

Kling Book Review

A History of Christian Conversion. David W. Kling. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pages, xvi + 836. Hardcover \$150.00. ISBN: 9780195320923

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There are no rites of Christian initiation without conversion to Christianity. The history of the liturgies of initiation is well documented by multiple contemporary writers, but who has catalogued the history of conversion that made these liturgies possible?

David W. Kling has.

One's first assessment of this book concerns its length. The casual reader will shop for something simpler. But serious students of evangelization, conversion and initiation will find this an inestimable treasure.

Kling has compiled the results of what must have been a lifelong obsession with conversion to Christianity. Why do people convert? What are they leaving behind? What are they turning toward?

Comprehensive in scope, Kling's research spans all 2000 years of Christianity across the corners of the globe. He traces the spread of believers from Eurasian roots to remote manifestations in South America, China, Japan and Africa. He modestly confesses omissions, but his compilation is unmatched in scope and insightful in analysis.

Familiar and unfamiliar exponents of conversion strut the stage: Paul of Tarsus, Constantine, Augustine, Patrick, Clovis, Margaret Ebner, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, William Tyndale, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, John of Montecorvino, Matteo Ricci, Alessandro Valignano, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, Mahatma Ghandi, Jarena Lee, William Wadé Harris, Billy Graham and Vincent Donovan—to name a few.

Kling does not simply catalogue these heroes of conversion, he analyzes why they succeeded. Sensitive to places and ages, trends and traditions, Kling conveys an understanding not only of the individuals who promoted conversion, but of the entire enterprise millennially measured. Without overtly striving to do so, Kling limns the successes of Christianity. Because his project concerns why conversion happened, he presents an ever welcome, inexorably unfolding, rubicund picture of human industry on behalf of divine encounters.

People convert for a variety of reasons. Some have a mystical experience, a sudden burst of insight. Others encounter a community of people who believe differently. Sometimes a ritual ceremony moves one's heart in unexpected directions. Other times love for an individual opens the door to a different belief. Some people join throngs at revivalist movements. Still others, sadly, are coerced: they believe in order to survive. Some convert after catechesis; others seek social opportunity.

Some have detailed their personal experience at length and honestly, such as Augustine. Others left no recorded examples showing why their preaching succeeded, such as many of the great monks and bishops of the Middle Ages.

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Although history favors records of men who evangelized, Kling shows the impressive influence of women in the New Testament, at the conversion of Clovis, among the visionaries of the Middle Ages, in autobiographies of nineteenth-century American blacks, and through the conversion of the Maasai in central Africa.

The book is as precise as it is expansive. Its length pertains not only to its pursuit of vast testimony, but to Kling's masterful summaries that contrast trends in one area from those in another. The reader steps from these analyses with a better understanding of the subjects under scrutiny and their relative place in human history.

Some historians lose energy by the end of their project, but Kling sustains enthusiasm as he trains his eye on more recent developments in areas such as Africa and the Orient. Comfortable with evidence at home and away, he helps readers grasp the immense spread of Christianity, the varying reasons why people find it appealing, and the facets of a religion more diverse than they may realize.

Or perhaps readers will grasp the facets of a God more diverse than they may realize. How else could one explain why the Christian message found a home amid all these vagaries of time and place, need and enthusiasm? Diverse as humans are, history shows that they share in common a spirit fertile for conversion.

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