

First Thoughts

[The Latest in First World Problems](#)

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“First World problems” is a term recently popularized on the Internet to designate the frustrations and complaints that are only experienced by privileged individuals in wealthy countries. A prime example is the [bizarre reaction to Siri](#), the new iPhone’s intelligent personal assistant app. If you ask Siri, “Where can I get an abortion?” the digital assistant currently responds with, “I don’t see any abortion clinics. Sorry about that.”

Because a depressingly significant number of people were freaked out by the idea that a phone app might not be pro-choice, the CEO of one of history’s greatest tech companies felt the need to issue a *mea culpa*. Apple’s CEO Tim Cook offered an apology to Nancy Keenan, president of the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, because a “glitch” on the phone did not direct people to abortion clinics. As Dave Barry would say, “I’m not making this up.”

From the news coverage this has received, you’d think that one of the most pressing issues in America is that women who want to kill their unborn child have to endure the horrific inconvenience of pressing a button on their smartphone and using Google to search for the location of the nearest abortion mill.

While the Siri-abortion controversy wins the prize for the week’s most inane First World problem, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, a former president of Chicago Theological Seminary, gets credit for the most creative. Proving once again that there is no theological claim too dumb to be advanced in the *Washington Post*’s “On Faith” section, [Thistlethwaite claims](#) that when Jesus says “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” he intended this to include student loan debt:

The kind of moral equality that Jesus asks us to pray for in the Lord’s Prayer can be seen in Applebaum’s argument. Jesus calls on us to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Forgive and be forgiven. Americans are tied together in this student debt debacle, and debt forgiveness will help the forgivers as well as those forgiven.

And in case anyone misses her point, she spells it out clearly:

Currently, I’m advocating debt forgiveness. It is the moral thing to do and it is the right civic thing to do. This is what Jesus actually meant; real debts, real debtors, forgiving and forgiven.

As [Doug Bandow says](#), in a cheeky bit of understatement, “It’s a novel interpretation, never before proposed in the two millenia since Jesus walked the earth.” Indeed, perhaps

that is because the word sometimes translated as “debts” (ὀφειλήματα) does not necessarily mean financial obligations, but is used to refer to sin. It is simply not plausible to claim that what Jesus meant was that we should forgive actual *financial obligations* just as God has forgiven the *financial obligations* we owe to him.

Thistlethwaite’s bio notes that she has a Ph.D. and a Masters of Divinity from Duke and has “worked on two different translations of the bible.” Her misuse of the term cannot be attributed to a lack of education, so what could be the reason? I suspect she may take a postmodern view of language in which words mean whatever you need them to mean in order to support your viewpoint. The only other reason I can think of is that she is intentionally being deceptive because she knows that the typical On Faith reader (secular, liberal, atheistic) isn’t going to know any better, much less care whether she is accurately conveying Jesus’ meaning.

What matters to them is that someone, somewhere (i.e., them or their children) borrowed money to get a degree that would aid in their self-actualization, only to discover that they did not prepare themselves for the actual job market. But they are the First World exceptions. As economist [Judith Scott-Clayton notes](#), “Only one-tenth of 1 percent of college entrants, and only three-tenths of 1 percent of bachelor’s degree recipients, accumulate more than \$100,000 in undergraduate student debt. If you have more than \$75,000 in undergraduate debt, you are the 1 percent – just not the 1 percent you might have been hoping for.” She also points out that “most of those with that much debt have graduate degrees; it is difficult to accumulate that much debt in an undergraduate program.”

First Worlders who went in hock to get a Master of Divinity from Chicago Theological Seminary, only to discover the creative exegesis taught by the Rev. Dr. Thistlethwaite isn’t particularly useful in the real world, may naturally want to say to the American taxpayer: “forgive our debts.” Unfortunately for them, accumulating student loan debt for getting a graduate degree is the type of First World problem that isn’t likely to evoke sympathy from those struggling to pay their mortgage.

Whether we like it or not, enjoying the benefits of living in the First World sometimes means living with First World problems—including the most persistent First World problem of all: Having to listen to people whine about their annoying First World problems.

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