



The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity

By Richard Fletcher

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The conversion of the pagan world that began in the obscurity of the Dark Ages was in no way inevitable. England did not embrace Christianity until 627, and while confessing communities existed from Greenland to China by the millennium, the last European conversion occurred late in the Middle Ages, in 1386. How did it all happen--and why? In a work of splendid scholarship that often reads like a detective story and that owes as much to keen intuition as to the mastery of difficult sources, Richard Fletcher lays out the story of the Christianization of Europe. It is a very large story, for conversion was not merely a matter of religious belief. Christianity brought with it enormous cultural baggage. With it came Latin literacy--books; Roman notions of law, property, and government--even the concept of town life, and Mediterranean customs, including new tastes in food, drink, and dress. Whether from faith or by force, conversion had an immense impact that is with us even today, and it is Richard Fletcher's achievement to make that impact felt and understood.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

What impels the leaders of a religion to begin systematically to convert an entire continent? How do they go about doing it? How thorough is the conversion to be? What roles do politics and military conquest play in such religious conversion? How does conversion proceed in society, and how does it change society?

Fletcher is well qualified to answer these and many other related questions with respect to the Christianizing of Europe during the Middle Ages. The prize-winning author of *Moorish Spain* and *The Search for El Cid*, he teaches at the University of York and is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, specializing in medieval Spanish history. Spanning an entire millennium and a whole continent, his new work is dauntingly broad in scope, but his lucid presentation and lively and engaging style will carry even casual readers smoothly along. Recommended for both academic and public libraries. *?James F. DeRoche, Alexandria, Va.*

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From Booklist

Fletcher weaves a rich tapestry out of a complex array of materials. He carefully addresses a nonspecialist audience, largely abandoning explanation of the acceptance of Christianity in favor of description of it. Guided by 10 considerations concerning evangelism and conversion, communication and acceptance, he is sensitive to the various ways in which Europe was Christianized and Christianity Europeanized during the course of a thousand years and amid considerable cultural, geographic, and linguistic diversity. Because of his 10-point agenda and because he resists dissolving stories into a single master narrative, his rambling but not superficial description depicts a conversion process that amounted to the continuing invention of Europe, a process that was cultural, not isolatedly individual, and intimately connected with economic, social, and political developments that often involved, as Fletcher puts it, "looking both ways." The conversion Fletcher describes extended beyond the temporal and geographic limits he sets, of course, and his narrative provides essential background for understanding Christianity's shape and cultural impact today, at the end of its second millennium. *Steve Schroeder*

From Kirkus Reviews

An elegant history of the Christianization of northwestern Europe. Not many historians would be willing to tackle a subject that encompasses more than 1,000 years of history, several discrete cultures, and numerous religious systems, or that requires a mastery of sparse resources written in several languages no longer extant. Then again, Fletcher (whose 1990 *The Quest for El Cid* won the Los Angeles Times history prize) is no ordinary historian. He bucks the trend of postwar historical specialization by writing a ``grand'' narrative tracing the rise of Latin Christianity not just in his native England (though this is the most normative case study in the book, to which he constantly refers), but also Spain, France, Germany, and Ireland, among many others. Scandinavia (including Greenland and Iceland) is also included, offering a much needed contribution to the history of western Christendom. The author concludes by recounting Western Christianity's push into eastern Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries, and the increasing emphasis on war (``crusade'') as a justified means to convert the heathen abroad. Fletcher's comprehensive, comparative technique is fruitful; he is mindful that the introduction of Christianity into these various regions necessitated not just a transformation of belief, but also an adoption of foreign cultural practices such as Roman government, dress, and food, as well as an emphasis on literacy. Throughout, Fletcher raises provocative questions about the motives for Christian evangelism, as well as the nature of conversion itself: At what point can historians claim that an entire culture was ``converted'' to a particular religion? Fletcher is an even-handed, creative historian. Well written and engaging, his book stands as a uniquely ambitious metahistory. His suggestions for further

reading provide direction for more focused inquiry. (36 b&w photos, 10 maps, not seen) -- *Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Irving Gaston:

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Edward Salazar:

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Nathaniel Thomas:

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