

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Reviews.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION.

PRINCIPAL SELBIE'S book under this title (Clarendon Press, 12/6) is an excellent survey of the subject for the use of students. It is sane and judicial in its judgments, thoroughly competent in its grasp of the data, and abreast of the most recent developments in a realm already crowded with books of one sort or another. A noticeable feature of its method is the incorporation of the higher Christian experience with the lower, primitive material. The attitude towards the "New Psychology" is sympathetic but critical. Whilst it cannot be said that any new ground is broken, the book will be very useful as an introduction to the subject, and will rank as the best work Principal Selbie has given us.

The method of the book is to study the religious consciousness in general as a definite reaction to the universe, to review the external expression of this consciousness in cult and worship, and the inner product of belief in God, and to show that religion is always both social and individual. The development of religion in childhood and conversion receives careful attention. The particular forms of the religious consciousness which are specially studied are prayer, sin, and repentance, mysticism and the hope of immortality. The final chapter is a well-balanced criticism of the theories of Freud and Jung.

Dr. Selbie justly claims that recent study, both of anthropology and psychology, and of religions in their relation to one another, brings out more clearly the fact that religion is something natural to man, an inevitable expression of his nature in reaction to the universe, in recognition of what is usually called the "supernatural." He lays stress on the fact that "The real essence of a religion is in its living power of development," and here includes the intellectual as well as the emotional. He shows how important it is to ask for the "why?" of the different forms of cult, and notes the influence in symbolism that comes from attaching a supersensible experience to events and things. "The psychological effect of it is to deepen the sense of reality in worship." Forms may be retained and still be of value, though they have lost their original meaning, whilst there is a spirit in man that continually struggles against the bondage of custom. The important contribution of Christianity to the modern sense of personality is fully recognized, especially on its social side;

"wherever religion is vital and active there will be something corresponding to a church." Dr. Selbie's definition of conversion is that it is "the process by which the self, hitherto divided and unhappy, becomes unified and satisfied under the impulse of religious ideas and motives." In regard to the life beyond death, we think he is wrong in saying that the Old Testament psychology clearly distinguishes flesh and spirit. As a matter of fact, the "shades" in Sheol are never called "spirits" or "souls" in the Old Testament, and the Hebrew idea of personality is based on the body, psychically conceived, rather than on the soul. Man is an animated body, not, as with the Greeks, a soul temporarily inhabiting a body.

The subject is one in which it may be claimed that Baptists have a peculiar interest, for the retention of the New Testament theory and practice of believers' baptism emphasises religious experience to a unique degree. Baptists have a really modern message if they understand their inheritance. Baptism, in the New Testament sense, does justice to both the inner experience and the external expression of it (which is always, in some form, necessary). There is all the more need, therefore, that Baptist teachers should study the psychology of religion, as this book will enable them to do.

H. WHEELER ROBINSON.

CONVERSION.

WHEN modern psychology first began to turn its attention to religious experience, it found in conversion a fascinating theme. The facts were presented in bewildering variety, and one of the first requirements was a careful sifting of the material obtained through the study of autobiographical records and the use of the questionnaire. But writers like James, Coe, and Pratt, while admitting that conversion is not a distinctly Christian phenomenon, relied in the main on investigations within the circle of Protestant Evangelicalism. Now, however, in Dr. Underwood's book, *Conversion, Christian and Non-Christian* (George Allen & Unwin, 10/6 net), we have an attempt to cover the broader field, to "widen the bases of induction." This book, as the preface indicates, was presented, in a somewhat different form, for the degree of D.D. at London University, and we may offer to Dr. Underwood a double congratulation . . . for his success in achieving that academic distinction, and for his publication of a thesis in such a form as will commend it to all classes of readers. He claims that it is much more than an academic treatise: the claim is justified, for among its many qualities we give an important place to its lucid style and its compelling

interest. Ministers will find it continually suggestive and deeply informative, for the author never allows practical considerations to be obscured by the scientific and speculative interests of the subject.

Part I. is a historical survey of conversion in the Old Testament, New Testament, and in the main non-Christian religions. Dr. Underwood here works under the great advantage of first-hand knowledge of the religious systems of India. This section of the book makes most interesting reading, and we believe that it will for long rank as a first-rate store-house of apt illustration. In some parts the terminology is, to most of us, unfamiliar, but help is given in the index which is also a glossary. There is extensive quotation from documentary sources . . . the poet-saint Manikka Vachakar, e.g., is quoted to the extent of three pages, while the account of Gotama Buddha reads like a romance. The same principle is followed in Part II., which deals with the psychological aspects of conversion. For every Western example the author has some reference to an Eastern type, and this gives to the book a freshness that is continued to the end. For vivid description of conversion-experience we may refer, for example, to the account of Debendranath Tagore (p. 128) and Raymond Lull (p. 137).

Dr. Underwood finds three main types of conversion, though he realizes the perils of classification. The changes in Buddha and in Paul are treated as mainly intellectual. Paul's conversion turns "on the acceptance of the proposition that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah." Augustine is regarded as a type of moral change. Instances are given of the change as "the birth of a new and dominating affection . . . many of the mediaeval mystics appear to have fallen in love with Christ at their conversion." But the types shade off into each other, Augustine, for example having a clear intellectual development, while Paul might be regarded as one who fell in love with Christ. Conversion is shown, by numerous examples, to have a special connection with adolescence. Dr. Underwood argues that a variety of motives may drive and lead men to conversion, and not merely the sense of sin which Starbuck regarded as the central fact of the pre-conversion state. "In many of the conversions to Christianity in the mission-fields to-day the sense of sin is by no means a marked feature of the pre-conversion state." There may be instinctive motives—like fear and remorse—and end-motives—the desire to get right with God, or for men to adjust themselves to the scheme of religious realities in which they believe. Dr. Underwood has a discriminating treatment of modern revivalism, and a keen insight into the psychological methods of men like Torrey and Alexander. He defines conversion as a

reaction taking the form of a psychological surrender to an ideal, and issuing in moral development . . . a definition which is clearly formed to cover non-Christian as well as Christian examples. The supremacy of Christian experience is explained by the fact that the Christian convert discovers in Christ an ideal that is at once personal, redemptive, perfectly moralised, and which, therefore, guarantees the moral development that follows on surrender to Him. "Thus in our search for the highest form of conversion we are led to Christianity."

The keenest attention will be focussed upon chapters 14 and 18, where Dr. Underwood deals with the Psychological Mechanism of Conversion, and Conversion in its Comparative Aspects. There is a distinction made which is important . . . that between the *psychological mechanism* and the *psychology* of conversion. Here we find a most important contribution to the subject, though it is clear that the author attempts the psychological analysis with some reserve . . . it is like "carrying out a vivisection on the body of a friend." The conversions of types like Augustine and Paul are examined and explained, as far as they admit of explanation, in terms of the New Psychology. Paul's tension, for instance, was the struggle between the Pharisee complex and the Christian complex, but "an explosive change took place in which the Christian complex rose from its burial in the unconscious and became the dominant factor in the conscious life of Paul." Augustine's soul was divided and unhappy because of the struggle between two major complexes, the religious and the sex. The difference between the two cases lies in the fact that in Paul's case the offending complex was repressed into the unconscious, whereas in Augustine's, both complexes were present to consciousness. This, however, is but to describe the psychological mechanism of conversion, and not completely to explain it. Dr. Underwood emphasises the voluntary factor, the surrender to God, and the operations of divine grace which are psychologically and ethically conditioned. "Men and women," he says, "are not converted by a rearrangement of their complexes."

From this it is clear that he accepts the findings of the newer investigators without accepting all their implications. We may safely say, for instance, that the psycho-analysts have no room for real freedom. Dr. Ernest Jones advocates the theory of psychic determinism: Freud claims that the belief in psychic freedom and choice must give way before the claims of a determinism which governs even mental life. Dr. Underwood, however, states: "Unification is brought about by a voluntary choice, which lifts one complex into a dominant position in the mind." And again: "The attempt to correlate the psychological mechanism of conversion with the surrender factor in it is

not inconsistent with a belief in human freedom . . . room is left for the view of the will as "character in action," which view is by no means committed to the notion that determinism reigns absolutely in the psychical as in the physical realm." It is realised that the solution of the problem cannot be attempted on the purely psychological level, but we cannot resist the feeling that occasionally Dr. Underwood does not sufficiently safeguard the Christian conception of will. There is an example of this in his answer to the question, "Why does voluntary action defeat itself?" He apparently accepts the Law of Reversed Effort, and says, "Voluntary effort, instead of freeing the mind from its evil habits, binds them more closely by repeated indulgence." It may be doubted, however, whether, in many of the cases cited by Coué and Baudouin, it is really a voluntary effort which is defeated: the conflict appears rather to be that between two different suggestions, and not between will and imagination. There is really not a complete act of will at all. Dr. Wm. Brown draws attention to this point in his *Suggestion and Mental Analysis*. Baudouin's conception of will, which seems to embrace nothing more than the putting forth of effort, or the inhibition of desire, is totally inadequate from the Christian viewpoint, for which will can mean nothing less than the whole personality in decision. Dr. Underwood accepts McDougall's version of will as "character in action"; would he urge that will in this sense, i.e., character in action, is subordinate to imagination? We prefer the phrase, "personality in action" where personality is regarded as open to the incoming of divine powers. And, along this line, we believe that Dr. Underwood's definition would convey more clearly his sense of values if he were to render it "a reaction taking the form of a *personal* surrender to the ideal . . ." On his own view the psychological investigation of conversion does not exhaust the meaning of it, and when we are dealing with the experience of conversion we may as well express it in terms of our highest category, personality. Doubtless the author's psychological explanations, as he anticipates, will be resented in some quarters. But there is no ground for resentment when it is realised that when psychology has said its last word, the ultimate meaning and issues of conversion remain to be settled on higher grounds.

We predict for this book a large and healthy influence in religious and psychological circles. No minister can afford to be without it, and it will rank as a bold and fresh treatment of a great theme.

F. TOWNLEY LORD.*