

# The Desecration of Man and the Crisis of Western Civilization

By Patrick Keeney

We live in feverish times. The daily news arrives as a succession of cultural upheavals, institutional breakdowns, and political fragmentation. It is accompanied by a pervasive sense that the moral grammar of Western civilisation is becoming increasingly unstable. Ancient truths and inherited verities, once the fixed points by which societies oriented themselves, are no longer merely questioned, but subjected to systematic suspicion and, increasingly, open repudiation.

What lies beneath this turbulence? In *The Desecration of Man: How the Rejection of God Degrades Our Humanity*, Carl R. Trueman argues that our cultural disarray reflects, at its deepest level, a crisis in our understanding of the human person itself.



Trueman is a professor of biblical and theological studies at Grove City College, though he makes it clear that his book is not an exercise in Christian apologetics.

Fundamentally, it is a work of anthropology, an inquiry into the nature of the human person and the conditions necessary

for human flourishing. Beneath the political controversies and ideological disputes that dominate contemporary culture lies a more fundamental question: What is man? What is the human being for? Upon the answer to that question rests not only our moral and political order, but also our educational institutions, our understanding of rights, and ultimately our conception of civilisation itself.

Trueman borrows the term “social imaginary” from the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor to capture how ordinary people understand their situation in the world. Trueman notes that the central modern assumption is that of “expressive individualism,” an understanding of the human in which the self is autonomous and self-creating, unbound by any transcendent moral order or inherited conception of human nature.

Trueman is hardly alone in this analysis. Here is how the political philosopher Pierre Manent summarises the temper of our times: “... what makes us human is our *autonomy*, our capacity to give ourselves the law, and, more generally, to *make ourselves*. The human being is defined by self-creation and freedom from all limits and constraints” (emphases in the original).

Yet once human identity is severed from any objective account of what man is, the person becomes increasingly defined by desire, will, and self-expression alone. Trueman writes, “The belief that we are autonomous, unencumbered self-creators lies at the heart of the anthropological crisis of our day.”

The crisis he describes is not merely political, cultural, or institutional but concerns the very meaning of the human person. Beneath our contemporary disputes lies a deeper uncertainty about whether human nature possesses any fixed character or purpose. Does freedom consist in self-mastery: the disciplined ordering of desire in accordance with truth, moral obligation, and the cultivation of virtue? Or does it

consist in the endless assertion of the will: the rejection of all inherited limits in the pursuit of radical autonomy and perpetual self-creation? Trueman writes: "... the dominant way of understanding ourselves – that of expressive individualism – places self-expression and self-creation at its heart. All of this intensifies and enables our taste for transgression."

Trueman traces this crisis to the Enlightenment's long legacy and its attempt to liberate humanity from transcendence. The older Christian vision of humans as created in the image of God, endowed with moral obligations and oriented towards transcendent ends, gradually gave way to a radically different conception of humanity and the self-creating will's decisive role in creating an entirely new order, what Max Weber famously described as the "disenchantment of the world". The sacramental imagination of Christendom, in which reality possessed intrinsic meaning and moral order, was displaced by a mechanistic and materialist understanding of existence. The universe became not a cosmos but a clockwork. Nature ceased to be revered and sacred, becoming instead raw material for consumption and manipulation.

The consequences of this disenchantment were profound. Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead," to which Trueman repeatedly returns, was never intended merely as an atheistic slogan. Nietzsche understood that once transcendence disappears, moral limits become increasingly difficult to justify. If there is no higher order to which man is accountable, then human beings inevitably begin to imagine themselves as their own creators. Freed from any externally given telos, the self seeks autonomy without limit.

Trueman rightly observes that this aspiration toward limitless self-creation is fundamentally Promethean in character: the desire to transcend all inherited boundaries and assume a godlike sovereignty over human nature itself. Yet, as the Greeks understood, the Promethean impulse rarely ends in liberation. More often, it culminates in hubris and disorder.

What is especially striking is that this impulse appears incapable of satisfying itself. As Trueman notes, "The revolution that modernity represents is a never-ending one. It is not that the old beliefs, values and practices are overthrown and something new and stable is put in their place. It is that the practice of overthrowing is itself the project." Transgression becomes perpetual because no stable conception of the good remains capable of bringing the restless will to rest.

Indeed, modern culture increasingly celebrates transgression as a form of moral achievement. Trueman notes that our age has effectively answered the question of what man is with a startling proposition: man is "the one who transgresses what was formerly considered sacred and thereby demonstrates his own godlike status." The act of desecration itself becomes a declaration of autonomy. What earlier civilisations regarded as limits to be respected are now treated as obstacles to be overcome. The result is a culture in which liberation is defined less by self-mastery than by the continual repudiation of inherited norms, obligations, and restraints.

Yet the paradox at the centre of the modern project, one that is exposed here with considerable force, is that the pursuit of limitless autonomy does not elevate the human person but ultimately degrades them. For once we reject the idea that humans possess a fixed nature, freedom itself becomes destabilised. Identity becomes endlessly malleable. The self becomes something to be constructed, curated, performed, altered and continually reinvented. The result is not liberation but exhaustion. A civilisation organised around expressive individualism eventually produces not confident selves but fragile ones.

Trueman is especially persuasive in showing how this anthropology has reshaped institutions far beyond religion. Education, law, politics, and even ordinary social life increasingly assume that the highest good is the affirmation

of subjective identity. The older language of moral formation, discipline, obligation, and self-command gives way to therapeutic vocabularies centred upon validation and self-expression.

The strength of *The Desecration of Man* lies precisely in its insistence that these developments are not isolated phenomena. They are all downstream from anthropology. Civilisations inevitably build institutions that reflect what they believe human beings to be.

And here Trueman's title proves especially apt. As he makes clear, desecration is not merely destruction. It is the stripping away of sacred meaning. What modernity increasingly desecrates is not only religion but man himself. Once the human person is severed from transcendence, dignity itself becomes precarious. Rights become unstable because they no longer rest upon any secure metaphysical foundation. The human being becomes, in effect, negotiable.

Trueman is not merely lamenting moral decline or criticising contemporary ideologies. He is reminding readers that the deepest conflict of our age is not finally between Left and Right, progressive and conservative, religious and secular. It is between rival understandings of what a human being is.

For if the human person is merely the accidental product of blind material forces, a temporary aggregation of biological matter without intrinsic purpose or transcendent significance, then concepts such as dignity, obligation, moral limits, and even freedom itself begin to lose coherence. The deeper moral foundations that once gave such claims intelligibility erode.

The Psalmist asks, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:4). The question captures a metaphysical depth and force that modern secular culture increasingly struggles to sustain. Until that question is faced directly, our institutional crises, political fragmentation, and cultural

confusion will continue to deepen. For if Trueman is right, anthropology, in the end, is destiny.

*An earlier version of this article was published in the [Epoch Times](#)*