



Science and Faith in the Second City Study Series

Session 5: Making sense of our identity in the 21st Century world

We live in an age of ‘the self’. Frequently as individuals we can be self-absorbed and self-obsessed. Rather than describing who we are, we ‘identify ourselves as...’ and sometimes even our self-identification is transient. In this talk consultant psychiatrist Professor Glynn Harrison explores what we mean by ‘personal identity’ and how we have arrived at the age of selfism. His argument is that the ‘self project’ does not serve us well and has largely failed. Instead, he shows how the Christian faith provides a reliable basis for understanding the true nature of human identity.

Our identity is found in the story we tell ourselves about ourselves and the headlines and themes that give coherence to our story. Traditionally our story was derived from our family and social context and even our understanding of God – it was a story which was open to the world around us. In the last 50 years that has changed. Now I tell my story in any way I choose, I find my identity inside myself, cut off from my traditions and the outside world. All I need to do is ‘allow myself just to be me’. Historically these ideas can be traced back to the philosophers of the 19th century, in particular the atheist Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that there are no universals, simply ideas, and that the ideas that come out on top belong to the people with the most power. Today we might express this in the words of Elsa from the film Frozen ‘no right no wrong, no rules for me’.

The central part of this talk is a critique of our modern understanding of the self. Glynn Harrison shows from evidence in modern psychiatry that the mantras of the modern view of the self, that you just need to look inside yourself, paradoxically produces a hollowed out, weakened version of ourselves intensely vulnerable to the pressures of social media. He shows that the ‘me project’ has failed leading to a lack of personal confidence and resilience.

A modern solution to this problem is to show that we need to be part of a story that is bigger than ourselves, that we need to serve a purpose larger than ourselves and belong to a story that is not just about me. Within a secular framework this could, for example, mean become an eco-warrior. However, Professor Harrison goes on to argue for a better way and shows how the Christian faith helps us make a more coherent sense of our identity.

Professor Glynn Harrison is a retired professor of psychiatry from the University of Bristol, where he was a practising consultant psychiatrist and was chair of the Department of psychiatry.

The main themes covered in this study are: the nature of human identity; modern selfism; my story as part of a larger story; mental health; human dignity and the image of God; sin and dissatisfaction; what our identity in Christ means; These notes are intended for private or small group study. Please watch each video clip and then consider the associated study questions. There are 26 minutes of video and so in order to give enough time for discussion it is intended that the session lasts between 60-75 minutes. The video material for this study can be found on our website at <https://www.scienceandfaith.co.uk>

Study Questions

Obsessed with ourselves

Watch the video

To what extent do you recognise Glynn Harrison's analysis of how we identify ourselves in our modern society?

- Do you like this analysis?

A changed understanding of identity

Watch the next video

Glynn Harrison argues that our identity might be defined in terms of 'the story we tell ourselves about ourselves'. This traditionally was derived by reference to the external world – our family, our geography our employment and is an understanding of the self, known as 'the porous self'.

- Share the extent to which you identify with the more modern understanding of self – 'I get to tell my story in any way I choose' (the buffered self).
- To what extent do you recognise this version of the self in the people you know and/or see in the media?

How is this project going?

Watch the next video

Look inside yourself. What do you see? Is it all good? Share in your group, as you are able, your thoughts on this 'common sense argument' presented in the talk.

- Using research data Glynn Harrison gives a fierce critique of the self-esteem movement. From what you know of your world (work/ family/ community) how plausible do you find his commentary on self-esteem?

A Christian understanding of identity

Watch the next video

Ways in which the Christian faith helps to make sense of our identity.

- Christians argue that we find self-worth in reaching out to something beyond ourselves. To what extent have you found this to be true?
- Discuss how helpful you find the assertion that 'the Christian faith makes sense of the deep dis-satisfaction that we feel about ourselves'.
- 'I find my identity in Christ' can be a very glib statement. How do we 'inhabit the rich reality' of this phrase?

The talk 'Making sense of our identity in the 21st Century world' was given in Birmingham in October 2022 as part of the Christian apologetics series 'Science and faith in the Second City'. You can watch the talk in its entirety on our website. The project was funded by a Scientists in Congregations grant from ECLAS, in Durham, and organised by ChaplaincyPlus. This written material is free to copy.