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ASC

AS200: The View from Australia

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What We Do Defines What We Worship – Integrative Essay

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Introduction

David Foster Wallace once said, “There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.” But how can we know what we are worshipping? Evidence for this answer is found in our pursuits. We all pursue some vision of “the good life” and each of our visions is a *telos*, or end (Smith, 2009, p. 52). Our view of human flourishing will ultimately move and motivate the way we live our life, because we will live to pursue this end in everything we do (Smith, 2009, p. 54).

As humans we are unable to serve two masters, and therefore we cannot pursue two *teloses* (Matthew 6:24). In this essay I will argue that what we do defines what we worship by analysing four example *teloses*: safety, happiness, image, and God. Each *telos* can be split into the pursuit of two or three relating themes (see Figure 1). The purpose of this essay is to provide evidence for what it looks like to worship each *telos*, and to explain how the worship of the first three *teloses* counters the worship of God.

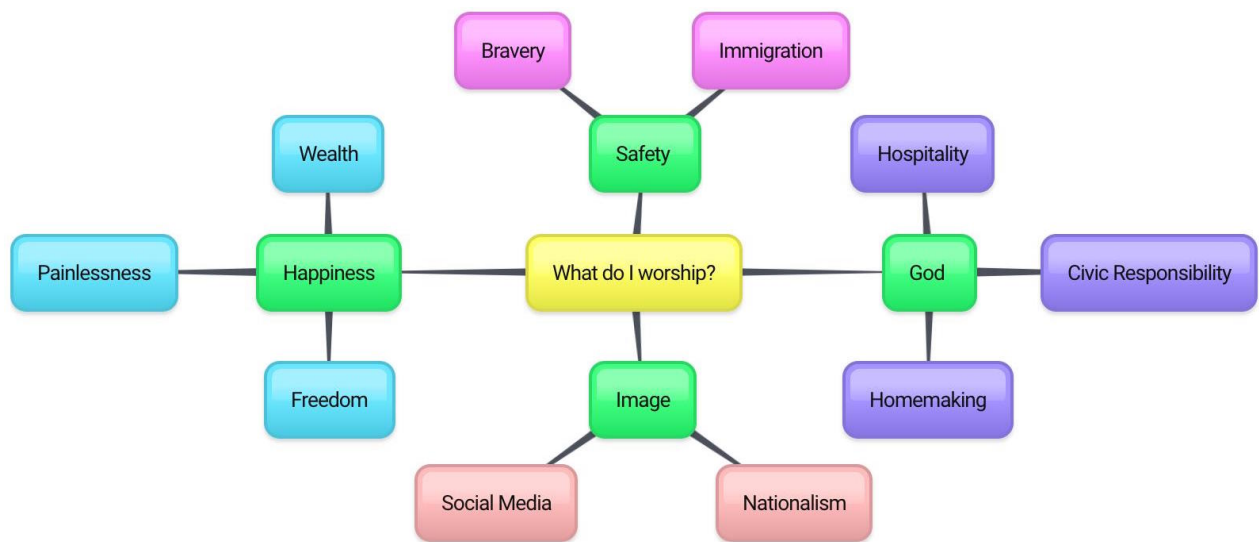


Figure 1: What do I worship?

Safety

This section will develop the analysis of two ways in which we may worship safety: bravery (or lack thereof) and resistance to immigration.

Bravery (or lack thereof)

True bravery is found when a man does not allow himself to be compelled by fear into evil or into failing to do good, even when he has no other option but to naturally fear for himself (Pieper, 1991, pp. 26-27). That being said, cowardice, then, is found when a man is compelled by fear into some kind of evil or failure to do good out of a deep desire to protect himself. I am exemplifying this cowardice when I allow the fear of evil to bring me to the point of forsaking that which I know is right (Pieper, 1991, p. 26). Say I am a teacher in a class of students and a man comes into my room threatening to hurt me or my students. If my solution is to pull out a gun and kill him, I am worshipping safety because I am allowing the fear of the pain this man may inflict on me or my students to push me to break one of the Ten Commandments: thou shalt not murder.

The Bible is clear on this point when it says, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28, NKJV). Cowardice is an action which may cause us to worship safety rather than worshipping God, because it shows we would rather break His commands to protect our current lives than trust that He will protect us Himself, providing us with true life that is everlasting.

Immigration

There is a deeply-rooted fear amongst some people that a percentage of the immigrants who enter their country can and will terrorize it. If you know that a small portion of immigrants will likely become terrorists, would you still let anyone in? The answer of those who fear these potential threats is an astounding, “No.” This is an example of worshipping safety.

After the Tampa incident and 9/11, citizens of Australia started to rationalise the possibility that asylum seekers trying to enter their country by boat could be terrorists

(Manne, 2009, p. 23). This created an immediate push towards stronger border control. In 2001, twenty-one percent of the population changed their vote to favour border control, and of this margin, more than half said it was because of the asylum seeker issue (Manne, 2009, p. 24). The situation became so elevated that Australian citizens began to attach terms like ‘extremist’ and ‘radical’ to ‘Muslim’— antagonising an entire people group out of fear for their own safety (Mackay, 2007, p. 146).

The Bible is clear on this topic as well. “For the Lord your God...shows no partiality...and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. Therefore love the stranger” (Deuteronomy 10:17-19, NKJV). Worshipping safety in a way that causes us to oppose any kind of immigration counters our worship of God because God wants us to love strangers. We cannot love strangers if we are constantly trying to push them away.

Happiness

This section will develop the analysis of two ways in which we may worship happiness: wealth, painlessness, and freedom.

Wealth

In today’s culture, the vision of abundant wealth as a picture of the good life is arguably the most popular one. One such reason for this is that high schools and universities educate students to assume that they will, and should, move up the socio-economic ladder in life in order to be successful (Bouma-Prediger & Walsh, 2003, p. 283). Students find themselves chasing jobs all over the world so that they can have more money, usually in bigger cities far from their homes. Those who find abundant wealth, like billionaire Bill Gates, are associated with success and money, which for many means happiness. Ask someone what it will require for them to be happier in life, and the answer is often, “Money.”

The pursuit of wealth counters our worship of God for many reasons. One reason is because loving money is a root of evils (1 Timothy 6:10). God wants us to benefit from the

fruit of our work (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20), but He does not want us to love our worldly possessions more Him (1 John 2:15). Another reason is that education for upward mobility on the socio-economic ladder removes us from a deeply-rooted Christian community and replaces the call to love our neighbours in our community with a generic love that does not go beyond the community's ability to gratify our wants (Bouma-Prediger & Walsh, 2003, p. 288, 290). Educational institutions put a lot of pressure on students, making them feel as if they need to move up in the world, and sometimes this comes at the cost of digging into the community around them. God loves when we live in community with one another under His name (Psalm 133:1), but this cannot be accomplished if we are worshipping happiness through a single-minded focus on gaining wealth.

Painlessness

Popular phrases like, "Everything is going to be alright...eventually," shape a society that is constantly searching for a life free from pain. This vision requires a life in which everything has to go right, a vision which believes that if I ignore all the bad that has happened to me, I will have a perfectly painless life, and then I will be happy. I can accomplish this through the well-known method, "Let's just live life. All this thinking about it only makes things harder" (Nouwen, 1996, p. 27). This is another way in which we may worship happiness. We desire a life free from pain, but in reality, our sorrows will never leave us and no amount of positive thinking will make them less (Nouwen, 1996, p. 33).

In fact, a life in pursuit of painlessness actually separates us from God. "How can I worship a God who lets me suffer through trials?" becomes, "How can I worship a God who does not want me to be happy?" We become disillusioned with God, blaming Him for not ending our trials. Instead, we should see our trials as the joy they are: an opportunity for us to become stronger in our faith (James 1:2-4). Suffering is not a punishment or an impediment

to happiness, rather it is a blessing—a way to new life in Jesus (Nouwen, 1996, p. 68). True happiness comes when we realize that happiness does not mean a life without pain.

Freedom

When the constitution grants American citizens the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, it is referring to “pursuit of happiness” as the freedom everyone has to find their own happiness. “Each individual has the right not only to pursue happiness but to define it as he wishes” (Newbigin, 1986, p. 26). So then, how do we define happiness? In medieval times, happiness was on the other side of death, but now we are caught in a frantic quest to find happiness before death, since modern science has brought many to believe there is no afterlife (Newbigin, 1986, p. 26-27). The frantic quest for happiness has developed the idea in many that happiness lies in living one’s life for fun, free of boundaries. Ronald Conway suggests that modern Australians avoid Christianity for that very reason: it spoils their fun; Australian principles consist of “unconditional freedom and the boundless satisfaction of the pleasure principle,” both which come into conflict with the moral regulations of a creed (Frame, 2009, p. 68).

It is in this way that the worship of happiness through the pursuit of freedom can diverge from worshipping God. Those who see religious practices and moral codes as the removal of their freedom do not understand how following God’s law is actually the path to true freedom through prosperity and deliverance (Proverbs 28:9, 25-26). God knows what true happiness looks like, and though we will not discover its truest form until we get to heaven, following His laws in this life will bring us as close to happiness as humanly possible.

Image

This section will develop the analysis of two ways in which we may worship our image: social media and nationalism.

Social Media

I have had quite the battle with social media over the years, constantly deleting and re-downloading apps like Snapchat and Instagram. The reason I had this battle was because I was debating between keeping my social media for my friends' happenings, or deleting my social media because it ruined my self-image. What I eventually realized is that social media is not "a neutral decision to enjoy a 'medium'", rather it is an immersion into a competitive world of self-display" (Smith, year, p. 144-145). I was constantly doubting my self-worth if I did not get many likes and praising myself if I did. Even if I tell myself I am using social media because I am interested in others, the reality of the social world is that it will always revolve around me; and it demonstrates a view of human flourishing centred on instant self-gratification (Smith, 2013, p. 148). In this way, I am worshipping my own image. This is not to say that the use of any social media platform always leads to self-worship, but it may be pushing us down such a path if we remain unaware of its possible effects. Many times we know exactly what we are doing in the software, but we are unaware of what it is doing to us (Smith, 2013, p. 149).

Such a use of social media counters the worship of God because it takes the focus off of Him and on to us. By competing in the social battle of self-display, we are idolizing ourselves, something that God is against (Leviticus 26:1, Exodus 20:4). We should instead shift our focus onto praising Him for how amazing He has made us, but if we continue to pursue the gratifying praises of our peers, inflating our pride and egos, we are only worshipping our own image.

Nationalism

"I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free" (Greenwood, 2007). This world-renowned song by Lee Greenwood encapsulates the nationalistic pride of many Americans. A similar nationalistic pride is held by the countrymen of many nations. This

pride is seen in the way countrymen share similar values amongst themselves. Americans value change, control, individualism, equality, competition, efficiency, and materialism—to name a few (Kohl, 1984, p. 7). Australians value mateship, the underdog, sports, money, and simple pleasures like lounging on the beach (Horne, year, p. 21-32). The fact that such a wide range of values can be shared among such a large population of people implies that these values play a huge part in what makes someone American or Australian. However, when citizenship to one's country becomes more important than heavenly citizenship, we begin to worship our image more than our God.

When any man of any country attests to the values of his nation out of pride for being a part of it, he is sacrificing his heavenly citizenship. One such example is voting against the acceptance of immigrants for fear of them stealing my country's jobs, which showcases the American values of competition and control. While some values of these nations are not entirely bad, the ones which counter the values we should hold as God's people lead us into worshipping our own image. We can be respectful of our country's rules while focusing on following God (Mark 12:17).

God

This section will develop the analysis of two ways in which we may worship God: civic responsibility, hospitality, and homemaking.

Civic Responsibility

The worship of God influences our every action, even actions as political as voting. We all have a civic responsibility to voice our perspective on how our government is run, and for Christians, this perspective should be one that glorifies God. If we are simply voting for someone because they are a Christian without checking to see if they have the qualities necessary to be a good leader, or if we are just voting the way we have always voted without being mindful of the characteristics of our candidate, we are not worshipping God through

civic responsibility (Dickson, 2004, p. 1). In order to glorify God through civic responsibility, it is important to be mindful of our choices. This can be done by voting in the interests of others or voting to strengthen the rights of the poor, weak, and marginalized (Dickson, 2004, p. 2-3). By being mindful about our voting methods, we are collectively achieving the “political recognition and protection of individual worth and rights” that, though impersonal, allows us to love God through our concern for others (Pohl, 1999, p. 63).

Hospitality

Though it is important to love our neighbours through our political choices, how can we love our neighbours daily? The answer is through hospitality. In order to worship God through hospitality we should be showing a genuine care and concern for all people, welcoming them into our homes and into our lives. This goes far beyond welcoming people already close to us, but stretches into recognising those who are not valued by society and receiving them—respecting their dignity, worth, and contributions to society (Pohl, 1999, p. 62). We are all made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27). Worshipping God through hospitality allows us to recognize God’s image in everyone, valuing them as we would value ourselves.

Homemaking

While hospitality is a wonderful way to worship God in our everyday lives, there is a danger attached to it when we allow such a broad claim to remain an abstract commitment that is not translated to action; turning neighbour love into general, superficial love (Pohl, 1999, p. 76). The way to counter this danger is with homemaking. Homemaking is accomplished through rooted, intimate relationships with a community, and by becoming a sticker, dweller, or inhabitant who loves and mutually respects and benefits a place (Bouma-Prediger & Walsh, 2003, p. 288-289). Where hospitality worships God through the acceptance and recognition of all people, homemaking provides them with a home—it is the extra step that turns the act of metaphorically opening my doors to my neighbours into giving

them a spare key. A great example of homemaking can be seen in monks. The Rule of St. Benedict welcomes all guests, showing great care and concern in receiving them as Christ would by greeting them with humility, praying with them, eating with them, and washing their feet (Cavanaugh, 2008, p. 353-354). These monks have made their monastery a home for all guests. Worshipping God through homemaking allows us to fulfil our call to love strangers (Deuteronomy 10:19).

Conclusion

What we do defines what we worship. We cannot serve two masters, and so we cannot worship two *teloses*. If I am to worship God, it will be evidenced by all of my actions; and the same goes for worshipping anything else. As David Foster Wallace says, we will all worship something, but we have the choice of what to worship. “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Colossians 3:17, NKJV). In all that I do, I hope to worship God.

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