on the internet some stuff that Trueman mentions. At the end of the book, there is an index and a short glossary. If someone needs to find more information about the topic of the book, that person might read a larger book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. If you want to share this message with your church and friends, then this book would be a guiding book for understanding today's culture.

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