

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic:	Reading Sacred Texts and Reading Ourselves: Narrative and Comparative Reading as Practices of Conversion
Convener:	Bryan T. Froehle, St. Thomas University
Moderator:	Brett Hoover, Loyola Marymount University
Presenters:	Karen Enriquez, Xavier University Nathaniel Samuel, Boston College
Respondent:	Thomas Groome, Boston College

Conversion is perhaps best understood as ongoing processes or sets of practices rather than as a blinding flash. The practical theological approach, grounded as it is in the rigorous, contextual study of lived faith, including the practice of ministry and broad explorations of praxis, offers important insights for the theological study of conversion. This session engaged a wide range of theological specialties in a practical theological framework to stimulate a broad conversation about conversion, particularly in light of methodological concerns related to the encounter of the other. The two selected papers offer an opportunity to dialogue from different vantage points, as well as to engage in-depth commentary from a major Catholic figure in practical theology.

The first paper explored the narrative shape of identity, proposing that conversion is a re-storying of life. Nathaniel Samuel cited the work of narrative psychologist Dan McAdams that describes the “life story” in terms of nuclear episodes, imagoes, an ideological setting and a generativity script, along with central themes of power and intimacy. Engaging contemporary challenges to faith the United States, particularly the question of otherness, Samuel engaged questions of pedagogical practice highlighting the methodological contribution of story and conceptualizing dynamics of conversion in psycho-narrative terms. The conversation then turned to themes of identity and narration in light of the practice of comparative reading. Karen Enriquez offered a paper suggesting that comparative theology is ultimately both a spiritual practice and means of further conversion. Such a practice allows the reader to enter the world of the other and thus be open to new insight as well as to enter more deeply into one’s own identity. Just as *lectio divina* moves from a close reading of the text to the transformation of the person by the text, comparative reading leads to a conversion of mind and heart, a “self-effacement before the text,” allowing the reader to be transformed and led into the world of the other. Such a practice reinforces both one’s identity and the understanding of the other, a critical kind of conversion in an increasingly plural, postsecular world.

After hearing each paper, those in the room, seated in a semicircle, reviewed silently what they had heard and then shared initial reactions and questions for about five minutes. Then, acting in his role as respondent, Thomas Groome followed with a series of prepared remarks based on the papers. He noted that his reading of the papers was informed by his approach to religious education, which is how he does practical theology. He noted a “uniting thread” in the papers: the question of the other, whether a religious other or a socio-cultural other, and what this means for conversion. He asked for more detail on how narrative hospitality may be offered to others, suggesting that encouraging people to refashion and reclaim their own

narratives could nonetheless lead more to a homogenized “sameness” than “otherness” simply through the encounter itself. Responding to Enriquez’s work on comparative theology, Groome argued that faith must not be content with understanding. Rather, he argued for a theological approach aiming toward sapiential wisdom. He suggested that the critical question for theology is ultimately not about understanding but rather about who we become in faith and how we do so. Citing Lonergan, he suggested that the dynamics of cognition should reach beyond understanding, passing on to judgment and decision, since this is how identity is formed and sustained. In other words, whatever the encounter with the other, ideally it should lead to an enriched identity in faith—not simply better understanding.

Groome concluded his remarks referring back to Samuel’s sense of conversion as “our storied yes to God’s self-gift” and observed that conversion is deeply intertwined with narrative, which joins faith and life. Citing Paulo Freire, Groome called for a constant critical consciousness about such stories, noting that one needs to have a healthy hermeneutic of suspicion for the distorted stories, the destructive stories, and the demeaning stories. Yet this is difficult, since questioning one’s stories calls into question one’s very identity. Such work requires a level of developmental maturity and should not be taken on lightly. Groome’s final point returned to the challenge of spatial hospitality initially suggested by Samuel and Enriquez. He emphasized the great importance of offering “safe space” where people can share their stories, question them, and re-story, something not frequently done in church life. He noted that twelve step recovery groups model a space when participants are empowered to tell their “real story”—and if they fail to do so are called to task. It is just this honest sharing and critiquing of stories that is salvific for both the storyteller and the community gathered.

The papers and respondent led to a lively engagement with those attending the session. After a pause for reflection, each person attending offered a question for the panelists. After all questions were heard and noted by the panelists, they responded to the audience and to each other. The conversation ended on a high note, as people observed that explorations such as these shed new light on practical theological methodology—and on its relationship to conversion, the theme of the conference.

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