

Public confessions. The religious conversions that changed American politics. By Rebecca L. Davis. Pp. viii + 248 incl. 11 ills. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. \$30. 978 1 4696 6487 3
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This book examines the public religious conversions of American celebrities in the mid- to late twentieth century. These individuals include Whittaker Chambers, Clare Boothe Luce, Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Muhammad Ali, Eldridge Cleaver, Susan Atkins, Charles Colson and Sammy Davis, Jr. Their wide-ranging religious and cultural backgrounds are analysed within the context of the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement and the general backdrop of American democracy. Rebecca L. Davis notes that many of these conversions provoked controversy, if not outrage – as in the cases of Luce, Ali, Cleaver and Colson. She highlights the degree of authenticity, or lack therefore, of the converts, thereby examining ‘insinuations of inauthentic faith’ that framed views of the marriages of Monroe and Taylor during the 1950s. She also questions the sincerity of the uncustomary racial and social identities adopted by Ali and Davis in the 1960s, and of the faith choices of Colson and Cleaver during the 1970s and 1980s, and of the others. Related secular issues consequently dominate the discussion. The public conversion from Episcopalian to Quaker of the ex-Communist conservative writer Whittaker Chambers demonstrates his renewed patriotism and allegiance amid national turmoil, while the conversion to Catholicism of the Connecticut Congresswoman and magazine editor Clare Booth Luce blurred formerly rigid Christian denominational boundaries. Ali’s adoption of the Islamic faith, meanwhile, tied in with prevailing trends of African nationalism and the struggle against white supremacy and also challenged existing paradigms of loyalty during the Vietnam War era. The born-again Christianity of ‘Chuck’ Colson (President Richard Nixon’s ‘hatchet man’), as seen in his book, film, comic book and prison ministries, coincided with (and fed) the rise of the Evangelical ‘Religious Right’ movement of the 1970s and 1980s – as did the story of former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, whose shift to Evangelicalism (and later Mormonism) was accompanied by a pronounced political tilt to the right. While Davis finds the conversions of both men far too sudden to be authentic, their Evangelical supporters embraced them, supposedly as props to reclaim an outdated Protestant moral leadership that would ‘[render] obsolete the very movements for social transformation [threatening] white Christian men’s grip on cultural and political power’ (p. 147). Finally, the scope of inquiry broadens into public confessions found within the realm of the purely secular as seen in *The Oprah Winfrey Show* which, from 1986 to 2011, created a televised confessional arena for guests and cheering studio viewers alike, as well as for the multitudes watching at home. Davis’s synthesis highlights interesting aspects of popular culture and changing national democratic vistas but shies away from exploring and isolating the full religious identities of confessors. The limited scope of the framework downplays major components involved in embarking upon a change of faith, thereby leaving the authenticity of the public confessions untested and the author’s conclusions not readily supportable. The book is informative and original none the

less, even though it lacks persuasiveness in recounting and illuminating the many paths taken toward conversion.

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