

**Richard J. CASSIDY, *A Roman Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (A Herder & Herder Book). New York NY, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2020, 16 × 23,5 cm, viii-219 p., ISBN 978-0-8245-0163-1**

**Ayodele Ayeni, C.S.Sp.**

Volume 76, numéro 2, mai-août 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111051ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1111051ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Collège universitaire dominicain, Ottawa

ISSN

0316-5345 (imprimé)

2562-9905 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Ayeni, A. (2024). Compte rendu de [Richard J. CASSIDY, *A Roman Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (A Herder & Herder Book). New York NY, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2020, 16 × 23,5 cm, viii-219 p., ISBN 978-0-8245-0163-1]. *Science et Esprit*, 76(2), 287–291.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1111051ar>

## THÉOLOGIE

Richard J. CASSIDY, **A Roman Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians** (A Herder & Herder Book). New York NY, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2020, 16 × 23,5 cm, viii-219 p., ISBN 978-0-8245-0163-1.

An instance of a comparative approach for articulating the identity of God and Lord is the subject matter of a new commentary on Philippians. Cassidy's *Commentary* (pp. 1-7, 35, 39-40, 43-44, 84, *passim*) captures the "God language" of the epistle to the Philippians, albeit, from a Roman imperial perspective. The language of sacrifice/worship, the politics of divinity and citizenship, and the economy of slavery anchor Cassidy's comparative analyses between Philippians and the Roman imperial cult/worship. His objective is to situate how to read Philippians from the Roman imperial reality of Paul's day vis-à-vis the divinity Paul preached. As one would expect, Cassidy lays a lot of emphasis on Paul's subversion (pp. 42-44) of the Roman imperial cult in favor of the God and Lord he preached to the Philippians.

Cassidy's commentary divides Philippians neatly into four parts – Phil 1:1-3:1; 3:2-4:9; 4:10-20) (p. 34) –, without regard for the usual debate concerning its multiplicity,<sup>1</sup> the synthesis he provides of the different trajectories of the themes of Philippians, and his descriptive approach; he unites the epistle on the basis of the message it presents to the Philippians. The three major, but non-exhaustive, themes of the epistle, which Cassidy outlines in his commentary provide the conceptual scheme for the message of the epistle: God-language, prayer/worship/sacrifice and identity/citizenship/filiation. The concepts of communion and God tie together the trajectories of the epistle.

From the title of the commentary, "A Roman Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians," one is made aware of the unique angle from which the author, Cassidy, analyzes the letter to the Philippians.

THE EXPLOSIVE POWER OF PHILIPPIANS (sic) is twofold. First, in a social setting in which Roman propaganda insists that Nero is lord and savior, Paul counters that Jesus *alone* is Lord. Second, in a social system in which slaves are exploited unto 'social death,' Paul proclaims that Jesus consciously embraced the form of a slave and underwent the slave's form of death (...). He [Paul] effectively challenges the cult of the Roman emperors. He also implicitly challenges the slave-based foundation of the empire. (p. 1)

It is from the evaluation of these twin Roman socio-political perspectives that I have decided to review Cassidy's commentary. Two questions guide my review: what is new and what is controversial?

### I. What is New?

Clearly, the Pauline subversiveness of "slavery" and "lordship" are the overarching theses of Cassidy's commentary. Besides his claim in page 1 cited above, he also says that: "Philippians is also a 'counter-imperial' letter. In it Paul challenges the cult

1. See Jerome MURPHY-O'CONNOR, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 215-221.

of Roman emperors and also the slave system over which these emperors preside" (p. 35). The first newness of Cassidy's commentary comes from its departure from the traditional approach to commentary writing, where authors attempt to help readers come to grips with the historical, literary and theological understanding of a Scriptural text, mainly for faith purposes, to a socio-political exposé. Cassidy's concentration on the Roman impact on the letter to the Philippians, instead of reading Philippians as a primarily theological text, suits his purposes of demonstrating the possible subversive reading of Philippians to Roman power. Here is the justification he gives for his political reading of Philippians:

In summary, the emperor cult dominated the public life of Philippians and is a factor to be reckoned with in any assessment of Paul's perspectives in Philippians. In his visits to the colony, Paul would have encountered the emperor cult at every turn. The expectations of the Philippian magistrates regarding the participation of *all* Philippians in this cult would have been a paramount issue both for Paul and for his converts. (p. 16)

To conclude his 44 pages of introduction, Cassidy calls the first part of his commentary "Christ drama" (p. 43). The apogee of this drama is explained thus:

To plumb the depths of Paul's meaning, it is useful to approach Philippians 2:6-11 as a prayerfully conceived drama that comprises eight separate, but related, scenes. the *action* delineated in each scene must be carefully considered. Similar attention must be given to the *characters* present in each scene. What visual images does Paul convey to his readers as he depicts each scene. (p. 39)

This "Christ drama" is what I consider the second element of "What is new" in Cassidy's commentary. Previous commentators on Philippians, to my knowledge, do not evoke this theatrics in their analysis of Phil 2:6-11 (pp. 38-39 *pace*).

The introductory part of Cassidy's commentary pays attention to the congruency of Roman Imperial cult or emperor worship and the dating of the letter to the Philippians. The explicit mention of Nero, on page 1, suggests the relevance of the imperial rule of Nero as a way of dating Paul's letter to the Philippians (pp. 8, 33, 37, 41). Having established their contemporaneity (Nero and Paul), Cassidy uses Greco-Roman theatrics as analytic tool to dissect and explain bits and pieces of Philippians that are susceptible and malleable to Greco-Roman drama. The high point of this dramatic art is Phil 2:6-11. Cassidy analyses the subversion of virtually every vocabulary of that pericope to demonstrate the overthrow of slavery because Jesus took the image of a slave and the title of "Lord" accorded to Jesus as the dethronement of the "lordship" of Roman emperors (pp. 18, 37). Although Philippians 3:20-21 talks about a heavenly citizenship, in the future, Cassidy makes it a present subversion of Roman citizenship (p. 35).

Cassidy starts out with deciphering the places where the term slave (*doulos*) appears in Philippians and correlates them with that of Jesus as slave in Phil 2:7. From Paul's identification of himself and Timothy as the slaves of Christ (p. 46, 49), in the opening salutation (1:1-2), Cassidy adds the fact that the name "Paul" from its Roman version, *Paullus*, connects Paul in reality to Roman slavery system, from where he got his name, probably from having been bought by a prominent Roman personality with the name Paullus (p. 47). Cassidy rejects the translation of *doulos*

as "servant" and argues that Paul equates his ministry (2:22) to the work of a slave through the verbal form of *doulos*, that is, *edouleusen* (p. 48).

For Cassidy, the frequency with which slaves were imprisoned provides Paul with the motif to read his chains, as a prisoner, to be those of Christ (1:13). The logical conclusion of Paul's slavery and imprisonment is death, which will make him like unto Christ (pp. 48-49) in the "drama" of 2:6-11. Cassidy argues that the additional motif for this type of reading is because slaves are at the beck and call of their owners, and Paul and Timothy are the slaves of "Christ Jesus" (1:1a), "the first of the twenty occurrences of these two names in the letter" (p. 51), to mean that slaves are entirely subjected to their owner. Paul does this, Cassidy argues, in order to read the difficulties of slaves into the sufferings of Jesus Christ; this is the first level of subversion of slavery, imprisonment and sufferings, into a means of evangelization and alternative citizenship of Philippians, that is different from the Romans'. So, the "peace," "honor" and "praise" due to the emperor (pp. 53-54) now go to Jesus Christ, who subverts the meaning of peace, honor and praise. Particularly, the difference between the "imperial peace" and Jesus' "peace" is that Jesus Christ's peace reconciles slaves and Roman citizens (pp. 74-78); this is Cassidy's reading of *politeuesthe* of 1:27 (p. 75).

Intriguing, yet captivating, is Cassidy's "dramatic" presentation (pp. 81-99), in eight scenes, of the six verses of Phil 2:6-11 (pp. 81-83), hinging his argument on a probable memorization of Philippians, either by Timothy or Epaphroditus (pp. 104, 108), because of the risk of carrying a physical letter from Paul in Rome to Philippi (pp. 104-113), and the need to perform or dramatize this memorized letter in Greco-Roman theatrical model because Phil 2:6-11 is theatrical enough to be performed. The theatrical performance of Phil 2:6-11, according to Cassidy, would have had subversive impacts on the Philippians: act 1 scenes 1-4 (Phil 2:6-8) and act 2 scenes 1-4 (Phil 2: 9-11). While Act 1 depicts the Roman crucifixion of Jesus, and Jesus serves as the protagonist of those scenes, the lessons drawn are those of subversion of the Roman crucifixion and the remodeling of the slave status. In Act 2 scenes 1-4, God the Father becomes the protagonists and "The Father takes Jesus from the cross to the highest place and the Father renders the entire universe subject to Jesus" (pp. 81-82). The powers that Jesus Christ will possess and exercise (Phil 3:8-16) have their origin in this exaltation of Christ (pp. 115-121). Furthermore, the "enemies of the cross" (Phil 3:17-4:1) become the Romans and their supporters whose world-views are already subverted in the "Christ drama" of Phil 2:6-8 (pp. 121-131).

Cassidy concludes his commentary by positing the imitation of Christ as a source and cause of joy (Phil 4:2-9) for Philippians (pp. 131-137), and Paul's refusal of the pecuniary gifts of the Philippians because of the image of Emperor Nero on the currency (pp. 137-147). Paul did this to show the overthrow of Nero by Jesus Christ as the true Lord: "Jesus Christ and the Father possess and manifest all power, *all benevolence, all majesty, all glory* (sic)" (p. 147).

## 2) What is Controversial?

The use of the conditional phrases, "Paul would" and "the participation of *all* Philippians in this cult would" (p.16), and many of such pronouncements (pp. 81-99 *passim*), make Cassidy's claim a probability lacking certainty. This is made clear by his conjecture of what the magistrates "could do," on page 29, without any proof

that they did any of the threats that were possible, according to Cassidy's opinion. However, one may extrapolate the next argument as a proof that Christians in Philippi boycotted Emperor cult, even though there were other religious cults or kinds of worship in the Roman Empire other than emperor cult worship that compete for Christian allegiances:

In his letter to Trajan (*Letters* 10.96.1-10) Pliny characterized the principal effects of the Christian contagion. The rapid growth of Christianity within the province led to temples being almost entirely deserted (*iam desolata templa*). A further consequence was that scarcely anyone could be found to buy the flesh of the sacrificial victims (*cuius adhuc rarissimus emptor inveniebatur*). (p. 27)

Actually, the mention of Trajan and Pliny suggests that this happened decades after the death of Paul, so does not advance Cassidy's case! Also, one may point out that Paul has a non-subversive response to the problem of "buy[ing] the flesh of sacrificial victims" in 1 Cor 8. The illogical conclusion of Cassidy's argument is this:

Acting now in the light of Trajan's earlier rescript, Pliny issued a decree (*edictum*) banning the Christian community as an illicit *hetaeria*, and began harsh measures to eradicate it (...) Pliny constructed a test in which suspected Christians were pressured to venerate the image of the emperor and curse the name of Christ. (p. 28)

This political reading of Philippians comes against the lack of proof texts in Philippians that demonstrate that the primary objective of Paul in writing Philippians is for a Roman subversion of power. Cassidy himself takes this position in these words: "In general, Paul's critique of Roman patterns is indirect. In Philippians, there is no castigation of any emperor by name, no direct criticism of the emperor cult, and no express call for an end to the Roman-maintained slave system." (p. 35)

Not only that Cassidy's application of theatrics is arbitrary, he does not provide either a Greek or Roman dramatic piece that conforms to the outlines of Philippians. The allusion he makes to the *Eclogues* of Calpurnius Siculus (p. 98-99) are way longer than Phil 2:6-11. Even when one assumes that an extrapolation is possible, how does he explain the formulaic and hymnic arguments that either makes Phil 2:6-11 pre-Pauline or a Pauline summary of *heilsgeschichte*? Indeed, he takes the position that Phil 2:6-11 is a Pauline redaction or composition, but definitely not composed *ex nihilo*. Paul's link with Judaism (Phil 3:2-7) is glossed over (pp. 113-115). One may ask, what was the Greco-Roman's level of familiarity with Judeo-Christianity in order to make sense of a drama on the wordings of Phil 2:6-11?

When the element of meaning is introduced into the approach of Cassidy's commentary, it becomes evident that his singular and notable contribution to the study of Philippians is hermeneutics. Exegesis as a hermeneutical enterprise involves helping readers to understand a text. Cassidy proposes that it is possible to understand Paul's letter to the Philippians from an awareness of political history or historical consciousness. Cassidy builds the politico-religious context of the Roman Empire around the time in which Paul wrote Philippians into elements of interpretation and understanding of Philippians. What is difficult to fault about Cassidy's commentary is the legitimacy of his approach to reading Philippians – politico-religious history and historical consciousness; these play a huge role in epistemology today, and they

sure help in exegesis as an aspect of historical method of exegesis. This is the credit of Cassidy's commentary to the understanding of Philipians.

Ayodele AYENI, C.S.Sp.

Donald J. GOERGEN, **Thomas Aquinas and Teilhard de Chardin. Christian Humanism in an Age of Unbelief.** Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2022, 15,3 × 23 cm, 312 p., ISBN 978-1-6667-3849-0.

The scholarship of this book is sound – well-researched and well-written. The author, Donald Goergen (hereafter G.) is a seasoned researcher and an acclaimed author of many books on similar subjects. He clearly draws from years of fruitful research in Thomism and Teilhard scholarship. The style of the book is simple: reader-friendly and geared towards all audiences. One of the things I like about it is that specialists and non-specialists who are interested in basic knowledge of evolution and issues of contemporary humanism will find the book useful. G makes every effort to avoid jargons and this is where he makes it accessible to non-specialists. Where some technical terms have been kept it is because there is no other way to speak to specialists in the two spheres of Thomism and Chardin-scholarship. This is evident in the 10 thematic chapters of the book. G. seriously engages the work of St. Thomas Aquinas and Teilhard de Chardin to further the dialogue, he thinks, is needed today. Why is the dialogue necessary? G. says it is to combat the secular humanism of our time. Taken as a given that evolution is a fact of life, the way many contemporary theologians have come to understand it, G. poses an essential question, “what is the future of religion in an increasingly secularized world?” G. proposes that the answer can be found through harvesting the wisdom of Aquinas and Teilhard – two thinkers who, according to him, were adept at using language creatively. “Teilhard uses language to help us see, Aquinas in order to help us understand. Aquinas’ language signifies; Teilhard’s language evokes. Aquinas communicates with great care the vision he has of God. Teilhard finds language at times a constraint... Aquinas speaks of God with analogy; Teilhard with ecstasy.” (203) The creative use of language of the two thinkers under consideration equally brings in sharp focus the contrast of their joint concerns. We see in Aquinas, as G. helps us to understand, the concerns of a teacher who desires to present the material world systematically in the age of faith. By contrast, we see in Teilhard the concerns of a thinker who is writing to present the material world scientifically in an age of unbelief. It is obvious that G. clearly appreciates the wisdom of the two thinkers. But he does not want us to get caught just marveling at their wisdom. As he tells us, their wisdom is only a starting point; also their synthesis is by no means a “closed door” (2). In the end, by juxtaposing the ideas of the two thinkers, G. gives the reader a glimpse of what a renewed humanism might mean in our age, which by his correct estimation, is largely an age of unbelief.

As the systematic thinker and fine synthesizer that he is, G. creatively weaves the ideas of Aquinas and Teilhard – two thinkers who lived in two different eras and two different places and separated about 700 years from each other. For people unfamiliar with the ideas of the two thinkers, the first chapter is an apt survey of