



Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome

By Patrick Allitt

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From the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, an impressive group of English speaking intellectuals converted to Catholicism. Outspoken and gifted, they intended to show the fallacies of religious skeptics and place Catholicism, once again, at the center of western intellectual life. The lives of individual converts?such as John Henry Newman, G. K. Chesterton, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day?have been well documented, but Patrick Allitt has written the first account of converts' collective impact on Catholic intellectual life. His book is also the first to characterize the distinctive style of Catholicism they helped to create and the first to investigate the extensive contacts among Catholic convert writers in the United States and Britain.

Allitt explains how, despite the Church's dogmatic style and hierarchical structure, converts working in the areas of history, science, literature, and philosophy maintained that Catholicism was intellectually liberating. British and American converts followed each other's progress closely, visiting each other and sending work back and forth across the Atlantic. The outcome of their labors was not what the converts had hoped. Although they influenced the Catholic Church for three or four generations, they were unable to restore it to the central place in Western intellectual life that it had enjoyed before the Reformation.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Being a Catholic in America or Britain hasn't always been easy. Since the days of "Bloody Mary," Catholics were viewed with suspicion and often actively discriminated against in Britain. Meanwhile, anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiment combined in many American cities to create violent mob scenes that targeted Catholic churches and other religious establishments. As recently as 1960, John F. Kennedy's Catholicism was an issue in the American presidential race. Church fortunes took a turn for the better in the years following World War II, and many of its leading intellectual lights have been converts. In *Catholic Converts*, Patrick Allitt, an associate professor of history at Emory University, takes a fascinating look at the men and women who came to Catholicism from other faiths and helped to shape it. Notable converts include Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Marshall McLuhan and Dorothy Day.

From Library Journal

The century and a quarter before Vatican Council II saw quite a few American and British intellectuals enter the Roman Catholic Church. Through their writings, these converts, among them John Henry Newman, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Christopher Dawson, and G.K. Chesterton, affected the life of the whole Catholic community and in fact often far outshone their born-Catholic contemporaries. While their stories have already been told individually, as well by others, Allitt (*Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985*, LJ 12/93) considers them as a group. And what a diverse group they were: liberals and conservatives, contemplatives and activists, apologists, spiritual writers, historians, and literary figures all evaluated here in the context of the wider church and society. Written in a lively style, this is intellectual history at its best. Recommended for all general collections. —Augustine J. Curley, Newark Abbey, N.J.
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From Kirkus Reviews

A scholarly and stimulating history of the impact made by gifted thinkers who became Catholics on both sides of the Atlantic between 1825 and 1962, and of the problems they faced in their new Church and in society. Generations of penal legislation in Britain and in many parts of the American colonies had left Catholics an uneducated, suspect group. Allitt (History/Emory Univ.) traces the fortunes of a rich variety of scholars and literary figures who "went over to Rome," often in the face of social and professional ostracism. Beginning with the English Romantic architect Augustus Welby Pugin and renowned Oxford scholar John Henry Newman, who unexpectedly found the stance of the early Church in contemporary Rome, we follow the careers of Americans such as Orestes Brownson and Isaac Hecker, who came to the Catholic Church from Transcendentalism and saw Catholic belief as uniquely consonant with the American ideals of freedom and optimism. Allitt shows how the converts had to deal with pressures from inside the Church, such as the 1870 declaration of papal infallibility and Rome's increasing phobia toward new ideas in politics, science, and philosophy, which resulted in the excommunication of scientist St. George Milvard and Jesuit theologian George Tyrrel. A very different era ensued with authors Robert Hugh Benson, Hilaire Belloc, and G.K. Chesterton, who focused on Catholicism as a counterculture opposed to the Protestant-inspired industrial society and big Capitalism. Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene brought their anguished perspectives to Catholicism, while Thomas Merton, Marshall McLuhan, and Fr. Avery Dulles initiated a more authentically American Catholic outlook before the watershed of Vatican II. Allitt makes good use of the extensive scholarship available on many of these figures, adding his own incisive observations and showing how their work tried but failed to restore the cultural visibility that the Church had enjoyed in former centuries. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

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