

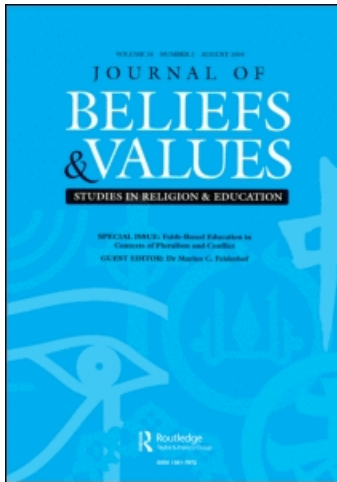
This article was downloaded by: [Tucker, J. Brian]

On: 21 May 2009

Access details: *Access Details: [subscription number 911586370]*

Publisher *Routledge*

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## Journal of Beliefs & Values

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713429021>

### Christian identity - created or construed?

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Online Publication Date: 01 April 2009

**To cite this Article** Tucker, J. Brian(2009)'Christian identity - created or construed?',*Journal of Beliefs & Values*,30:1,71 — 77

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/13617670902784659

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13617670902784659>

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### Christian identity – created or construed?

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**Exploring early Christian identity**, edited by Bengt Holmberg, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2008a, WUNT 226, viii + 205 pp., €64.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-3-16-149674-5

**Identity formation in the New Testament**, edited by Bengt Holmberg and Mikael Winnige, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2008b, WUNT 227, xii + 341 pp., €80.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-3-16-149687-5

**Christian identity in Corinth**, V. Henry T. Nguyen, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2008c, WUNT II 243, xii + 272 pp., €59.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-16-149666-0

Was early ‘Christian’ identity created or construed? This is an important issue that separates a number of approaches to the study of identity within New Testament scholarship. The three books under review offer differing approaches to this question, with those focusing on construal de-emphasising the agency of the epistolary discourse, while those arguing for creation supporting a more comprehensive understanding of discursive agency. Also, the difference between construal and creation may also have an ideological/theological component to it as well. These three works read together, provide an excellent overview to the various approaches followed within current New Testament scholarship.

*Exploring early Christian identity* is part of the result of a ‘four-year’ study project entitled ‘Christian identity – the first 100 years’. The present volume functions as a summary of the work of the scholars who have participated in this research project sponsored by ‘the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation’ (v). The book addresses several important issues related to the formation of identity within the early Christ-movement including: social memory, labelling, behavioural norms, group prototypicality, ethical formation, and gender. Taken together, they provide a complex interpretive framework for understanding how Christian identity was construed and created.

Bengt Holmberg’s introductory essay, ‘Understanding the first hundred years of Christian identity’ provides a critical overview of approaches to the study of identity within the first century of the Christ-movement. Holmberg’s definition of identity focuses on the recognition of one’s ‘belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ’ and his survey of current research on this topic seeks to understand how scholars address ‘the degree of concreteness of early Christian identity’ (5). Holmberg’s work not only provides an excellent survey of identity studies but also puts forth his approach, closely aligned with that of Ben F. Meyer, in which identity and self-understanding are bifurcated,

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with the former expressing itself in the latter. In this framework, Paul's epistolary discourse is understood as construing identity and not creating it. This leads him to critique the work of Philip F. Esler and William S. Campbell who emphasise Paul's agency in the creation of early Christ-movement identity (26, 29).

Samuel Byrskog's essay, 'Memory and identity in the Gospels: A new perspective' argues that social memory creates a sense of belonging which is sourced in 'the Jesus of history' (40). Byrskog's focus is the social identity of the early Christ-movement and his understanding of social identity is grounded in the research of Henri Tajfel (34). The importance of Byrskog's work lies in his understanding of how the group's past functions to socialise new members (57).

Anders Runesson in 'Inventing Christian identity: Paul, Ignatius, and Theodosius I' discusses the importance of scholarly labelling in the context of early Christ-movement identity. This study addresses contours of the debate concerning 'the so-called "parting of the ways"' (63), which in Runesson's reconfiguration of terms did not actually occur (79, 88). He brilliantly describes those within the early Christ-movement as members of '*Apostolic Judaism*' in which 'ethnic' and 'cultural' identity are understood as inseparable from 'religious' identity and thus continue to impact the communal life of those who follow Christ (71–2, 77, original emphasis). Runesson's essay is a welcome addition to the literature on methodological and terminological issues in identity studies in the New Testament.

Rikard Roitto's essay, 'Behaving like a Christ-believer: A cognitive perspective on identity and behaviour norms in the early Christ-movement' employs the resources of cognitive psychology to explain the emergence of group norms and Christ-movement identity. It provides a fine example of cross-disciplinary research combining contemporary social identity theory, cultural anthropology, and social cognition to describe how behavioural norms emerged within the culture of the Christ-movement. He concludes that it 'integrated narrative, identity, prototypical attributes and behavior norms into a (more or less) shared web of cognitive schemata' (114). Roitto's essay provides a theoretically complex and exegetically plausible reading that addresses the emergence of group dynamics within the Christ-movement.

Mikael Tellbe in 'The prototypical Christ-believer: Early Christian identity formation in Ephesus' contends that the various Christ-following groups around the Mediterranean basin may helpfully be described as 'textual communities'. He remarks, 'the formation of early Christian identity is to a considerable extent, the result of the interpretation of its seminal texts' (119). Understood this way, Paul may be described as creating Christian identity. Tellbe's understanding of social identity builds on the work of Richard Jenkins and John C. Turner. This combination provides a useful framework for investigating prototypicality in relation to the letters sent to the Christ-followers in Ephesus. Tellbe brings to the fore the role of doctrinal issues in the formation of the Christ-movement, while following cautiously the work of Walter Bauer and more implicitly that of Ben F. Meyer (135–7). The primary contribution of Tellbe's essay is his recognition of the importance of textual prototypes in the development of later Christian social identity.

Runar Thorsteinsson's essay, 'The role of morality in the rise of Roman Christianity' argues that 'morality was integral to the Christian identity from the very beginning' (140). This is accurate in a general sense but Thorsteinsson applies this idea specifically to the Christ-movement in Rome. He focuses on the teaching concerning the importance of showing love for one's neighbour and he suggests that with regard to this the leaders within the Christ-movement were not moral innovators. Thorsteinsson remarks

‘Christian moral teaching was not fundamentally different from, but *fundamentally similar* to the prevailing ethical system in Rome’ (152, original emphasis). Thus, the appeal of the movement may have been in its similarity and not in its difference with the wider Roman ethical discourse. This reinforces the idea that previous social identities are not obliterated in Christ but re-evaluated (Campbell 2008, 166).

Fredrik Ivarsson continues to discuss the influence of existing cultural discourses in, ‘Christian identity as true masculinity’. He argues that ‘Christian identity is characterized by true masculinity’ with New Testament texts being complicit in creating an outgroup identity for the ‘effeminate’ (159, 171). Paul is understood as one concerned with a Roman understanding of masculinity and presents his gospel as a means to re-socialise those considered culturally effeminate (e.g. women, slaves, men). Ivarsson’s gendered analysis of Paul’s rhetoric is an important reminder of the role that kinship, gender, and ethnic discourse played in the creation and maintenance of early Christ-movement social identity. Bengt Holmberg concludes this collection of essays with, ‘Early Christian identity – some conclusions’ in which he summarises the key findings of the various researchers and offers suggestions for addressing some of the issues brought up by their research into early ‘Christian’ identity.

*Identity formation in the New Testament* is the second book to be reviewed. It presents further cross-disciplinary analysis of the way the identity of the Christ-movement emerged and was maintained. The essays are a result of ‘The Nordic New Testament Conference 2007’ held in Helsingborg, Sweden (v). The book covers themes related to identity formation in the context of literary criticism, intertextuality, gender, biblical traditions, social identification, and post-colonialism. It provides a wealth of information on the current state of research in identity studies as well as numerous examples of the ways in which texts are complicit in the formation of social identity.

The first group of essays deals with the ways texts in the New Testament interacted with other Second Temple texts in the formation of the social identity of the early Christ-movement. Samuel Byrskog, in ‘Christology and identity in an intertextual perspective: The glory of Adam in the narrative substructure of Paul’s Letter to the Romans’ argues for the existence of an Adam Christology in Paul. This, then, becomes for him an identity forming concept that relies on the resources of social memory prompted by the performance of a text such as Rom 1–8. This section of Romans contains a narrative substructure sourced in the story of Adam, whose plotline reinforces communal memory that ‘*affects the hearers’ negotiation of how they remember the past socially and construe their social identity*’ (4, original emphasis). Per Jarle Bekken, in ‘The controversy on self-testimony according to John 5: 31–40; 8: 12–20 and Philo, *Legum Allegoriae* III: 205–208’ compares the way John and Philo assess the legitimacy of self-testimony. This intra-Jewish debate on biblical law is re-deployed by John to re-inscribe a Christologically informed identity for the community who came to understand Jesus as the Son of God. For Bekken, early Christological reflection is one of the ‘formative forces of the identity of early Christians’ (41). The focus on intra-Jewish debates also leads Bekken to conclude that ‘Christian identity’ formed through conflicts between ‘Christianity’ and Judaism and the resulting split occurred by the end of the first century (41). Tobias Hägerland in ‘Rituals of (ex-) communication and identity: 1 Cor 5 and 4Q266 11; 4Q270 7’ argues for an indirect influence on Paul by the excommunication ritual evident in two fragments from Qumran. He understands Paul to be a sectarian and the early Christ-movement to be a sect; thus the performative nature of identity evident in the ritual of

excommunication reveals both similarities and differences between the Pauline community in Corinth and the Qumran community. Both groups are understood corporately as temples with one primary authority figure while they differ with regard to their understanding of the ‘messianic age’ and the charismatic nature of communication (60). Hägerland’s work rightly notes the importance of ritual in forming social identity; however, he too quickly accepts the sectarian nature of Paul and the early Christ-movement (Campbell 2008, 58; see 1 Cor 5: 10).

The second group of essays concerns the way the literary devices within texts contribute to the formation of social identity. Judith M. Lieu, in ‘Literary strategies of personification’ argues that personification functions to create a textual identity and that it is a highly gendered literary device with ‘the vast majority’ of the examples surviving from antiquity employing ‘feminine’ characteristics (73). Lieu’s work is helpful in that it recognises the vital role that individual literary devices within a text play in constructing a narrative identity; though she rightly focuses on identity within a literary work, the emerging literary identity does impact the formation of identity within actual interpretative communities. Lauri Thurén’s essay, ‘The antagonists – rhetorically marginalized identities in the New Testament’ provocatively suggests that opponents within the New Testament function rhetorically to create an ingroup identity for their hearers/readers by describing characteristics of a ‘fictional’ outgroup character with whom the group should not theologically or socially identify (92, original emphasis). Thus, questions about the historical identity of these opponents are unhelpful and beyond reconstruction because of the rhetorical nature of the New Testament texts. In Thurén’s formulation, ‘Paul needed antagonists because of his theology’ (94); whereas Campbell rightly argues that ‘*identity precedes theology*’ (2008, 52, original emphasis). However, the dialectic nature of identity and theology may be such that separating these two out in a linear fashion is inadvisable. Thomas Kazen, in ‘Son of Man and early Christian identity formation’ contends that the Son of Man typology played a central role in the creation of group identity in the early Christ-movement (98). He suggests that in the gospels a collective understanding of the Son of Man, similar to that found in Daniel and *1 Enoch*, is evident and ‘provided an eschatological group identity’ (120). He rightly notes that Paul does not explicitly employ the phrase Son of Man, but he suggests that similar concepts are to be found in Paul’s ‘participatory christology’ including ‘suffering and martyrdom, serving behaviour, reversed value scales and expectations of eschatological vindication’ (122). Overall, Kazen’s suggestion is plausible and the focus on a corporate interpretation of the Son of Man is most helpful in understanding how textual images could form social identity. Raimo Hakola’s insightful essay ‘Social identity and a stereotype in the making: The Pharisees as hypocrites in Matt 23’ proposes that to reduce the level of cognitive dissonance which the Matthean community was experiencing because of the social implications of their view of the Mosaic Law, Matthew rhetorically constructed Pharisees as outgroup prototypes for those who struggled ‘to comprehensively follow their own teaching in their daily lives’ (139). Thus, the description of the Pharisees in Matt 23 is understood as a result of issues related to social identity salience and not reflective of the actual practice of historical Pharisees in the first century CE. Hakola’s work is an excellent example of an identity critical analysis and his overview of social identity theory and self-categorisation theory (131–3) provides an excellent examination of the wide-ranging importance of these two theories for understanding the formation of social identity within the Christ-movement. Rikard Roitto in ‘Act as a Christ-believer, as a household member or as

both? – A cognitive perspective on the relationship between the social identity in Christ and household identities in Pauline and Deutero-Pauline texts' contends that differing patterns of social cognition between Paul and later New Testament writings coupled with the emergence of disparate cognitive resources resulted in two approaches to identity hierarchies: an early one that maintained separate domains for the 'in Christ' and household identities and a later one that subsumed household identities under the 'in Christ' identity. Roitto's work makes good use of the findings from the field of social cognition to explain the way in which 'texts ... order social identities' (153). However, his emphasis on identity hierarchies (147, 50–1) and roles (141) is more aligned with the Identity Theory of Sheldon Stryker and Peter Burke rather than that of Tajfel and Turner whom he relies on and who both downplay the significance of roles and situational salience.

The third group of essays addresses topics related to identity, gender, and power. Halvor Moxnes, in 'Body, gender and social space: Dilemmas in constructing early Christian identities' argues that 'faith in Christ' begins the process of the embodiment 'of a specific Christian identity' which impacts 'gender roles and the structures of social space' (181). New Testament texts, Moxnes suggests, provide a polyphonic understanding of the male body and at some points support accepted Roman ideological constructs while at other points subvert those same discourses of power and control. Fredrik Ivarsson's essay, 'A man has to do what a man has to do: Protocols of masculine sexual behaviour and 1 Corinthians 5–7' argues that the 'threat of effeminacy' (198) was a problem in 1 Cor 5–7 and that Paul's rhetoric is highly gendered, employing a taxonomy of 'dominance and self-restraint' (187) to indicate problematic aspects of an emerging social identity within the Corinthian Christ-followers. Hanna Stenström's essay 'Masculine or feminine? Male virgins in *Joseph and Aseneth* and the Book of Revelation' continues the study of masculinity, contending that males described as *parthenoi/parthenos* in Rev 14: 4 and *Jos. Asen.* 4: 7, 8: 1 function both as 'literary character(s)' and 'as elements in the construction of a collective identity' (201). They represent bulwarks against communal boundary transgression while exemplifying 'virtuous' behaviour of "'self-containment" and "integrity"' both often associated with 'virginity' (211).

The final group of essays discusses the relevance of post-colonialism for identity and biblical studies. Hans Leander begins with 'Parousia as medicine: A postcolonial perspective on Mark and Christian identity construction', in which he offers a cogent introduction to postcolonial theory and its impact on identity studies which emphasises the discursive nature of identity and the way 'a text ... forms, not just reflects, early Christian identity' (225–32, here 232). The difference between creation and construal of identity relates to scholars' understanding of the presence or absence of a prior identity; this will be addressed below. Christina Petterson's essay 'Mission of Christ and local communities in Acts' reinforces the importance of representation, mentioned also by Leander, in postcolonial studies and notes 'the instability of identity formations' (251). Petterson also problematises that which postcolonial biblical criticism entails, and argues for a methodological distinction between 'historical empire studies' and 'postcolonial biblical theory' (250). Ann Rebecca Solevåg in, 'Perpetua and Felicitas – reinterpreting empire, family and gender' shows how an early Christian text represents identity transformation as 'a shift downwards' from the perspective of Roman social standards while 'the texts reinterpret' these same experiences in the context of following Christ (278). Solevåg's essay addresses issues of empire, gender, power, and identity to show how '*Passio* ... subvert(s) the meaning'

of key Roman social structures while providing a model for others to follow in the creation of Christian identity (283, original emphasis).

Postcolonial scholars would understand Paul to be creating identity in that no group identity existed prior to the discursive agent. Those who argue that Paul's writing construes identity understand there to be a prior identity created by another agent (Holmberg 2008a, 24–7). Yet, a third group recognises a prior event that began the process of identity; however, its ongoing concrete expression or creation was accomplished through Paul's writings. Esler and Campbell fit into this third category and thus Holmberg's critique of their work is unfounded (26). It may be applied to postcolonial identity scholars such as Leander (2008b, 232), though it is unclear if Holmberg's critique of a creational understanding of textual agency is not situated in his prior commitment to Meyer's bifurcation of the concepts of self-understanding and identity, a separation that is not self-evident. Thus, if one accepts the self-understanding/identity framework, then construal of identity logically follows; however, if one does not accept that framework this distinction loses its force and Paul may be understood as one among many discursive agents that create the social identity of the early Christ-movement.

The final work in this review article is V.H.T. Nguyen's *Christian identity in Corinth* which argues that *persona* functions as an ancient equivalent for the concept of social identity and thus it may be studied to understand more clearly Paul's rhetoric in 2 Corinthians and how the Corinthian Christ-followers were employing this concept in 'their conception of Christian identity' (2008c, 130). Nguyen's monograph is a revision of his doctoral thesis done under the supervision of Andrew D. Clarke from the University of Aberdeen and compares the use of *persona/prosōpon* in the works of Valerius Maximus, Epictetus, and Paul (4). He concludes that by adding the modifier 'social' in front of *persona* one may then understand Paul, in 2 Corinthians, to be addressing a preoccupation with the superficial aspects of one's social identity, in a manner similar to that of both Valerius Maximus and Epictetus (5–9).

Nguyen's approach, with the exception of Marcel Mauss, does not overtly employ contemporary identity studies but his move to include 'social' in front of *persona* provides one possible model for combining the social history and social theory approaches. His work follows closely the understanding of social identity put forth by E.A. Judge which may also explain Nguyen's reticence with regard to the usefulness of contemporary social-scientific theories for understanding the social identity of the early Christ-movement (1980, 210–7; 2008c, 5, 202–4). Thus, *Christian identity in Corinth* may be described as a study on the social location and relations of the early Christ-movement and not a study of their social identity in a manner congruent with the previous two works which were reviewed in this article.

Nguyen's approach may serve a proto-sociological function in that it does provide conceptual language that may be used to further study contemporary dynamics that are similar to those within the text. This extension of the epigraphic, numismatic, onomastic, literary, and archaeological work of social historians by social theorists is envisioned by Bruce W. Winter as a legitimate application of their work (2001, xiii). Thus, Nguyen's work provides an important first-step in the study of early Christ-movement social identity in Corinth; however, what still remains to be done is a study that fully combines the resources of the social history and social theory approaches. Kathy Ehrensperger rightly concludes 'contemporary theories can provide an illuminating perspective and shed light on aspects of the fragmentary discourse of the Pauline epistolary conversation which would otherwise go unnoticed' (2007, 3).

Scholars will find these works helpful in the study of the formation of the social identity of the early Christ-movement. The first work provides a solid overview of key issues in identity studies. The second book offers various explorations into how identity may be researched in the context of biblical studies. The third book provides a useful introduction to Valerius Maximus and Epictetus while presenting a rather different approach to uncovering the significance of identity within the early Christ-movement. All three books are recommended and taken together present a nice overall picture of viable approaches to the study of identity and how it was created by the various New Testament texts.

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