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Strange New World in the Prayer Book: The Sovereign Self and the Psalter's Invitation

Introduction: This Present World

Does a woman have a right to an abortion, or does the unborn child have a right to life? Does a person have a right to marry a same-sex partner, or does the definition of marriage preclude this right? Does a man have a right to become a woman? Does he have a right to play women's sports and use a women's bathroom? What about the rights of a biological woman who competes with him and wants to use the same bathroom? These are some of the pressing questions of the present world in which individual rights clash and strong emotions flare.

How are traditional Anglicans, who oppose abortion, same-sex unions, and transgenderism, to respond? They can campaign to elect conservative representatives and judges; they can debate in favor of certain rights and against others; or they can take to the streets to protest loudly and demonstrate their passion for the cause. These responses may do good in the political sphere, but they will not convert many to Jesus Christ or convince them to change their moral views. In fact, they will most likely enflame conflict in this polarized society. These issues are all symptoms of a deeper disease: the contemporary view of humanity. Anglicans need to be reminded that they have a "timeless treasure" in their prayer book for responding to this crisis in anthropology.¹ Here is a proposal:

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (Huntington Beach: Anglican Liturgy Press, 2019), 268.

*Anglicans should pray the Psalter in the Daily Office and invite others to join them.*² Everyone can do this. It may seem like an odd or ineffectual response, but the rest of this essay will show why it is so crucial.

The Rise of the Sovereign Self

Carl Trueman’s recent book *Strange New World* argues that the current sexual revolution is driven by “expressive individualism”:³ the belief that each individual has a self—a unique core of feelings and intuitions—that must unfold to express that person’s true humanity.⁴ He also characterizes this “strange new world” as a “cultural of authenticity” that celebrates the individual’s quest for self-expression.⁵ His description helps to explain a number of things. First, it explains the rampant emotivism of the culture: the more strongly someone feels something, the more true it is believed to be. Also, it explains why people cannot agree to disagree with traditional Christian morality. By denying that people should act on their desires, Christianity is thought to deny the basic human rights of the individual. Seen through a cultural lens, that is not just mistaken; it is wicked.

According to Trueman, expressive individualism did not arise with the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Rather, it developed over a much longer period of

² It is possible to *recite* or *sing* the Psalms for aesthetic or traditional reasons but without faith. The language of *prayer* assumes a stance of faith in God that is open to change.

³ Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022). This is a shorter and more accessible version of his previous book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

⁴ Trueman, *Strange New World*, 22. He takes this term from Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 333–334.

⁵ Trueman, *Strange New World*, 23. He takes this term from Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 475.

time, beginning hundreds of years ago.⁶ His historical narrative describes how the self is psychologized, politicized, and sexualized. First, the self is psychologized. By doubting all authorities and traditions, René Descartes (1596–1650) disconnects God from human nature. With his dictum “I think; therefore, I am,” he creates a mind-body dualism and gives the individual’s mind ultimate power over the body. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) sees the self, in its natural state, as fundamentally good and its emotions as central to human identity. Next, the self is politicized. Karl Marx (1818–1883) proposes that human alienation is caused by oppressive economic disparities in the social order. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) argues that “the superman” must show himself strong through self-creation, defying the weak who maintain power over society. Finally, the self is sexualized. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) believes that human identity is essentially determined by sexual desires and that happiness depends on the freedom to express such desires. All of these developments lead to an anthropology of the sovereign self. Human nature is neither given by God nor determined by society; rather, the self is thought to possess ultimate power.

Although most people have not read these philosophers, their understandings of humanity are common today. How is this possible? The concept of “the social imaginary” helps to explain.⁷ The social imaginary is the shared way that ordinary people imagine their social world and act within it. The ideas of these philosophers have deeply influenced education, books, movies, and Internet media that have influenced everyone—Christians and non-Christians alike. Everyone has a sovereign self now. Some still hold traditional moral views, but, unless the social

⁶ The summary of this paragraph comes from Trueman *Strange New World*, 33–34 (Descartes), 34–42 (Rousseau), 52–59 (Marx), 59–68 (Nietzsche), 72–78 (Freud).

⁷ Trueman, *Strange New World*, 27. He takes this term from Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171–172.

imaginary changes, it is only a matter of time until their morality changes as well. What can be done about this? Trueman suggests that the Psalms have a crucial role to play: “It is no coincidence that the Psalter is a book of corporate praise. Singing such poetry as a community shaped the social imaginary of the Jews. And the church needs to do the same today.”⁸ Rather than thinking of worship as a chance to perform for God, Christians should let the Psalms form their social imaginary.

In 1917, Karl Barth delivered a lecture entitled “The Strange New World within the Bible.”⁹ Although modern people believe the Bible’s world is old and their world is new, Barth reverses this polarity: the present world is actually the old one, and the biblical world is the new one. Opening the Bible is opening a door into the foreign world of God. Since expressive individualism has long influenced the social imaginary, Trueman’s strange new world is really just the same old world.¹⁰ A stranger newer world awaits in the Psalter, where the true God reveals what it means to be truly human.

The Rule of the Sovereign God

The Psalter provides an alternative to the sovereign self that dominates contemporary culture. But the anthropology of the Psalter is a *theological* anthropology. Therefore, before asking “What is a human?” it is necessary to ask “Who is God?”—and the short answer to that question is *God is the King*.¹¹ This is

⁸ Trueman, *Strange New World*, 181.

⁹ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 28–50. For a newer translation, see Karl Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 15–29.

¹⁰ It is unclear if Trueman is aware of Barth’s lecture/essay. He does not cite it in *Strange New World*.

¹¹ On the image of God as King in the Psalms, see James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), esp. 12–22.

seen, first of all, in the most common term for God in the Psalter: the LORD.¹² The God of the Psalter is not a distant deity or an abstraction; he is a ruler with power, authority, and agency. In addition, the imagery of divine kingship appears at the beginning, middle, and end of the Psalter.

Near the beginning of the Psalter, Psalm 2 sets forth a hierarchical worldview as the backdrop for the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7). Enthroned in heaven, God has established his Anointed on Mount Zion above his people and all the kings and nations of the earth.¹³ The drama of the psalm plays out through three quoted speeches. First, the rebellious rulers of the earth express their plan to throw off the dominion of the LORD and his Anointed: “Let us break their bonds asunder and cast away their cords from us” (v. 3).¹⁴ Next, God laughs and assures them that their revolt will fail because he has firmly established his Anointed: “I myself have set my King upon my holy hill of Zion” (v. 6). Finally, the Anointed recounts his relationship with God and God’s promise to give him all kingdoms of the earth: “He said . . . ‘You are my Son. . . . Ask of me, and I shall give you the nations for your inheritance’ ” (vv. 7–8). The psalm ends with a warning to the rulers of the earth to serve the LORD and do homage to his Son (vv. 10–12). Those who oppose him will perish, but those who trust in him will be blessed.

¹² *The LORD* (with all capital letters) represents the divine name in Hebrew. It stems from the Jewish practice of protecting the sanctity of the divine name (*YHWH*) by substituting the title *my Lord* (*'adonai*). Greek and Latin translators followed this precedent by using their own equivalents for *Lord* (*kurios*, *dominus*), and Coverdale followed them in his English translation.

¹³ In the context of Christian worship in the Daily Office, the Anointed of Psalm 2 is rightly identified as the Lord Jesus Christ. New Testament authors also interpret Psalm 2 in this way (Acts 4:25; 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5; Rev 2:27; 19:15).

¹⁴ All quotations of the Psalms come from *The New Coverdale Psalter* (Huntington Beach: Anglican Liturgy Press, 2019). Verse numbering differs, at points, from other English translations.

Near the middle of the Psalter, Psalms 93–100 repeat the affirmation “The LORD is King” (93:1; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 98:7; 99:1).¹⁵ Here, God’s sovereign rule is depicted in three ways.¹⁶ First, God’s kingship is based on his creation of the world: “Ever since the world began, your throne has been established” (93:3). Second, God’s kingship is expressed in just judgment and lawgiving: “Arise, O Judge of the world, and reward the proud according to their deserving. . . . Blessed is the one whom you chasten, O LORD, and whom you teach your law” (94:2, 12). Third, God’s kingship should evoke praise from all his creatures: “O be joyful in the LORD, all you lands; serve the LORD with gladness, and come before his presence with a song” (100:1). All are invited to join the song of God’s kingdom.

Near the end of the Psalter, Psalm 145 returns to the image of divine kingship: “I will magnify you, O God my King” (v. 1). This psalm has a concentric structure. The center (vv. 11–13) exalts God’s eternal kingdom: “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all ages” (v. 13). The inner ring (vv. 8–10, 14–20) extols God’s gracious care for all his creatures: “The LORD is loving to everyone, and his mercy is over all his works” (v. 9). Finally, the outer ring (vv. 1–7, 21) encases the whole psalm in universal worship: “Let all flesh give thanks unto his holy Name for ever and ever” (v. 21). The ripples of praise continue through the last five psalms of the Psalter (146–150), which are all hymns of praise.

¹⁵ Biblical scholars often classify Psalms 47, 93, and 95–99 as “Divine Enthronement Psalms.” On the literary unity of these psalms, see David M. Howard, *The Structure of Psalms 93–100* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

¹⁶ Psalm 96:10 encapsulates all three kingship themes in one verse: “Tell it out among the nations [praise], ‘The LORD is King; it is he who has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved [creation]; he shall judge the peoples righteously [judgment].’ ”

The Role of the Servant Soul

If *God is the King*, then what does that make humans? The Psalter's theology leads to its anthropology: *humans are servants of God*. Instead of a self, the individual has a soul, and the whole person—body and soul—is created to serve God: “Comfort the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul” (86:4).¹⁷ All God's people are servants: “Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters . . . even so our eyes wait upon the LORD our God” (123:2–3). Indeed, all God's creatures are servants: “Surely your ordinances stand firm this day, for all things are your servants” (119:91).¹⁸ The nations do not yet serve God, but they are urged to bow before him in service: “Be wise now, O you kings; be warned, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD in fear, and rejoice with trembling” (2:10–11). The human soul receives its identity as a member of the kingdom of God, a great body of faithful servants.

What does it mean to serve the LORD in the Psalter? It means to honor him as the Creator in prayer and praise; it means to obey his will and keep his laws; and it means to represent him to those who do not yet serve him. These are the fitting roles of the human servant. But service also involves exercising dominion over creation. Like Psalm 2, Psalm 8 pictures God at the top of the cosmic hierarchy. God is enthroned on high (v.1) above the heavens and earth that he has made (vv. 3, 6). Unlike Psalm 2, Psalm 8 fills out this picture with the creation of humanity in the divine image (Gen 1:26–27).¹⁹ God made humans a little lower than the angels,

¹⁷ On the soul in the Old Testament and Psalter, see Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1974), 10–25.

¹⁸ In addition, various human leaders are called God's servants, such as Abraham (105:6), Moses (105:26), David (78:71), and the priests (134:1)—as well as the angels (103:21).

¹⁹ Some New Testament authors also find the rule of Christ in Psalm 8 (Heb 2:6–8; 1 Cor 15:27; Eph 1:22). This is fitting because Christ fulfills the royal vocation of humanity.

crowning them with glory and honor and giving them dominion over the animals (vv. 5–8). Humans occupy a special place in this world: they are servant-kings. They rule over the other creatures, but they must not rule in selfish and oppressive ways, for they, too, are servants of the LORD.

Conclusion: Invitation to Another World

This essay has shown that current debates over abortion, same-sex unions, and transgenderism are really symptoms of an underlying disease: the anthropology of the sovereign self. This is not a new way of thinking. What seems like a “strange new world” is really the same old world that Trueman shows developing over hundreds of years. After philosophers disconnected humanity from its transcendent source in God, they psychologized, politicized, and sexualized the self. The sovereign self is now deeply imbedded in the social imaginary of the culture. This is why it is so difficult to convince people to change their moral views with rational arguments. This is also why the sexual revolution sees traditional Christian morality as an enemy that stands in the way of human flourishing. Even Christians are natives of this conceptual world.

This essay is an invitation to all Anglicans to pray the Psalter in the Daily Office and to invite others—Christian or not—to join them. The Psalms do not directly address the controversial issues of the day, but they contain the worldview that is necessary for addressing them faithfully.²⁰ In that sense, the Psalms are the antidote to the disease that is ailing this culture and causing the symptoms. They

²⁰ The Psalms do touch on some contemporary issues implicitly. For example, Psalm 139 describes God knitting a baby together in his mother’s womb (vv. 12–16), and Psalm 45 assumes that marriage is between a man and a woman. Also, several psalms refer to God’s law (e.g., 1; 19; 119), which contains texts that relate to abortion (Exod 21:22–25), homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13), and transvestitism (Deut 22:5).

hold the power to reshape the social imaginary of those who pray them. In the words of Barth, there is a “strange new world” waiting in the prayer book. The Psalms are invitational.²¹ They invite people to see God as their sovereign King who lovingly rules his creation, judges justly, and welcomes all in worship. They also invite people to see themselves as God’s servant-rulers, who exercise dominion by honoring, obeying, and representing their Creator: “It is he that has made us, and not we ourselves” (100:2). Perhaps it is precisely because the Psalms do not directly confront the controversial issues of the day that they can extend an appealing invitation to the sovereign self: “O come, let us sing unto the LORD; let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving and show ourselves glad in him with psalms” (95:1–2).

²¹ On invitation as a model of evangelism versus conversion and hospitality, see Richard R. Osmer, *The Invitation: A Theology of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).