

# Book Reviews & Notes

## *Christian Identity, Religion and Global Encounters: Some Recent Biblical and Historical Studies*

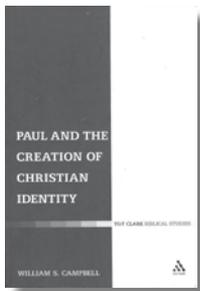
*Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity*, by William S. Campbell (T&T Clark, 2008, 224pp.)

*Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians*, by Philip A. Harland (T&T Clark, 2009, 256pp.)

*Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World*, by Carla Gardina Pestana (University of Pennsylvania, 2009, 312pp.)

—reviewed by Brad Gill

“Global connectedness” seems to be the new mode in historical study. The standard history textbook is more prone to view the past as a “world of flows,”<sup>1</sup> using our modern experience of globalization to reinterpret how earlier ideas, technologies and peoples traveled across disparate regions of the world. This bias has been a fortunate boon to our understanding of how cultures and religions interfaced historically. Missiology is benefiting enormously. Three recent publications have reframed certain ethnic and religious frontiers within some oh-so-familiar biblical and historical periods. All three share a singular interest in the emergence of Christian identity amidst these historic “world of flows.”



A New Testament scholar, William Campbell, has snuck up on us with his publication on Paul. He could have easily remained tucked away in New Testament studies. But he has waded into the first century Graeco-Roman world and reinterpreted how Paul understood the “Christ-follower” amidst the inter-ethnic and inter-religious tension of his day. Along

with his exegetical and historical expertise, Campbell brings to the table a skillful integration of new social scientific perspectives. The result is a rich and nuanced appreciation of Paul’s apostolic challenge of “creating gentile identity in Christ.” This is certainly a heavy piece of New Testament scholarship, but it’s a *tour de force* for any cross-cultural mission worker who might assume he understands Paul’s idea of how Christian identity is formed on a cross-cultural frontier.

Campbell again and again has to slice through our modern tendencies in biblical studies to get at how Paul understands Christian identity. Our interpretations usually

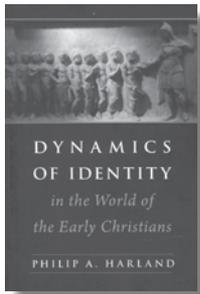
demand clear-cut categories of Jew and Gentile, or assume Judaism and Christianity as separate religions, when Paul’s context actually yields no such dichotomy. Paul’s “world of flows” defies categorical simplicity. Yet, we tend to homogenize Paul’s theological themes and impose them unilaterally across his different epistles, thereby weakening a clear contextual reading of Paul’s thinking. Campbell contends that each epistle presents Paul with a different mix of Jew, gentile and Roman civil authority, each a different equation on that ethno-religious frontier. Campbell’s respect for this contextual complexity yields a cross-cultural realism, a realism that speaks to many mission situations today.

Campbell figures we overlook Paul’s “peculiar problem.” His mainly gentile communities had to work out their Christian identity in relation to traditional Jewish synagogue communities. So, was an “anti-synagogue attitude” essential to the identity of a true Christ-follower? Was standing against an aggressive Judaism of the synagogue an important “negative identity marker” for all Christ-followers? Campbell says “no” and offers an interesting twist in defending his position.

Over a couple of chapters he gives a masterful recasting of the book of Romans. In doing so, he does not permit post-Reformation theological priorities, nor his own original assumptions, nor the imported themes of other epistles, to cloud the unique contextual challenge Paul faced in this Roman context. The Judaizing-infested context of Galatians cannot be assumed here in Rome. Campbell’s interpretation of Romans, therefore, reverses the typical reading of Paul as absolutely negative to Jewish law, circumcision and synagogue. Romans, Campbell contends, is actually Paul’s first defense of the Jewish way of life amidst the dominance of a gentile Christian movement in that city. So, Paul’s idea of conversion does not require an obliteration of a distinctly Jewish past. In Campbell’s hands, Romans is a testimony that both Jew and Gentile were able to accept their own ethnic particularity as they submitted to that transforming process we know as conversion.

Campbell’s work of New Testament scholarship must be introduced into our missiological discussion. It will humble any presumed dogmatism that views Christian identity as one undifferentiated expression across an ethnic and religious frontier. Campbell has concluded that for Paul any Christ-defined identity actually included multiple identities in Christ, that ethnicities are accepted and affirmed as “sub-identities in a nested hierarchy of identity of which being in Christ is the primary.”(157) Campbell’s exegetical study is a solid biblical blueprint for Christian citizenship, identity and conversion, one that speaks easily to modern mission contexts.

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Harland's *Dynamics of Identity* expands the examination of Christian identity in this same Graeco-Roman world of early Christianity by using the interesting probe of "associations." It's through associations that we can better understand identity formation in that religiously complex society. A different temple or religious association was

virtually on every street corner, a feature somewhat replicated in the modern Western world's plethora of voluntary associations. We take these associations for granted, assuming they are normative. Some have even suggested that not until the American Revolution would we see anything comparable to the religious freedom of Roman society, certainly nothing in pre-modern Europe, Asian or Islamic society.<sup>2</sup>

What makes Harland's study missiologically significant is how it reflects on our understanding of the early church as an association that formed Christian identity. Harland insists that "synagogues and churches should not be studied in isolation from analogous social structures."<sup>(25)</sup> Local devotees of other religious, cultic or commercial associations "assembled regularly to socialize, share common meals, and honor their earthly benefactors." Christians shared many of the same categories of cultural life with these other associations, whether "fellow initiates," "mysteries" or "processions." They shared many of the same "processes of negotiation" as they assimilated, differentiated, and acculturated to their locales. The implication is that "early Christian authors could draw on familiar concepts and categories from local cultural life, including associational life, in order to define and express the identities of congregations."

Since other associations did not have the rich epistolary tradition as did churches, Harland's study is mainly archeological. Certain chapters take us through intricate aspects of certain Jewish and Syrian families to ascertain how their identity was shaped by group interaction, mobilization and rivalry. This is not your normal missionary reading by any means! But Harland's two chapters on the common associational use of the family metaphors of "brother," "father" and "mother" make a vital point we all can understand: Christians may be distinct, but they are not totally unique. Christians in association drew from the same family ideals of solidarity, goodwill, affection, friendship, protection, glory and honor as did members of other groups. Christian churches drew from the same pool of kinship terms that were used to express belonging within associations across that empire.

Harland's study helps us appreciate, as did Campbell's, that Christian identity was not "a choice between strongly main-

taining ethnic identity through separation, on the one hand, and accommodating completely to the surrounding culture, on the other."<sup>(121)</sup> His evidence suggests that Christians were not simply a singular, stereotyped, sectarian movement, but that Christian association ("church") was "recognizable to many outsiders as another instance of the association" in which all citizens were involved. The potential source of tension that arose from the Christian emphasis on one God, a tension increased by calls for exclusivity by Christian leadership, did not result in a Christian identity immune to the society around it. Christians in association, according to Harland, used common modes of identity construction.



Pestana extends this study of Christian identity, but turns to another "world of flows." She uses a wide angle lens on the British Atlantic Protestant world that followed the Reformation and the discovery of the Americas. She paints a broad mosaic of religious encounters that characterized that world, and in so doing, lifts us Americans out of our simple story line of the European

pilgrim who builds democracy out of a savage wilderness. A few decades ago, one couldn't find such an open and refreshing read of religion in this historical period. She also has done missiology a great favor by painting a more comprehensive canvas. From the shores of West Africa and the more northern shores of a conflicted Europe, to the frontiers of Caribbean islands and American mainland, Pestana reinterprets how Christian and religious identities emerged among the multiple cross-cultural encounters that dotted that vast Atlantic world.

Her descriptions of the encounters between Native Americans, African immigrants and Protestant newcomers are vivid accounts of how "religious encounters involved an ongoing transaction of give and take."<sup>(10)</sup> Her account of King Philip's war illustrates how the Bible gets confused and stigmatized in the turmoil of political resistance. And she helps us see that the "all-or-nothing" idea of conversion ingrained in the Protestant tradition was surprised by the indigenous negotiation of Christian identity that confronted them in those cross-cultural encounters. History, well-written and well-aimed, grants frontier missiology new perspective, and Pestana, Harland and Campbell together are a rich study of Christian identity in the ethnic and religious "world of flows." **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lewellen, Ted C. *The Anthropology of Globalization*, Bergen & Garvey, London, 2002, pp. 95-98.

<sup>2</sup> Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 192.