

## **Our 21st Century Identity Crisis**

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([https://helenair.com/news/local/matthew-brower-column-our-21st-century-identity-crisis/article\\_608b70b9-bafb-5367-8da5-0940aba13708.html](https://helenair.com/news/local/matthew-brower-column-our-21st-century-identity-crisis/article_608b70b9-bafb-5367-8da5-0940aba13708.html))

During a recent presentation, I asked participants to take a moment to ask themselves, “Who am I?” The question is as ancient as the human race and one with which people have wrestled from time immemorial. Recall the Delphic maxim “Know thyself” inscribed on the Temple of Apollo. In a sense, “Who am I?” is the most fundamental question but one not easily answered.

Simply asking oneself the question can be unsettling. Maybe that’s because deep down we know that our answer unavoidably impacts how we live. Our answer reflects back to us what we believe about our end, our responsibilities and ultimately the meaning of life.

Who am I? Where do I come from? What is my destiny? These questions are preceded by the essential metaphysical question “What is real?” and lead us to conclusions regarding ethics (What should I do?) and epistemology (How do I know anything?).

These questions are the big ones and while perhaps we aren’t regularly asking ourselves these in a deliberate way, I think everyone at some level makes these inquiries. We have an innate hunger for truth and can’t help but seek answers. These are questions from which we cannot hide. They shadow us every step of our way and demand our thoughtful gaze.

But are we finding answers? If so, where? How do those answers impact our daily living?

The world’s great religions, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. propose answers, sometimes bearing similarities amongst each other. But these aren’t just questions of religious faith and the fact that many truths are accessible by reason provides opportunity and hope for dialogue not only among religious believers but between all persons. One doesn’t need to be religious to believe that all humans have intrinsic worth or that love is the highest value in human life.

Perhaps our ever-widening divides on social and moral issues can be traced not so much to differences in religious precepts but, more fundamentally, to different views regarding the human person.

Before we talk about what we ought to do, we must discuss who we are. It’s difficult, if not impossible, to agree on ethics without some agreement on metaphysics and anthropology, and while there is certainly room for dialogue and agreement between Christianity and those of other faiths or no faith at all, Christianity does have important things to say about our origin, nature and destiny.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat.

But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”

Lewis’ statement reflects a profound Christian belief—that each person is a masterpiece, a uniquely gifted and irreplaceable union of body and spiritual soul destined to exist forever. We believe reality, including human persons, encompasses both the material and the spiritual. We aren’t idealists, gnostic dualists or materialists.

Certainly, many deny that humans have a spiritual soul. The challenge for them is to explain how a purely material creature is capable of abstraction and self-reflection. And what we believe about such things matters deeply. Moral responsibility only makes sense if we can rise above the effects of chemical processes and nerve impulses.

Christians trace our origin to God in whose image and likeness we have been created. This origin communicates something about our nature, destiny and purpose. Saint John Paul II said that being made in God’s image and likeness means we “are called to exist ‘for’ others, to become a gift.” At a time when it’s very easy to weaponize faith, it’s good to be reminded that it is in living our life as a gift for others that we encounter and reveal to the world the true meaning of human dignity.

We live in an age when many do not truly know who they are. We can’t help but find ourselves asking questions like, “Am I defined by what I achieve or possess? Am I a ‘someone’ or a ‘something’? Am I loved or even lovable? To whom do I belong?” The litany of questions laying bare our deep identity crises seems infinite.

But whether one is religious or not, a fulfilling life is realized in meaningful self-sacrifice for the sake of others. One doesn’t need to be Christian or religious to accept that as true. However, for those of us who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ, we believe that it is in him that we find the full revelation of what it means to be a human person.

It is Jesus who shows each of us who we must become and in him we find our true identity. He answers the fundamental questions and calls us to fullness of life in him. He invites all to come and find rest as he reveals us to ourselves.