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ARTICLE

Ecological Conversion in the College Classroom: Practical Theological Reflection as Transformative Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes an introductory theology course that appears to support ecological conversion. Ecological conversion is a term from Catholic Social Teaching popularized by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si';* it indicates a transformation that results in ecological spirituality. The author, a Protestant theology professor at a Catholic university, makes a brief case for ecological conversion in the university and offers three reasons for the course's impact: (1) a case study on consumerism, (2) a transformative pedagogy, and (3) cultivation of attentiveness to interconnections and personal involvement. The central theoretical claim is that Richard Osmer's practical theological reflection cycle, when operationalized in the classroom, functions as a transformative pedagogy in the tradition of Paulo Freire, which can itself be seen as pedagogy of conversion. The author shows how the course units track with a conversion sequence outlined by Lewis Rambo while calling for student agency and appropriation, thus supporting ecological conversion. The author details teaching practice and student engagement.

KEYWORDS

ecological conversion, pedagogy, Richard Osmer, integral ecology, transformation, Lewis Rambo

Ecological Conversion in the Classroom

Claire,[1] a reflective freshman, waited until the classroom emptied. She asked me, "I hope this isn't too personal, but what *does* Christmas look like at your house?" She explained, "I don't want to go home for the holidays and act like nothing has changed. Because for me, this hasn't just been a class. I feel like I'm a completely changed person, but people at home haven't been in this class. I'm not sure how to go home and explain why I'm not going to the mall."

1 Name changed; story used with permission.

I would argue that Claire has undergone conversion—specifically, ecological conversion. Ecological conversion is a term championed by Pope Francis in his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'* (Pope Francis 2015). Beginning in joyful celebration of the earth's beauty, Francis urges humanity to hear the cries of our "mother and sister," who suffers under our planet-killing way of death. He calls instead for worldwide "conversion" to "ecological spirituality." At stake in this call is life itself.

Drawing on work with my colleague Timothy Hanchin, I understand ecological conversion as a transformation of the self-in-relation in which we come to perceive the interconnectedness of all things, including environmental and social crises, take greater responsibility for the consequences of our own thoughts, emotions, actions, and ways of life, and seek the good of our common home. Ecological conversion is a transformative process more than a moment, with continual possibilities for development. Christian ecological spirituality is premised on the trinitarian life of God, as well as on the Incarnation of God in Christ (Edwards 2014). But ecological conversion is not limited to Christians. As Neil Ormerod and Cristina Vanin argue, the planetary crisis makes ecological conversion urgent for people of every faith and none (Ormerod and Vanin 2016, 336).

Ecological conversion is especially urgent for students in universities and colleges. As those who will practice leadership and governance in coming decades, they will play a pivotal role in worsening or addressing the ecological crisis. Yet despite the need for ecological conversion, few concrete proposals for teaching toward ecological conversion have emerged,[2] and almost none consider the university context.[3] What might appropriate pedagogies of ecological conversion look like, particularly in theology classrooms?[4]

As a practical theologian, I wish to answer this question by reflecting on teaching practice. This essay arose out of my experience of witnessing what appears to be many students' ecological conversion in an introductory theology class I teach (Lang Hearlson 2019). I have taught my version of Faith, Reason, and Culture in three semesters to five sections of about twenty-five students each, for a total of 123 students over two academic years. Claire was one of them. When I planned Faith, Reason, and Culture, I had no intention of instigating ecological conversion; rather, I wanted to teach students how to do practical theology—a learning goal that continues to be central. Yet ecological conversion appears to have happened. The question is, why, and what can other educators learn from this experience?

In the following, I first give a brief overview of course content and learning goals, as well as the teaching context. I then comment on the appropriateness of advocating "conversion" in a university context. Next, I offer evidence of ecological conversion in my class. In the central theoretical contribution of this essay, I propose that the course I teach scaffolds ecological conversion for three reasons:

1. The case study we use, consumerism, illuminates the need for integral ecology.
2. The curricular structure, drawn from Richard Osmer's practical theological reflection cycle, functions as a transformative pedagogy, which supports a common conversion sequence, as described by Lewis Rambo.
3. Osmer's practical theological reflection process fosters sustained attentiveness to interconnections, including the connection between personal habits and social issues, which is a mark of ecological spirituality.

All three reasons have explanatory power as well as implications for educators who wish to scaffold ecological conversion in an age of ecological crisis. In the practical contribution of the essay, I describe the curriculum, with attention to content and method, demonstrating how the course supports a process of ecological conversion.

2 For one modest proposal, see Ayers (2017).
3 For an exception, see Bannan-Watts (2009).
4 I thank my colleague Dr. Timothy Hanchin for conversations and reading recommendations on this topic.

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Brief Context and Course Overview

While I am a Protestant theologian, I teach at Villanova University, an Augustinian Catholic private liberal arts university whose student body is 75 percent white. Many students, though not all, come from wealthy backgrounds; the annual cost for an undergraduate is approaching $70,000. Students go on to leadership positions in business, medicine, law, and other sectors.

Every undergraduate takes Faith, Reason, and Culture, a foundational course in the department of Theology and Religious Studies that reflects the department's motto of "Faith Engaging Culture." Students normally take the course in their freshman year in a class size of twenty-five, and the sections I have taught have all been during the school year on a twice-per-week schedule, on campus, and in person.

As we prepare to teach Faith, Reason, and Culture, instructors have freedom of course design. The two requirements are that we draw on the Vatican II document Gaudium et spes and address three shared learning goals:

1. Articulate how theological concepts and religious practices and beliefs reciprocally interact with diverse cultural contexts, local and global;

2. Correlate theological/religious and cultural responses to existential life experiences such as friendship and loss, beauty and suffering, love and injustice; and

3. Evaluate the significance of Christian practices, beliefs, and traditions for personal, communal, societal, and global living.

   To these shared departmental goals I have added two more for my course:

4. Practice and become adept at a basic process of practical theological reflection of describing, interpreting, evaluating, and strategizing around particular issues or situations; and

5. Interpret and evaluate the semester's focal issue of consumerism and its relationship to Christian faith, as well as to your own way of living in the world.

These two goals reflect my training as a practical theologian, and they also set the course structure: over the term, we learn how to do practical theology together by describing, interpreting, evaluating, and strategizing around the case study of consumer culture while drawing on Christian resources and perspectives.

Conversion and College

Advocating "conversion" of any sort in an academic context is provocative. Conversion has, for good reasons, a host of negative connotations, conjuring painful stories of forced baptisms and psychological manipulation. Thankfully, substantive theological work on conversion has emerged in recent decades. Catholic theologians such as Mary Boys, Walter Conn, Robert Doran, Thomas Groome, and especially Bernard Lonergan, as well as Protestants James Loder and Katherine Turpin, have offered normative visions of conversion in which they argue for the centrality of critical thought and personal appropriation, and in which they posit aims of liberation, love, hope, and work for the common good (Boys 1982; Conn 2006; Doran 2006; Groome 1981; Loder 1989; Lonergan 1990; Turpin 2006).

In this vein, I understand conversion normatively and theologically as a process of holistic transformation toward greater awareness, authenticity, integration, and responsibility, wrought in the context of community by the Spirit who gives freedom. The aim of such transformation is close to Elena Mustakova-Possardt's elaboration of "critical consciousness." Expanding on Paulo Freire, she describes critical consciousness as a "whole-person phenomenon" (Mustakova-Possardt

2003, xvi) that "engages in an intuitive and progressively more conscious critical moral dialogue with the world, spurred by a quest for truth and justice," and moving "the individual into moral agency," culminating in "moral maturity and empowerment" (2003, 3).

As a process *of* freedom and responsibility toward greater freedom and responsibility, true conversion cannot be coerced. Still, as Groome, Boys, and Conn have all explored, teachers can play a key role in conversion, forming communities of learners, asking questions that prompt self-reflection, urging learners to take responsibility for their arguments, values, and actions, and modeling self-transcendence (Boys 1982; Groome 1981; Conn 2006, 179). As Groome notes, to play such a role fairly and faithfully requires teachers to reflect critically on their power and to submit to "ongoing conversion" themselves (1981).

The aim of transformation is common in religiously rooted institutions such as Villanova. For example, Villanova's learning goals include growth in moral integrity; intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth; and contribution to the common good.[5] Writing about the aim of transformation in Catholic higher education, Bernard Prusak justifies this "radical aspiration" on several grounds, noting (1) the holism of any learning process, which already assumes underlying virtues and values; (2) the fact that much education already aims at changing people's minds, which involves affect, and (3) the reality that professors often reach students' minds by way of their hearts (2018, 180–81). That is, educators are already engaged in formative and transformative work, and they may do it in better and worse ways.

Nor is the aim of transformation limited to Christian teachers; Mustakova-Possardt has argued from a Bahá'í perspective that nurturing holistic critical consciousness should be at the heart of education (2003, 167ff). Along with educators such as Groome and Turpin, she has explored educational and communal processes that support the development of expansive critical consciousness (Mustakova-Possardt 2003, 141ff). This essay seeks to contribute to that ongoing conversation; if a particular kind of transformation—ecological conversion—is urgently needed, what pedagogical processes support it?

Obviously, difficult questions of assessment emerge. How does one recognize and assess transformation? Should it play any role in the student's grade? Is ecological conversion a learning goal, a hoped-for side effect, an ideal, or something else? While a longer discussion is not within the scope of this essay, I submit that a teacher can facilitate moral and spiritual aspects of ecological conversion without requiring students to demonstrate ecological conversion in order to do well in a course. I indicate how I attempt to do that in the following discussion. I also believe it is possible to hold spiritual or moral ideals for the outcome of a course that surpass concrete learning goals, though it may entail them. Thus, as Prusak (2018) argues, teachers may hope for students' transformation while assessing student work according to academic standards that any student can achieve with effort.

"This Class Changed My Life": Evidence of Ecological Conversion

Conversion, as I have described it, becomes "ecological" as we begin to perceive the world as an interconnected ecology, and ourselves as part of it, and as our affections, commitments, and habits consider the flourishing of the planet, as well as other people. That is, ecological conversion affects both the content of our caring and the pattern of our thinking.

Of the 123 students I have taught in this course, only one has described himself as undergoing an "ecological conversion,"[6] but other evidence suggests a process of ecological conversion for the majority. For example, on the last day of class, as part of a class exercise, students write anonymous responses to open-ended questions, including, "How will your life be different after this class?" In response to that question, all twenty-two students in the most recent semester wrote a comment that reflected a deeper sense of their responsibility to other people or the planet, or that suggested a more critical assessment of normal habits of mindless consumption and disposal. Eleven out of twenty-two students described themselves as more "conscious" (used five times), "mindful" (four), "aware" (four), and "concerned" (two) in relation to

5 Villanova University website, https://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/provost/about/learninggoals.html, accessed June 7, 2019.
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sustainability or their impact on the world and other people. Fifteen out of twenty-two also commented on either increased commitment to environmental care or to others around the world, including "people in faraway places that I didn't know existed before this class," or to both planet and people. Such responses parallel responses in prior semesters.

Another form of evidence comes from the final brief assignment of the course, which offers students the option of writing a letter describing what they have learned, how they have grown, or how the course has impacted them. Of the sixteen students who chose this option in the most recent semester, thirteen stated that the course changed their life in significant ways, deeply impacted them, or dramatically changed their perspective. All sixteen wrote about an increased awareness of social or environmental problems, and half discussed new alertness to the impact of their actions. Six wrote about a desire to show greater love for the earth and for others, and twelve said they felt more hopeful or empowered. Five described the practical theological reflection cycle as essential, while two named specific moments of that cycle as influential.

Of special interest to educators who want to increase student interest in theology, eleven of the sixteen volunteered that they had been skeptical about taking a theology course but now understand the discipline as relevant and exciting (another sort of conversion!). One described it as the most important class he took that semester; another stated he believed it was the most important course he would take in college. It is possible they were writing to please me. But those who wrote about the course's impact insisted on their honesty on this point, sometimes repeating their statements for emphasis. Additionally, the mean score of the same semester's course, as rated anonymously by students for "overall value," was 4.8/5, well above the mean score for courses in my department and the larger college in which I teach.

This data does not, of course, reveal the durability of change. Having only taught the course for two years, I do not know about enduring impact. A long-term impact study would be useful. But from where I stand, students appear to be reporting experiences of ecological conversion. The question is, why, and how might educators interested in fostering ecological conversion learn from this experience?

How the Course Scaffolds Ecological Conversion

In the following section, which serves as an overview of the course structure, I suggest three reasons for the apparent impact of this course. First, the course takes consumerism as a case study. Second, it uses a practical theological reflection cycle that facilitates a common conversion sequence. Third, the same practical theological reflection cycle attends to interconnections between phenomena, also calling for self-implication.

The case study of consumerism. Since this course is meant to introduce students to using theology to engage culture, my original goal was to teach students a process of practical theological reflection. Such reflection requires an object of study. I chose consumerism because it is a cultural and economic phenomenon many theologians have addressed, and because it intersects with multiple social issues, connects with students' experience, and is so pervasive as to be invisible. I hoped that as students studied consumer culture, they would practice skills in theological reflection and become aware of the scope of theology.

Consumerism is more than an aspect of the current global capitalist system. Psychologically speaking, consumerism can be understood as "the particular relationship to consumption in which we seek to meet our emotional and social needs through shopping, and we define and demonstrate our self-worth through the Stuff we own" (Leonard 2010, 145). Consumerism can also be seen as a larger ideology, a faith system that forms desires and imaginations (Cavanaugh 2008; Clapp 1998a; Beaudoin 2003; Kavanaugh 2006; Turpin 2006; Mercer 2005; Smith 2009). Moreover, since rapid consumption requires displacement of older items, consumerism may also be thought of as "disposerism," with serious environmental impacts. Because of these features, studying consumerism offers ample opportunity for examining interactions of faith and culture.

I suggest that a critical study of consumerism scaffolds ecological conversion because such a study points to the need for integral ecology. As William Cavanaugh (2008) shows, consumer culture is marked by detachment. We are not attached

to our possessions, since we constantly seek to replace them with new things; we are disconnected from the people and processes involved in production; and in a throwaway culture, we ignore the destination of what we discard (Cavanaugh 2008). Integral ecology, by contrast, perceives that everything is connected, including us.

In the course I teach, we search for such connections by learning where our things come from (always somewhere, from someone), as well as where they end up (there is no "away"). I emphasize that asking questions of origin and destination is, in fact, the habit of Christian theology, which wonders where everything came from (see Genesis 1 and 2) and imagines where it will end up (see Revelation), as well as what it means to live responsibly and joyfully in between. When students recognize the damage done by an ideology of detachment and willful ignorance, they also see the logic and urgency of integral ecology.

In addition to elucidating the need for integral ecology, a critical study of consumerism also points to the need for some kind of personal change. In Freire's terms, a consumer culture of detachment means we are alienated from the world, an alienation that is symptomatic of our "estrangement from [our] own creative and responsible drive for self-transcendence" (Conn 2006, 154). The choice to reclaim that drive for self-transcendence is, according to Walter Conn, a sign of conversion. If we do not wish to remain detached, if we want to take responsibility, then we are already beginning a conversion process.

Practical theological reflection as transformative pedagogy. To take on our case study, I teach students a practical theological reflection cycle adapted from Richard Osmer's work. I build the course units around the four "tasks" Osmer names for practical theologians engaged in the work of leadership: the *descriptive* (what is happening?), the *interpretive* (why is it happening?), the *normative* (what ought to be happening?), and the *pragmatic* (what might we do?) (Osmer 2008).

Something important happens when we practice Osmer's cycle together, and here I offer the main theoretical contribution of this essay. When operationalized as a pedagogy, Osmer's cycle resembles the methods of problem-based, liberative (also called transformative) pedagogies in the tradition of Freire (1990) and bell hooks (1994). One such model is elucidated by David White (2005), who describes a process much like that of Osmer, though citing Freire as inspiration. White's process moves from *listening* to *understanding* to *remembering* and *dreaming* and on to *acting* (2005). Jennie Knight summarizes White's "transformative" approach:

1. Listen for a community's concerns around a generative theme,

2. Seek to understand and think critically,

3. Dream and reflect on the resources of their own tradition, whether cultural, faith, or ethical,

4. Act by planning and implementing a project. (Knight 2008)

As discussed above, the goal of this process is critical consciousness, what Freire called *conscientization*, which is "at once a way of thinking, acting, and feeling" (Goodwin 2018). Freire's work was grounded in liberation theology (Elias 1976; Ferry 1996; Goodwin 2018), and, as Conn has noted, *conscientization* is a kind of conversion (2006, 155), when conversion is understood as "liberation of critical creative intelligence" (324 n. 117). I submit that when Osmer's cycle is practiced with a community of learners, it becomes a transformative pedagogy. Because the liberation of critical consciousness is a conversion process, and because transformative pedagogies aim at such conversion, Osmer's cycle, when operationalized as a transformative pedagogy, scaffolds a conversion process.[7]

7 An instructive comparison appears with Thomas Groome's (1991) process of religious education, in which we (1) name and express present praxis; (2) reflect critically on present action; (3) make accessible Christian story and vision; (4) appropriate Christian story/vision to participants' stories and visions, and (5) decide/respond for lived Christian faith. Tellingly, Groome links his approach to conversion (1991). Osmer's work also resembles Bernard Lonergan's (1990) transcendental imperatives to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible. Lonergan understands the appropriation of these imperatives to involve conversion (1990).

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How do transformative pedagogies facilitate conversion?[8] In my view, transformative pedagogies are potentially powerful not only because they are participatory, formalized processes designed to reflect human problem-solving, but also because their sequence mirrors the pattern of religious conversion as it unfolds in "ordinary" life.[9] While religious studies scholars disagree about the specifics of the conversion pattern, Lewis Rambo observes a common sequence, drawing on studies in psychology, cultural anthropology, and missiology, as well as "numerous interviews with converts from a wide variety of backgrounds" (1993, xi). Rambo's sequence is: *context*, *crisis*, *quest*, *encounter*, *interaction*, *commitment*, and *consequences* (1993).

As there are similarities between Osmer's process and that of Freirean pedagogies, so striking parallels between Osmer's and Rambo's sequences also appear:

1. They both acknowledge a starting place in a larger context.

2. Rambo observes crisis that sets in motion a search, while Osmer advocates description that follows being brought up short.

3. Rambo observes a quest for understanding, while Osmer describes a multidisciplinary interpretive task.

4. Rambo observes an encounter with an Advocate of another way, as well as interaction with that Advocate, while Osmer describes a normative task where we listen to and critically evaluate wise guides.

5. Rambo observes commitment, and Osmer describes a pragmatic, strategic task where we plan and act.

6. Rambo observes consequences of conversion, and Osmer describes reentrance to the reflective cycle.

The point is that, as I built the course around Osmer's reflection cycle, seeking to teach students how to do practical theology, I inadvertently structured a process that supports (though surely does not "cause") conversion. When this cycle comes alive in a community, it is more than an objectified set of mental operations. It is, in my experience, a catalyst for transformation. Table 1 elucidates the relationship between Osmer's cycle, transformative pedagogies, and Rambo's conversion sequence.[10]

8 This is not to say that all transformative pedagogies result in intended outcomes.

9 This insight, that formal processes can reflect informal ones, with powerful effects, is the basis of much experiential education (Dewey 1938; Lave and Wenger 1991; Mezirow 1991). Whether transformative pedagogies reflect a particularly Christian history of conversion and transformation is an important question beyond the scope of this essay.

10 This is not to suggest that these processes are all identical. Osmer and Rambo are more individualistic; Osmer has in mind the work of well-educated congregational leaders and theologians, while Rambo describes individual conversion. Freire, by contrast, envisioned communities of oppressed workers and their teachers. Osmer and Freire propose normative structures, while Rambo, working as a scholar of religious phenomena, describes patterned phenomena.

Table 1: The Relationship between Osmer's cycle, Transformative Pedagogies, and Rambo's Conversion Sequence

Osmer's (2008) Practical Theological Reflection Cycle

Experience of being caught up short	**Descriptive Task** What is happening?	**Interpretive Task** Why is it happening?	**Normative Task** What ought to be happening?	**Pragmatic Task** What might we do?	**Action** Re-enter the cycle

White's (2005) Transformative (Freirean) Discernment Process

Experience of oppression	**Listen** Discover a community's concerns	**Understand** Think critically about themes and discover root causes	**Dream** Reflect on resources of faith tradition; discover a word of hope and guidance	**Act** Plan and implement an action project	**Reflect**

Rambo's (1993) Conversion Sequence

Emerging Crisis	Quest	Encounter, Interaction	Interaction, Commitment	Consequences

Rambo's "Context"

Despite the power of structures, conversion is not induced mechanistically by structures, nor do teachers "convert" their students. The growth that can happen within structures depends on the mysterious movement of the Spirit, as well as on the inner work and agency of the "convert" and the support of outside guides.

Training in attentiveness to interconnections.

The final reason that the course may scaffold ecological conversion is that Osmer's (2008) cycle trains us in attentiveness to interconnections. For Osmer, theological reflection is grounded in the call to attentiveness, which he regards as a spiritual and academic discipline (Smith 2009). Osmer's emphasis on attentiveness resonates with Laudato Si', which depicts the "path of transformation" as beginning in "attentiveness to the world around us" (Miller 2017, 12). Osmer's cycle begins where the path to ecological conversion starts: paying attention.

The goal of attentiveness, Osmer says, is wisdom that perceives the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate realities in the whole "web of life" (2008, 16). Such a commitment to the web of life aligns Osmer's view with the vision of integral ecology, which Vincent Miller defines as "an understanding that interconnection is the essence of reality, as a way of

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seeing that can perceive interconnections among humans and the rest of creation[,] and as a moral principle for acting in harmony with them" (2017, 11). Participating in Osmer's reflection cycle raises ecological awareness. This is a crucial point: regardless of the case study topic, using this cycle would help us perceive that all things are connected.[11]

The Course Curriculum: A Pedagogy of Ecological Conversion

The above discussion has theorized reasons for the course's impact, as testified to by students. In order to help educators picture the concrete practices involved in the course, as well as to support the theoretical claims, the remainder of the essay describes the curriculum. Throughout, I show how its structure, based on Osmer's (2008) cycle, aligns with White's (2005) Freire-inspired transformative pedagogy and tracks Rambo's (1993) conversion sequence. Each section offers a theoretical frame, a description of teaching practice, and an explanation of student work.

Setting the Stage: Doing Practical Theology Together

Conversion in context.

Every conversion occurs in a context. Rambo argues that context, "the total environment in which conversion transpires," affects the likelihood and shapes the distinctive unfolding of each conversion (1993, 20). Osmer (2008) likewise recognizes that every practical theological reflection process is sparked by a prior experience in a particular context. Transformative educators who wish to scaffold ecological conversion must attend to context.

Some context can be created: I actively cultivate a class ethos. I ask students to make name cards on bright cardstock, which we use all term. I claim the classroom as a "magic phone-free zone," and I ask students to put their phones away before entering, even if they are early, so that they can talk with one another. To enable such conversation, I play music as students enter class and post questions to discuss. I arrange tables in groups, with students facing each other. We begin with a ritual of silence, which ends with welcoming one another by name.

I also set a *moral and intellectual context*; in the first two class sessions, I describe practical theology as a way of doing theology that attends to lived realities and to God. Students name major problems facing humanity, and we list our options for response—denial, despair, frantic action, or sustained hope. I invite them to do the work of hope.

I must also acknowledge contextual givens and their influence on conversion, one of which is my own power as instructor—power to structure experience, give assignments, evaluate work, dampen or enliven motivation, and even create additional "oppression of learners" (Fenwick 2005). I must constantly interrogate my use of power, as well as submit to ongoing conversion myself, so that I do not fall prey to the temptation to turn students into versions of myself (Groome 1981, 485). When grading, for example, I offer clear rubrics and evaluate work on its demonstration of academic skills, including students' adequate interpretation of texts, support for their arguments, appropriate application of ideas, and quality of writing, not on whether they agree with me or with the authors we read. That is, a student can do well in the course even if she does not evince ecological conversion. On the other hand, I require students to take responsibility for their claims and value judgments, which, while an academic value, is also one element of conversion. In anonymous end-of-term surveys, students unanimously agree that I evaluate their work fairly. That said, one area of growth for me involves assigning more defenses of consumer culture, offering students resources for argument and multiple perspectives.

11 Since I began teaching this course, I have learned that two colleagues at other schools, Dr. Amanda Drury at Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana and Dr. Terri Elton at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota also analyze a semester-long topic using Osmer's cycle. They have used it to address the topics of poverty, mass incarceration, and specific ministry tasks and also report powerful effects.

Other contextual elements also matter. The religious context of a Catholic university, where half our student body identifies as Catholic, heightens students' "religious availability," as Rambo puts it, to ecological conversion, since their "religious beliefs, practices, and life-style are to some degree compatible with the new option" (1993, 62). I am myself an ordained Presbyterian minister seeking to show hospitality to students of all religions and none.

Age is another contextual factor. Young adulthood, where my students find themselves, is a time often marked by shifts in commitment, as well as a desire for transcendence, which Rambo argues can initiate conversion (1993, 50). I am in early middle age and early in my academic career.

Finally, economic and social class and race are important contextual features, as my students attend an expensive private university and are mostly, though not all, from upper-middle class backgrounds. The majority are white, though certainly not all. I am a white female professor. These features affect how we experience and respond to consumer culture.

The Descriptive Task

Crisis in the descriptive task.

Rambo (1993) notes that "some form of crisis usually precedes conversion." Such crises may include dramatic experiences such as mystical visions and near-death experiences, or simply a "vague and growing dissatisfaction with life as it is." Crises can also be "externally stimulated" (Rambo 1993, 48–55).

Our unit on the descriptive task often precipitates minor crises. In the descriptive task, we ask what is happening in the case of consumerism, engaging in what Osmer (2008) calls "priestly listening." Intercession, Osmer notes, begins with "entering into the situation of others through personal contact, listening, and empathetic imagination" (2008, 35). The descriptive task is not detached observation, but a deep dive into the world's realities.

This task aligns with the listening moment in transformative pedagogies, in which the community discerns its concerns. Yet as privileged consumers, my students' anxieties do not immediately overlap with the dire concerns of those whom consumer culture most negatively impacts. Most of my students have been shielded; the world's injustices have been hidden from them, its cries muffled. For this reason, even as I ask my students to describe their world, I must also show them the world as others see it, as well as help them discern their personal connection to the world's problems.[12] In my context, this is my primary work in the descriptive task: to lift the obscuring veil, to puncture the soundproof wall and let the cries in—or, in the case of students who have experienced the world's injustices, to honor the knowledge they bring.

Teaching practice in the descriptive task.

We begin with a simulation of a real-life summit that happened at our university. The summit brought together administrators, factory workers, Nike representatives, and the campus student group that protests sweatshops. It occurred after garment workers at the Hansae factory in Vietnam protested appalling working conditions—a factory where branded garments of our university are produced. In our simulation, each group must describe reality as they see it. The conditions of the factory make the injustice of the global economy clear from the beginning, but the summit format also clarifies the complexity of the issues, as we learn that apparent "bad guys" (such as subcontracted factory owners) are themselves caught in a larger system. Often, this activity alone sets some students searching for ethically-sourced clothes.

After studying basic definitions of consumerism and overconsumption, we face the effects of the hidden production and disposal processes on which consumer culture depends. Divided into three topics, our study reviews the effects of consumer-disposable culture on (1) ourselves, (2) on the environment, and (3) on people around the world.

12 For an extended treatment of the theme of transformative pedagogy with affluent young people, see Turpin (2006).

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Recognizing the positive dimensions of consumer culture, such as choice, innovation, and job creation, we also learn about its psychological and health impacts. Students resonate with the overwork and debt consumers experience, and they appear struck by studies that show that, after a certain level of prosperity, happiness does not track with greater wealth (Leonard 2010). They volunteer stories about the anxiety of trying to keep up appearances at an expensive university. They also make laughter-inducing "anti-commercials" for common consumer products like t-shirts, lipstick, and aluminum cans, drawing on information in Annie Leonard's work, *The Story of Stuff*, to reveal the human health impact of such items (2010).

To learn about environmental impacts of consumer-disposable culture, we watch a video about ocean plastic that ends up in seabirds (Leeson 2017), and students look around the room, registering how many of them have brought drinks in disposable plastic containers. We also learn about water shortages related to overconsumption of water in agriculture and manufacture. Everything is connected.

To study impacts on others around the world, we read about enslaved fishermen who catch fish for American pet food (Urbina 2015), and study a photojournalism essay about a Chinese toy factory (Jacobs 2017). We watch a video about the collapse of Rana Plaza, a garment factory in Bangladesh, in which 1,134 people died and over 2000 people were injured (Fitch and Ferdous 2014). Most powerfully, students watch *The True Cost*, a documentary that explores the interconnected injustices of the fast-fashion garment industry (Morgan 2015). Students begin to note that everything comes from somewhere, often from places we would rather not think about. In journals and class discussion, students have remarked that they finally understand that workers half a world away are real persons with recognizable desires. Everyone is connected.

In this unit, we become "painfully aware" (Christie 2017). One student wrote in a paper:

> I am in a pit of balls. I am desperately attempting to find my footing to propel myself above the balls and gain some air, but the ground is simply unreachable. I continue sinking deeper and deeper into the pit, as the balls consume my body, until I am entirely surrounded by them. There is nothing for me to do, except sit here and sink, further and further away from the top of the ball pit. . . . The problems surrounding mass consumerism seem suffocating, overwhelming, with no end in sight.[13]

As educator, I must not ignore crisis, especially if my course is provoking it. Sinking and suffocation can snuff out hope; anxiety and guilt can induce paralysis. Further, raising emotion without reflecting on that emotion would be an academic form of Finneyism.[14] So instead of putting our subject matter at arm's length, we probe our emotions as part of the situation. We stop and talk about how we feel about the stories we have encountered, naming our emotions and the thoughts that accompany them. We are a part of the situation, so we must also describe ourselves, discerning links between our emotional responses, thoughts, and lived choices. I also assure students that we won't wallow in sad stories forever.

Student work in the descriptive task. At the end of the descriptive unit, students write a brief essay. They choose between three options: to track their expenses for one week and note patterns in their spending, to trace the origin of one mass-produced item, or to track their consumption of one commodity for a week. They need not draw any conclusions at this point; they simply note patterns. They are often astonished at what they discover, and they appear eager to share their findings with one another. Many are struck by the difficulty of finding out where their stuff originates, while others say how surprised they are to see small things (whether purchases, paper napkins, or plastic utensils) add up quickly.

This seemingly non-theological exercise plays fosters the attentiveness Osmer (2008) urges of leaders, since students become aware of their own habits while learning from one another. They locate themselves within the larger system. One student shared that he threw away seventeen plastic water bottles per week. He calculated how many plastic water bottles Americans would throw away every year if everyone did as he did. He commented, "I used to see the problem as other people. Now I'm realizing I'm part of the problem."

13 Used with permission.
14 Charles Finney (1792-1875) was a famous Presbyterian preacher in the Second Great Awakening who founded a science of religious revival. He famously played on people's emotions and anxieties in order to persuade them to convert to Christian faith and invented the "anxious seat" or "anxious bench."

The Interpretive Task

Questing through the interpretive task.

Rambo (1993) describes conversion as a process that begins with a context and is sparked by a crisis, which is in turn followed by a *quest*. The "notion of quest," Rambo writes, "begins with the assumption that people seek to maximize meaning and purpose in life, to erase ignorance, and to resolve inconsistency" (1993, 56). After the plunge into the tragedy of the descriptive task, we enter the quest of the interpretive task, what Osmer (2008) describes as a period of sustained inquiry that listens to multiple disciplines and voices. In transformative pedagogy, this is the moment for "thinking critically about particular themes and discovering their root causes" (Knight 2008, 228).

Teaching practice in the interpretive task.

In this task, we seek to understand consumer culture better. For the sake of student agency, I introduce them to multiple interpretations of consumerism. I want students to learn the implications of our mental models and disciplinary perspectives, as well as to see that theology has become inherently interdisciplinary in the twenty-first century. We first interpret consumerism *historically* (Clapp 1998b), asking how it came about and what role religion played. We then encounter sources that interpret it as an *addiction* (Thompson 2012), as an *epidemic* (de Graaf, Wann, and Naylor 2014), and as the result of *evolutionary biology meeting modern technology* (Penn 2003). We compare and contrast these perspectives.

Moving onto the traditional ground of theology, we read interpretations that regard consumerism as a faith system (Turpin 2006), a spiritual training regime (Beaudoin 2003), and a form of systemic sin (*Laudato Si'*). We also discuss consumerism as a religion whose dominant mood is detachment (Cavanaugh 2008), and we construct a ritual calendar of consumerism, comparing it to the Christian calendar. The hope is that students will understand why consumerism is a relevant theological topic as they witness thinkers who bring theology to bear on the world.

Student work in the interpretive task.

At the end of the interpretive task, students write a second paper, drawing on two course sources to interpret their consuming habits or those of people around them. One student, for example, diagnosed himself as "addicted" to listening to music through his earbuds, cut off from everyone else, and he referenced Augustine's *incurvatus in se*.[15] Others have drawn on Tom Beaudoin's (2003) work to explain the preponderance of certain high-status brands among university undergraduates, while others have brought theological and evolutionary perspectives into conversation. As before, students share these papers with one another, and note how diverse disciplines help them understand the same phenomena differently. I have found that the interpretive quest changes how students think about theology. Over the course of teaching this class, I have several times heard students say something like, "I now see that theology isn't just about religion. It can pertain to almost anything you do."

The Normative Task

Encounter and interaction in the normative task.

Following the quest, Rambo describes an encounter with an "Advocate" of a new religious, spiritual, or moral option, noting, "encounter might be seen as the vortex of the dynamic force field in which conversion takes place" (1993, 87). Since humans struggle to imagine possibilities for different ways of life until we have witnessed something new, this encounter

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is crucial, offering what Turpin calls "alternative imaginations," which include "alternative stories, symbols, and practices to live by" (Turpin 2006, 64). This encounter is followed by a period of interaction. Rambo comments of this phase, "For people who continue with a new religious option after the initial encounter, their interaction with their adopted religious group intensifies." Potential converts are invited to "become more fully incorporated" into a new group (Rambo 1993, 102).

In my course, the normative task of practical theological reflection provides sustained encounter with multiple Advocates of alternative visions, as well as opportunities for critical interaction. According to Osmer, the question of the normative task is, "What ought to be happening?" In this task, we seek a guiding vision, looking to theological and ethical norms, as well as examples of good practice, and reflect critically on those norms (Osmer 2008, 132–33). In transformative pedagogy, this is the phase of "dreaming," or "reflecting on the resources of one's faith tradition and discovering a word of hope and guidance about how to address the theme from a faith perspective" (Knight 2008, 228).

Teaching practice in the normative task.

To begin the normative task, we discuss visions of the good life. We examine the normative visions embedded in advertisements, noting how these visions of the good tend to be narrow, aimed at personal happiness. We contrast the ads with the expansive visions of Chief Joseph, Alice Walker, Susan B. Anthony, and Jesus. We discuss the power of normative visions to shape our picture of a good life.

Throughout the unit, we evaluate sources of normative visions that might help us respond to consumerism. For example, we do a dramatic reading of the first Genesis creation story, noting its call for human "dominion." I explain the ambivalent history of dominion, and students articulate the liability and potential of this story for environmental responsibility. We also enact trinitarian *perichoresis*: three students stand at the front of the room throwing objects to one another, and then begin throwing them out to other students, who toss them back. This kinesthetic task illustrates that in a Christian view, divine life is interconnected and opens out to include human life in a world that bears the imprint of God. Everything is connected.

We also examine Jesus' teachings on money, elements of Catholic Social Teaching, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermon on the Good Samaritan (King 1962), the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Douglas Hicks' examination of justice (2010), and Laura Hartman's discussion of neighbor love (2011). Each of these "Advocates" offers "alternative visions." Students are by this time sensitized to the urgency of these visions; they understand what is at stake—their own well-being and the life of the planet—and they demonstrate moral and intellectual intensity in their journals and class discussions.

Student work in the normative task.

Rambo's (1993) "interaction" is most evident at the end of the normative task, when students write a third essay. Here I ask them to bring their own values, principles, or inherited stories into dialogue with one of the documents we have discussed. For example, students might describe a deeply-held value or tell a family story and then show how one of the thinkers we have encountered would expand the scope of its import. They may also disagree with their chosen thinker, as long as they explain their interlocutor's position clearly.

One Latina student began her paper by describing the practice of mutual blessing in her family. In a sign of love and respect, she greets her parents, saying, "*Ción*," (short for *benedición*, or "blessing,") and a kiss, and her parents reply, "*Dios te bendiga*," returning her kisses. She wrote how *Laudato si*' "emphasizes how these values [of love and respect] should be extended beyond our immediate worlds." She reflected, "When my family eats dinner, I thank my mother for preparing the meal that I am able to enjoy, but I don't say '*bendición*' for the immigrant farmers who work long hours under the sun to pick the vegetables in my food." She then considered how Francis' critique of anthropocentrism challenges her to speak *bendición* to non-human creatures. If her life is to express *bendición* to all, she wrote, it will happen in

both prayer and action, which includes "joining the fight against unethical consumerism, donating to charities that fight against sweatshops, no longer using things that have animal cruelty involved in [their] production, and not support[ing] companies that inadequately pay their workers."[16]

To be clear, these were her solutions. For a student who had never studied theology, this was an extraordinary work of practical theology, building on her own (nonconsumerist) cultural resources and on the wisdom of the church to respond to real-life suffering.

The Pragmatic Task

Encounter and commitment in the pragmatic task.

In Rambo's description of conversion, interaction culminates in commitment, what he calls "the fulcrum of the change process" (1993, 124). He notes that commitment may include "a specific turning point or decision," which is "often dramatized and commemorated—sealed with a public demonstration of the convert's choice" (124). Commitment is a possibility for students in the final unit of the course, when we do the pragmatic task of practical theological reflection. In Osmer's words, they are "forming and enacting strategies of action that influence events in ways that are desirable" (2008, 176). In transformative pedagogy, this is the moment for "planning and implementing an action project" (Knight 2008, 228).

Teaching practice in the pragmatic task.

Students often spontaneously cheer when we reach this unit; they are restless to act. Even as I give students space to "seal" any commitment publicly, I also want them to think critically and exercise freedom. Thus, as with the first three units, I invite students to study multiple possibilities, which in this case means encountering diverse models of response grounded in Christian history. (This is a reversal of many theology courses, which start with history as background. Here we retrieve history as a resource for strategic hope).

We start with the "ethical consumer" response, an approach with roots in religious campaigns. The core question here is, "Is there a more ethical, sustainable way to buy the things I want?" To answer this question, they work in groups, doing online research to complete "Ethical Consumer Challenges." Groups find an "ethical" woman's summer wardrobe; plan a sustainable birthday party; furnish an apartment with only secondhand goods found online nearby; find sustainable footwear for a man, and so on. This activity alerts students to the existence of companies who put sustainability at the core of their mission, as well as to sources of secondhand items. Remarkably, students have often told me in class that they previously believed there were no alternatives to buying new products made in sweatshops.[17] After they share their discoveries with classmates, I ask them to critique ethical consumerism. They identify problems with this approach's anthropology (we are still private consumers) and its neglect of the addictive quality of consumerism.

Noting such insufficiency, we move onto the next approach: asceticism. We meet the desert fathers and mothers, with their self-discipline and discernment. Instead of asking about better ways to buy, the ascetic asks, "Why do I want this in the first place? Am I capable of saying no to my fleeting desires?" We brainstorm contemporary ascetic possibilities, and I introduce them to ascetic movements such as Buy Nothing Day and minimalism. In response to asceticism, we consider aesthetic approaches—our third approach—that emphasize delight in the created world, savoring what we consume, and making rather than buying things. The core question here is not, "Can I say no to myself," but, "Can I love what I already have?" To invite critical thought around each of these approaches, I invite students to take up a position in the room that

16 Used with permission.

17 This project, I joke with students, hacks their lives, because henceforth, the algorithms that feed advertisements to their laptops and phones will reflect their expressed interest in ethical, sustainable products. It is, I admit, a manipulation of the sources of manipulation in their lives.

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indicates whether they think asceticism, marked by self-discipline and restraint, or aestheticism, marked by gratitude and savoring, is more important today in responding to the ecological crisis. The ensuing debate clarifies the potential and liabilities of each approach.

We go on to study a monastic-communitarian approach, asking how community can sustain us and hold us accountable, and a vocational/Sabbath approach, asking how work and rest together can provide meaning to life and respond to the world's crises. We end with a citizenship approach, learning the importance of seeing ourselves not only as consumers, but as active citizens who can join together to change the world. While each of these studies serves as another "encounter with an Advocate," we also stop to consider what effects commitment to each approach would have on our lives.

Student work in the pragmatic task.

Commitment becomes clearer as students take the lead in group presentations, in effect engaging in Rambo's (1993) "public demonstration" of whatever commitment they feel ready to make.[18] In these presentations, students describe one bounded issue related to consumerism and then use Osmer's (2008) practical theological reflection cycle to inspire responses. Topics of these presentations, which students generate themselves, have included dealing with the plastic water bottle crisis, breaking the fast-fashion habit, eating sustainably, celebrating an ethical Christmas, and holding more responsible summer barbeques. The groups offer possibilities for individual and collective action, after which the class enjoys a lively discussion, often with some controversy.

I grade each group according to a clear rubric, with the most important element being coherence; that is, their proposals for action must reflect their interpretation of the problem and their agreed-upon normative commitments. That is, they need to show that they can do practical theology. While many groups have cited scripture or Christian doctrines, others have drawn from human rights statements, while others have adapted Christian thinkers to articulate a secular normative vision.

In this way, we conclude Osmer's (2008) practical theological reflection cycle, having described and interpreted consumer culture from multiple perspectives, considered diverse theological and ethical viewpoints, and encountered multiple models of response. Throughout, I emphasize such multiplicity so that students do not perceive one single answer to the problems we face, but must instead recognize their viewpoints, articulate their deepest values and visions, and take ownership of their responses.

Learning to Care

In *The Moth Snowstorm*, Michael McCarthy observes that "most ordinary individuals do not care" about the ecological crisis "because people are quite naturally focused on their own concerns, which often seem harmless enough, and do not grasp that the essence of the trouble to come is their own individual choices, multiplied seven billion times" (2015, 19).[19] In my theology course, I have seen students start to care, even passionately, about other people and the planet, as they draw connections between their decisions and larger crises. I have seen students move beyond caring to hoping, as they imagine strategies of response.

I have theorized in this essay that such transformative change occurs for some students because the course (1) uses the case study of consumerism; (2) employs a transformative pedagogical approach that supports a conversion process; and (3) teaches attentiveness to interconnectedness. My hope is that other educators might adapt this approach to their own contexts as they teach the next generation of leaders to attend to their world, seek understanding, discern abiding values, and act for the common good.

18 Not wanting to make public commitment a requirement, I used to offer students a choice between a group presentation and a final long paper. After multiple students who chose the final paper said that they wished they had done the group presentation, I changed the requirement so that everyone participates in a presentation, still offering multiple ways for them to participate.
19 Again, I thank my colleague Tim Hanchin for recommending McCarthy's book.

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