

## Reviews

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*Conversion. The old and the new in religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo.*

By A. D. Nock (intro. Clare K. Rothschild). (Library of Early Christology.) Pp. xxxvi + 309. Waco, Tx: Baylor University Press, 2019 (first publ. 1933 by Oxford University Press). \$39.95 (paper). 978 1 4813 1158 8

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Arthur Darby Nock's classic monograph, first published in 1933 by the Oxford University Press, and based upon lectures originally given in Trinity College, Dublin in 1931, and Lowell, Boston, in 1933, remains a work of remarkable range and perspicacity. Nock, only in his early thirties at the time of publication and a mere twenty-nine when he gave his original lectures in Dublin, seeks to set out the religious context out of which Christianity emerged by covering almost a thousand years of history. The book takes a broadly exceptionalist view of Christianity based on Nock's own view, itself dependent upon William James's *Varieties of religious experience*, that conversion, defined as 'the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new was right', is best exemplified among Christian converts (and also Jewish proselytes). Of course, the ancient world witnessed, for various historical reasons, a shifting religious landscape in which cults and new religious movements emerged, but few were exclusivist and almost none were ideological, that is, they offered no transformative new vision. 'Paganism', he wrote, 'offers cults; Christianity and Judaism religion.' Nock was prepared to argue that ancient philosophy presented something akin to an idea of conversion found among Christians, but at the time of Christian origins it had begun to lose its allure. Nock was not, however, arguing that Christianity was entirely different – much of what he has to say is comparative and shows up continuities between Christianity and the world out of which it emerged, in which freedom from fate and disaster played a significant part in man's anxieties. Christians combined the old and the new. This is part of Nock's argument about the appeal of the new movement. In the process of making his case, Nock introduces his readers to a striking array of material, both literary and inscriptional; and the endnotes, though succinct, give further evidence of Nock's remarkable erudition. The book is in many ways about much more than conversion; the subtitle, in its vagueness, gives a better sense of the wide-ranging contents.

The decision to issue a reprint of this volume is to be welcomed. Nock's work continues to be cited, and even if its influence has waned, its status as a classic

in the field is enough to justify its appearance. Scholars now think differently from Nock, whether this relates to specific areas like Mithraism, whose study has been greatly revised by new discoveries, or more generally about ‘paganism’, or in relation to Nock’s understanding of ‘paganism’ as marked exclusively by praxis. From a more methodological context, his work sits uneasily in a landscape marked by identity studies and the literary turn. In her helpful introduction, Clare Rothschild mentions some of these points as well as giving a *précis* of Nock’s book. She notes that it is impossible to gauge its ultimate significance but intriguingly suggests that its wider context was the First World War and the troubled 1930s when a kind of post-Nietzschean atheism had the upper hand and the agnostic Nock called upon people to have a conviction. This comment partially chimes with that of E. R. Dodds and Henry Chadwick found in their jointly written obituary of Nock in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, where they noted that for Nock religion meant ‘feeling – a refusal to admit meaninglessness and helplessness and a like refusal to admit that man has the power to solve his own problem’ (*JRS* liii [1963], 168–9). In addition to such semi-biographical readings of the book more could perhaps have been made of its place among the so-called *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, which sought to contextualise Christianity within the wider religious world of the ancient Near East. Nock mentions some of its luminaries in his text and endnotes, and his work, as Rothschild briefly notes, reflects some of the concerns of that disparate school; and yet in many ways he eschewed some of its more commonplace conclusions, not least on the place of mystery religions or a pre-Christian gnosis in the history of Christian development. The reprinting of this classic work is not only important, I would suggest, because of what Nock tells us about nearly a thousand years of religious history, but for what it tells us about some of the scholarly (and cultural) tendencies of the time.

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*The rise of the early Christian intellectual*. Edited by Lewis Ayres and H. Clifton Ward. (Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte.) Pp. xiv + 272. Berlin–Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020. £79. 978 3 11 06T0755 0  
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As the editors of this volume inform us in their introduction, ‘intellectual’, as a term that refers to a caste of people, or a self-conscious group, first appears in France at the end of the nineteenth century and has had a complex history subsequently. In broad terms, then, it is a modern concept, with all the difficulties which that potentially has for its application to a much earlier period, in the case of this volume, broadly the second century. And yet, with a necessary health warning, it can be heuristically useful when applied to a period when Christianity was beginning to attract to itself educated individuals, who sought to discuss the fundamental ideas of their movement within a set of known philosophical and cultural categories. In seeking to negotiate a place for Christianity within such a landscape, ‘intellectuals’ took up often complicated positions in relation to inherited ideas; and did so from a Christian setting where, as the editors indicate, membership of the