

Review

Transformative Religious Experience: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion, by Joshua Iyadurai. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015. xii + 254 pp. ISBN 978-1-620-32746-3 (pb).

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In *Transformative Religious Experience: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion*, Joseph Iyadurai studies the conversion narratives of Indian Christians. The author positions the work as having two chief contributions. First, as the subtitle suggests, he argues that an approach which takes into account a convert's own perspective on the conversion experience has been lacking in the literature on Indian religions. To this end, he has carried out multiple interviews with converts to Christianity. Theoretically, for this aspect of the book, he draws somewhat on the work of William James. As a second contribution, Iyadurai constructs a scheme for understanding religious conversion that he terms the 'Step Model'.

Iyadurai structures the book primarily around categories developed out of his informants' reports. Each chapter is thus centred on a concept he relates to the conversion experience—such as 'Visions', 'Dreams', and 'Miracles'—and contains stories from his interviews exemplifying the role the titular concept played in the informants' journeys to becoming Christian. Each chapter is composed almost exclusively of excerpts of Iyadurai's interviews with informants, as well as narratives from these sources, which are quite lengthy at times. The last chapter is an exception to this structure and format, as it lays out Iyadurai's 'Step Model'. This model attempts to meld socio-psychological stages of conversion (on an x-axis) with the 'religious dimension', that is, the convert's stated experience of conversion (on a y-axis).

It is worthwhile to point out the amount of work Iyadurai has done in compiling and categorizing his interview materials. It should also be acknowledged that he is quite consistent in his phenomenological approach, even stating his own theological 'journey' and biases in the introduction (p. 5). In reciprocity, my own perspective and training is in Religious Studies rather than Theology. From that view, and considering the audience and readership

of this journal, there are some central criticisms of this work that should be offered. I hope they will be taken in the spirit of scholarly dialogue.

First, though it is perhaps part and parcel of the phenomenological method of 'bracketing' or *'epoché'*, the author's approach to his interviews lacks theoretical consideration. This is most evident in the construction of the categories which form the backbone of the book. It would have been helpful to the reader for concepts such as 'Visions' or 'Dreams' to be outlined and defined with far more precision. As they stand, such categories overlap to a great extent, rendering their usefulness unclear. Others (such as 'Mild Experiences') are subjective to such a degree that any manner of phenomena could potentially qualify. In fairness, Iyadurai positions the work as a phenomenological consideration of firsthand conversion accounts. Subjectivity in narrative and discussion is thus to be expected. However, for the work to be of broader use to other scholars, more theoretical sophistication and precision would have been helpful. Indeed, such a discussion is hinted at throughout the book as Iyadurai opens each chapter with a pair of seemingly 'dueling' quotes: one from a 'reductive' scholar (such as Freud) and another from a more phenomenologically-minded thinker (such as James). Frustratingly, the author does not integrate or interrogate the perspectives of these theorists into the body of any given chapter, leaving it up to the imagination of the reader as to why these quotes have been selected.

To this reviewer, the author's 'Step Model' stands as perhaps the most intriguing part of the work, although this too is not without issue. The prospect of better integrating social scientific approaches with firsthand accounts of conversion is appealing, but as with the conceptual layout of the rest of the book, the terminology used in the model is only weakly defined. For example, one stage given in the 'Step Model' is '*crunch*', which is defined as 'a difficult situation in one's life prior to conversion' (p. 240). As such, it is a rather expansive category into which many situations or occurrences could be placed. Another dynamic, termed '*the Spark*', is said to 'be a supernatural experience with sensory elements or a mild experience of a realization, a flash of spiritual insight, or an awareness of the divine presence' (p. 241). Similarly, it seems a vast number of phenomena are encapsulated by this definition, rendering it difficult to potentially apply to cases. On a separate point, the author describes this approach as 'interdisciplinary' (p. 5), yet, without adequate theory from the social sciences composing the x-axis of the model, this assertion is difficult to substantiate.

Still, the concept of the 'Step Model', and that final chapter in general, stand as the material scholars of a Religious Studies, historical-critical approach may find most interesting. Additionally, scholars broadly interested in how converts personally construct their conversions to Indian Christianity may find the material Iyadurai has compiled useful. Otherwise, the book seems chiefly aimed at a Theologically-oriented audience, particularly those given to constructing religious experience along the lines of William James.