

The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion

Lewis R. Rambo and Charles Farhadian, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 803 pp. \$130. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780195338522.

The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion (OHRC) is one of the latest releases in the ambitious *Oxford Handbooks* series, the purpose of which is to offer “an authoritative and state-of-the-art survey of current thinking and research in a particular subject area.” The specific goal of the OHRC is to provide “an invitation to a model of conversion studies that is global, interdisciplinary, multireligious, and inclusive of the personal, social, cultural, and political dimensions of the human predicament” (16). This reviewer is not aware of anything that comes close to the breadth and depth of a genre surveying this important topic in religious studies. (Newton and Southard’s *Handbook of Religious Conversion* [1992] is somewhat similar in scope but is only about one-third the length of the OHRC and is now over twenty years old.)

The contributors were tasked with reflecting the “global, interdisciplinary, multireligious” agenda of the volume. They are international scholars, representing private and public academic institutions and writing from a wide variety of religious persuasions and a broadly interdisciplinary range of fields. Religious conversion is addressed from a truly unique set of disciplines, surveying perspectives from sociology, psychology, geography, anthropology, feminist studies, literature, modern languages, communication theory, and political science, as well as traditional categories of world religions, religious studies, and cultural history. Thirty-two essays have been assembled, and each represents critical thinking and serious scholarship, as reflected in their robust engagement with mostly secondary sources, cited in the endnotes. Each chapter concludes with an extremely helpful, up-to-date bibliography.

The editors have provided a constructive, programmatic introduction that outlines the book’s methodological assumptions, expressed goals, broad perspectives, and major issues, and proposes an emerging definition of conversion. The handbook is neatly divided into two main sections: Part 1 covers “Disciplinary Perspectives” and Part 2, “Religions.” The primary purpose of this twofold division is so that “the reader may approach this handbook in different ways” (16). If the reader wishes to undergo a comparative analysis of religious conversion within the world’s major religions, then she may begin by reading Part 2 to identify common, recurring themes and notable distinctives. On the other hand, if the reader desires to investigate the various diverse aspects and perspectives that are treated by the aforementioned academic disciplines, she may delve into any number of chapters in Part 1. For example, since feminist studies have brought to light numerous previously unknown perspectives within academic disciplines, it might behoove the reader to take in Eliza F. Kent’s “Feminist Approaches to the Study of Religious Conversion.” Surely one’s perspective can only be broadened by the inclusion of gender issues in the religious conversion process.

Alternatively, one may want to combine these two approaches to studying religious conversion. One could read Heinz Streib’s “Deconversion” from Part 1 as an aspect of academic discipline and then go on to read Stuart A. Wright’s “Disengagement and Apostasy in New Religious Movements” in Part 2 as an investigation into “deconversion” within a specific religion or religious movement. I was both pleased and enlightened to find these two essays in the *OHRC* because they offer fresh insight into the “downside” of conversion. The essays that address the topic of brainwashing and religious conversion could also be consulted in this discussion.

Three issues caught my attention for the reader’s consideration. First, I find that the *OHRC*, like other works with multiple contributors, is necessarily uneven in quality. Some of the chapters are outstanding essays on their assigned topics. Bruce Hindmarsh’s essay “Religious Conversion as Narrative and Autobiography” is excellent, interacting with primary and secondary sources, but also importantly and convincingly reaching beyond his own area of expertise (the history of early British evangelicalism) to include aspects of several other world religions. Additionally, Todd M. Johnson’s

“Demographics of Religious Conversion” is a fine contribution to his field. Some essays, however, lack detailed critical engagement and do not meet the standards set by those that are noteworthy.

Second, when recommending a reference work to students, I would prefer one containing essays constructed upon the priority of primary sources. One of the dangers of the academic enterprise is to build one’s works upon what others have said about the giants, rather than building upon the shoulders of giants themselves. I recall years ago driving to college on the interstate in a terrible blizzard with less than twenty feet of visibility. I believed that by following the tail lights of the car directly in front of me, I would remain true to the road and therefore arrive safely at my destination. Instead I followed the car immediately in front of me into the ditch, as did others after me. Following what others have said does not necessarily lead one on the road to truth, but rather can mislead one in disastrous ways. Part 2 of this volume should contain essays that delineate aspects of religious conversion based primarily on the writings of the religion’s founder(s). I find this lacking in several essays.

Third, I was puzzled by the inclusion of the chapter “Migration and Conversion of Korean American Christians” by Rebecca Y. Kim. I think the essay itself is valuable and only highlights an important movement within modern Christian missions, migration and religious conversion. The Korean community is vitally important to what is happening globally with respect to Christian conversion and expansion, both in Korea and in America. However, I wondered, why just the Korean movement? Why not have essays on migration and conversion to Christianity among Chinese Americans or Christianity and Islam among particular countries on the continent of Africa? I know parts of chapters mention some of these significant movements. But surely these migration and conversion movements which are transforming the global community merit standalone essays. I also wondered about essays addressing religious conversion among political refugees. I can only guess that this was an editorial choice due to lack of space.

Notwithstanding these considerations, I believe that the editors have achieved their goal of offering a “model of conversion studies that is global, interdisciplinary, multireligious, and inclusive of the personal, social, cultural, and political dimensions of the human predicament.” Graduate students and scholars alike will greatly benefit from this reference work, which promises to be the standard work in its genre for years to come. Naturally the electronic version of this work may be especially useful to its readers for its ability to search specific keywords and themes.

At one point, Lewis Rambo comments that his work as an editor is much like that of a musical conductor: “Both select musicians/scholars, both seek to give each musician/scholar the best possible venue for his or her gifts, and, when all is going well, all come together to create something new, stimulating, and even beautiful” (18). I think that aside from my minor squabbles with a few notes on the score, this handbook is already and will continue to make important contributions to religious studies and across multidisciplinary boundaries. That is, the editors have assembled, directed, and produced a large-scale work, the various sounds of which join together in forming a noteworthy composition.

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