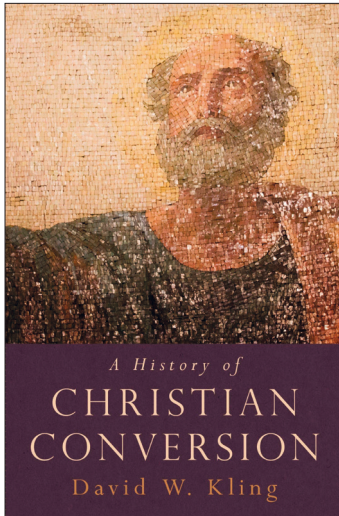


## A HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN CONVERSION



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DAVID W. KLING'S *HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN CONVERSION* IS AN AMBITIOUS work, on a monumental scale, which sets out to survey the entire history of the phenomenon of conversion in the Christian faith. As Kling acknowledges, conversion remains an essentially mysterious phenomenon; exactly what it means for a person to come to faith or to change faiths, and why, are contested issues in more than one discipline. However, by approaching the subject through history, Kling seeks to provide into what conversion may have meant in different eras without becoming bogged down in theory. However, although Kling eschews any single methodology for his study, he does identify several "broad themes" that recur throughout the book,

such as “human cognizance of divine presence”, the cultural and social context within which conversion occurs, movement towards and resistance to Christianity, internal controversies, the importance of personal testimony, and debates around gender, identity, self and agency (pp. 20-23).

Following an initial discussion of “The Anatomy of Conversion” in the book’s introduction, Kling begins by examining conversion in the Roman world (the New Testament era, the Early Church to 312 and the Imperial Church in the West between 312 and 500). Kling argues that, while some vocabulary of conversion existed in the pre-Christian ancient world, Christianity introduced a new, “universalized” concept of personal transformation that contrasted with prevailing ideas that the natures of peoples and individuals were fixed. As Christianity expanded into the Roman world, conversion often required sacrifice owing to the Roman Empire’s persecution of the new faith, but as the Church entered its 4<sup>th</sup> century its transformation into the faith of the Empire meant that the meaning of conversion altered considerably. For many, conversion to Christianity became a pragmatic as well as a religious consideration, while for others a conversion of life came to mean dedication to various ascetic forms of life.

A characteristic feature of Kling’s book, and a particular strength, is the author’s willingness to range widely over the full geographical and cultural range of Christianity as well as its full chronological extent. The subsequent sections of the book after Kling’s consideration of the Early Church adopt a geographical rather than a chronological focus, with sections on medieval Europe, early modern Europe, the Americas, China, India and Africa. The author takes pains to avoid a parochial approach to the history of Christianity focussed too narrowly on Europe and lands colonised by European settlers, and the discussion of Christianity in Asia is particularly commendable and insightful. There are some surprising gaps, however; for example, Kling barely considers Christianity in Africa before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and gives short shrift to early modern developments such as the Kingdom of the Kongo. A rather more serious shortcoming is the book’s omission of the most historically important iteration of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopian Christianity; the author might at least have explained why no account of the conversion of Ethiopia is necessary or appropriate (although it is hard to imagine why this might be so).

The geographical approach throughout much of the book may well be the right choice on the part of the author, dealing with a vast range of material, but it surely hinders the possibility of the drawing of parallels between the evangelisation of disparate regions at the same period of time. It would be intriguing, for example, to compare the late medieval conversion of Lithuania from paganism with the conversions of Minorca (from Islam) and the Canary Islands (from indigenous religion) that

occurred at around the same time, while all three conversion events foreshadowed the imminent encounter between the Old and New Worlds. In a book of such length, however, it is easy to see how such comparative discussions might prove unwieldy, and it is to be hoped that the scope of Kling's book will encourage other scholars to pursue studies of this kind.

In such a wide-ranging book, whose intent is to give a brief account of each region in turn, it would be unfair to be critical of an absence of depth, and the individual scholar will always have their own preferences regarding the details that Kling ought to have included. However, certain assumptions underlying the structure of the book do seem to limit its scope, such as the implicit portrayal of African Christianity as an essentially 19<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon. Nevertheless, in spite of some blind spots there can be little doubt that this book will become the standard account of the phenomenon of conversion in the history of Christianity, and its scale and scope are remarkable. *A History of Christian Conversion* is deservedly a landmark book in the field, and will be read and contested for many years to come.