

Expressive Individualism: What Is It?

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Earlier this year, I identified [four of the big challenges](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/4-big-challenges-facing-church-west-today/) (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/4-big-challenges-facing-church-west-today/>) facing the church in the West today. We've looked extensively at the problem of [societal fragmentation](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/fighting-fragmentation-spiritual-plane/) (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/fighting-fragmentation-spiritual-plane/>) and [political polarization](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/why-are-we-so-politically-polarized/) (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/why-are-we-so-politically-polarized/>). Now we turn our attention to the reality of a culture awash in what is often called “expressive individualism.”

What Is Expressive Individualism?

This column will serve as the first in a series dealing with expressive individualism. Our only aim here is to briefly entertain the question, “What is expressive individualism?” Later on, we'll look at how the church can live as salt and light in this kind of culture.

When defining expressive individualism, it might be best to start with the slogans behind the movement:

- *You be you.*
- *Be true to yourself.*
- *Follow your heart.*
- *Find yourself.*

Slogans orient us to the philosophy in popular culture. History points us back to where it comes from. Robert Bellah and the sociologists who wrote *Habits of the Heart* (<https://amzn.to/2C7F8l1>) trace the origins of expressive individualism back into the 1800s. The authors point to the writer and poet Walt Whitman as one of the best representatives of the philosophy.

“Individualism” goes back further. Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman who traveled extensively in the United States and then wrote the classic *Democracy in America* (<https://amzn.to/2pOYMLb>) noted certain traits of American individualism, in which the expressivist part grew later. Here’s what he said about individualism and its isolationist tendencies:

“Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.”

That’s an older description of individualism and the isolation that Tocqueville feared. But what about *expressive* individualism? What does that refer to? Yuval Levin in *The Fractured Republic* (<https://amzn.to/2A2xHu8>) describes it well:

That term suggests not only a desire to pursue one’s own path but also a yearning for fulfillment through the definition and articulation of one’s own identity. It is a drive both to be more like whatever you already are and also to live in society by fully asserting who you are. The capacity of individuals to define the terms of their own existence by defining their personal identities is increasingly equated with liberty and with the meaning of some of our basic rights, and it is given pride of place in our self-understanding.

Age of Authenticity

There’s a similar definition given by the Catholic philosopher [Charles Taylor](https://amzn.to/2QFzrih), (<https://amzn.to/2QFzrih>) who uses “the age of authenticity” as a descriptor. We could define “authenticity” in different ways. When we’re talking about “authenticity” as the opposite of “hypocrisy,” then striving for authenticity becomes a good thing. (Jesus had a lot to say about hypocrites and the deceit that masks inauthenticity.)

But Taylor does not use “authenticity” as a synonym for integrity or honesty. He uses the term in a way that pits *authenticity* against *conformity*. Here’s [Taylor’s definition](https://amzn.to/2QFzrih) (<https://amzn.to/2QFzrih>):

I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live

out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.

The key here is that the purpose of life is to find one's deepest self and then express that to the world, forging that identity in ways that counter whatever family, friends, political affiliations, previous generations, or religious authorities might say. (Many a Disney movie has followed a narrative plot line of someone finding and forging one's self-identity in opposition to the naysayers.)

Seven Statements of Belief in Western Culture

Once we understand the term “expressive individualism” we get from Bellah and his fellow sociologists as well as the “Age of Authenticity” as defined by Taylor, we begin to see the elements of this worldview and how it affects life in Western societies today.

This is where Australian church leader Mark Sayers helpfully sums up several beliefs that swirl around in an expressive individualist society. These seven summary statements come from Sayers's book *Disappearing Church*. (<https://amzn.to/2A3iXeE>)

1. The highest good is individual freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression.
2. Traditions, religions, received wisdom, regulations, and social ties that restrict individual freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression must be reshaped, deconstructed, or destroyed.
3. The world will inevitably improve as the scope of individual freedom grows. Technology—in particular the internet—will motor this progression toward utopia.
4. The primary social ethic is tolerance of everyone's self-defined quest for individual freedom and self-expression. Any deviation from this ethic of tolerance is dangerous and must not be tolerated. Therefore social justice is less about economic or class inequality, and more about issues of equality relating to individual identity, self-expression, and personal autonomy.
5. Humans are inherently good.
6. Large-scale structures and institutions are suspicious at best and evil at worst.
7. Forms of external authority are rejected and personal authenticity is lauded.

In future columns, we will dig further into some of these as we consider how expressive individualism makes it challenging for the church to be faithful today.

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