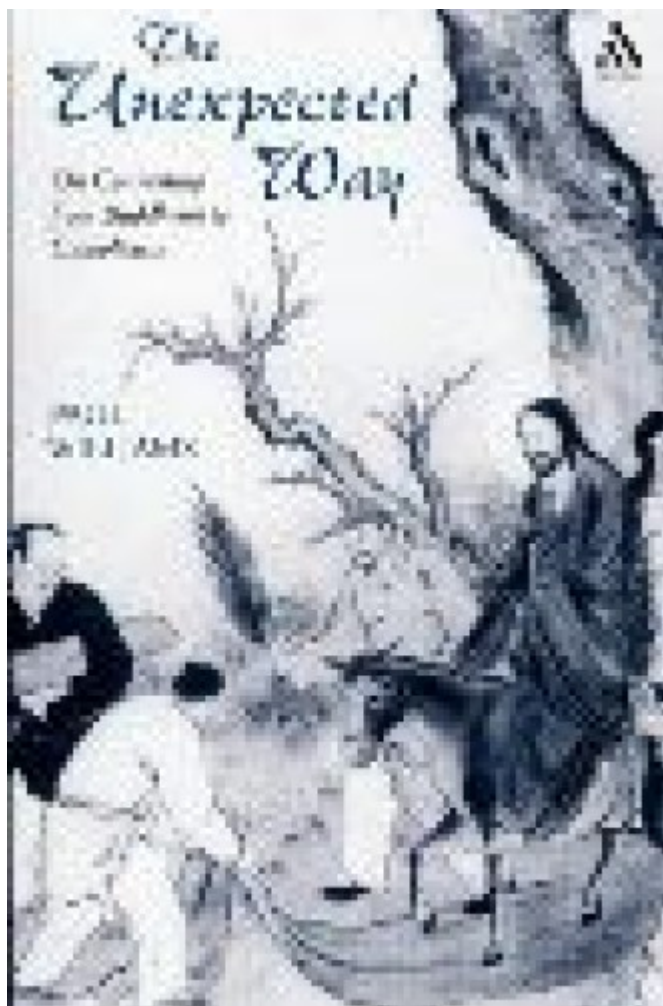


The Unexpected Way

reviewed by [Irving Hexham](#) in the [October 19, 2004](#) issue

In Review



The Unexpected Way: On Converting from Buddhism to Catholicism

Paul Williams
T & T Clark

Anyone who teaches at a secular university knows that today's students are far more likely to know the name of a Hindu god or to practice some form of Buddhist meditation than to recognize the name of the mother of Jesus or to pray in an explicitly Christian way. For decades, converting from nominal Christianity or plain Western secularism to Buddhism and other Eastern religions has been in, while talking about Christianity has decidedly been out. This is especially true in Europe where the influence of secularism is far stronger than it is in the Americas.

Therefore a book like *The Unexpected Way* comes as a complete surprise. Paul Williams is an internationally known and well-respected scholar of Buddhism who, before his conversion to Catholicism, had been a devout Buddhist for at least 30 years. A professor of religious studies at England's University of Bristol, Williams writes in a highly readable style. He crafts his arguments around three themes: issues related to the existence of God, morality and the nature of human community; the evidence for Christ's resurrection; and why he became a Roman Catholic rather than another type of Christian. Two appendices, one on rebirth and the other on how to become a Catholic, and an extended discussion of basic works on Buddhism, Christianity and related topics conclude the book.

My favorite chapter in this remarkably intelligent and well-informed work is "Can Wensleydale be saved?," in which Williams addresses his children's concerns about the eternal fate of a pet—an issue that children often raise but few adults take seriously. Williams's desire to deal with real issues—however trivial they may seem to some—with compassion, solid scholarship and carefully reasoned arguments is impressive. Protestants may wish he had written in a more ecumenical style, more like C. S. Lewis's and G. K. Chesterton's. Though his total commitment to Roman Catholicism will jar some readers, it challenges us all to think through the implications of our faith and to take differences within the Christian tradition seriously.

This book ought to be in every theological school library and on the reading list of all who are concerned with the fate of Christianity in an increasingly multicultural and multireligious society. Its apologetic rings true because it addresses questions about religion that trouble many. That it is also extremely entertaining makes it a rare treat.