

David Yamane: *Becoming Catholic: Finding Rome in the American Religious Landscape*

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In the US today about 10 % of all Catholics have converted to the faith as adults through a formation program known as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). David Yamane's fascinating new book investigates this process of phased entry into Roman Catholicism, and does so in a way that is grounded in impressive empirical evidence including survey, ethnographic, and interview data. As a case study of initiation at the individual and parish level, this book also makes an important conceptual contribution to the understanding of religion in US society in general.

The book begins by placing the RCIA in the context of an important feature of the American religious landscape, chiefly the increasing emphasis on religion as a chosen identity category. Yet, to echo Marx, Americans make religious choices but not entirely in circumstances of their own choosing. What is remarkable about US religious identity is just how much pre-existing family networks matter. But this is not the whole story. Drawing on the work of Christian Smith, Yamane argues that rational choice theories—influential in the subfield for the past three decades—offer only a partial explanation of religious decision-making and that people are also moral actors who seek to bring their behavior into line with certain moral and cultural frameworks.

The following chapters detail how the RCIA is contextualized in particular parish settings, the success of the ritual's incorporation, and the degree of change in individuals who participate in the RCIA.

One of the interesting features of the book's "bottom up" treatment of the RCIA is the way it skillfully weaves individual stories into the narrative, like that of Diane

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Gall whose early negative childhood memories did not prevent her identifying with the Mass as an adult and later entering the RCIA through involvement with her partner's family. While Yamane singles out Gall's religious life history as a representative example, he found that other individuals travel quite different pathways to becoming Catholic.

But this book goes beyond individual stories by examining the “top down” process of how different parishes—6 in all in the Midwestern Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana—variously implement the RCIA program and how this, in turn, shapes individual experiences. Yamane finds (with the assistance of two co-researchers, Sarah MacMillen and Kelly Culver) that parishes—the basic organizational unit of the church—are not all of a piece, but reflect important variation in interpretations of Catholicism and resource mobilization, thus confirming the plurality that characterizes the post-Vatican II church today. Here Yamane writes with the narrative skills of a literary scholar, incorporating rich descriptions of the on-the-ground contextual realities of parish life.

As well as examining the motivations leading people into the RCIA and their experiences, Yamane also asks whether the RCIA does what it says on the tin. In this regard, he finds that while individuals may formally become Catholics with the privileges and duties this entails, there is noteworthy variation in how devotees internalize the faith and become sacramental Catholics, varying between committed adherents who fully participate in the ritual life of the church to those who do not integrate into the church. In general, he shows that the added value of the RCIA is that it increases people's identification with the church's sacramental life and of its social teachings, but, surprisingly, appears to have less of a bearing on the latter.

Finally, the concluding chapter of the book pulls together the major findings and examines the RCIA as reflecting a series of five tensions or oppositions. As a creature of the reforms of Vatican II, the RCIA has increasingly become embedded—though not in a uniform way—in the US church. But its cross-national impact is uneven. In other national churches, such as in Ireland, the RCIA is much less significant as a component of local church practices. Future studies could incorporate a stronger comparative perspective in the study of this religious initiation ritual.

Yamane's book deserves a wide readership and will appeal not just to sociologists of religion but to all with an interest in the future of the Catholic faith in the US, clergy and laity alike.

Yet there are some noteworthy questions that this book about initiation in context leaves unanswered. To what extent is the description and analysis of the RCIA that Yamane provides generalizable to other parts of the Catholic world? How do different national episcopal conferences variously implement initiation in the church? How do top-level religious elites interpret and make sense of the RCIA as a process for socializing the laity into the faith? As sociologists seek greater understanding of how people deepen or change their religious identities and of how the church operates as an institution, this book serves as an important invitation to fill these gaps in our knowledge.