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Reformed and Always... Deconstructing?

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Reformed and Always...Deconstructing?

As a matter of survival, I generally stay away from social media mud-slinging contests. However, last June, when someone posted an anti-COVID vaccine link, I spoke up. COVID had already taken a neighbor and church member, the organist who lit the church services of my youth on fire—with the organ—and this fall it would take a local business owner and father of three.

But before commenting, I followed the link. It led me to a speech by Ryan Cole, MD. One of Dr. Cole's first lines was to thank the other speakers at the conference, including lawyers, who would "fight for freedom." I stayed with his opening comments for less than two minutes, at which point Dr. Cole said about the COVID vaccine, "I don't even like calling it a vaccine." When someone from the audience offered "fake vaccine," Dr. Cole parroted the response: "A fake vaccine...the clot shot, needle rape—whatever you want to call it." I had heard enough. Clearly, this was someone—in a white coat, naturally—speaking to a crowd that had already made up their minds about what they wanted to hear.

And he was giving the audience exactly what they wanted, in just the terms they wanted. It sounded like a pep rally.

Dr. Cole was also violating one of the first principles of college composition, which I teach: because of the biased context, Dr. Cole could not be delivering science or evidence. He was simply "preaching to the choir," to use a cliché, a "teacher," (really a slick salesman) saying what itching ears wanted to hear.

A lot of preaching to the choir happens today; choirs are legion, as are preachers. It certainly can and does happen in higher education, too, and yet any good academic operates by the same rule as college composition: to count as evidence, research must be shared in a wide enough context that it can be tested by experts from many backgrounds.

However, even among academics and pastors and people who should know better, there's been a revival of what I'll call Christian "worldviewism," that looks a lot like the fiasco that was the Dr. Cole video. In a nutshell, the worldviewism I'm talking about goes something like this: THE Christian worldview is right and has always been right; in fact, it has never been wrong, not even once.

Some recent examples of worldviewism come from pastors and other Christians with significant platforms. Consider Pastor Matt Chandler's statement that, "You and I live in an age where deconstruction...has become some sort of sexy thing to do." Or Bethlehem College and Seminary President Joe Rigney writing that empathy is a sin. Both statements created a mild social media uproar for the way they tend to consolidate power of THE Christian worldview. Offer criticism of THE Christian worldview and you're just trendy at best or a dangerous deconstructionist at worst. Empathize with an LGBTQ+ person who hasn't felt at home in the

church and you're just...a sinner? In either case, the authority of THE Christian worldview becomes more centralized, more untouchable.

On a more academic level, I saw worldviewism in an online seminar critiquing Critical Race Theory, where the constant chorus was how CRT failed to defend the life of the unborn—therefore, could it really be justice? If you really want justice, the claim was, the church has had it all along. Then, in the Q&A at the end of the seminar, came the first question: “If the church had focused its energies on racism, couldn't it have done a lot better for black and brown brothers and sisters?” Yes, came the answer. In fact, the church actively perpetrated racism for far too long. The implication is, of course, that racism was terrible and in the past. Worldviewism is quick to take a triumphalistic tone, fearful of admitting feet of clay.

This worldviewist approach is also what bothers me about a new book about sexuality that many churches seem to love and academics seem to...mainly not love. Carl Trueman's book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* came to our university through a pastor's recommendation. My own church used it as one of the bases of a seminar on sexuality, largely to affirm our church's position on sexuality over and against another church in the denomination.

And that's the first warning sign that *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* is worldviewism: when it's set in the arsenal as firmly “on our side,” to be used against the other side.

Of course, books can be used against the intentions of their authors, so does Carl Trueman intend his book to be used as a weapon?

The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self is 400+ pages of Trueman walking us through the intellectual history of Western culture to illustrate how we've come to our present understanding of sexuality—where gay marriage is legal and transgenderism is on the rise. As the review by Felipe do Vale at the London Lyceum says, Trueman's book “places a finger on a number of issues on which Christians ought to reflect carefully.” As that review goes on to say, however, Trueman cherry picks his topics. Dr. do Vale writes,

“...[S]ame-sex marriage and bathroom bill debates fit into a fairly recognizable cultural narrative and set of political associations, but repeating a cultural narrative is not the same as giving a historical analysis of modernity. The issue with an approach such as this is that the argument is only compelling to the extent that the reader already agrees with Trueman's judgments about what is problematic about modernity and its current cultural issues. It would be hard to see it convincing someone not already on board with a particular cultural standpoint.”

This echoes my problem with Trueman's book. Like Dr. Cole's “white coat” lecture, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* is preaching to the choir.

And as such, one can anticipate Trueman's arguments.

Trueman's basic claim is that a succession of radical thinkers has moved us from a more stable view of the human being to one characterized by "expressive individualism"—a radical view of the self that prioritizes self-expression over biology and resulting in people saying things like, "I'm a man trapped in a woman's body," and leading to a rise in transgenderism.

The thinkers that Trueman has in mind are the usual suspects. If you've taken a Western Civilization course somewhere along the way, or even if you've been paying attention to Christian bumper stickers and t-shirts, you can guess them. Go ahead, close your eyes and try. Got them?

Yep, that's right. Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud.

Trueman's points about these thinkers are at times good reminders. Freud, for example, has had an outsized influence on the world and our ideas about sexuality. My science colleagues were much less impressed with Trueman's treatment of Darwin, who is portrayed more to stereotype, as a sort of plotter whose goal was to undermine biblical faith rather than a careful scientist whose theories are not going away.

Closer to my own discipline of English, Trueman predictably blames the Romantics for the current state of things, specifically the Romantic poets. "While he would no doubt have retched at the thought," Trueman declares with a kind of magician's panache at one point, "William Wordsworth stands near the head of a path that leads to Hugh Hefner and Kim Kardashian." Sure, that's a catchy statement, and Trueman even makes a plausible dot-to-dot argument about these thinkers—if your purpose is to have a theory ready at hand with which to pick a fight, or a tract to explain why the world is going to hell in a handbasket. And the corollary to this tract, of course, seems to be about how right we are: THE Christian worldview has always been right; in fact, it's never been wrong, not even once.

This triumphal reclamation of THE Christian worldview seems to be Trueman's larger aim. The likes of Hugh Hefner, Kim Kardashian, Ariana Grande, and Kaitlyn Jenner stand like barbarians at the gates of Western culture, threatening to overrun it, and Trueman is Pope Gregory defending the faith one more time.

Actually, it's in Trueman's choice of barbarians that he makes himself susceptible to Chandler's bogeyman, deconstruction. With Trueman's somewhat strange emphasis on Ariana Grande, it seems like he might simply be jealous. Here he is, a white man full of the best wisdom of Western culture, but nobody listens to him. Meanwhile, Ariana Grande has legions of followers.

But—Ariana Grande? Give me Madonna any day, says this Gen Xer. That is, we've seen this before, Carl.

Yes, we should think about the fact that trends in culture come from ideas. My problem is that Trueman's delivery is similar to that of Dr. Cole's. Is there any other way to see Wordsworth? Darwin? Nietzsche? Reading Trueman, one wouldn't think so.

But because this book preaches to the choir, as people read the book, the effect can be the same as misinformation online: the seemingly airtight case Trueman makes—airtight because he does not give any airtime to any other way of thinking about these thinkers or contemporary trends—reads like a test of orthodoxy, not just on issues of sexuality but on THE Christian worldview and its enemies. Where do you stand on LGBTQ+ rights? On Darwin? Nietzsche? Ariana Grande? For readers in churches all over the country, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* seems ready to be plugged in to bookshelves as part of Orthodoxy 101.

The book's problem, then, is somewhat a problem of audience. Trueman is not really writing as an expert to other experts. If he were, he wouldn't attempt to make his case seem so monolithic. He couldn't. Biology profs can't be so dismissive of Darwin. His work is more complicated than that. Nietzsche is tremendously useful to understand the present moment, and not simply as a bad guy. But because Trueman finds his audience among readers who are eager for his standard of orthodoxy, he is able to reduce and dismiss these thinkers as bad guys.

Late in the book, in the "Concluding Unscientific Prologue," Trueman writes,

"It is easy to imagine that, in thirty or forty years' time, adults who were used as, in effect, experimental subjects for their parents' trendy gender ideology and subsequently had their minds, bodies, and lives traumatized by medical treatment, will sue their parents, the doctors, and the insurance companies who financed the whole mess. Without wishing to sound too much like a Marxist, it is quite likely at that point that capital will determine the future shape of the morality of gender ideology, and transgenderism will become a minority interest once again."

It is easy. In fact, the internet is already full of claims and counter claims about gender reassignment regret. Trueman's prophetic vision here is another softball for his audience.

My point is that Trueman doesn't acknowledge any other possible conversations about sexuality in our present cultural moment, and that makes it hard for me to take his book seriously. In fact, in the above passage, I find Trueman's anxiety about being labeled "a Marxist" fairly funny. We're certainly not the first generation where someone is making a profit by redrawing gender lines. Failing to consider how the market has been part of this conversation all along seems naïve, or as is perhaps more likely, shows that Trueman brackets out the market for fear of sounding "like a Marxist," which is itself another of the major tests of Christian orthodoxy, at least in academic circles.

We live in a "therapeutic age," Trueman says. As I listen to students talk about their mental health, I don't doubt it. But to resort to Trueman's worldviewism seems, despite his claims to the contrary, like nostalgia. And because Trueman traces our "cultural pathologies" back to circa 1700, Trueman's argument implies that if we could only get back to sometime before that, we could get back on track.

For argument's sake, let's say that we could go back—say, all the way to the Reformation. Would the Reformers really fear deconstruction? Or Critical Race Theory? Or evolution? Or even new ideas about human sexuality? Isn't it the Reformers who have opened us to all this hard thinking?

The Reformation isn't my area, but Reformation types like to throw around *semper reformanda*, always reforming. Always reforming implies a process of unreforming—of something like deconstruction—before reforming again. The Reformation meant the church was newly open to knowledge in a way it hadn't been before, that the church could be fully open to the book of nature as well as the book of scripture.

And that is hard. We'd like one book, the Bible as playbook, rulebook, encyclopedia; we'd like it to contain all knowledge.

But the Bible isn't trying to anticipate the complexities of the modern world. Rather, it is a solid foundation from which to explore all creation, confidently and without fear, as humans made from the humus but also in God's image, and invited to name all things. .

The bigger question, the continued big question, one that's at least as old as Galileo, is how will we let the book of nature relate to the book of scripture? How will we allow all truth as God's truth—including truth revealed by the "bad guys" of intellectual history—to continue to work on us?

For me, a greater cause for alarm is that many Christians from Reformed traditions don't see the narrowness in Trueman and in worldviewism generally. As Kristin Kobes DuMez put it recently on Twitter,

Thing is, I'm part of a Reformed tradition that holds a high view of intellectual life and of Scripture. It means that we investigate original (sic) languages, historical context, and reject a narrow literalism for an interpretive framework that centers the redemptive work of Christ.

But, the question might be asked, isn't worldview our area? As Reformed Christians, hadn't we better defend Christian worldview?

Yes, if by worldview you mean a reformed—constantly deconstructed and reformed again—worldview. And to remember that worldview, even Christian worldview, is not one, monolithic thing, it's not THE Christian worldview. That's not how worldview works.

And yes, we Reformed Christians have been guilty of worldviewism. We have certainly used worldview against people. In this very article I haven't even mentioned trans people, whom this conversation really affects. Again, Kobes DuMez:

I've walked alongside many, many LGBTQ students who struggle enormously. This is not "expressive individualism" or whatever you want to dismiss it as. They're not looking for easy answers. This is deep, soul-searching agony. Existential agony.

Dr. do Pale likewise emphasizes that Trueman's book offers no pastoral help, no help for the church in ministering to actual human beings: "In the end, it does not seem to me that Trueman's book encourages careful and gentle attention to the individuals who may walk through the doors of any church, especially when it reduces them to their desire for sexual fulfillment.... The picture is just much more complex than that."

When preaching to the choir, whether that be Dr. Cole talking to anti-vaxxers or Carl Trueman talking to Christians who want to draw battle lines in the endless culture war, worldview really does get used against people.

But in reformed worldview conversations, that adjective "reformed" means we're committed to something more. We're committed to complexity, committed to deconstruction, and to reforming again beyond that deconstruction, committed to listening to opposing voices to not only hear what they have to say but to take to heart their critiques, to even call them prophetic when they are. It means we can admit when we're wrong and that we're not even afraid of ideas that seem to challenge scripture. It means we're committed to ideas and people, too.

Maybe most importantly, it means we're committed to conversations—across lines, with all kinds of people made in God's image, admitting we don't know it all, admitting we've gotten it wrong in the past, admitting we're all just trying to figure it out, deconstructing and reforming, and deconstructing again and reforming again. And again and again and again.