

Daniel König, Bekehrungsmotive. Untersuchungen zum Christianisierungsprozess im römischen Westreich und seinen romanisch-germanischen Nachfolgern (4.–8 Jahrhundert), Husum (Matthiesen Verlag) 2008, 638 S. (Historische Studien, 493), ISBN 978-3-7868-1493-1, EUR 79,00.

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In the last thirty years, the study of the Late Roman period has intensified and has spawned a whole new branch of study commonly known now as Late Antiquity. Within this field there are now research journals dedicated exclusively to the theme, regular congresses now convene on the same and scholarly articles and books are produced at a rate annually that makes it a herculean task to keep up with it all. Within such a historiographical framework is the Germanic invasion and settlement in Western Europe by a wide variety of tribes. Discussions on the nature and impact continue without abatement, as an example the recent works by Heather, Ward-Perkins, Goffart and others demonstrate that considerable divergence of interpretation still abound and will so for a long time.

The present work by Dr. Daniel König, who is presently associated with the Deutsches Historisches Institut, Paris, was submitted as his doctoral dissertation that he wrote at the Universität Bonn (2006), and is now published in the series »Historische Studien«. As the title of the book suggests its focus is upon the process of conversion of the various Germanic tribes who did eventually convert to either the Catholic or the Arian forms of Christianity. In time, it resulted in the complete triumph of the Catholic form and the total demise of the Arian in the latter half of the sixth century in Visigothic Iberia. This thematic approach is not the usual fare in Germanic invasion studies of late; most have focused their attention on ethnic identity, social and economic factors, with not much consideration of their Christianization. This gap in my view has resulted in a somewhat deficient understanding of the whole process of settlement, integration, and domination that marginalizes the role of the Church, the most dominant institution – religious and social – that survived the collapse of the Roman social order in the West.

The work is divided into four chapters or sections within which there are very detailed subsections. I will only summarize briefly their content and intention due to the space provided for this review. In the first »Einleitung« the author sets out explain his definition of »conversion«, which will be the underlying guiding principle throughout the work. He addresses the question of the motives of conversion of the Germanic peoples, which he believes were not driven by any common motive but that they varied instead. That is, in some cases it could have been driven primarily for political-economic gain, at other times personal conversion and even the mystical power of the message itself. We cannot reduce the process of conversion to a tight neat sociological-religious paradigm that applies cross the board. Chapter 2, »Der Aufstieg der Kirche« is a historical introduction that introduces the reader to a summary of what scholars have said about the conversion of the Goths, Sueves, Burgundians, Franks and Lombards. The author does not offer here- that was not his stated intention- any critical analysis. It is meant to provide a broad historical framework for what follows. The only critique I have of this section is regarding the Sueves, the works consulted is quite deficient and could have benefitted from much recent research that has been done on them. Nevertheless, the overall framework is still valid. Chapter 3, »Nachweis von Bekehrungsmotiven« is by far the most extensive section that makes up most of the book. Here he returns to various Germanic tribes set forth in chapter 2 and analyzes their conversions giving attention to political, social and religious factors. In terms of the latter the passage either from paganism to Christianity or Arianism to Catholicism, or in the case of the Sueves a combination of the two. The section is far too dense even to summarize here. It suffices to say, however, that these »conversions« were hardly the result of simple motives or factors. He rejects the tendency of some scholars of overemphasizing one factor or motive over others that did also have a hand that led to their conversions. The last full chapter 4, »Verbreitung von Bekehrungsmotiven« is where the author ties together the very complex excursus that has been presented in the previous section. He deals with conversion contexts (Ausgangslagen), catalysts of conversion (Auslöser), forms of conversion (Bekehrungsformen) and their motives (Bekehrungsmotive), in short it summarizes chapter 3. Within chapter 4, however, there is more than mere summary of the previous section. The

author comments about the various motives regarding the social groups, individual persons and even their professions in the context of what role they may have played in the process of conversion to Christianity. Dr. König attempts ambitiously to cover from the fourth through eighth centuries for Western Europe and by the author's clear intention excluding Ireland and England. The author is careful to note that in any given conversion context the motives were multivariate and not the result of a single driving force. In short, he maintains that the simultaneous conversion of the Germanic peoples in various places was effected by common yet dissimilar processes led to the same result, »official« conversion of all of the tribes to Catholic Christianity.

In the last section of chapter 4 (4.3), he sets forth various overarching conclusions. One, he sets aside as inadequate the hypothesis of Harnack that it was mainly the »universal« appeal of Christianity that drew the Germanic tribes to conversion. It was certainly one component but as the author has demonstrated, it was more complex than that. Dr. König expresses that Christianity answered the needs of many types of peoples – some seeking humility, others power, etc. – and thus it was a religion that was quite adaptable to the specific needs of peoples and social groups and more so than the pagan cults that it competed with for devotees. I would only point out that although that »diversity« did exist in the conversion process and after the fact, there did emerge an overarching Catholic-Orthodoxy that held together all of the disparate »Christianities« all across Christendom, notwithstanding pockets of dissenters here and there, as the late eminent Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan pointed out in an interview years ago.

Dr. König's is to be congratulated for this study which is a step in the right direction to fill in a gap that has of late not been given much consideration in the process of Christianization in the Germanic settlement in the West. Although that is not his explicit stated goal – that is my own observation as reviewer –, the author obviously recognized such a need. In its scope this dense book, however, turns out to be a rather ambitious enterprise that some may find lacking depth. This study is to be seen, in my view, as a broad general outline of the topic, which then needs to be pursued by the author and others in greater detail. That is, it proposes what will be points of discussion and further elaboration as each Germanic people and their conversion is taken into account. The bibliography is fairly up to date, but there are a few bibliographical gaps here and there but none of any major concern. The author has read widely, which is not the case in much contemporary scholarship, whereby researchers at times will consult scholarship almost entirely along nationalistic lines to their own detriment. This is not the case here with Dr. König who has integrated a broad range of modern scholarship from every modern scholarly quarter, for which he is to be commended. Insofar as primary sources they are all accounted for in this study. The volume includes extensive bibliographies and even various other indexes (Personen-, Institutionen- und Ortsregister).

Lastly Dr. König at the very start of his study quotes Arnold Toynbee who observed, »No collection of facts is ever complete, because the Universe is without bounds. And no synthesis or interpretation is ever final, because there are always fresh facts to be found after the first collection has been provisionally arranged« (p. 10). I think that this study has validated that observation in that as far as texts are concerned there are no claims to some new dazzling discovery, there are none, they are the same ones we have had, but in this case given some new fresh interpretations. It is my wish that Dr. König will dedicate his efforts in the future to the numerous propositions he has set forth in his work. I do suggest that if he does so he ought to integrate the vast archaeological record – especially in the Iberian Peninsula – that is deepening our understanding of this momentous transition from pagan to a Christian West in late antiquity via the Germanic settlement in the West.