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with Dr Justine Toh

Everyday Theology in the iWorld
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Apple’s iconic iPod advertisements summarise the spirit of the age, and the dreams and aspirations of the world in which we live. In this world, nothing is more important than being free to be me, to be an autonomous, self-expressed individual. We can see such qualities celebrated in these silhouetted figures who are free to move any way that they wish.

Taking his cue from Apple products — all with their prefix of ‘i’ — Dale Kuehne names this world the ‘iWorld’ (2009: 45). It’s a world committed to the freedom of the individual (the ‘i’ of the term) to forge their own path in the world, free from the strictures of the past ‘tWorld’ where tradition (the ‘t’ of the term) reigned, along with religion, family and culture (2009: 33–40).

In the tWorld, your identity was largely given to you. Your job, who you might marry, where you would live were largely predetermined. The individual stepped into a pre-existing role and they understood their place in a wider story. The tWorld placed a high priority on doing one’s duty, since this was their responsibility. In contrast the iWorld individual believes the most important thing to do is follow their dreams.

Individualism is celebrated in our culture and is a product of the iWorld’s insistence on individual freedom. This is clear to see in Apple’s suite of products prefixed with ‘i’, and also in the virtual deification of late Apple CEO Steve Jobs — particularly in relation to the commencement address he delivered to Stanford students in 2005. His speech resonated with individualist ideology: a commitment to individual vision, following one’s inner voice rather than that of others, independence, and self-reliance. Extracts of this legendary speech have since been transformed into motivational catchphrases, particularly Jobs’ exhortation for people to ‘Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish’ when it came to following their dreams (Jobs 2005: online).

This state of affairs should be of great interest to Christians, for the gospel faces a new raft of opportunities and challenges in the iWorld. Tonight, I will be arguing for the need for an ‘everyday theology’ that understands life in the iWorld and how the gospel speaks into it — which will be the focus of the final section tonight. I hope you find the idea of everyday theology useful when it comes to navigating this mission (mine)field.
**Everyday Theology: ‘faith seeking understanding’**

For Kevin Vanhoozer, ‘everyday theology’ is the biblically faithful attempt to make sense of everyday life (2007: 16). It attempts to see everyday life ‘as God sees it and, with God’s help, to be an agent of redemptive change’ (Vanhoozer 2007: 56). Everyday Theology is an activity of cultural exegesis that is centrally concerned with identifying and understanding the values communicated in the stuff of everyday life, and how we are persuaded to adopt them. With this understanding, Everyday Theology points to how we might live with eternity in mind instead (Vanhoozer 2007: 9).

Everyday Theology takes as a given that the gospel changes the way we view life. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Roman church that they were no longer to ‘conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [their] mind[s]’ (Romans 12:2). Such non-conformity to the ‘pattern of this world’ and the renewal of our minds and lives are the goals of Everyday Theology. For it implicitly understands that our culture shapes us into particular kinds of people, with values, attitudes and beliefs that may be out of step with the gospel. Therefore, it is important to identify such values and, by God’s grace, see how we might choose differently.

Everyday Theology focuses on the stuff of everyday life, because this reveals the ways that we are in the (i)World. Vanhoozer writes that ‘every part of life signifies something about the values and beliefs that shape culture’ (2007: 24). Put another way, the stuff of our everyday life tells us stories about who we are and the nature of the world we live in — particularly what it values, and what it dismisses or ignores. These cultural stories help us answer big questions like ‘What’s the good life?’, ‘What should I strive for?’, ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Who should I be?’ So, anytime in this talk when we look at examples from our culture, listen out for what they reveal about the iWorld in which we live.

That Everyday Theology will seek to take the gospel directly to these questions reveals the importance of contextualisation. The gospel needs to be couched in terms that are meaningful to the people being ministered to. The everyday theologian, therefore, has to be doubly skilled: not only able to read and decipher the cultural text ‘but also the culture of the hearers’ (Patrick 2010: 196). In order to do that effectively, one has to keep an ear close to the ground so as to listen out for people’s fears, hopes, drives and dreams. This practice draws on theologian Paul Tillich’s counsel that the best way to understand a culture or even era is to discover its greatest anxiety and greatest hope (Vanhoozer 2007: 19). In the end, Everyday Theology is all about understanding what’s important to people, and bringing the gospel to bear on that.
Let’s explore the iWorld mission field in further detail.

**The mission field of the iWorld**

A good way to understand the preoccupations of the iWorld is to focus on those who have grown up in it. I’m not trying to single out young people for criticism. Rather, I want to work out what story/ies their assumptions, values, and taken-for-granted ideas about themselves and the world tell us about life in the iWorld today. So while we look at young people’s experience in more detail in this section, it’s only because they offer — in a concentrated form—a good insight into the aspirations of the iWorld.


The ‘language of the self’, Twenge writes, is Generation Me’s ‘native tongue’, with the individual feeling good about themselves and focusing on their needs both high on their priorities (2006: 2). Some broad beliefs of this generation are that people should follow their dreams, do what makes them happy, and not bother themselves with what other people think (Twenge 2006: 20). They insist on being individuals and being free to be themselves. For Generation Me, jobs are more than ways to earn a living, and should be lifestyle options inasmuch as they express the individual’s identity (Arnett in Twenge 2006: 98). Twenge notes the high optimism of Generation Me, who expect to go to college, make lots of money, and maybe even be famous (2006: 2). No wonder Steve Jobs is their hero.

Perhaps a way to summarise the priorities of Generation Me — and, more broadly, the iWorld — is through the notion of mobility. Recall those iPod dancers: their freedom of movement, their hyper-flexibility and skill. These talented dancers don’t just symbolise the iPod’s promise of music freedom, but the expansive possibilities of the self — particularly in an iWorld dedicated to individual freedom. Mobility, then, isn’t just about being able to physically move, but is about having options, opportunities and aspirations. Such a desire for mobility isn’t simply confined to Generation Me, but is a general feature of the iWorld.
The iWorld’s commitment to individual mobility overrides any other competing claims on the self. As such, it implicitly rejects the idea of restricting individual freedom. This attitude is artfully explored in Jason Reitman’s comedy *Up in the Air* (2009) where Ryan Bingham (played by George Clooney) works for a company that specialises in firing people from their jobs. Such work means that Ryan spends most of his year flying around the country letting people go — and with the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis forming the backdrop of the film, it’s boom time for his organisation — but Ryan wouldn’t want it any other way. He loves being on the road, and even moonlights as a motivational speaker who counsels people to fit their life into a backpack and not be weighed down by relationships or possessions. ‘The slower we move, the faster we die’, Ryan intones, ‘moving is living’.

*Up in the Air* offers a snapshot of life in the contemporary West where commitment is studiously avoided because it is seen to limit individual potential and restrict people’s freedom. The alternative, then, is to be perennially on the go, and this is well emphasised in the film’s many shots of Ryan navigating airports and staying in impersonal hotel rooms. For him, temporariness and mobility are a desired way of life.

But maybe not just for Ryan in *Up in the Air*. Observing that modern life is one that is constantly on the go, cultural critic Richard Sennett claims that the airport waiting lounge is the architectural emblem of the contemporary era (Sennett in Turner 1999: 43). Full of strangers waiting to take off to their varied destinations, in the departure lounge all social interactions are temporary and fleeting, because no one has any intention of staying or settling where they are. The picture Sennett paints of the iWorld is one of individual choice and endless mobility, and is a sharp contrast to the tWorld that firmly rooted our lives and identities.

The transitory nature of life in the modern West also prompts the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2003) to consider tourism as a metaphor for modern life. Like tourists, the lives of liberated Westerners are marked, Bauman says, by mobility and impermanence, a looseness of ties to place and people. The mobility of the tourist, Bauman claims, gives rise to ‘grazing behaviour’: an endless sampling of experience that shies away from strict commitment to any one style, ideology or belief (2003: 207–8). This applies as much to the physical mobility of Westerners — perhaps when they travel abroad to foreign countries — as it does to their pursuit of individual identity. Because, in contrast to the past tWorld where individual identity was shaped by one’s place in a defined order, there is now ‘no lifelong identity’ that one takes up at birth. Rather, there is a constant ‘living from
one moment to another, living for the moment’ and being the person that the present situation calls for at any given interval (Bauman 2003: 209).

Closely bound up with the iWorld’s priority of individual freedom is its commitment to individual self-development. As Kuehne notes, the iWorld is ‘continually encouraging us to be ourselves, find ourselves, or create ourselves’ (2009: 69). The idea is that people shouldn’t feel limited by their circumstances, but seek to develop themselves to their fullest potential. The good life, in these terms, is one of self-actualisation and, as Oprah would put it, ‘Liv[ing] Your Best Life’. That the ‘best life’ or ‘good life’ is bound up with the active pursuit of personal health, comfort, prosperity, enjoyment and satisfaction shows the pervasive nature of the therapeutic ethos in the iWorld (Furedi 2002; Lears 1983).

The therapeutic ethos is not new to the iWorld or Generation Me, but represents the full flowering of modernity’s placing of the individual, not God, at the centre of cosmic meaning and purpose. A consequence of this radical reordering was that eternity receded from view as people sought the good life here on earth. Accordingly, the therapeutic ethos became a secular replacement for traditional religion as early twentieth-century Protestant values of salvation, hard work and self-denial gave way to ‘a therapeutic ethos stressing self-realisation in this world’ (Lears 1983: paragraph 4)

Consequently, focus shifted from the ‘soul’ — with its increasingly outmoded associations with immortality — to the satisfyingly secular ‘self’ (Hiebert 2008: 169). And consumerism offered itself as the path to secular self-realisation (Lears 1983).

Let’s look briefly at each in turn, for they find unique expression in the iWorld.

**Self not soul**

Hiebert observes that ‘the only story many modern people feel a part of is their own’ (2008: 170). Postmodern scepticism of grand narratives and the waning of influence of religion and tradition mean that our own personal stories become more compelling, and we look to our individual ‘life biographies’ in order to provide us with a sense of meaning and significance. Self-identity, in this context, is ‘a reflexively organised endeavour’, or the product of considered reflection (Giddens 1991: 5). It is less about one’s personal characteristics and more about keeping the story of one’s life going, and continuously revising it at will.

The iWorld exhorts us all to be centrally concerned with crafting our own
identities for ourselves, without much look-in from tWorld sources of authority like religion and tradition. Moreover, the therapeutic emphasis on individual happiness and wellbeing sets the standard for many of our ideas about what it means to lead a ‘good life’. But what does this mean for iWorld citizens who happen to be religious — and feel pulled in either direction when it comes to their allegiances: do they serve God, or serve themselves and their own happiness?

According to sociologist Christian Smith, many young American Christians today resolve this contradiction via their engagement with ‘moral therapeutic deism’ (2005). This belief system is ‘moral’ because for young believers, religion is primarily about being good and helping someone to become ‘a better person’ (Smith 2005: 151). It’s also ‘therapeutic’ because God wants people to be happy, and to feel good about their lives (Smith 2005: 165). This belief positions God as ‘like a cosmic therapist or counsellor’ who is there when you need him but doesn’t make any demands on us and doesn’t really get involved — the deistic component of this belief system (Smith 2005: 148).

This ‘therapeutic’ God scarcely resembles the God of orthodox Christian belief. Moral therapeutic deism drains Christianity of sin, the need for repentance, sacrifice and humility, and makes it into a ‘feel good’ religion that prioritises personal comfort, psychological support, and emotional wellbeing. Of course, religion has typically provided such beneficial ‘side effects’ but, as Smith observes, ‘major American religious traditions have historically been about more than helping individuals make advantageous choices and maintain good feelings’ (2005: 154).

We see here a Christianity held captive to the individualistic ideology of the iWorld, and co-opted by the therapeutic mindset. In the final section, we’ll explore how the notion of being called by God responds to the context of ‘moral therapeutic deism’ and invites the individual to take part in God’s story rather than simply their own.

**Consumerism and self-realisation**

The phrase ‘retail therapy’ suggests a therapeutic dimension to shopping: that buying stuff and spending money can help someone to feel better. But this doesn’t exhaust the ‘feel good’ potential of consumerism. Indeed, consumerism promises to turn us into the best version of ourselves we can be, and so continues our therapeutic drive for healing and wholeness.
Just consider advertising. It shows us the ‘good life’ — how we might be if we bought the advertised product. Advertising proposes to each of us, writes visual culture critic John Berger, ‘that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more’ (1972: 131). It does this, Berger says, by showing us beautiful, happy people who have apparently been transformed through their association with the product on sale or brand being advertised. And so when we buy a product we are also buying into a desirable way of life — the ‘good life’, in fact.

For example, Levi’s recent ‘Go Forth’ ad campaign features a number of slim, beautiful people challenging authority, swimming with sparkly clothes on, head-banging, making out with each other — all with an air of youthful insouciance. Over these images of rebellion and rugged individualism, a voice narrates Charles Bukowski’s poem ‘The Laughing Heart’. Featuring lines like ‘You can’t beat death but / You can beat death in life, sometimes’ and ‘You are marvellous / The gods wait to delight / In you’, the poem celebrates pioneers and those who live with passion, and claims that those who dare to defy received wisdom achieve a kind of immortality through their deeds.

This ad and accompanying poem could be something of a mission statement for Generation Me for whom identity, lifestyle and freedom are all-important — after all, ‘your life is your life’. The advertisement celebrates the Levi’s jeans wearer as a free spirit, a risk-taker, an authentic individual, and someone who lives large. Who among Generation Me today wouldn’t want to be regarded as a passionate, bold, uncompromising individual who stands up for themselves and lives by their own rules?

Few of us are naïve enough to believe that buying Levi’s jeans will instantly make us cool like those beautiful, authentic, self-expressed people in the ad. But advertising has taught us that we can position ourselves in a favourable way through our association with brands or products that have been imbued with particular meanings. Why else would anyone want to buy a Mercedes if not for the status envy of others, inspired by the brand’s association with wealth, luxury and quality engineering?

Consumerism, then, not only involves buying stuff but is something of a makeover opportunity that promises to transform us and make us into better versions of ourselves. And consumerism relies on our own desire for wholeness, success and fulfilment to spur on our therapeutic quest to change our lives. It promotes what I call a ‘do it yourself’ ethos (DIY ethos) in its suggestion that individuals have the power to position themselves favourably and control, to some extent, how they are viewed by others.
This DIY ethos is not confined to advertising and consumerism but proliferates throughout our contemporary makeover culture: from weight-loss programs to self-help literature, plastic surgery, university degrees that encourage you to ‘start your next life’ by enrolling in a course, The Biggest Loser, MasterChef and so on. These texts of makeover culture encourage us to view our lives as individual projects on which we have to work so that we can construct our identity and achieve personal fulfilment (Lewis 2007: 286).

The following quote by Tiffany Hall, trainer for The Biggest Loser, grants us an insight into what the individual needs to do in order to work effectively on themselves. In the quote, Hall runs through the techniques she uses to encourage the contestants to push through the pain and physical exhaustion of training:

   My training sessions are like interviews: ‘Why are you here, what do you want to achieve, what are you feeling now?’ They need to be honest. They need to admit that when they look in the mirror, they don’t like what they see (Atkinson 2012: online).

Hall relies on the contestant’s dissatisfaction with themselves and their bodies when she motivates their training by asking ‘Why are you here?’ This is the first step of a successful DIY project of successful selfhood: a brutal self-assessment. Secondly, the individual needs to identify the goal they’re working towards — why Hall prods, ‘What do you want to achieve?’ Lastly, the individual needs to commit to a lot of hard work because in a makeover culture, success or failure is a matter of personal effort — a philosophy that is wholly in keeping with the iWorld’s valorisation of ‘me’. In all of this, Hall presents the idea that everything (a svelte body, better fitness, a new life) is up for grabs if the individual wants it badly enough.

When we witness the before-and-after shots of Emma Duncan, 2010 winner of The Biggest Loser, it’s hard to fault this approach that encourages people to push past their limits in order to get great results. But what if you fail? How does life fare for the eliminated contestants on the show?

This is one of the problems with makeover culture’s glorification of individual effort. Because it’s up to the individual to change and improve their life (which flows out of the iWorld’s unwavering belief in the power and potential of the individual), the individual has to accept all responsibility. This is great if the individual happens to succeed but failure is always haunted by the possibility that you just didn’t try hard enough.
Perhaps this explains why, as Twenge's subtitle asserts, today's young Americans are 'more miserable than ever before'. In psychologist Martin Seligman's latest book *Flourish*, he writes that not only is depression about ten times more common than it was 50 years ago, but it is increasingly affecting people at younger ages. In the 1960s, the first onset of depression was about age 30. Now, it's about 15 (2011: 79-80).

Rampant depression in the West seems counterintuitive given the advantages Generation Me has over earlier generations — greater freedom and mobility, medical advances, less manual labour, and sexual liberation. But the wealth of opportunity of the average iWorld citizen — particularly in relation to individual freedom — is also part of the problem. Twenge notes that a downside to our fierce independence and self-sufficiency is that 'our disappointments loom large because we have nothing else to focus on' (2006: 109).

Seligman goes further, arguing in *The Optimistic Child* that depression rates rise in tandem with 'the slide away from individual investment in endeavours larger than the self: God, Nation, Family, Duty' (1995: 40). Whether Seligman knows it or not, he links the psychological implosion of the iWorld to the waning of the way the tWorld endowed people's lives with meaning by encouraging them to look beyond themselves. Not that the tWorld was perfect — in fact, many would say it enslaved the individual self in the name of the group. But the iWorld, with all its thrilling opportunities and unparalleled liberties, hasn't exactly led us to utopia either. And focusing on the self and its desires in the iWorld is its own form of slavery.

We see such a predicament in the sex-addiction drama *Shame* (2011). The film offers a toxic vision of the iWorld in which individual freedom — especially in areas relating to sex and relationships — accepts no limits. Brandon Sullivan is a successful New York executive so controlled by his sexual compulsions that he can't be emotionally, physically or sexually intimate when he tries to have a 'normal' relationship with a woman he clearly likes. For Brandon, sex needs to be anonymous, casual and on demand. Not only does this isolate him from potential romantic partners but it also cuts him off from relationship with anyone who would care about him.

In some ways, *Shame's* Brandon Sullivan recalls *American Psycho's* Patrick Bateman, though Brandon is far more agreeable than the sociopathic would-be serial killer of Bret Easton Ellis's imagination. Both Brandon and Patrick enjoy the 'good life' — they are handsome, successful, well-off and live lives of unparalleled freedom — but they each tell a story of spiritual emptiness in the midst of material (*American Psycho*) and sexual (*Shame*) abundance. In a recent interview, Bret Easton Ellis reflects on his similarities to his character:
On the surface, like Patrick Bateman, I had everything a young man could possibly want to be ‘happy’ and yet I wasn’t... Patrick Bateman is the extreme embodiment of that dissatisfaction. Nothing fulfills him. The more he acquires, the emptier he feels. On a certain level, I was that man, too. (The Paris Review 2012: online)

In this quote, Ellis discusses the unfulfilling nature of Patrick’s habit of conspicuous consumption — the fact that Patrick is enslaved to a desire to live the ‘good life’ that never really delivers true satisfaction. Ellis’s comments equally apply to Brandon who has everything he wants (sex on demand) and yet nothing he needs (love and care). Brandon is a man who ‘has every freedom’, as Shame film producer Iain Canning says, ‘and yet uses his body to create his own prison’.

The iWorld offers the individual a wealth of opportunity to create themselves and live their lives as they wish. It is a great time to be alive, for in no other time have we enjoyed so much freedom to be our own person instead of having other people, or family, or religion, or culture dictate to us who we might be. Yet we see in Shame that the iWorld’s insistence on personal freedom and self-determination can be its own form of tyranny.

**The gospel and the iWorld**

As I said at the beginning of this talk, Vanhoozer, drawing from Tillich, counsels us to discover the greatest anxiety and greatest hope of an era or culture in order to best understand it. We've considered the iPod ad, the Levi's ad, Steve Jobs' motivational rhetoric, and The Biggest Loser to see what stories they tell about life in the iWorld. They've taught us that the greatest hope of the iWorld is a self-actualised life where the individual is free to do what they want and become the best version of themselves they can be. We've also looked at Up in the Air and Shame and glimpsed the greatest anxiety of the iWorld: having all the freedom in the world, and yet not feeling free, or not being able to fully enjoy it. These latter texts have betrayed the recognition that the good life is not all that it is cracked up to be.

With this understanding of iWorld’s greatest anxiety and greatest hope, how can the gospel speak into the iWorld? I have three suggestions for Everyday Theology:

1. Show how the Christian doctrine of grace relieves the iWorld pressure for the individual to change their life;
2. Show how God’s call on the individual’s life is far grander and more substantial than the iWorld’s emphasis on self-determination;

3. Show how self-sacrifice — particularly that of Jesus — challenges the iWorld’s preoccupation with unrestrained freedom.

**Grace not effort**

As we’ve seen, the iWorld regards individual fulfilment and satisfaction as a matter of personal responsibility. It emphasises the role of individual effort when it comes to improving one’s lot in life. This amounts to a secular ‘gospel of works’ — as if by working on ourselves we will attain ultimate meaning, identity and purpose.

The problem with this system is that you never know if you’ve ‘made it’ unless you measure up to a standard of success offered by your peers or culture. Emma Duncan’s transformation brought her into line with dominant standards of beauty and value. It’s her satisfying of these standards that qualifies her as a ‘success’. But such standards are culturally specific and subject to change — so the recognition and status they can bestow are by no means real or universally applicable.

Living up to such standards makes someone into a ‘horizontal self’, argues Mark Sayers (2010). The horizontal self looks to others for a sense of identity, and their peers or culture determine their understanding of what it means to live a good life. Estranged from a larger story that structures their lives and gives them meaning and purpose, horizontal selves dedicate their lives to the therapeutic ethos by endlessly working on themselves in pursuit of the earthly good life. Horizontal selves risk becoming slaves to achievement and the approval of others (Sayers 2010: 17).

However, Sayers contrasts the plight of the horizontal self with that of the ‘vertical self’, who understands that a larger story frames their endeavours in the world. As a Christian writer, Sayers argues that the identity of the vertical self is grounded in God, rather than in the opinions of other people. God’s grounding of individual identity not only provides the individual with ‘existential security’ that reassures them of their ultimate value but also provides a context for meaningful action in every area of life. Christian vertical selves, then, are a ‘story-formed community’ (Hauerwas 1981: 15) whose lives and identities are shaped by the gospel — the story of God’s redemption of humankind that is only possible through God’s grace, rather than our human efforts to earn salvation.
The parable of the workers told in Matthew 20: 1–16 is a good illustration of the gospel of grace. It tells us that essentially, all of us are eleventh-hour workers and yet enjoy a full day’s wages. Its point is that God saves by grace, not by worthiness, which is radical news in an iWorld that sees us thrive or languish on the basis of our individual efforts.

The call of God

The iWorld is obsessed with identity. Its insistence on individual freedom and self-determination offers everyone the opportunity to make something of their lives, to be self-expressed, authentic people who can live up to their potential. This is quite a romantic prospect, but one that constrains as much as it liberates. Because our identities are no longer grounded in God (the vertical self) or shaped by our culture or tradition (tWorld), we are Bauman’s endlessly mobile ‘tourists’ free to make of ourselves what we will. But the potential downside of the freedom we enjoy through our nomadic roaming and ‘grazing’ of experience is restlessness. We remain forever unsatisfied.

An answer to this ceaseless roving is not only the Christian’s identity as a vertical self, but their identity as a pilgrim. Like Bauman’s tourist, the pilgrim is constantly on the move but not for the sake of movement. Rather, pilgrims always locate themselves in relation to their final destination (Bauman 2003: 209). As with the vertical self, the pilgrim understands that a cosmic story directs their movement in the world. iWorld tourists, on the other hand, only feel part of their own individual story and may struggle to find a sense of meaning and purpose beyond their individual interests.

Christian pilgrims have as their model Abraham, the first pilgrim called by God to leave his land, culture and people for a land God would show him (Volf 1996: 38–43). It’s striking how similar, and yet so different, is God’s command in comparison to that of the iWorld. The iWorld says: depart and leave your family, tribe, tradition and religion in order to create and fulfil yourself. In contrast, God says that Abraham must be prepared to leave everything he knows in order to grasp his identity and inheritance in God: to become not just ‘father’ but ‘father of many’. In both cases, Abraham must depart but it is only God who knows Abraham’s true identity, and only by obeying God can Abraham hope to discover it for himself.

Understanding that God has a unique call on one’s life may help challenge ‘moral therapeutic deism’ among young Christians today, for God’s call for one to take up their identity in him goes far beyond the satisfaction of individual needs that constitutes the belief system. In an interview with
youth pastor Kenda Creasy Dean, she says that she is ‘strangely hopeful’ that young moral therapeutic deists can be won back by the gospel:

The most hopeful thing for me is that young people, even though they adhere to moralistic therapeutic deism, are not giving their lives to it. It’s not big enough, it doesn’t matter enough, it’s not substantial enough, it doesn’t have enough teeth for them to give their lives to it (Dean in Arca Mooney 2010: online)

Dean remains positive, then, because young people aren’t ‘giving their lives’ to moral therapeutic deism as they might if it were something they really cherished. And this may be the undoing of this sham system of belief — even in an iWorld that demands no commitment to anything save the good of the individual self. For while the iWorld offers people much to live for (freedom and self-determination), it gives them no great cause for which to fight, no calling beyond the gratification of individual desire. And while a great many iWorld citizens don’t mind such a state of affairs, many also intuitively sense that there is more to life than being the star of one’s own story. The gospel’s assertion that there is a larger narrative of which we are all a part presents a good opportunity for the gospel to flourish. A key part of that narrative concerns self-sacrifice, to which I’ll now turn.

Self-sacrifice

Timothy Keller’s *Counterfeit Gods* (2009) teaches us that good things — money, purpose, love and freedom — are dangerous if they become ‘ultimate things’ on which we stake our significance, security and fulfilment. They become idols that control us ‘since we feel we must have them or life is meaningless’ (Keller 2009: xxii). Earlier, I used *Shame* to briefly explore the idea that freedom can become its own form of tyranny if pursued at all costs.

If sexual freedom is an idol, as it is in *Shame* and the iWorld at large, then most forms of sexual restraint will be rejected as prudishness. The iWorld regards limits on legal, consensual sexual behaviour as repressive, and a hangover from the tWorld that sought to control individual freedom, since the tWorld made its own idols out of traditional morality, responsibility and duty.

The general rejection of limits on behaviour doesn’t just apply to sexual freedom, but for most freedoms in the iWorld. In order to ensure the liberty of the individual, we tend to operate on a ‘freedom from’ model — we want freedom from tradition, history, convention, religion, authority, family, other people’s expectations, and so on. This iWorld attitude is audible in Steve
Jobs’ rhetoric when he counsels people not to let others’ opinions drown out their inner voice. Rather, Jobs said, people should follow their intuition and go after their dreams, for that would lead to the greatest satisfaction.

While there is wisdom in Jobs’ words, they indicate the iWorld assumption that any constraint or limit is undesirable or repressive. And yet we’ve also seen that iWorld individuals who reject the company of others (Ryan from *Up in the Air*), satisfy their every whim (Brandon from *Shame*), or who enjoy unparalleled freedom (the average iWorld citizen), do not seem all that happy and fulfilled either. The rising rates of depression in the West testify to that.

Perhaps what we need to do is to reconfigure the way we conceive of freedom. The ‘freedom from’ model is negative; perhaps the cure lies in the switch to a positive alternative — articulated in the terms ‘freedom for’. Instead of asking, then, ‘What should we be liberated from?’ we need to reframe the question to ‘What will we use our freedom for?’

Such a positive model of freedom (‘freedom for’) introduces the possibility of self-sacrifice — quite a radical idea in an iWorld dedicated to expanding the possibilities of the individual, rather than giving them up. We can see such a self-sacrificial attitude at work in a speech that J K Rowling, best-selling author of the *Harry Potter* series, gave the Harvard University graduating class of 2008.

In it, Rowling spoke of the power of imagination — which she defined as not only the ability to imagine what is not, but also the power to ‘empathise with humans whose experiences we have never shared’ (2008: online). Reflecting on her experience of working for Amnesty International and hearing horrible stories of people persecuted for speaking up against the brutality of their governments, she exhorted Harvard students to use their power for the good of other people:

> Your intelligence, your capacity for hard work, the education you have earned and received, give you unique status, and unique responsibilities... choose to use your status and influence to raise your voice on behalf of those who have no voice... choose to identify not only with the powerful, but with the powerless... choose to retain the ability to imagine yourself into the lives of those who do not have your advantages. (Rowling 2008: online)

Notice how sharply the story of the world told by Rowling’s speech contrasts with Steve Jobs’ commencement address. While Jobs said that it was most important to pursue your dreams, Rowling said it was most important
to lift up others, to identify with the powerless. This isn’t just lip service for Rowling either; it was reported in March that she’s donated so much to charity that she’s no longer a billionaire (Prince 2012: online). While Rowling still has a fortune of £646 million to her name, it’s a rare sight to see rich people emptying themselves out for the sake of others.

I suspect that while most iWorld citizens would find Jobs an inspirational figure, they would find more to admire in Rowling. For Jobs exhorts people to reach for their dreams; Rowling asks that in doing so, they shouldn’t forget about others but, rather, be their advocate.

If iWorld citizens can applaud Rowling’s example, then marvelling at Jesus shouldn’t be too hard for them either. For while Jesus had everything and was richer than the richest of billionaires, he gave it all up for the good of others (Philippians 2). Jesus lowered himself at such great cost to himself because God is other-person centred, which completely overturns the overall philosophy of the iWorld: that life is all about you. If we can make those connections between Rowling and Jesus, and show that the good we applaud in Rowling’s behaviour reflects, in small part, what Jesus has done in giving his life for others, then perhaps those who admire Rowling can come to a greater admiration of Jesus. They may even come to worship him.

**Some final thoughts**

For Everyday Theology to be effective it must demonstrate an understanding of the preoccupations, desires and fears that drive people. As I’ve suggested today, popular culture and everyday life are good places to start listening out for the stories our cultural texts tell about life in the brave new iWorld.

Tonight, we’ve mostly considered the notion of individual freedom — for this is the iWorld’s matter of greatest concern. As I’ve identified, the iWorld tends to operate on a negative model of freedom — ‘freedom from’. In ministering to iWorld we need, however, to restate the question in positive form through the question ‘what will we use our freedom for?’

I suggest that this approach is useful because it strikes a balance between the commitments of iWorld and the tWorld. First, it insists on individual agency — which the tWorld often downplayed (at best) and suppressed (at worst) in the name of the group. And yet, in contradiction to iWorld values, this question also acknowledges that the best chance of happiness for individuals and groups is not a throwing off of all constraints but a willingness to make sacrifices for a greater good — especially the good of others.
In other words, the question ‘what will we use our freedom for?’ indicates that our burden of selfhood in the iWorld is not simply about being free, but what to do with our freedom. The gospel gives us good reason to believe that the good life, so eagerly desired in the iWorld, is not one of self-sufficiency or unrestrained individualism, but one lived in sacrificial service to community. Jesus, above all, shows us what it means to live a good life: a willingness to use one’s strengths, gifts and freedoms for the good of others (Dickson 2011: 24). And by no means does Jesus intend to hold out on us. It was he, after all, who said, ‘I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full’ (John 10:10).
Bibliography


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