Every so often it is helpful to step back from a familiar topic and take stock. In the social sciences, particularly in the burgeoning anthropology of Christianity, conversion to Christianity is one of those familiar topics. Richard Fox Young and Jonathan Seitz perform a major service by taking stock of this topic in Asia, assembling this impressive multi-disciplinary volume of scholarship in order to not only explore the concept and reality of conversation across South, East and Southeast Asia, but to interrogate understandings of conversion generally. This clarity of purpose means that, rather than being an assortment of essays taking up Christianity and conversion, the editors have managed the rare feat of a coherent edited volume with a real focus. “The prerequisite for admission to the project,” they note, “was an author’s willingness to address and assess one or another of the many models of understanding conversion now under debate in the academy” (p. 2). The result is a volume that serves to explore larger questions of conversion and religion through the in-depth and richly drawn historical or ethnographic studies each author brings to the work. From a well-written, and comprehensive, introduction through the thoughtful division of the essays, this book introduces the topic of conversion in such a way that someone newly coming to the discussion will find it an excellent place to begin, while those who have been thinking about these issues for decades will find helpful resources for further work.

In these sorts of projects, the introduction is vitally important for setting the tone of the volume and framing the chapters in the larger conversations. Co-authored by the editors, this introduction deftly handles the social scientific literature on conversion without getting bogged down. Contrasting the “intellectualist” approach of Robin Horton (1971) with the “group-dynamics theory” emphasised in the edited volume from anthropologist Robert Hefner (1993), the introduction sets up the three sections into which all the essays are organised. Part One, “Continuity in Change, Change in Continuity,” focuses on the ways people reorganise, imagine or “simplify” cosmologies as a result of encounters with an “exogenous” Christianity. Part Two brings the discussion to the ground more through explorations of religious experience and individuals in context engage in “systematic reorganisation of personal meanings” (p. 22). Invoking the contrast of the so-called Great Tradition and Little Tradition (but explicitly eschewing a hierarchy of these realms), these essays relate the intellectualist and group-reference models in distinct contexts. Finally, Part Three, “The Politics of Conversion and the Conversion of Politics” moves to familiar
territory for studies of conversion—colonialism and conflict—while holding to the particularities of case and time that ground these studies in the focal conversation.

The book will be of great interest in the anthropology of Christianity, where comparative projects, using the ethnographic and historical data of diverse expressions of Christianity, have become the norm. In some cases, a bit more of the comparative perspective could have helped to illuminate some of the data here. For example, a number of the essays, such as Erik de Maaker on Garo Christianity, or Jonathan Seitz’s work on Chinese conversion, make note of the transformation of various parts of the pre-Christian pantheon into “malevolent” entities (p. 159). Is this akin to the diabolisation famously discussed by Birgit Meyer (1999) in her study of missionisation and conversion among the Ewe of Ghana? Similarly, in the essays directly taking up conversion in the context of colonialism, as in the case for Mukherjee’s fascinating essay on conversion among Bengalis in the 19th Century, there is no lack of theoretical and historical rigour, but comparison to the widely-cited work of John and Jean Comaroff (1991) on the “colonialisation of consciousness” by the London Missionary Society in Southern Africa is not directly referenced. Even in Richard Fox Young’s engrossing chapter, “Loss and Gain in a Hindu-Christian Life,” which refers to “a colonisation of the mind” and the tension of “Reason and Revelation” (similar to the Comaroffs’ subtitle of “Of Revelation and Revolution”), we do not get explicit interaction with their influential (though often critiqued) notions of hegemony and modernism in missions and conversion (p. 233). This small gap may be a disciplinary difference of history and anthropology. Notably, anthropologist Edwin Zehner’s chapter on conversion among the “Thai and Sino-Thai of Modern Thailand” is replete with comparative examples from geographically and ethnographically diverse contexts.

That said, this disciplinary diversity is certainly one of the great strengths of the book. The presence of historians, anthropologists, religious studies scholars, gives distinct voices in the various approaches to conversion. Notably, the authors come from a range of institutional positions, including seminaries, churches and independent scholarship, in addition to secular and religious universities. This diversity prompts a range in the literature with which the essays interact. For example, the important work of Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh, too often overlooked in some studies of conversion, receive substantial interaction in a number of the essays. La Seng Dingrin, a self-described fifth-generation Kachin Christian from Upper Burma, profitably and creatively invokes the work of Donald McGavran (1970), an evangelical missiologist known for his theories of “church growth” published in the 1970s, in his analysis of conversion among