

# BOOK REVIEW: Darius Baronas, S.C. Rowell, The Conversion of Lithuania from Pagan Barbarians to Late Medieval Christians, Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, 2015, ISBN 978-609-425-152-8

Alexandru-Ionuț Drăgulin

Christianity is one of the most disputed and commented features of the European cultures, not only due to its separation between Orthodoxy and Catholicism in 1054, but also due to the relationships between political power and the religious power. As we know, in the medieval era it was not a separation between these authorities, so that the Christian leaders have used their influence to civilize other communities and impose their religion. But it was a similarity concerning the evolution of Christianity both in Eastern Europe and the Western – the campaigns to change people’s beliefs and deities were also powerful instruments of consolidation of the political power. Also it was a “competition” of the Catholics and Orthodox to gain more and more territories and believers. Lithuania is a little special case but it does not make an exception from this rule.

This book has 12 chapters in which we can discover the actors and the circumstances in the process of Lithuania’s conversion to Christianity. It was a long and sinuous objective and we can observe that politics and religion were equally involved. In its 612 pages including the bibliography, the book presents us the entire historical moment, including the initial setup of the Lithuanian people and its position in the European civilizational mosaic after the conversion to Christianity. The Lithuanians were considered an example of “delay” in their crossing to Catholicism by some historians, on the one hand, but others argue that the Vatican’s power and influence in Europe raised after this moment because Eastern Europe was traditionally a centre of the Orthodoxy.

As we can read in the short description before the table of contents, “medieval Lithuania was the late state in Europe to accept Christianity: officially, pagan Lithuanians converted to Roman Catholicism in

1387; the westernmost part of the country, known as Žemaitija (Samogitia), became 'Christian' only in 1417, when the diocese of Medininkai was established by the Commission of the Council of Constance and through the good offices of King Jogaila of Poland and Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania". The conversion to Christianity emerged simultaneously with the consolidation of the differences between nations on the European continent. Christianity divided Europe's peoples in two main spheres but also contributed to the creation of the national identities, and Lithuania is a case in this sense: "Once crossed, Lithuanians embraced essentially all paraphernalia of late-medieval Christian spirituality thus becoming a recognizably European nation". Generally, for most of the European nations the Christian religion is an element contributing to their national identity. The Catholic sphere has many examples before Lithuania: Hungary and Poland became regional powers after their conversion to this religion in Central Europe. The Baltic region were the last conquering of Christianity, in the late-medieval period. At that time, Eastern Europe including Russia and the Romanian territories were already Orthodox.

One of the main ideas in the book is that for Lithuanians, being "pagan barbarians" was not a status of pride at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In that historical context, the process of the Europe's conversion to Christianity was relatively at its apex and being a non-Christian was the equivalent of being a "pariah" or a retrograde civilization. The political leaders observed the relationship between their recognition within the European group of influential states and then proceeded to the conversion to Catholicism. The case of Lithuania shows that the contribution and influence of Poland as a Catholic state was decisive. As the authors of the book argue, the neighbourhood played an important role and contributed to the development of a homogenous Catholic territory that will have its own characteristics regarding the culture, politics and religion.

To put it in a nutshell, we consider it is a very well-documented work in this field of research and it has a lot of information. The historical perspective is completed by a cultural and religious analysis. Undoubtedly, the authors demonstrate us the importance of the cultural factor in the construction of a nation. Regardless of the historical point which is also very specific, the conversion of Lithuanians to Roman-Catholicism was, by extension, a step to the transformation of the entire Europe in a Christian civilization.