

THEOLOGY

Intellectual Conversion as Liberation

Martin Madar, PhD

Mentor: Thomas E. Strunk, PhD (Classics)

Project Description

The Ignatian Mentoring Program provided me with an opportunity to approach my *Theological Foundations* course (TF) in a broader way than I had before. Guided by Tom Strunk, a colleague the Department of Classics and Modern Languages, I read widely from *A Jesuit Education Reader*.¹ From the readings and from my conversations with Tom I deepened my understanding of the principles of Ignatian pedagogy and found the inspiration for what I wanted to do for the program.

As a key building block of Xavier Core Curriculum, the goal of TF is to introduce students to theology as a mutually critical correlation of religious tradition and culture, and assist them in negotiating their world. During the Spring 2015 semester, I conducted my TF course with an enlarged perspective on one component of Ignatian pedagogy, namely, on reflection. Reflection is already a significant element of TF, since teaching students theological reflection is one goal of the course. I broadened the role of reflection in the course by focusing on learning as such, not only on learning theology. Concentrating on learning and its transformative function, and inspired by Pedro Arrupe, S.J. and Ken Bain, I introduced the students to and we explored the topic of “Intellectual Conversion as Liberation.”² I invited them to pursue intellectual conversion (IC) and to make a commitment to deep learning.

During the course of the semester, I designated five class meetings to specifically address the topic of IC. At the first meeting, I presented the concept to the students and invited them to reflect on it and apply it to their entire academic and non-academic life during the semester. For the subsequent meetings, I invited guest speakers who shared their stories about journeying with intellectual conversion and engaged the students in a conversation.³ For each of these class meetings the students read a chapter from *What*

¹ George W. Traub, ed., *A Jesuit Education Reader* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008).

² I am referring to Arrupe’s 1973 address “Men and Women for Others” given to the Tenth International Congress of Jesuit Alumni of Europe held in Valencia (Spain), in which he said that a call to conversion is the most specific mark in Christian education. See

<http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/men-for-others.html>

³ Dr. Thomas Strunk (Classics), Dr. Carol Winkelmann (English), Dr. Jamie Leslie (Nursing, College of Mount St. Joseph, Cincinnati), and Charlie Rosebrough (Xavier HAB student).

the Best College Students Do,⁴ and after class they reflected on their experiences with IC by submitting a short journal entry.

IC and genuine learning transform one's conception of reality, which may be experienced as liberation from what was in some way inadequate, naïve, or even false, to what is more real.

Intellectual Conversion: What Is It?

- IC is the effort to reach cognitive integrity in one's intellectual positions.⁵
- IC starts with a realization that we cannot run away from asking questions, because it is only by raising and answering questions that we arrive at truth.⁶
- IC transforms one's cognitional life so that questions regarding meaning and truth are pursued for their own sake, and not for utilitarian and narrowly pragmatic purposes.⁷
- Conversion entails a movement *from* something *to* something. IC effects a shift in the criterion of truth . . . *from* regarding knowledge along the analogy of taking a really good look at what is already out there now *to* regarding knowledge as a matter of raising and answering questions.⁸
- "IC involves taking responsibility for the truth or falsity of one's beliefs by examining and testing them in the light of perspectives and frames of reference differing from one's own. In so doing, a person opens to ongoing clarification, revision, and transformation."⁹
- An initial IC often simply involves the realization that other frames of reference exist, have validity, and make necessary claims on one's attention. Ongoing intellectual conversion delivers individuals into a world of genuine systematic inquiry.¹⁰
- "People who are actively engaged in an ongoing process of intellectual conversion exhibit a love of truth that transcends any particular belief they might hold. The love of truth inspires curiosity, nurtures intellectual flexibility, and

⁴ Ken Bain, *What the Best College Students Do* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁵ Robert Doran, "What does Bernard Lonergan Mean by 'Conversion,?'" in *Essays in Systematic Theology: An E-book*, no. 40, p. 5, accessed January 13, 2015, <http://www.lonerganresource.com/book.php?1>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 8

⁸ Ibid., 8, 19.

⁹ John J. Markey, *Moses in Pharaoh's House: A Liberation Spirituality for North America* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2014), 88.

¹⁰ Ibid.

encourages people to explore unfamiliar ideas or areas of knowledge outside their normal fields of expertise, opening them to unexpected surprises. In response, people become willing to change not only their thinking but also their actions. Truth itself becomes the ultimate goal.”¹¹

How Can IC Be Identified?

By asking questions like these:¹²

- Have I taken responsibility for my own rational judgments? Have I moved beyond conventional wisdom, or do I take most things for granted?
- Do I tend to or want to see things in “black and white”? How am I at dealing with the “gray”?
- Do I deal well with diversity of opinion, even when it is in an area of great concern for me?
- Do I consider other points of view before making a judgment? Do I generally know what the other points of view are? Do I want to know what they are?

Excerpts from Students’ Journal Entries

While watching the documentary *I Am* in class, I came across my own intellectual conversion, and I hope that it is more than just a phase. It certainly feels more than a phase, it feels like an *awakening* in my life, like someone stood in the path I was walking in, and pointed in another direction for me to follow. My entire life and goals for college were based on one priority, making money, and then secondarily I would pursue my hobbies and interests. While watching the documentary, I really began to think to myself if that is all worth it and really the right path for me, and I have come to the conclusion that it is not.

I am currently a business student, specifically finance and entrepreneurship. I chose these because, while in high school, I started my own business making websites and made a decent amount of money. Everyone around me thought that I was a prodigy, likely to be the next Bill Gates or Steve Jobs. I was praised by my family, girlfriend, friends, and school administrators. I won “Most Likely to be a Billionaire” and “Best Dressed” out of a class of 650 due to this simple thing. But I realized that it truly *wasn’t fulfilling* to me. Maybe I was good at it, but it seemed too simple to me, regardless of how much people paid me or told me I was a prodigy.

I fell in love with literature, it seems like it was a random day, but I just started to fall in love with literature. I read every book I could get my hands on (still do) and I wrote as often as I could. I studied movies and acquired a taste for intelligence and depth. I accepted that I was not

¹¹ Ibid., 89.

¹² Ibid.

as smart as people thought that I was, and I was not as smart as I would like to think that I am. I am just another human being trying to figure out the meaning to life. I was content with this.

This year, I have battled my parents and tried as hard as I can to convince them I want to be an English Professor, and nothing else. I want to be an author on the side, but that's in my free time. Professors make good money (which helps my parents' side a bit) and the job would be extremely fulfilling to me. They still want me to get a business degree, but I want to get my PhD in English, so I am looking to double major. I don't care how hard it's going to be to double major, I don't care if I have to take out loans for graduate school, because it all seems worth it to me. I don't care if people think I'm a "bum" or am making a wrong decision with getting an English degree, because it makes me happy. It makes me fulfilled. It makes me happier than any sum of money I could work behind a cubicle for. I find that this is the strongest intellectual conversation I have ever had, and most likely ever will. I feel as if I'm in *The Matrix* and just took the red pill.

I think the most memorable intellectual conversion I've had occurred in my English class. It wasn't a one-time conversion, though. It was a process that started at the beginning of the semester, and now, I've realized that I've changed a lot. I can sometimes be stubborn in my beliefs about certain things. In my English class, every student had to give a presentation on a controversial issue. The topic that intrigued me the most was that of women in the military. I had always thought that it was more of a man's position, but the presenter brought up points that I had never thought about that made me realize that the military does need women. It was a humbling experience to accept the fact that I had had a narrow view. I was more willing to accept what I had not acknowledged before. After that presentation, I was more open to hearing opinions contradictory to my own and seeing where I could grow intellectually and spiritually.

In recent weeks, I have decided that I wanted to grow in a particular area of my interest because of my commitment to truth. I am very interested in current events, and feel that global news is important because it affects everyone. Due to my busy schedule, I am unable to watch the news in the morning like I used to, and don't often have time to read newspapers. In recent weeks, I decided to make a more dedicated effort to allow time to educate myself on what is happening in my country and the world. I experienced intellectual conversion as liberation through this example by wanting to change how I spend my time. I have made a conscious decision to take part in intellectual conversion as liberation by addressing something I viewed as an issue, changing my behavior and the way in which I think, and allowing myself to be liberated by the new knowledge I am experiencing.

My experience with intellectual conversion has been quite significant this past month. Culminating in the class on truth during the discussion on truth, I came to the eye-opening conclusion of how choosing to go forward with my search for truth in life doesn't jive with others' ideas of what a truth search should be. I understand the conflict between acceptance and approval and truth. This past week I had my advising appointment in which I had to unofficially declare my minor. I chose biology, which I one of the hardest minors to pair with my Occupational Therapy major. My advisor, parents, and others in my major showed extreme

skepticism, when I revealed my choice. However, I chose my minor because I wanted to learn more about the human body and take more dissection classes because it really interests me. Gaining more knowledge on the subject opens my eyes to why humans do things certain ways and why life around us is the way it is. It is my search for understanding in life. Reflecting on this experience showed me that it is hard to go against the societal want to be accepted and approved of, but if you want truth badly enough you will try.

Through the speaker in class on March 23rd, I have found myself questioning and reflecting on the lifestyle of integrating two faiths. I had recently began reflecting on different religions during the chapter from *Faith, Religion, and Theology*, regarding how multiple different religions can exist as well as the conversation between Jesus and Buda. The two chapters sparked my curiosity but ultimately made different religions and cultures clear to me. Specifically, the concept stressing that dialogues between religions is key to understanding ones faith and truth. Affirming my thoughts and reigniting my curiosity, the professor during class chronologically went through her life and explained how she got to her position with her faith. Her life events were interesting but ultimately the union of Buddhism and Catholicism generated my interest.

The standpoint from the professor as well as the position the book *Faith, Religion, and Theology* hold brought a new topic to my religious life and has ultimately inspired me to seek other reference points. These reference points have opened my mind to uniting different religion practices. Because of these two perspectives, I want to know the standpoints of other people who have tried to accommodate different religion practices. So far, in my life, I have practiced simple mediation; however, not to the extent of Buddhism thus inspiring me to learn more about the religion.

My biggest intellectual conversion has occurred in my philosophy class in the last couple weeks, which would make sense because one of the points of studying philosophy is to get to the truth of matters pertaining to reality and existence. One of the core concepts we focus on is what justice is and what is the best way for one to live life. We started out in the course reading Plato's *Republic*. Even though I never thought about what I held to be "true justice," and though we didn't read the whole book, it was hard to argue with the points that Socrates made. I still don't know what justice is, and I don't know if anyone will ever know for sure, but when in conversation with others, Socrates refutes their definitions of justice making me see how little I know about justice and how much I actually want to know about what it is.

I just finished reading part of Hobbes' *Leviathan* in my philosophy class. I believe that in order to find what I think is the truth of justice, it is important to look at multiple philosophers' beliefs of justice and how they compare to each other and what I hold to be true. I want to grow in this area of defining justice because I want to know the truth. It is a liberating feeling knowing that I am reading books hundreds, and in Plato's case, thousands of years old in pursuit of that which those philosopher were also trying to find the truth.
