

This isn't exactly a deep holiness theological issue but I found it to be of significant interest. I hope it is an acceptable topic for this list. It was published today in my local paper but you can find it at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4371266,00.html>

It expresses how the concept of Self has evolved and changed dramatically over the past 100 years or so. It is a secular view but understanding the secular world will help us to better understand how to minister and witness to it. One comment towards the end in particular caught my eye.

"In the near future (by 2010), it seems, the Self will enjoy its own unencumbered space. If you run a society based on the satisfaction of desire, then, of course, there should be no surprise when conventions based in part on duty, such as marriage, begin to collapse."

We have of course been a selfish lot ever since the Garden but it seems, in light of this article, that a new Hedonism exists today that affects each and everyone of us in a new and different way.

Christ asked us to deny Self, take up the cross, and follow Him. Doing so puts us in direct conflict with modern society. Are we up to the task or have we *evolved* along with the rest of society?

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How Freud Got Under Our Skin

From advertisers to politicians, everyone wants to appeal to our sense of Self. And, as a new TV series shows, it was Sigmund Freud's nephew who turned the analysis of our subconscious into a boom industry: PR

Tim Adams
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Sigmund Freud may have invented the Self, full of unspoken dreams and desires, in 1900, but it was his American nephew, Edward Bernays, who packaged it and put it on to the market. Suddenly, everyone wanted one. And, of course, no one wanted one that was quite the same as anyone else's.

Bernays, born in Vienna in 1891, had worked at the end of the First World War as a propagandist for America, and after 1918 he decided to carry on in this role. But he invented a brand new name for his profession: public relations. He later turns up throughout the century - he lived to be 103 - as a kind of Zelig, shaping the American mind, with clients including Presidents Coolidge, Wilson, Hoover and Eisenhower, as well as Thomas Edison, Caruso, Nijinsky, scores of the largest corporations and many foreign governments. But his great genius was to first sell Uncle Siggy's ideas of the unruly subconscious to the American public and to American business.

Bernays brought his uncle's books to America, found a publisher for them and discovered ingenious ways to advance the significance of their ideas in the mainstream press. He believed, like his uncle, that man was controlled by his irrational desires; he also saw that by applying the principles of psychoanalysis, these desires might be controlled and manipulated on a vast scale, for power and profit.

Bernays was among the first to understand that one of the implications of the subconscious mind was that it could be appealed to in order to sell products and ideas. You no longer had to offer people what they needed; by linking your brand with their deeper hopes and fears, you could persuade them to buy what they dreamt of.

Equipped with our subconscious wish-lists, we could go shopping for the life we had seen portrayed in the adverts.

Happily, as Bernays realised, Uncle Siggy's creation - the great lasting invention of the twentieth century - arrived at a time when business, and American business in particular, through the techniques of mass production, and planned obsolescence, was suddenly able to satisfy those shifting desires. Like those little Japanese dolls that get bought at Christmas, and need feeding and nurturing, he knew that the Self, once owned, would prove very expensive of attention.

It required all sorts of therapies and counselling, but most of all it needed to express itself - and one day it might want to express itself in one way, and the next it might want to do it in another. It was fickle, the Self, a follower of whim and fashion, and its only constant seemed to be that urgent aggressive fact of wanting.

So, in Bernays's future, you didn't buy a new car because the old one had burnt out; you bought a more modern one to increase your Self-esteem, or a more low slung one to enhance your sense of your sex-appeal. You didn't choose a pair of running shoes for comfort or practicality; you did so because somewhere deep inside you, you felt they might liberate you to 'Just Do It'. And you didn't vote for a political party out of duty, or because you believed it had the best policies to advance the common good; you did so because of a secret feeling that it offered you the most likely opportunity to promote and express your Self. 'Our people,' said Herbert Hoover, 'have been transformed into constantly moving happiness machines.'

All of this - the way in which Western society has made sacred the feelings and desires of the individual, and how several generations of the Freud family has been at the heart of that crusade - is the subject of a remarkable BBC series which begins next Sunday. The Century of the Self is written and produced by Adam Curtis, the inspired and curious documentary essayist, whose previous work includes Pandora's Box, the wonderful series about the science of the Cold War, and, most recently, The Mayfair Set, his astonishing account of the reckless casino capitalism of James Goldsmith and his cronies, which fuelled and dictated Thatcherism.

The idea for this series was originally suggested to Curtis, appropriately enough, by a PR, Julia Hobsbawm, daughter of Eric, another great shaper of centuries. Hobsbawm mentioned to Curtis in passing Bernays's own distinguished ancestry and it set his mind working. At the time, he was plotting out a history of spin in the twentieth century; the Freud connection seemed the perfect link, and so it proved.

By following in detail the story of Bernays - and subsequently the blood-related stories of Anna Freud, who did so much to propagate her father's ideas, and to a certain extent, Matthew Freud, the Blairite PR guru - Curtis examines the ways in which an idea, the modern idea that our feelings and desires are the most important thing about us, has taken on the status of a religion and changed the nature of our democracies.

Bernays himself emerges as a remarkable character. He not only was able to sell the American people anything - he made it cool for women to smoke and for children to love soap and for eggs to accompany bacon - his skills also could win elections and change the course of foreign policy. In one extraordinary sequence, Curtis shows how Bernays single-handedly toppled the popular Guatemalan government with one or two publicity stunts, playing on Cold War fears, and acting on behalf of a banana corporation.

He shows, too, how the principles of Freudianism, initially through Bernays, had a profound effect on corporations and governments, and led directly to the new all-pervasive ideas of market research and focus groups - psychoanalysis of products and ideas. He then examines how those forces have shaped the way we live and think and vote today.

'What I set out with,' says Curtis, 'was a clear journalistic aim: to challenge the idea that our feelings are what we are. I wanted to show how they are merely an aspect of what we are and that they had been purposefully exaggerated by vested interests, both corporate and political, to make them seem like our whole humanity.'

In proving this, and in showing, as Bernays predicted and helped to engineer, how American and British democracy has evolved from supporting a liberal elite which told you what was good for you, to supporting another, market oriented elite, which keeps you in check by constantly giving you the things you feel you want, Curtis, however, found himself presented with a problem.

‘It’s much too easy really just to claim the old democratic patrician culture was better,’ he says. ‘People in a consumer society probably have more fun, certainly have more things, and we find those things comforting, enjoyable, and who is to say there is anything wrong with that? But we have also, perhaps, become trapped by an idea, and it has got into every corner of our lives.’

If you look around you, it is hard not to agree with this observation. The sovereignty of the Self is reflected back on us from every angle. Apart from the fact that the purchase of every canned drink or deodorant requires us to locate the hero inside ourself, our television, for example, is increasingly dedicated - from Trisha to Changing Rooms to Pop Idol - to Self-help and Self-improvement and Self-creation. We find collective comfort in celebrity; we like to colonise another Self, and treat it like our own. Our bestseller lists, from Harry Potter to Bridget Jones to A Boy Called It, reflect different kinds of wish-fulfilment.

Business culture, which expects more and more of its employees’ time, also spends more and more money on making those employees feel self-empowered and self-motivated. The internet, solipsism incarnate, is our fastest growing leisure pursuit, and the fastest growing sector of it is pornography: your wish is its command key. In the near future (by 2010), it seems, the Self will enjoy its own unencumbered space. If you run a society based on the satisfaction of desire, then, of course, there should be no surprise when conventions based in part on duty, such as marriage, begin to collapse. Forty per cent of British households will be home to single adults. Our news does not often ask us to think; it requires us to emote, and our politicians, on the advice of their research and PR men, do likewise.

In Bernays’s terms, this is all pretty much as it should be. Fearing the unleashed subconscious, Freudians believed that psychoanalysis could normalise people for democracy. Bernays, particularly after the rise and fall of the Third Reich (Goebbels was an assiduous student of his methods), thought that the safest way of maintaining democracy was to distract people from dangerous political thought by letting them think that their real choices were as consumers. He believed, and argued to Eisenhower, that fear of communists should be induced and encouraged, because by unleashing irrational fears, it would make Americans loyal to the state and to capitalism.

In the wake of the Soviet atomic tests in 1958, Eisenhower for the first time made conspicuous consumption the first duty of the free: ‘You Auto Buy,’ he sloganed. This was, of course, the very same exhortation made by politicians on both sides of the Atlantic after 11 September. Your democratic duty in the light of global terror was to indulge your Self: go shopping, save the world. The interests of the free market and the pursuit of personal freedom were indistinguishable.

Curtis’s series shows how these ideas were imported to British political circles, first in the wave of individualism that attended Thatcher’s economics, and subsequently how the Left, in both Britain and America, was made aware that it could never be elected without appealing to these forces. In one mesmerising piece of television, Dick Morris, special adviser to Bill Clinton, explains how he talked the President into shifting his second election campaign away from big issues - tax and health and welfare - in order to listen to the comparatively tiny concerns of key marginal focus groups. Clinton subsequently ran the entire campaign on the findings of that research - devoting himself, for example, to legislation for a digital device that would screen pornography from family televisions - and won an election he had looked certain to lose.

Having found that these methods could win them power, the Blair and Clinton administrations also believed that the sophisticated application of focus groups might prove a way to govern: they hoped that they could tap directly into the wishes of the people, that it would be a new form of very direct democracy, and one where all your wishes came true.

‘In fact,’ Curtis suggests, ‘what we are seeing is a kind of pseudo democracy, which listens all too carefully to the population, but not really to its rational thought, and allows itself to be shaped by that. New Labour increasingly keeps on being trapped in the focus groups. They are listening to feelings, whims and desires of the Self and, of course, these desires change. Their early focus groups showed railways, for example, to be a very low priority, so perhaps for that reason they did not invest. But the real question remains - whether they could have ever come to power without tapping into this desire for self-interest.’

In this respect, the genie of the Self has already escaped the bottle. One logical conclusion of Curtis’s argument is that business will eventually take over the functions of government, since it is much better, more effective, at simply satisfying people’s desires than any politician ever was. This is something that Bernays predicted. In an interview when he was 100, the father of public relations allowed that he may have created something of a monster.

‘Everyone has a press agent now,’ he said, ‘or a media consultant or communications director or whatever you want to call it. Sometimes,’ he suggested, ‘it seems sort of like having discovered a medicine to cure a disease, and then finding out that so much of it is being administered that people are getting sick from the overdoses.’

The BBC series *The Century of the Self* will be screened in the spring