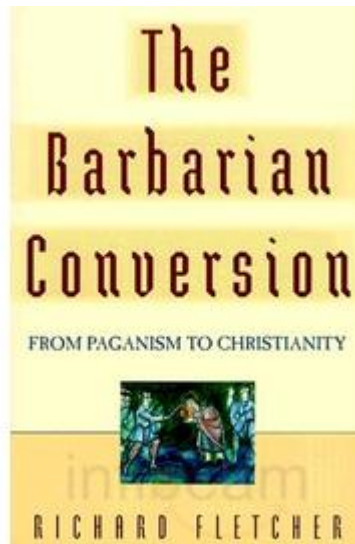


Review

Richard Fletcher

The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity



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Oxford educated scholar, Richard Fletcher, has produced another outstanding volume: *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity*. Evangelicals have been accused of many things, but one censure that may well stick is their lack of historical perspective. This failing can be alleviated by reading Fletcher's outstanding volume on the history of the conversion of barbarian Europe to the Roman or Byzantine forms of Christianity. It is packed full of insights that challenge many of the presuppositions of Evangelicals at several levels. Second, it fills up with great detail the European gaps in what K. S. Latourette calls *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty*.

In fifteen chapters, with an erudite but fascinating style, Fletcher weaves into his very lively account stories and vignettes showing both the advance of the Christian faith and the heart thought of many of the participants of that mission. Using an abundance of primary materials taken from monastery archives, libraries, letters, collected works of the various saints, and ar-

chaeological data, he perceptively discusses the roots of this long-lasting missionary movement. The progress of the movement that converted the “barbarians” endured century by century until the last pagan peoples in Western Europe, the Lapps and Lithuanians, were Christianized about a century and a half before the Reformation.

“Who is it [the Gospel] for!” is the title of the first chapter. This lays a necessary foundation for the mission mandate in the writings of the church fathers, especially Augustine and Patrick. In this first section, Fletcher confirms how Augustine and Patrick clearly understood that the Good News must spread beyond the Roman imperial borders. For Augustine, this foundational root was biblical and spiritual. His vision of the heavenly city, The City of God, was a international metropolis that brings together “its citizens from every nation and assemble[s] a multilingual band of pilgrims; not caring about any diversity in the customs, laws and institutions whereby they severally make provision from the achievement and maintenance of earthly peace.”¹ Augustine, Fletcher states, was further convinced that the end of the world was at hand. Civilization was collapsing all around him. In response to a letter from Bishop Hesychius of Salona concerning Daniel’s prophecies regarding the end of the world, Augustine stated that first the Gospel must be proclaimed to all nations before that end (see Mt 24:14).

To Hesychius’ reply that the Gospel had been so proclaimed, Augustine stated that many barbarian [Berber] tribes in North Africa had not yet had the Gospel proclaimed to them. Thus he concluded, God did not promise the Romans “but all nations to the seed of Abraham.” He then cited Psalm 72:8 that Christ will rule from sea to sea, which he interprets to mean the whole earth. All nations, Augustine states, “as many as God has made,” referring to Psalm 86:9, will adore and call upon him. At this point, he cited Romans 10:14-15: How shall they call upon him if they don’t believe; and how shall they believe without a preacher proclaiming the word of the Gospel. Though he did not then explicitly state that we must “send out missionary preachers”—Fletcher thinks he hesitates at this point—I believe it is at least implicit in what he writes.

In about the same era, however, God directly called the Celto-Roman Patrick in a dream. Patrick was the son of a deacon and grandson of a presbyter but only a nominal Christian until captured and enslaved by Irish raiders. In the dream, the Lord called him to return to the people that had enslaved him so that he might preach the good news to them. In his *Confessions* he explained some of the biblical motivations that the Lord had given him for his mission to the Irish. He quoted a plethora of passages from both the OT and the NT, including the Servant Song: “I have put you as a light among the nations, to be a means of salvation to the ends of the earth” (Fletcher 1997, 85). This means, he wrote, that Christ wants us to be “fishers of men” . . . to catch “a vast multitude and throng . . . for God and [that] there might be clergy everywhere to baptise and exhort . . . [as] He urges and teaches in the gospel, saying ‘Go and teach all nations, baptising them . . .’” (Fletcher 1997, 85).

These two great men of God cited Scripture passages that many contemporary missiologists use to illustrate the mission mandate. Augustine and Patrick motivated many missionaries throughout the history of this period with these biblical impulses. Patrick’s originality, Fletcher writes, was that “no one within western Christendom had thought such thoughts as these before, had ever previously been possessed by such convictions” (Fletcher 1997, 86). Well, this may be true at least since Paul’s writings. However, we have only a tiny fragment of extant manuscripts from the era that Fletcher covers. The indwelling Lord—according to Patrick’s own Confession—and these biblical testimonies, impelled him to go outside the bounds of civilization. By

¹Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, xix.17 (Fletcher 1997, 31).

his own testimony, he led thousands to Christ among all social classes and ordained presbyters [priests] for them. The Irish were one well-documented case of a people movement to Christ that came together to faith through webs of leaders, families, commoners and nobility. Fletcher demonstrates, using primary sources, that Patrick helped plant and inspire a Church that was to be the vanguard of itinerant missions to pagan peoples for several centuries to come, first on the British Isles and then on the continent.

The evangelization of Ireland was surely a bright and shining star shining through the almost uniformly cloudy-grey accounts of the Christianization of European barbarians. I am certainly not implying that Fletcher omits the many shining stars and break-throughs of the sun as light from the Lord during these dreary centuries. Indeed many did seem to bring the power of God. Fletcher summarizes: “Like it or not, this is what our sources tell us over and over again. Demonstrations of the power of the Christian God meant conversion. Miracles, wonders, exorcisms, temple-torching and shrine-smashing *were in themselves* acts of evangelization”—especially in the early centuries until about the 6th century (Fletcher 1997, 45; emphasis in original). Absolutely, many of these works of extra-ordinary were undoubtedly from God’s Spirit. Yet as Deuteronomy warns all signs and wonders are not from God. Many of the missionary saints led their converts to worship the saints and Mary and not the true and living God exclusively in Christ. Fletcher, however, merely reports what the primary sources describe. He does not add a biblical note of discernment except possibly in the last chapter. There he notes that a Lutheran pastor in Lithuania during the Reformation complained that the veneration of saints was “abominable idolatry” (Fletcher 1997, 509). Yet he cites this as merely an illustration of the difficulty of discovering what makes a Christian. The “line between the encouraged and the unacceptable had been redrawn in a different place” (Fletcher 1997, 509).

Now the first three chapters further deal with another aspect of the conversion movement that I wish Fletcher had continued throughout the whole volume. This is the actual methodology and message the earliest missionaries used. Chapter two especially illustrates how the early church disciplined the countryside throughout the imperial borders before 476, the official fall of Rome. There are many similarities to what has been occurring in China the last thirty years. The third chapter moves beyond the imperial boundaries into the first Western extra-imperial mission, that of Patrick to the Irish. Throughout the whole volume he cites many such personal examples to concretize the broad principles concerning the growth and movement of the Gospel.

In the remaining eleven chapters, the author continually returns to a second major root motivation for Christian mission to Europe. It was political and military: Christian imperial aggression began when Constantine saw a vision, “By this sign conquer” [“ἐν τούτῳ νικά,” or more popularly the Latin *in hoc signo vinces*]. Time and time again, kings and emperors conquered tribes such as the Saxons, Wends, and Prussians and then sent in the monastic brothers, clergy, and bishops to Christianize them. Time and again, kings and their princes would submit in baptism bringing them under the nominal hegemony of either the Roman emperor and his church in Byzantium (e.g., the Bulgars, Southern Slavs, and Kieven Rus) or the Roman Church and the Pope’s emperors (e.g., Charlemagne). Always these landowners and princes imposed Catholicism or Orthodoxy upon their peoples, some with a more or less biblical Gospel, most with an almost neo-paganism with the veneration of Mary and the saints as the vocal point rather than the worship of God through Christ.

This process was often tempered by a godly desire to accommodate the weaknesses of recent converts following the precedent of Gregory the Great’s advice to Augustine, Roman missionary to Britain. Fletcher demonstrates accommodation with stories and accounts of the

growth of the veneration of the saints and their relics, accommodation to national languages, and replacing of pagan ceremonies with Christian festivals on the same dates, and so forth. “The laity had been encouraged by their priests to revere the saints with festivities and with candles” (Fletcher 1997, 509). Some of this, of course, is excellent missiological practice. Fletcher extensively discusses how the Byzantine church, for example, pioneered using liturgy and literature in the ethno-national language of its commonwealth of vassal peoples under the Emperor and his patriarch.

However, unfortunately, the missionary priests and brothers most often brought a new Christian way of life, modeled not on Scripture alone but on the traditional Roman or Byzantine cultural template. They brought a surfeit of new rules based on those traditions and called it Christianity. In the West especially, Rome and her vassal kings imposed a foreign language and ecclesial culture. Byzantium imposed an alien liturgy. Both wings of the Christian movement that Fletcher studies decreed new legalisms for behavior. For example, there were rules for the baptism of pagans with the giving of foreign “Christian” names to the young, laws for burial around a parish church and the forbidding of cremation; decrees about mandatory tithing to the Bishop and coerced church attendance. They taught a new sexual morality, brought many new holy days, feasts, food prohibitions, and eventually a mandatory celibacy for the clergy, a law resisted for centuries in the Western Church. Some of these norms were Scriptural, but many were not.

Fletcher states: “It was a part of the business of changing your identity and self-perception from barbarian to a kind of Roman” (Fletcher 1997, 516). “The imposition of alien rule,” he then adds, brings with it “the imposition of Christianity as an instrument of cultural dominance” (Fletcher 1997, 517). Accommodation was an effort to heal the wounds of such imposition and this effort of healing itself ceased (apart from standard Roman Catholic syncretisms) with the imposition of the faith upon the Baltic peoples by Teutonic Knights in the 12th and 13th centuries. Imposition, however, consistently led to passive and active resistance. The passive resistance was often seen in the accommodation process. New saints and their virtually magical powers replaced the old gods and spirits. Pagan temples often were reused as churches or at least their foundations were the basis of new churches. However, the new imperial and ecclesial master never tolerated active resistance for long. They always—often brutally—suppressed them. This is true, as Fletcher documents, especially in Spain. Within three centuries of the Muslim conquest, Spain was about ninety percent Muslim and rapidly Arabizing. The *reconquista* used the exact methods as the Muslims—the sword, differential taxation, and often forced emigration.

Fletcher almost equates this imperial imposition as Christianization. I perceive this to be one of the book’s weaknesses. I wish he had written from a consistently Protestant perspective, which alas he did not. He does not show much perception of the freedom that the Reformation brought to the Catholic peoples who began to understand the faith in a Lutheran or Calvinian manner. Time after time new renewal movements were indeed needed to deepen the conviction and behavior change of these converts because of this coercive, law-based religion. Fletcher seems to view the Reformation as only one of the many renewal movements throughout history, which in a way it was. The year 1386 marked the formal end of mission in Europe when the Lithuanian and Polish realms merged under the Lithuanian king who accepted Catholic baptism and renounced paganism. He led his people into the Roman Church after his predecessors had vacillated for over a century between Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. However, “Christianization was as slow in Lithuania as it was elsewhere in Europe” in the previous millennium (Fletcher 1997, 508). The earliest Lithuanian text that has survived the ravages of the

last centuries is not Roman Catholic or pagan but Lutheran, Fletcher writes. It is a catechism written by Protestant pastor Martin Mazvydas in 1547. (Note his name. The Protestants also brought the foreign names of their saints!) In the catechism, Mazvydas repeatedly condemned “the cult of the god Perkunas”—the former god of the pagan Lithuanians, whose worship the ruling elite had only abandoned sixteen decades previously. In a letter Mazvydas wrote to Martin Luther’s friend Duke Albert of Brandenburg, he bemoaned the “irreligion of his flock. They did not go to church, did not abstain from work on Sundays, did not know the Lord’s Prayer, did not receive the sacraments” (Fletcher 1997, 508). Fletcher adds that many reforming notables such as Caesarius of Arles (c. 500-543); Gregory of Tours, Venerable Bede or Hincmar could have repeated such sentiments through the centuries.

True evangelism and imposition by conquest and accommodation thus are consistent themes throughout the book. Eventually, these processes produced Christianized peoples, who in turn returned the favor to their neighbors. For example, Charlemagne and his descendants conquered the Saxon’s to their north, who were encroaching upon their empire even as their own Frankish tribes did a few centuries earlier upon the Romans. After a few fits and starts, revolts and accommodations, the Saxon’s themselves became zealous Catholics who imposed the faith at first brutally upon the Wends, a Slavic people to the east of Saxony. Only after conquest did the multitudes of brothers move into the conquered areas with something of the Christian Gospel.

Barbarian Conversion’s last chapter “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” summarizes the process of conversion. In this chapter, he faces the serious issues in fascinating detail that remained after the formal discipleship of Europe was completed. From first to last, Fletcher continually engages the readers’ interest. In the process of doing so, he informs the modern missionary movement of both excellent precedents and many excesses to avoid. I highly recommend this volume for use in classes on the history of the expansion of the Christian movement.

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