

**BOOK REVIEW: McGill, J. (2016). *Religious Identity and Cultural Negotiation: Toward a Theology of Christian Identity*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers. 286 pp. ISBN: 9781498290128**

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Jenny McGill's, *Religious Identity and Cultural Negotiation: Toward a Theology of Christian Identity in Migration*, is a useful contribution to the sociology of religion as well as to the philosophical reflection on the nature of human identity. Its empirical focus is evangelical students who migrated from outside the United States to take theological studies at Dallas Theological Seminary in Texas between 1983 and 2013. Its theoretical focus is on the theological approaches to the process of identity formation of theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Miroslav Volf, and the psychologist Jenny Pak. Her unique contribution is to seek to apply those approaches to the empirical case of evangelical Christian students involved in migration. In pursuit of this goal, McGill attempts to elaborate a "theological understanding of identity" (McGill, 2016, p. 5) based on her interpretation of the work of these three scholars. Although her work throws useful empirical light on the theories of identity formation of her chosen sources, it does not fully test those theories or engage with the political orientation of two of those sources.

Although McGill draws on a wide diversity of scholars from various disciplines, her primary guides are Hauerwas, Volf, and Pak. As a philosopher and a theologian, I cannot assess the technical details of her sociological research methods (such as the adequacy of her sample sizes or interview procedures, etc.), but I can speak about her application of the philosophical and theological approaches of her three main sources. However, I will note regarding her general sociological approach that McGill devotes a fair amount of the introductory chapters to discussing and contrasting the approaches of positivism, constructivism and critical realism. She chooses to adopt a critical realist approach. Whether this decision represents a significant weakness in the study will depend on the position taken by the sociological reader's views on these contesting approaches in that field.

McGill's attempt to synthesize the theoretical perspectives on the process of identity formation of her three primary guides and then apply this perspective to the investigation of an evangelical student population is a unique project. Her work provides the useful service of locating areas of overlap and compatibility between these three theorists. The discussion of

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identity has been particularly influenced in the last few decades by the publication, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in 1989, so it is somewhat surprising that this book does not appear in McGill's bibliography. However, she does reference Taylor's essay, "The Politics of Recognition", included in his 1994 book, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*.

In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor attempts to articulate "a history of the modern identity... what it is to be a human agent: the senses of inwardness, freedom, individuality, and being embedded in nature... in the modern West" (Taylor, 1989, p. ix). Taylor's work has spurred many scholars to consider the importance of cultural identity and the challenges individuals face in increasingly multicultural contexts in negotiating differences between cultural outlooks and with maintaining functional senses of their own identity. Volf, for example, bases his approach in part on Taylor's concept of the "politics of difference" (Taylor, Gutmann, & Taylor, 1994, p. 38). According to Volf, Taylor's concept of the politics of difference rests on the claim that "since the identity in which we live is partly shaped by recognition we receive from the social setting in which we live, 'non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false distorted, and reduced mode of being.'" (Volf, 1996, p. 19. Quoting from Taylor and Gutmann 1994). Taylor's work has exercised a significant influence on many scholars concerned with multiculturalism by providing a theoretical explanation of the essential role played in the constitution of self-identity by communal sources such as language, religion, and customs.

McGill seems to accept this basic starting point in her own work and seeks to expand on it by applying it to the specific tradition of evangelical Christianity and the challenges members of that tradition face in multicultural settings resulting from processes of migration for the purposes of education. She draws on her own life experience of migration and living in diverse contexts throughout her life. As she notes "I have experienced a transnational identity....", but:

as much as transition and diversity have made me who I am, I have also made them my own by seeking new opportunities for exploration and bringing them to bear on my research. To be sure, this work will bear the marks of the Christian tradition that I follow—Protestant and, more specifically, evangelical. (p. 4)

Although her work is firmly embedded and grows out of her own distinct experiences she hopes that it will also help shed useful light for those seeking to understand their own processes of identity formation and common challenges facing individuals in increasingly multicultural contexts. She observes that "given increasing global migration and the importance of positive cross-cultural relations across national borders, this book offers an interdisciplinary exploration of identity formation in migration, namely, with theological, psychological, and sociological lenses" (p. 4). Drawing on eighteen interviews and 405 surveys administered to graduates of her chosen educational institution she seeks to "combine the theoretical and social research to offer an initial theology of Christian identity in migration, the primary conclusion of which is that migration is integral to Christian identity" (4-5).

McGill attempts to synthesize the understandings of Christian self-identity formation of Hauerwas, Volf and Pak and thereby provide what she calls a "theology of Christian identity" (p. 100). In describing her effort as a work of theology she draws particularly on the writings of Pak, whose study of "bicultural identity" (Christian-Korean and Christian-

American) leads her to argue, according to McGill, “that contemporary understanding of human nature is limited, and certain approaches should be expanded to allow perspectives from other disciplines, such as psychology in theology and vice versa” (p. 102). The first commonality she finds in the three thinkers is that they agree that the self is experienced by Christians as “given.” She notes, “Hauerwas argues no standpoint exists at which the self can position itself so as to be removed from its particular story. Rather...the self understands its existence as part of a larger story” (pp. 102-103). The second commonality is that the self is always “related,” which means that it is formed in community. She notes “Volf describes that the self and, by extension, its identity include the other in its construction” (p. 105). The third commonality is that all three authors also argue that the self is always “divided.” For Christians, there are possibilities for division between the self and others which allows for the self to seek to override or ignore the needs of others. Possibilities of sin and self-deception lurk in the process of identity formation. These possibilities can be destructive, but also potentially redeemable by actions of God and the community to help one to create a “new self” (p. 110). The greatest strength of McGill’s work is her analysis and attempt to synthesize the views of her three chosen guides. Her work in this area provides much food for thought and a basis for further discussion.

The greatest potential weakness in her work is her attempt to apply the three shared postulates that she discerns among her chosen guides. It is unclear whether McGill’s empirical enterprise is meant to test these postulates or whether she simply takes them as given. The theory of Christian identity she develops has clearly been influenced by communitarian thought, such as that of Charles Taylor. This impact of Taylor is not just something one can surmise from the influence he has had on at least one of her guides. McGill herself references the connection when she discusses the “social self” and cites Taylor’s book, *The Politics of Recognition*, in support of her observation that “One’s identity is first shaped by birth history and family and later formed by one’s conscious choice to identify with one particular person [as mentor or role-model] or group” (p. 42). For Taylor the social nature of the formation of identity is based primarily on his reflections on the nature of language. We need others in forming our sense of self because this process depends on language and language is not something that is the product of individuals. Identity formation inescapably involves individuals in complex processes of linguistic negotiation with specific human communities that are evolving through time.

Identity formation is a cultural process, and any culture is riven by divisions based on ethnicity, nationality, religion, sex, gender identification, not to mention a myriad of possible sub-cultures, intellectual traditions, institutions and private associations. These various “sources of the self” are according to Taylor the foundations for our sense of meaning and evaluation. Because of their diversity they are also sources of conflict within the individual and within society. A question that raises itself during McGill’s discussion, which is dealt with in depth by Taylor, is what is the proper role of the state in this process?

Part of the impetus for Taylor’s work on identity in *Sources of the Self* is to consider the role of the state in critical aspects of cultural diversity since communal sources provide the essential wellspring for the sense of what he calls “strong evaluation” (Taylor, 1989, p. 14), which he argues lies at the heart of every individual’s sense of meaning in life. His work therefore reflects on the inherently political question of multicultural policymaking, such as, can language preservation policies like those of his native province of Quebec be justified? He is well known for providing a philosophical rationale for why and how such policies, can make sense, which led to him being asked by the government of Quebec to co-chair an extensive

and far reaching public commission on the accommodation of cultural minorities (See Bouchard & Taylor, 2008).

His position on language preservation is, in brief, that minority languages can face extinction in the face of pressures from larger and more powerful linguistic groups. Such threats can justify state actions to help preserve minority languages and offset wider social and cultural pressures so that a linguistic culture (and the unique outlook it helps engender) does not go extinct. Leaving the preservation of sources of the self, such as language, completely up to individuals, as liberals have traditionally argued, is a potential recipe for a kind of cultural tragedy of the commons. The burdens of maintaining a language end up being born by smaller and smaller numbers of people as members “defect” and are peeled away by the benefits of participation in larger linguistic communities. So, state actions that support minority languages can be justified, such as Quebec’s language preservation laws, which grant a privileged place to the French language in public space.

This justification of state action aimed at helping to recognize aspects of cultural diversity is a cornerstone of the political philosophy of multiculturalism, and it is not just communitarians like Taylor who defend such policies. Will Kymlicka has developed a distinctly liberal rationale for states playing a supportive role in the support of minority groups. He even suggests that his analysis can be applied to “a diverse array of associations and groups based on class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, moral belief, and political ideology” (Kymlicka, 1995a, p. 18; Kymlicka, 2015b). McGill, drawing particularly on the work of Hauerwas and Volf, also seems to suggest that religion, although distinguishable from other major aspects of culture such as ethnicity or nationality, is also like them. Her chosen topic of migration for the purposes of education potentially highlight the kinds of issues addressed by Taylor and Kymlicka, but, in the end, she does not engage the question of the role of the state in the process of identity formation to any great depth.

This is somewhat puzzling as at least two of McGill’s guides are highly political when it comes to their discussions of identity. Volf’s work focuses on the political conflicts between ethnic groups and especially religion minorities and how to resolve those conflicts, especially in his particularly fraught home region of the Balkans. Hauerwas’ work has been seminal in the development of a highly politicized variation of anabaptist theology called neo-anabaptist thought (Hiebert & Hiebert, 2013). This intellectual movement argues that Christians form a distinct minority in any society that is continuously under threat from the wider culture. So, for example, Hauerwas and his co-author William Willimon have argued that “We believe that nothing is more destructive for Christians in North America than the habits of mind we are taught in public schools” (Hauerwas & Willimon, 1996, p. 47). Both Hauerwas and Volf have rejected the traditional withdrawal from public life of anabaptist traditions.

Although seeking to learn about the experiences of others undergoing the challenges of navigating novel cultural circumstances is bound to uncover some interesting insights, one cannot help but wonder whether the theoretical issues regarding the conception of Christian identity, needs much greater elaboration before an exercise like McGill’s empirical investigation will be fully fruitful. Although she does provide sections in which she assesses each of her three primary guides, these sections are short, and for the most part, focus on challenges presented by postmodern and secular “emancipation” narratives that assert the ideal of the “unattached self” (p. 82) and criticize the potential Western biases of her three main guides. Still, her empirical investigation does support one of the general claims of her theological understanding of identity, which is that religion can play a significant, if not determining, role in personal identity.

Regarding the migratory-oriented nature of identity formation, some of her subjects do identify with the stories of figures, such as Abraham and Moses, but her questions do not seem particularly oriented to determine whether such references are intrinsic to evangelical identity or a product of the selection of a religious tradition that just happens to be particularly influenced by sacred narratives involving accounts of migratory prophets. And if she were to have truly undertaken to test the postulate regarding the supposedly inherently social nature of identity formation, questions meant to discern the importance of the influence of her research subjects' home communities/churches might have been helpful, such as:

- Are there beliefs or practices of your home community/church that helped you during your time in the U.S? Are there beliefs or practices that you abandoned?
- How did people in your home religious community respond to your decision to migrate for an education?
- Were relevant educational opportunities not present in your homeland?
- Did you experience conflicts in your country of origin (in society/church) that figured into your decision to study abroad?

But the closest we get to these kinds of questions are the following taken from McGill's list:

23. Did your faith help you in your transition back overseas? How? Example?
24. When you returned home, how did people see you?
25. How have you been received (in society/church) as someone who has studied abroad?
26. Have you faced resistance in your return? From whom?
27. If you could correct one misconception (about you) among your friends and family, what would it be? Among your neighbors? Among your congregation?
28. Have you experienced any tension between who you were in America and who you are expected to be now that you are back home? (p. 250)

McGill does ask, "What term would describe your current religious affiliation" (p. 249)? However, she provides no detailed analysis of the responses to this question. Instead, she describes her subjects using the general term "evangelical," which she defines primarily using David Bebbington's classic definition, which "identifies four chief priorities [of evangelicals]: activism, biblicism, conversionism, and crucicentrism" (pp. 11-12). As a result, we find out very little detail about the specific religious communities of the distant lands that nurtured these Christians. For example, one might wonder whether, in the case of the European participants: Are they offshoots of Moravian or specific anabaptist traditions? Or perhaps recent converts of American Pentecostal evangelization?

Given the influence on her work of Taylor's politics of recognition, the absence of such details about original communal sources is striking. The communities of the participants remain essentially anonymous. McGill does mention this issue in passing:

The experience of someone who identifies as an evangelical in Hungary is strikingly different from their counterpart in Poland. Space does not permit a through consideration of the historical and political context of each locality (pp. 6-7).

Given the emphasis on the concept of the recognition by the wider community of the distinctiveness of individuals and the specific communal narratives that nurture the “social self” that lies at the heart of the work of her guides, it seems strange that her questions should avoid exploring, at least to some extent, the influence of her subjects’ original social ties. The whole issue of causes of migration resulting from distinctive features of their religious backgrounds and their struggles in their homelands is only briefly touched on.

McGill, who places such strong emphasis on community, seems indifferent to details of the “constitutive ties” (p. 81) that her three guides argue are such an integral part of the formation of individuals. Her emphasis is more on the struggles of her research subjects in coping with living in the U.S. and transitioning back overseas. A significant number of her questions focus on her subjects’ experiences of the U.S. and how those experiences have changed them and whether those changes prevented them from being reembraced by their home religious communities and the wider community of their homelands upon returning. McGill mentions that her work in part grew out of her own experience working in a university administrative position supporting foreign students (p. 4). One can wonder whether this experience was an original impetus for her research. Her work does provide a wealth of practical observations about student experiences of adjustment to the United States and then readjustment back to life in their home countries. She also provides suggestions for lessons that those seeking to aid such students might draw from such observations. This is a particularly strong aspect of the book.

In her analysis of the struggles of students going to and returning from the United States McGill’s study provides some potentially useful empirical light on the process of identity formation. Some of her research subjects reported, for example, changing from sexist and male oriented ways of thinking after their stay in America. Their organizational and individual daily practices were affected, especially regarding teamwork, delegation, communication style, and habits regarding punctuality and planning. They also reported changes in themselves regarding assertiveness and activities like littering and certain customs around eating and other mores. She also reports that many of her subjects found themselves responding in a less “legalistic” fashion regarding their adherence to religious convictions and regarding the judgment of others. But McGill admits that it was impossible to discern whether this change was a result of her subject’s experience of U.S. culture or their seminary training. Part of the uncertainty results precisely from a lack of information about the beliefs and practices of the communities her subjects came from compared to those they were involved with while in the United States. One interesting and unexpected result was that although most of her subjects deemed their religious identity to be central to their sense of self, their national identity came next in priority, not their ethnic identity (p. 159).

This last finding supports a case for exploring in more detail the dynamics between religious identity and national identity, and by implication the relationship between religion and the state. This is clearly an area requiring further study and clarification. For example, McGill notes:

Participants also conveyed varying amounts of concern for their children’s educational, economic, and social opportunities in their countries of origin. Of those who responded, over two-fifths were not concerned at all (23.3 percent) or concerned very little (19.5 percent). Almost three-fifths were somewhat concerned (22.1 percent), very concerned (22.1 percent), or extremely concerned (13.1 percent) (p. 143).

It is left unclear what precisely it is regarding education and social opportunities that are the source of concern. Is it simply economic limitations of the home society that make obtaining a good education difficult? Are there problems of discrimination or conflicts with secular institutions at the root of her subjects' concerns? The fact that these issues were not clarified in the question itself, with its elision of schooling and social opportunities with economic issues, speaks to a certain lack of interest in McGill in exploring potential political issues regarding religious identity formation.

The largely apolitical tone of the book is a striking contrast to the theoretical work of Hauerwas. McGill does briefly comment on the criticism of Hauerwas' vision of the church as "vehicle for self-formation" and accusations that he overemphasizes "community and non-violence over faith and holiness" (p. 98). Her remark only touches the surface. Hauerwas has called for a radically new vision of Christian life and practice. He recommends that Christians take on the ethos of embattled ethnic minority. Hauerwas and co-author Willimon refer to the church as "colony amidst a secular society" (p. 91). They elaborate:

The Jews in Dispersion were well acquainted with what it meant to live as strangers in a strange land, aliens trying to stake out a living on someone else's turf. Jewish Christians had already learned, in their day-to-day life in the synagogue, how important it was for resident aliens to gather to name the name, to tell the story, to sing Zion's songs in a land that didn't know Zion.

A colony is a beachhead, an outpost, an island of one culture in the middle of another, a place where the values of home are reiterated and passed on to the young, a place where the distinctive language and life-style of the resident aliens are lovingly nurtured and reinforced (Hauerwas & Willimon, 2014, pp. 11-12).

But they do not call for embracing a quiescent minority outlook, which seeks only to avoid persecution, but a combative outlook, which demands a place in the public sphere for the expression of the Church's distinctive vision, such as its commitment to the ideals of non-violence. As McGill notes, "Rowan Greer likens Hauerwas's stance to that of Augustine when he points out that neither theologian advocates a Christian's withdrawal from society" (p. 90).

The images of "colony" and "minority" are evocative and probably meant to appeal to churches that are experiencing dwindling numbers and facing a growing sense that their survival is at stake. The opening anecdote of Hauerwas and Willimon's influential book *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* has been widely discussed by religious commentators. It regards the decision of the local movie theatre in Greenville South Carolina in 1963 to begin showing movies on Sundays. As they comment:

That evening has come to represent [for us] a watershed in the history of Christendom, South Carolina style. On that night, Greenville South Carolina—the last pocket of resistance to secularity in the Western World—served notice it would no longer be a prop for the church. There would be no more free passes for the church, no more free rides (Hauerwas & Willimon, 2014, p. 16).

But Hauerwas and Willimon's anecdote is not meant as a call for return to Christian privilege or control of the state. Instead they rejoice at the end of social and political supports of religious life, such as blue laws, which they label as "Constantinianism".

But they also reject the notion that the Church should retreat from public space or from seeking to transform its wider society. They have argued that,

A primary way in which the United States, through its constitution, has sought to disarm troublesome Christians is by declaring that politics is public and that religion is private. Thus “religion” is allowed to preoccupy itself with “sexual issues” because sex also is “private.” We are free to be religious as we want, so long as we keep it to ourselves, so long as religion concerns itself with our innermost feelings and our deepest desires. This is an unsatisfactory account of a religion like Christianity, which believes that God, not nations, rules the world—a very public, political belief, indeed (Hauerwas & Willimon, 1996, 36).

Some have accused Hauerwas and Willimon of helping to foster a “new sectarianism” and “resurgent tribalism,” or a call for the Church to become “a Christian ghetto,” but they retort: “Yet who taught us that sect, tribe, and ghetto are bad words?” (Hauerwas & Willimon, 1996, p. 35). Their response is that the state that has been a significant source of such beliefs, including, and perhaps even especially, liberal democratic states.

This kind of vision of the centrality of participation in communities, including faith communities, therefore raises a critical question: If religion can be such an integral part of the process of identity formation as other facets of culture, such as ethnicity or national identity, and religions can conceive of themselves as embattled counter-cultural minorities, can religions call upon states to recognize and even support their efforts to maintain themselves in the midst of more powerful cultural majorities and cross-cultural currents? We are back to the kinds of questions that are central to the work of Taylor and to complex issues of how religion must factor into a recognition of the need for governments to actively support different forms of diversity in the public sphere, which are issues that are noticeably absent from McGill’s book.

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