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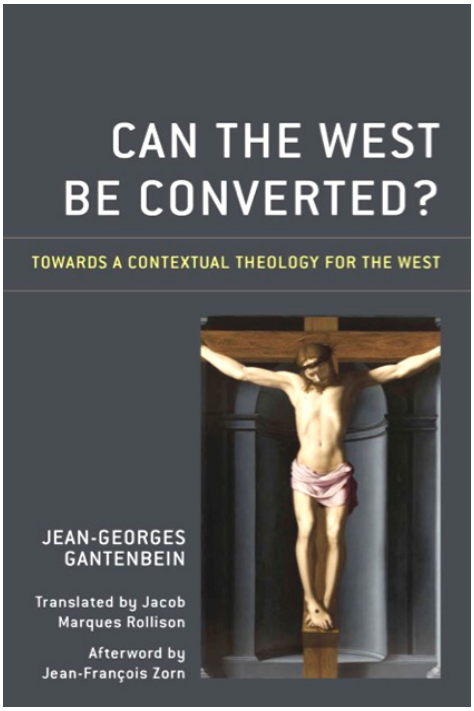
## Book Review:

# Jean-Georges Gantenbein, *Can the West Be Converted? Towards a Contextual Theology for the West* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 387 pp.

**Reviewed by Fr. Prof. Dr. Cristian SONEA***




Jean-Georges Gantenbein's *Can the West Be Converted?* is one of the most thoughtful contributions to Western missiology in recent years. In it, the author advocates for a contextualised missionary theology that responds to the challenges faced by post-Christian Europe. Combining rigorous sociological analysis, interdisciplinary methodological reflection, and a theologically grounded proposal centred on the Cross and eschatology, this book addresses the theological academy and ecclesial communities with urgency and clarity.

It opens with an epistemological introduction that explores the fragmentation of theological discourse in Western academia and the marginalisation of mission within theological curricula. Drawing on the insights of David Bosch and Lesslie Newbigin, Gantenbein argues

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that any renewal of Western missiology requires methodological revision and theological reorientation.

The core of the book presents a comparative analysis of four European contexts: France, the United Kingdom, Romania, and Eastern Germany. These case studies illustrate the various interconnected manifestations of religious decline and transformation. France is presented as an example of institutional secularism, characterised by the exclusion of religious expression from the public domain and the emergence of alternative spiritualities. The United Kingdom is presented as a pluralistic post-Protestant society where "believing without belonging" is the prevailing trend. Eastern Germany is presented as a post-atheist society that is still shaped by the legacy of enforced secularism under communism. Romania is presented as a more complex and ambivalent case, combining high levels of declared religiosity with emerging religious pluralism, an undefined public theology, and signs of increasing individualisation of faith.

This analysis provides a foundation for the book's central theological contribution: a proposal for a missionary theology that is rooted in the Cross and shaped by eschatological hope. Gantenbein proposes a series of theological criteria to guide Western missiology. These include the reaffirmation of theology's missionary character, the incorporation of lay voices in theological discourse, the existential reinterpretation of soteriology, and the transition from apologetic strategies to a witness grounded in humility, presence, and hospitality.

Perhaps the most compelling chapter is the one dedicated to the theology of the Cross as the foundation for a credible mission in contemporary Europe. Gantenbein proposes that, in a continent characterised by historical trauma—including nazism, communism, colonialism, and ecological crisis—the Church is no longer able to articulate a discourse of moral authority; rather, it is compelled to speak from a position of solidarity with human suffering. The mission of the Church, therefore, is not to restore Christendom, but to embody a cruciform, humble, and hopeful presence.

The book concludes without proposing simplistic solutions or prescriptive strategies. Instead, it calls for a *metanoia* of ecclesial identity and theological method. The invitation offered is not of an ideological nature, but rather eschatological in essence: to rediscover the Church not as a dominant cultural force, but as a sacrament of the Kingdom, attentive to the silence of God and the wounds of the world.

While the book addresses the Western context with depth and nuance, its approach could be enriched by a more detailed engagement with the Eastern European experience, particularly as these societies are now part of a shared European spiritual landscape. In the context of Romania, for instance, the subject is perceptively treated as complex and ambivalent. Gantenbein highlights Iuliana

Conovici's thesis on a paradoxical trajectory: following the fall of communism, the Orthodox Church reclaims public visibility and national symbolism, yet may also unwittingly advance secularisation by shifting its focus from transcendence to sociopolitical concerns. Conovici's argument, drawing on Olivier Clément, is that nationalism constitutes a form of secularisation in Orthodox countries. This is contrasted with Olivier Gillet's view that the Byzantine model of a harmonious relationship between Church and state can act as a safeguard against secularisation. (p. 79) In his conclusion, Gantenbein rightly acknowledges the ambivalence of Romania's "religious restoration," emphasising the tension between statistical religiosity and genuine belief, and recognising that the Church's public presence may either inhibit or accelerate secularisation.

This nuanced account is valuable and insightful. Nevertheless, the richness of the Romanian case — and, more broadly, the wider Eastern Christian experience — could have benefited from further development, particularly in dialogue with Orthodox theological and liturgical traditions. The spiritual resources of Eastern Christianity, which are rooted in communal memory, martyrial witness, and sacramental life, might offer important perspectives for a truly pan-European missiological vision.

*Can the West Be Converted?* succeeds in offering not merely a diagnosis of decline, but a framework for renewal. It is a courageous, theologically grounded, and pastorally sensitive book that will be of great value to theologians, missiologists, church leaders, and all those engaged in reflecting on the future of Christian witness in Europe.