

Book Reviews

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.

Carl Trueman's *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* is a useful and competent work of Christian scholarship. However, one experiences a combined sense of disappointment and frustration because more might be expected from this author. This does not derive from any major weakness in the style or structure of the book, or from a failure to give clear explanations for the points he seeks to make. Trueman presents both fact and analysis in a manner that is informative, coherent, thought provoking, logically sequenced, and easy to understand. Nor are the core subject matter and the legitimacy of Trueman's concerns in question. For some time many of us have quietly longed for an accessible and engaging treatment of the historico-philosophical background to the present moral and cultural chaos by a Reformed scholar of Trueman's stature and academic credentials.

At the heart of the book, Trueman identifies a series of historically influential modern and postmodern literary, philosophical, and artistic narratives in an engaging analysis of the elements that link them together. He then uses that foundation to build an explanation of the origins of cultural Marxism in its espousal of sexual and gender perversion, not merely as activities but as allegedly positive attributes comprising a core component of human identity. In doing so, Trueman provides the historical context for what he and others refer to as "the sexual revolution" of the past five decades and does so competently *as far as he goes*.

From a Reformed Christian perspective (it is legitimate to presume Trueman, a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and former

professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, to be writing from such a perspective), the first inkling one has of Trueman's reluctance to go as far as he ought is found on page 24 of the book, where he makes the following observation:

First, one can so emphasize a universal, metaphysical principle to which one is committed that one fails to understand the particulars of what one is analyzing Those who hold to grand schemes of reality can all tend this way. The Christian might be tempted to declare that the reason for the sexual revolution was sin. People are sinful; therefore, they will inevitably reject God's laws regarding sexuality. The Marxist might declare that the reason for the Russian Revolution was class struggle. Rich people exploit the poor; therefore, the poor will inevitably rise up in rebellion. Within the framework of each belief system, the answer is true, but in neither case are such blunt statements capable of explaining the particulars of the events in question.

None would disagree that, in order to give an accurate, thorough, and intelligible account of origins and outcomes, in addition to highlighting the general cause, one must strive to identify and articulate the nature and character of particular and proximate secondary causes so as to leave as little doubt as possible regarding the connection between all the relevant causes and the effects that allegedly derive from them. Nevertheless, this paragraph raises some important and disturbing concerns as to Trueman's surprisingly cursory treatment of the origin, character, and operation of sin, the essence of which is surely pivotal to the ultimate credibility and usefulness of his thesis.

First, although it is almost certain that this was unintended, in illustrating the importance of the specifics of detailed historical investigation over the generalizations of "grand schemes," it seems to me that the thrust of Trueman's argument could risk leaving the unwary reader with the impression that he regards human sin as a subjective ideological construct rather than an objective and all-pervasive reality whose origin is firmly and historically located in time and on earth, as described in the Genesis account. This impression derives from the rather confusing juxtaposition that he makes between the conviction of the Christian that the reason for the sexual revolution was sin and the conviction of the Marxist that the reason for the Russian Revolution was the class struggle. Although designed to illustrate the technical point that a true understanding of cause and effect cannot be obtained by reference to generalities alone, the comparison leaves Trueman overly exposed, at least in my view, to accusations of postmodernist relativism in his understanding of the fall and its consequences. Indeed, from the way in which he presents the illustration, one can be

forgiven for concluding that sin, as an actor and cause, is real and valid only within the subjective mindset of a Christian and that the class struggle, as an actor and cause, is real and valid only within the subjective mindset of a Marxist. In truth, however, not only is it the case that sin and the class struggle are equally real and valid, but sin, as the potent and ubiquitous consequence of the fall of man, is as much the root cause of that brutal conflict that Marxists term class struggle as it is of the sexual revolution.

The second concern is that Trueman's somewhat cursory treatment of sin in this passage of the introduction provides an uneasy foretaste of the scant attention that is paid to its importance in the book's core analysis. Indeed, more than that, it is a troubling precursor to the author's unexpected silence as to the sovereign centrality of the victorious, risen, and ascended Christ and the omnipotence of the word of God, of the gospel of redeeming grace, in its role as the power of God unto salvation and the pulling down of the strongholds of sin and Satan, both individually and corporately, including those very fortresses of Western paganism over whose existence Trueman's book (despite his expressed hope to the contrary) becomes a somewhat demoralizing lament.

In this regard, let us take the example of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose philosophy Trueman seemingly considers to be the prime source and *sine qua non* of postmodern expressive individualism and the sexual revolution. As with all the various currents of philosophical thought that form the focus of his book, Trueman provides a very eloquent and accessible summary of the key components of Rousseau's thought pertaining to humanity in the hypothetical state of nature and humanity in the context of society. In this regard, he highlights the Genevan philosopher's distinction between the "Two Loves," *amour de soi-même* ("self-love") and *amour propre*:

In sum, self-love in the natural state is a good, leading individuals to seek self-preservation. *Amour propre*, however, is the result of rivalries and interpersonal competitions and conflicts that society generates. This is what renders men and women corrupt, disingenuous, and false to themselves. ... Gone is the innocence of the natural man whose desires and needs were simple and matched each other perfectly. Now a competitive social sphere has been introduced that creates needs—to be the best, the most highly regarded, to be the master—which by definition cannot be satisfied for all people all the time. Thus comes inequality and the strife and struggles that mark human existence.

... For Rousseau, the individual is at his best—he is most truly himself as he should be—when he acts in accordance with his nature. This is the deep principle of Rousseau's understanding of authentic personhood and of ethics. And conscience is the internal, pristine and God-given voice that points each one in this direction. It is society, with its temptations and corruptions, that prevents conscience from being the omnipotent governor of human action. (117–23)

On the basis of such a fulsome and engaging summary analysis of the foundational principles of Rousseau's moral philosophy, one would have hoped that Trueman might have deepened his analysis further and thereby enhanced the fruits of his investigation by deconstructing these philosophical principles and assessing them through a biblical lens. Speaking merely as one learned in the law, I believe that he could probably have done so without necessarily compromising the historiographical thrust of his narrative.

For example, given the content of the above analysis, one would have expected Trueman to explore the historical background of Rousseau's emphasis on conscience, as opposed to reason, as the principal driver of human nature and identity. The logic behind this assumption, particularly in a Christian context, is that, in identifying the human conscience as the headquarters of individual thought and action, Rousseau is by no means the innovator that Trueman would have us believe but stands very much on the shoulders of the antischolastic legal philosophy formulated by Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon almost two hundred years previously. And, as we shall see, the key to any analysis of how humanity arrived at where it presently stands in terms of the rise and triumph of the modern self is not so much culture per se but the indispensability of law in the formation of culture, and the approach adopted by man in the identification and formulation of legal norms.

The supremacy of human conscience in the thought of the two German Reformers is well summarized by Harold Berman in his book *Law and Revolution, II*.¹ As Berman points out, unlike his Roman Catholic scholastic predecessors,

Luther subordinated reason to conscience. Conscience, he taught, is not merely the skill of applying rational principles of natural law and knowledge. Conscience is the bearer of man's relationship with God, the religious root of man that shapes and governs all the activities of his life, including both his rational apprehension and his application of the natural law. ... Luther did not deny that all people possess the rational faculty of distinguishing between good and evil; he differed from the Roman Catholic scholastics, however, in their assertion that this faculty is independent of, and even superior to, conscience.²

Similarly, notes Berman, Melanchthon taught that

God has implanted in all persons certain "elements of knowledge" (*notitiae*), which are a light from above, a natural light, without which we would not find our way in

¹ Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution, II: The Impact of the Protestant Reformations on the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

² *Ibid.*, 75.

the earthly kingdom. These inborn moral concepts, argued Melanchthon, are “facts of [human] nature,” which form the premises, not the objects, of rational inquiry. They are thus beyond the power of human reason either to prove or disprove Human reason, being corrupted by original sin, is incapable not only of proving the existence of certain fundamental inborn moral concepts but also of apprehending and applying them without distortion.³

For that reason, natural law must always be subordinated to biblical law, which is revealed by faith and summarized in the Ten Commandments.

The lethal problem with Rousseau’s philosophy, which Trueman somehow fails to point out, is that, while emphasizing the key role of conscience as the core of human nature and the root of human endeavor, Rousseau rejects the relevance of the external biblical law as fulfilled in the risen Christ and falsely ascribes the perfection of the latter to the conscience of man, which in truth, like every other aspect of human nature in its unregenerate state, is utterly corrupt. Accordingly, rather than simply opposing the gospel, Rousseau confronts us with an antigospel that subtly but effectively turns the truth of God’s word on its head. Like the Pharisees described in Matthew 15, who complain about Jesus’s disciples’ habit of eating without first washing their hands (v. 2), Rousseau is convinced that, in the case of man, purity lies within and defilement comes from without. However, as Jesus makes plain in verses 18–19 of the same chapter, it is those things that proceed from the heart and come out of the mouth that are the true pollutants.

As such, Rousseau’s philosophy presents us with nothing radically new but merely repackages, in a later historical context, the very deception that precipitated the equally historical fall in Eden: the desire for complete autonomy from God, which culminated in the desire to ascertain good and evil apart from the will of God so clearly revealed in his law, which culminated in the degeneration of human nature into total corruption and the inability of man in his own wisdom to recognize that corruption, which culminated in the descent of degenerate man into the state of a self-centered law unto himself.

Finally, then, the historical root of the present-day Western collapse, whose trajectory Trueman valiantly and eloquently sets out to trace, lies not primarily in culture, as Trueman argues, but in law. The ideas variously promulgated and the doctrines of humanity variously defended by the likes of Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and other secular thinkers whom Trueman features in his account are all symbolic of

³ Ibid., 79.

the disaster that ensues when finite, corrupted, divided, and ever-restless humanity actively plots to abandon the validity and normativity of the perfect and everlasting law as revealed by God the Creator and fulfilled in Christ the Redeemer. For, by way of substitute, man inevitably seeks to occupy God's throne by devising legal norms, ostensibly perfect in nature and eternal in value for the governance of self and society, that are sourced in corruption and founded on nothing more than a grandiose deception as to his own identity, value, and purpose. And that is precisely what "cultural" Marxism has succeeded in doing in the West in our present era.

On that basis, if the sociopolitical demise of the anglosphere can be traced historically to any of the mainstream philosophers, it must surely be traced to Sir Francis Bacon, whom Trueman surprisingly dismisses in a couple of lines as a relatively insignificant player in the whole drama. Bacon, philosophy's Lord Chancellor,⁴ who behind the mask of orthodox sixteenth-century Protestantism, in writings such as *New Atlantis* and *Holy War*, arguably sets out the blueprint for a philosophy that gives "human beings prerogatives of the gods: dominion over all other beings, dominion over the universe, and immortality."⁵ Nietzsche repeatedly cites Bacon as one of his chief influences. In turn, Bacon gave philosophical birth to Jeremy Bentham. Trueman completely ignores Bentham, and yet Bentham's legal philosophy of utilitarianism runs to the heart of his book's inquiry, positing that the foundation of all law should be rooted and grounded in human emotion and feeling, taking as its reference point neither the law of God nor rationally objective principles derived therefrom, but instead whatever fosters maximum happiness or pleasure in the corrupt human heart. Utilitarianism is the philosophy that, in the English-speaking world, little by little, over a period of two hundred years, succeeded in supplanting, in the hearts and minds of legislators and judges alike, the sacred philosophical pillars of the covenant-based English Common Law crafted under the light of the gospel, with all its biblical roots and fruits. Given that we are all unavoidably and deeply impacted by the laws governing the communities in which we live, utilitarianism has arguably had more influence in molding the psyche of succeeding generations of ordinary men and women than the ideas of philosophers, poets, and artists with whom (however popular they may be in academia) most people have never come into direct contact.

This is the story I was hoping Trueman would tell, at least in part. Sadly, I have been disappointed. Somebody with scholarly credentials still needs

⁴ See Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes and Nietzsche* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), Part 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

to tell that story from a Reformed Christian perspective, and they need to do so sooner rather than later.

ANDREW MUTTITT

Director
Wardell Graham Consulting
Johannesburg

Scot McKnight. *Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021.

Hans Boersma. *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021.

The relation between biblical studies and dogmatics is the subject of a perennial debate often resembling a vicious circle: biblical exegesis needs a theological framework to avoid becoming a simple catalogue of mutually contradictory historical descriptions ... but theology must remain tethered to Scripture, taking into account the literary and historical contexts in which it was given. This discussion has been given fresh expression in two recent books, provocatively titled *Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew*, by Scot McKnight, and *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew*, by Hans Boersma. Although written independently of each other, each author has read his counterpart's book and offers an introduction and friendly rejoinder.

The result is an invigorating conversation between two world-class and well-read theologians. Although no reader will be entirely convinced by either approach, the debate helps clarify the issues involved and points out where underlying problems can be located. The following review will summarize some major points of each book, highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each, and offer some concluding thoughts on the question.

McKnight begins by stating his fundamental position: "I am convinced that we must begin with the Bible, and we must let the Bible speak on its own, and we must cede to the Bible the categories it provides" (3). From this thesis, he develops five convictions, which he fleshes out in five chapters. Theology needs

- a constant return to Scripture,
- to know its impact on biblical studies,
- historically shaped biblical studies,
- more narrative,
- and to be lived theology.