Who am I today?

The modern crisis of identity

By Glynn Harrison

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Dietrich Bonhoeffer[1]

Cambridge Papers

Towards a biblical mind

Summary

It has never been easy to answer the question 'Who am I?' but increasing social pluralism, the fast-changing world of social media, and easy access to cosmetic surgery make it more difficult than ever. The resulting confusion may undermine wellbeing and threaten social cohesion. The biblical view of human identity as 'given' in Christ, worked out imaginatively in relational communities, can potentially buffer these harmful consequences, defend against narcissism and help cultivate personal resilience.

Introduction

According to the New York Times, 2015 was the 'Year We Obsessed Over Identity'.[2] In June 2015, the parents of Rachel Dolezal, a 37-year-old white civil rights activist, reportedly 'outed' their daughter for falsely portraying herself as black. She refused to back down, maintaining she still 'identifies as black'.[3] A few months later, a transgender father of seven children reportedly left his wife and family in Toronto to start a new life as a six-year-old girl.[4] And the concept of 'species dysphoria' entered many people's vocabulary for the first time when they read about a 20-year-old Norwegian woman who claimed to have been 'born in the wrong species'.[5]

These extreme examples are subject to sensationalist reporting and we do not know the complex personal realities that lie behind them. They are cited, however, because they illustrate one of today's most influential ideologies: the repudiation of 'given' identity in favour of *self-identification*.

We see this commonly in public discourse around the nature and meaning of gender. A questionnaire designed for use in British schools posted[6] recently on the website of the UK Government-appointed Children's Commissioner, offered young people aged 13–18 the choice of self-identifying in terms of 23 different genders, including 'bi-gender', 'tri-gender', 'demi-girl' and 'genderqueer'. The experience of gender dysphoria (a term that denotes the persisting discomfort of those whose gender at birth is different from the gender they identify with)[7] is a complex area calling for empathy and understanding. Those who struggle in this area are often confused, frightened and humiliated, and it is not possible to consider this issue in detail here. But regardless of this specific issue, whereas perception of gender (what is meant by male and female) was previously determined by biological sex (physical characteristics,

> The right to identify oneself – 'I identify as' – is fast becoming one of the defining features of modern life.

1   'Who am I' (1945), from *Letters and Papers From Prison*, SCM Press, 2013.
2   www.nytimes.com/2015/10/11/magazine/the-year-we-obsessed-over-identity.html?_r=0. Retrieved 14 Dec 2015.
3   www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/11678667/Rachel-Dolezal-who-pretended-to-be-African-American-says-she-identifies-as-black.html. Retrieved 12 Dec 2015.
4   www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/stefonknee-wolschtt-transgender-father-leaves-family-in-toronto-to-start-new-life-as-a-six-year-old-a6769051.html. Retrieved 12 Dec 2015.
5   www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/12127067/woman-says-she-is-a-cat-trapped-in-the-wrong-body.html. Accessed 4 Feb 2016.
6   www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/press-office. After critical press reports the survey was removed but its draft questions had already been circulated to some schools as reported here: http://m.theargus.co.uk/news/14239440.Gender_survey_sent_out_to_schools_was_a__draft__not_signed_off_by_Children_s_Commissioner/. Retrieved 1 Feb 2016.
7   www.dsm5.org/documents/gender%20dysphoria%20fact%20sheet.pdf. Accessed 29th Feb 2016.

hormones, and chromosomes), it is now becoming widely accepted that sex should be interpreted by the individual's perception of gender. Further, in today's world (as the above examples show) the logic of *self-identification* is now being applied well beyond gender.
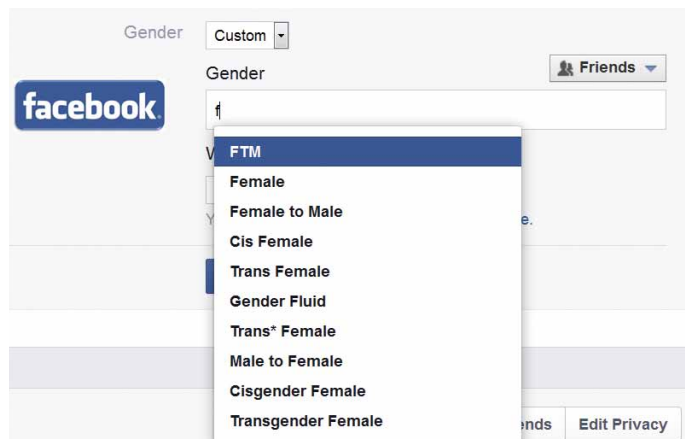
We have come to understand identity as fundamentally premised on a person's freedom to choose his or her own meaning and their own form of life. Indeed, the right to identify oneself – 'I identify as' – is fast becoming one of the defining features of modern life. This paper aims to set out some key questions about the nature and meaning of human identity, explore some of the possible adverse consequences of these developments, and briefly examine the relevance of the biblical understanding that human beings are made in the image of God.

What is identity?

There is no simple, agreed definition of identity.[8] A sense of *personal* identity depends on our capacity for self-awareness – the ability to look inside and reflect on what we find. The 'I' asks curiously of the 'me' – 'who is this person?' Personal identity refers to the way we attempt to answer that question.

People usually think about their identity in terms of key personal characteristics (such as male or female), or social identifiers (such as nationality) or their different roles and responsibilities (doctor or teacher). A 44-year old British-born woman of Asian background may have a work role as a part-time company executive whilst at home her role as a mother comes to the fore. At the same time, she may have an online presence in a blog that exploits her celebrity status after appearing on a popular reality TV show. Her sense of personal identity results from the way in which these different components of self are selected and integrated to create a sense of *coherence and inner continuity*. But how does that happen? Depending on background and discipline, commentators have different views and perspectives on this.

> Personal identity is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves – the constantly revised plot-line that explains the nature and purpose of our life and imbues it with meaning.

Erik Erikson, the psychologist and psychoanalyst, adopted a *developmental perspective* in which the formation of a boundaried and coherent sense of self – a personal identity – represents a critical stage in the process of psychological maturation.[9] According to Erikson, personal identity is formed gradually as a child distinguishes between 'me' and 'not me' and as they develop a sense of inner continuity as a separate human being. It is this sense of having a coherent 'core' that allows people eventually to move between different social roles whilst retaining a sense of being one and the same person.

Sociologists on the other hand concentrate upon the *social construction* of the beliefs and attitudes we hold about ourselves. Here there is less emphasis on inner coherence or persisting core. Irving Goffman argued that because society is constantly changing we should think in terms of people having multiple identities equated with different roles, framed by their social context at the time. But despite the fact that identity is socially situated in these different roles, today's identity politics illustrates how people still search for a *defining core* to the self – a lynchpin holding everything together. Both perspectives appear to be important: people search for coherence, a sense of inner 'core' whilst also remaining exquisitely sensitive to the formative influences of their social context.

Drawing upon both these perspectives, philosophers such as Charles Taylor and Paul Ricœur introduce the notion of *narrative identity*.[10] They suggest that human beings are instinctive storytelling creatures ('narrative animals') making sense of the world they live in through the structure of narrative. People seek coherence and meaning by *narrating* their identity, weaving together the different roles and circumstances of their lives into a personal plot-line or script. As circumstances change, narrative identity becomes the constantly reworked story of the self. Even when people choose a single, overarching self-definition (such as occurs in identity politics), this assertion is still framed by their personal sense of story.

And so personal identity is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves – the constantly revised plot-line that explains the nature and purpose of our life and imbues it with meaning. This, broadly, is the definition we shall work with for the remainder of this paper.

Today's crises of identity

But what are the factors driving today's preoccupation, obsession even, with questions of identity? The speed and scale of social and cultural change over recent decades is one potential culprit. But first we consider the importance of the radical individualism that now pervades much of Western culture.

With its renewed emphasis upon the primacy of human reason, the seeds of today's individualism were sown in the

8 D. Miller, *What is the relationship between identities that people construct, express and consume online and those offline?* London: Government Office for Science, 2013.

9 Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1968.
10 Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The liberation of reason from the constraints of traditional political and religious hierarchies imbued 'thinking for yourself' with new power and authority, and many of the social and personal goods we take for granted today, for example the concept of civil liberties, followed in its wake.

But today's *radical individualism* goes much further, particularly in the sphere of identity and self-understanding. 'Given' or 'received' construals of the self are spurned in favour of self-generated definitions. We discover ourselves 'within', repudiating external authorities and creating our own meaning and form of life. Here the self is positioned as both agent and arbiter of its own destiny.

Charles Taylor speaks of the pre-modern individual as being 'porous' in the sense of the self being much more open to the outside world.[11] In the past, the porous-self absorbed enchantment and purpose from the world around it, enabling it to create a sense of personal meaning and narrative. The modern self, in contrast, is a 'buffered' entity, insulated against the world by its default individualism. Repudiating notions of dependence and submission, the buffered self asserts its right to make its own way in the world and when it encounters dissonance with reality, *it is reality that is redefined not the self.*

The pace and scale of social and cultural change
The rise of today's radical individualism has coincided with fast-changing cultural and technological developments that pose new challenges to people's ability to develop and maintain a sense of coherence. Highlighting these threats, a recent UK Government report entitled 'Future Identities'[12] raised particular concerns about the rise of 'hyperconnectivity' – the modern phenomenon of being constantly connected to social networks and streams of information. It is estimated that in 2011 there were more devices connected to the Internet than the number of people in the world, and numbers were predicted to reach 15 billion by 2015.[13] Hyperconnectivity means 'always on' and readily accessible; unlimited information in constant flow; and constantly interactive, not only between people but also between people and machines.[14] The resulting speed at which we shift from one context to another, and the blurring of boundaries between social life, work and home, make it potentially ever more difficult to retain a sense of coherence of self.

Social media also offers a platform for the development of an 'online identity' that allows us to present, and re-present, ourselves to the world in highly editable formats. Apps are available for smoothing out wrinkles or applying artificial make-up; the more radical option of cosmetic surgery has boomed in Western culture over the past few

years as well. In a recent poll by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, 64 per cent of plastic surgeons reported an increase in the use of cosmetic surgery or injectable treatments in patients under 30, attributed mostly to the influence of images via social media.[15]

The possibility of creating a *virtual online identity* is another radical new departure. Some individuals feel they only achieve their 'true' identity when in role as their avatar: 'I have a lot of physical disabilities in real life, but in Star Wars Galaxies I can ride an imperial speeder bike, fight monsters or just hang out with friends at the bar.'[16]

As we come to terms with these changes, some will rightly argue that throughout history people have faced social upheavals of one kind or another. But what makes the present moment so unique is the convergence of fast-moving changes that blur the boundaries of reality with the rise of a radical individualism that redefines it. Indeed, this whole area brings into focus, in a big way, the question – what is real?

> In the Christian worldview God not only reveals who he is, he shows us who we are as well.

But why should we care?
Contemporary culture places before us a smorgasbord of possibilities for self-invention and when we grow tired of one reality of self, we may simply choose another. And why not? The problem is rather obvious. In a world of limitless choice and endless possibility, with no guide or map to provide an external point of reference, how do we choose? As we look within, which facet of our inner experience will help us decide today? Should we follow this fleeting thought or that whim? This feeling or that impulse? What if freedom turns out to be a terrifying hall of mirrors?

The *tragic hero* variant of today's radical individualism may well assert 'so be it, rather the captain of my own sinking ship than a slave on a vessel captained by somebody else.' But what if our inner hero turns out to be elusive? What if the self we discovered within turns out to be weak, vulnerable and dependent? And what if the suspicion grows that the notion of the inner hero itself has simply been marketed to us – and we swallowed it hook, line and sinker? In a manipulative consumerist culture, far from being the architects of our own destiny, maybe the idea of inventing ourselves is simply something else that we have been sold, and the real driver is not the individual at all? The result is an increasing sense of fragmentation and instability of the self.

Mental health and wellbeing
A relatively stable sense of self is integral to an individual's mental health and wellbeing. Devoid of a sense of inner coherence, a core in which we narrate our meaning and purpose, it is difficult to resist short-term rewards

11 James K. A. Taylor, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2013.
12 www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-identities-changing-identities-in-the-uk. Accessed 13 Feb 2016.
13 P. Biggs, 'Emerging issues for our hyperconnected world'. In S. Dutta and B. Bilbao-Osorio, (eds), *The Global Information Technology Report 2012: Living in a Hyperconnected World*. World Economic Forum Insight Report [online].

Accessed 1 Feb 2016. Available from: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/Global_IT_Report_2012.pdf
14 http://www3.weforum.org/docs/Global_IT_Report_2012.pdf. Accessed 4 Feb 2016.
15 www.aafprs.org/media/stats_polls/m_stats.html. Accessed 5 Feb 2016.
16 R. Cooper, *Alter Ego: Avatars and Their Creators*, London: Chris Boot Ltd, 2009.

and impulses in the interests of longer-term aims and objectives. At the mercy of other people's expectations and whims, we find it more difficult to behave purposefully and confidently. It is plausible (if not at the moment provable) that a recently reported increase[17] in self-harm and associated 'borderline' issues among young people is at least partly attributable to this modern fragility of the self.

But there is more to personal identity than coherence. The ability to act effectively and confidently, to give love and receive it, requires a sense of self-worth and significance.[18] But if the self is in constant flux, a shifting sand of doubt and reinvention, how can it integrate a sense of worth and value? The deceit of the self-esteem movement[19] as it has been marketed in popular culture is to suggest that worth and value can simply be asserted: 'I'm special!' 'I attract people to me now!' 'Think positive!' But as studies have shown, rather than producing new improved versions of the self, brimming with confidence, these self-affirming statements leave people with low self-worth feeling *more* depressed.[20] It is hard to believe your own propaganda, and so self-affirmation tends to backfire for the people who need it most. Indeed, the pursuit of self-esteem for its own sake appears to increase contingency and drive people back into yet more approval-seeking and the quest for status.[21]

Society and relationships
Issues of identity are relevant to the quality of relationships and our ability to form co-operative communities. Durable relationships depend upon the capacity to anticipate the needs of the other and to respond in predictable ways. This is especially important in families where stability and predictability are fundamental to the healthy development of children. Community is undermined as well if individuals are constantly in flux. And where an individual's sense of worth is constantly at stake, empathy towards others is reduced: few emotional resources remain available for others when so much care and attention needs to be expended upon oneself.

Victimhood identity and the chilling of free speech
Finally, the fragility of identity appears to be connected with a growing obsession with self-protection observed in some aspects of university campus life. Today's preoccupation with 'safe spaces' projects the notion of the self as fragile and wounded, in need of cosseting and protection, with 'trigger warnings' to reduce the risk of offence. As a result, people with the wrong kind of ideas may be banned from campuses (as occurred in the UK in the instance of Germaine Greer) in case they inflict offence on the vulnerable and unsuspecting. Of course, every society must consider what limits it needs to

impose on the propagation of potentially harmful ideas, but 'victimhood identity' consolidates the notion of the self as inherently fragile and constantly at risk: a self so vulnerable that reality itself must be made to conform to its needs.

A biblical perspective
The endgame of these cultural developments is far from clear, and it is important that we retain a balanced perspective on the benefits, as well as the risks, of new social media and communications technologies. We should acknowledge and celebrate their potential for enhancing productivity, reducing poverty and enriching human communication and relationships around the globe. Other factors put a brake on our pessimism too. As the Roman poet Horace once pronounced 'you may drive out Nature with a pitchfork, yet she still will hurry back.' Those who believe that human beings are made in the image of God, endowed with God-given reason and the capacity to interact meaningfully with the reality he has created, have cause for optimism: despite our terrifying destructiveness and nihilism, the essential nature of our humanity (although badly disfigured and repudiated in the fall) has a habit of reasserting and making itself known. And yet, despite these caveats, the convergence of radical individualism with the social and cultural changes discussed in this paper clearly raises important questions for human flourishing. How may Christians begin to engage with these issues?

Incurvatus in se
First, we should be less surprised by what we find. Seen within a secular worldview in which the Universe is essentially meaningless, there is an intrinsic logic to the modern dilemma of identity. Individuals who believe that they stand alone in the Universe must indeed self-construct as best they can. And neither should we be surprised by the emotions generated around this topic, especially the

> Our creaturely identity is charged with purpose and destiny – to be conformed to the image of the revealed face of God in Jesus Christ.

17 www.bbc.com/news/health-30414589. Accessed 20 Jan 2016.
18 G. Harrison, *The Big Ego Trip*, IVP, 2013.
19 Ibid.
20 http://pss.sagepub.com/content/20/7/860.abstract.
21 G. Harrison, 2013.

anger and provocations unleashed in the arena of identity politics. Martin Luther reminded us that there is a spiritual struggle being worked out in the heart of 'man curved in on himself':

> Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin being so deeply curved in on itself (*incurvatus in se*) that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them … but it also fails to realise that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.[22]

Called to live under the rule of God, the story of Genesis 3 tells us that humankind chose self-rule instead. We refute our creaturely identity as beings created in the image of God, called to exercise dominion under his Lordship. 'Inwardly curved', we now seek to identify ourselves, determining our own meaning and forms of life. The confusion that results from the endless possibilities for self-presentation, marketed ruthlessly in a fast-changing world, presents a new and remarkable opportunity for Christian apologists. But where should we begin?

Welcome to God's reality

The Christian worldview begins with God: 'In the beginning was the Word' is profoundly good news for those left vulnerable to the endless flow of competing ideologies of self. This truth declares that God is there, that we are not alone in the Universe, and that our Creator, in and through his Word, welcomes us into his reality. In this conviction we can approach life's confusion and struggles with renewed confidence that in God's world, and the world to come, we find our true home and mode of being.

Supremely, of course, God reveals *himself* to us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. But in the Christian worldview God not only reveals who he is, he *shows us who we are* as well. He speaks our identity to us. For the Christian, identity is not 'discovered' within the self, nor autonomously constructed by the self, it is revealed to the self. Jesus calls his sheep 'by name' (John 10:3) and those who receive him are given the authority to become (and to be called) 'children of God' (John 1:12; 1 John 3:2).

This God-spoken identity has two parts. The revelation that we are created in the 'image and likeness of God' (Genesis 1:26–27) speaks first of our *creaturely identity*. Our creaturely way of 'being in the world', our 'functional arrangement', so to speak, echoes something of the way that God himself has his being. We are called to rule as he rules, exercising dominion over his creation. This frames our experience of being in the world with a given form and purpose.

Further, being made in his image, God places great value upon us: it is wrong to take the life of another human being because, even after the fall, we are still patterned after

the image of God (Genesis 9:6). No longer saddled with making up our own value, or relying on the contingent approval of others, we are identified by the unconditional love of God. This is infinitely more foundational for self-worth and identity than the force of our own will.

Second, our *redemptive identity* recognises that the image of God, though disfigured by the fall, is being (and one day will be fully) restored after the image of his Son, Jesus. Thus our creaturely identity is charged with purpose and destiny – to be conformed to the image of the revealed face of God in Jesus Christ. This means that in addition to the foundational dimension of our identity (creatures made in God's image and redeemed in Christ as his children) there is a dynamic, formative dimension: as I *work out* my identity in Christ I am called to be 'me' in a new way.

Here then is the 'thick' view of human identity we have been searching for: a narrative of self that rests upon the creative and loving will of God rather than the contingencies of our own making; a narrative charged with purpose and meaning because it participates in a story bigger than itself. The task facing the church, therefore, is to reframe and embody these truths in ways that speak into modern culture and, indeed, in ways that reform the hearts and minds of its own people.

This presents a potent challenge to the quality of Christian community and fellowship. Just as secularism fires our imagination with a thousand possible ways of answering the question 'who am I today?', our experience of formation in community should inspire the imagination as well, in ways that embody, dramatise and live out the realities of what it means to bear the image of God.

A learning community

Pastors must ask themselves how well they help their people, through narrative and illustration, to *see* as well as to *know* what it means to be divine image-bearers. Do community members have a picture in their minds of how their work, and the quality and character of their everyday

Learning how to be God's creature and his image-bearer is a life-long calling that belongs to every one of us.

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22 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, L515–516, quoted in Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, p.88.

relationships, bring life to the world as God brings life to his creation? Is their artistry – whether in architecture, full-time parenting, lecturing or plumbing – consciously celebrated as the tangible fruit of their image-bearing? And perhaps most challenging of all, are young people (and older people) in our churches being helped – consciously and explicitly – to integrate their sexuality and desires for intimacy, as well as their physicality, into their imaginative concept of what it means to bear the divine image? Indeed, can we help people to feel welcomed by God's love *into the reality of their own bodies*?

An accepting community

We should not underestimate the scale of the challenge here. Whilst bearing resolute witness to the great truth of Christian identity in Christ, our fellowships must also act decisively to ensure generous accommodation – 'big tent' hospitality – for all whose lives fall short of it. We need honest, authentic testimonies that allow people to see how, in one way or another, we *all fall short*. Only then will Christian communities become beacons of hope and redemption for the most damaged, confused and psychologically fragmented souls. Whether our confusion centres on issues of sex and gender, or the thirst for status and public recognition, in one way or another we are all struggling to be re-formed after Christ.

For those individuals who find their way into more intensive pastoral care we must repudiate simplistic solutions. In a fallen world, learning how to be God's creature is not easy. The counter-formation of fragmented identities involves commitment to a long and, at times, arduous journey of relearning and reshaping of deeply-rooted feelings and thoughts. For some, skilled counselling may be required, especially for those from abusive backgrounds or whose identity has been hollowed out in the dark corners of contemporary life. For others it is a process of patient formation through the example and modelling of others, in small groups and one-to-one discipling. Learning how to be God's creature and his image-bearer is a lifelong calling that belongs to every one of us.

Conclusion

In summary, in this paper we ask whether the radical individualism of our culture is delivering the freedom and authenticity it promises, or whether in fact it merely intensifies our dependence, indeed enslavement, to a treadmill of self-reinvention. Faced with the consequences for communities, families and – most of all – for children, the pendulum may swing back much faster than we realise. Our contemporary crisis of identity offers churches a remarkable opportunity to rethink, and to put on display, the Gospel's good news about what it means to be human.

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