

FIRST THINGS

Darel Paul's "[Under the Rainbow Banner](#)" in the [June/July issue](#) of First Things might be one of the most important and incisive essays the magazine has published. As Rod Dreher [notes](#), it is a terrific piece of cultural analysis. It goes to the heart of our current moment, when individualism, freedom, and recognition are moral imperatives. And yet, as Paul hints, these things are not necessarily compatible, even in our world of kaleidoscopic identities and confected communities. Rather, they are bringing us to the point of lowest common denominator chaos.

The essay reminded me of the many years I spent trying to understand the various approaches to culture that fall under the umbrella term of [Critical Theory](#). [Queer Theory](#) is one of the most significant of these approaches. Wading through the pretentiously written and interminably opaque prose always left me wondering: [What exactly is the endgame here? What do these people want in terms of positive philosophical and political construction? I eventually concluded that the answer was really quite simple: The purpose of critical theory is not to establish anything at all. Rather, it is to destabilize as potentially oppressive any claim to transcendent truth or value. Its target is the destruction of all metanarratives, and thus the bombastically rebarbative prose is itself part of the "argument."](#) Leaving readers hopelessly confused about even the simplest things is an important part of the game, pellucid simplicity being one way the oppressors made their oppression seem natural.

[Conservatives often respond to claims about the death of metanarratives with the trite observation that this too is a metanarrative claim. That is true, but only in the most banal sense, and the point is polemically useless. All previous metanarratives have, for good or ill, attempted to provide the world with stability, a set of categories by which cultures can operate. They may have offered different, even mutually exclusive, accounts of the world, but offering stability was still the intention. The metanarrative of the death of metanarratives does the antithesis of this: It serves only to destabilize everything. It is the quintessential ideology of the anti-culture, opposed to any and every form of transcendent authority. And that generates all manner of problems, even in the most unlikely of places.](#)

Take the following testimony, drawn from the feminist bible *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, in which a lesbian speaks of a modern challenge she faced:

When my partner began his gender transition my lesbian identity had been central to my life and my sense of self for well over a decade, and I didn't know what his transition made me. Some people told me I was "obviously" still a lesbian, but it was just as obvious to others that I was now straight, or bisexual. It wasn't obvious to me at all, and I struggled with it for a long time. Now I've been the partner of a trans man for as long as I was a lesbian, and I've gotten comfortable just not having a name for what I think I am. I think of myself as part of the family of queers and trans people.

This is the kind of dilemma that can only arise in our world of fluid identities and no fixed categories. For this woman to affirm her identity as a lesbian is for her to deny her partner's identity as a transgender man. For her to affirm her partner's identity as a transgender man is for her to deny her own as a lesbian. What do freedom and authenticity and recognition look like in this situation? Ultimately, they have to look like queerdom—the abandonment of any static, external categories whatsoever. It looks like identity free-fall. It looks terrifyingly vertiginous. This is because no stable category—not even the L, the G, or the B of the Rainbow Alliance—can survive.

There is a human tragedy here. This kind of emotive personal testimony is often used (as in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*) to give a sentimental power to the plausibility of the sexual revolution. Yet notice what it really says: Queerdom has left this woman hopelessly confused about who she really is. Ideas kicked around in graduate seminars bring with them real human costs when put into practice in real human lives. In her story, being part of the family of queers looks like a barely adequate consolation prize, a straw at which to desperately grasp, rather than a joyous epiphany of true freedom and belonging. The total freedom that queerness promises is actually bondage—it prevents her from being who she really thinks she is. She cannot belong where she wants because the anarchic freedom of queerdom will only allow her to belong to the community it has declared, in the face of all historical and chromosomal testimony, to be legitimate. Total freedom has unleashed total despotism.

Joe Biden may well think, as Paul notes, that trans equality is the civil rights issue of our time. The problem is that he thereby grants moral supremacy to the metanarrative of the rejection of all metanarratives, even that of our own bodies. In doing so—as even as exemplary a Marxist critic as Terry Eagleton has repeatedly noted for many decades—we are left powerless to resist the claims of whatever lobby group happens to have power. And that, of course, poses a huge challenge to the church: If traditional feminists and lesbians cannot meet the exacting standards for recognition set by the practitioners of queer theory, what hope do those who maintain the Christian metanarrative of creation, fall, and redemption have in the public square?

Therein lies our challenge. And the first step in meeting it is to make sure that Christians are aware of exactly what we are facing. The debate over LGBTQ issues is not a debate about sexual behavior. I suspect it is not really at this point a debate with the L, the G, or the B. It is the T and the Q that are carrying the day, and we need to understand that the debate is about the radical abolition of metaphysics and metanarratives and any notion of cultural stability that might rest thereupon. Until we clarify that and adjust our strategy of engagement accordingly, we cannot develop the arguments needed to persuade our fellow Christians of the truth, let alone anyone else. Given this, Darel Paul's article is most welcome as a signal contribution in pointing us in the right direction.

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Articles by Carl R. Trueman

