If You're Ready, I Am Ready (But the Wait Is Harming Us Both) Individual Risks in Institutional Conversions

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Published online: 13 July 2020

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Abstract

Rambo, Adele, and a religion professor walk into a coffee shop. What in the world do they have in common? This essay integrates Lewis Rambo's scholarship on conversion with pop singer Adele's popular song "Send My Love to Your Lover" to understand and redress inequity in individual risk within processes of institutional conversion. The author focuses on practices of inclusion in institutions of higher education using the specific example of theological schools with aspirational school mission statements that embrace equity and diversities. She argues that bringing Rambo and Adele into conversation with anecdotal and published research on institutional (in)justice illuminates four practices that institutions could adopt to better align practice with promise and thereby promote wellness for all who are impacted by institutional health.

Keywords Conversion · Institutional change · Lewis Rambo · Adele · Pastoral theology · Postcolonial practices

"Conversion is never a neutral act." (Rambo and Farhadian 2014, p. 2)

"The more one has to reject, the more drastic the new identity." (Rambo 1993, p. 117)

"Conversion leaves us devastated—and transformed." (Rambo 1993, p. 176)

"If you're ready, I am ready." (Adele 2016)

Prelude

"'If you're ready, I am ready' is your part; you sing it six times." These were the instructions given to me in the car by my then middle school-aged kids. My children had given me singer Adele's 25

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album for my birthday. We listened to it together in the car while driving to and from school and various activities and commitments. The song entitled “Send My Love to Your New Lover” quickly became a favorite in family car sing-alongs, especially its final overlapping chorus. The chorus has two different phrases sung in different melodies at the same time, and we loved each having a part in singing the harmonies. We talked about what the song could mean in contexts beyond a coupled love relationship but generally focused more on joining our voices with the powerful voice of Adele. My family is not alone in being drawn to the power of Adele’s voice and this song in particular. As of the drafting of this paper, the YouTube version of the music video for just this song registered over 650 million downloads. For a stretch of time when it was our family’s #1 car song, I found myself humming it between meetings, classes, reading, and writing. Not surprisingly, during this time Adele’s “Send My Love to Your New Lover” song would often be an earworm throughout my day.¹

One ordinary workday while waiting on a notoriously slow copy machine, I realized that “my” line “If you’re ready, I am ready” was playing in my head. I was struck by hearing the words as descriptive of what’s at stake in relationships where partners fail each other, where people get wounded, and where possibilities for transformation could lead to change in future relationships. I thought about this in the context of collective conversion in institutional life in theological education, what can go wrong, and which bodies get more or less wounded in the process. I was pondering the age-old theological and philosophical debate of the difference between *is* and *ought*. Why is what is happening so different from what ought to be happening? Why is there so often such a chasm between *is* and *ought*? What kinds of changes or conversions are needed to close the gap?

As a theological educator, I have been fascinated by the aspirational mission statements of seminaries and theological schools that stress prophetic witness, truth, and justice. Yet, my studies in postcolonialism have exposed histories of educational and religious institutions, methodologies, and curricula as deeply flawed, at times serving as instruments of discrimination and oppression (hooks 2010; Smith 2012). I wrestled with these thoughts in front of the copy machine while Adele’s chorus “If you’re ready, I am ready” played in my mind. What does “being ready” mean in the context of theological education? Ready for what? I heard Adele calling for readiness in her lyrics, including readiness to live into who we say we are in our educational mission statements. Adele sings of readiness to learn from relational failures and change one’s future practices for the better. What does it mean to do better and learn from relational failures on an institutional level? These kinds of questions became a secondary earworm influencing how I bear witness to, interpret, and participate in some of the more difficult aspects of institutional life. In this paper, I weave three unlikely conversation partners—Adele’s song “Send My Love to Your New Lover,” Lewis Rambo’s theory of conversion,² and a practical theological engagement with inclusive and equitable institutional practices. While they may seem unrelated, weaving Adele, Rambo, and institutional practices together yields insights into practices of institutional conversion that could address gaps between the inequities and injustices that exist and the aspirational educational missions that many schools claim.³

¹ An earworm is a musical tune that gets stuck in one’s head and replays in one’s mind involuntarily throughout the day (Williamson et al. 2012).

² Although other conversion scholars could also serve as fascinating conversation partners, in this paper, I highlight and honor the decades-long contributions of Lewis Rambo to the study of conversion.

³ This paper was drafted before the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic, but these questions of disparities and the need for addressing equity and justice with innovative institutional responses are only more pressing (Westfield 2020).

In order to redress ways in which institutions of education, including religious and theological education, are shaped by oppressive and exclusive histories and habits, institutions must embrace and expect change, what Rambo calls conversion. One sign of change would be robust diversities represented in curricula, faculties, administration, students, boards, and other stakeholding groups and aspects of teaching and learning. But, change is hard, and institutions, like individuals, can resist or be slow to embrace equity and inclusion in practice (Sharp 2019). At the copy machine, I thought of friends, once relieved at the promise of an academic job after years of unpaid doctoral studies, who were now leaving tenure-track faculty positions to start over at other schools or leaving the academy altogether. Nearly all who came to mind inhabited minoritized identities. The online publication *The Feminist Wire*'s scathing 26-article "Black Academic Women's Health Forum" had already been haunting me and helping me recognize institutional dynamics across higher education where friends were and were not struggling in academic vocations (Cox et al. 2012). The forum editors amplified one anonymous reader's comment on the forum:

With every piece I read, I felt like a layer of my skin was being pulled back, like more and more was finally revealed. I've spent so many years on the margins of this institution that I got used to making myself invisible, on purpose. I am seeing myself again. I will demand to be seen. Thank you. (Cox et al. 2012)

Most folks I knew and read about who were suffering serious health consequences related to institutional stress were underrepresented in various ways due to race, gender, sexuality, nationality, religious identity, and more, and had been hired with great joy by institutions who celebrated their initial inclusion. Yet, the relationship with their institutional contexts had not lived up to the promises of inclusive institutional practices. Stress was increasingly manifest in more minoritized bodies while other dominant-culture colleagues appeared to be just fine. For some community members, the way things had always been seemed to be working—or folks long ago had adapted to a normalized system and become more change averse. Other community members seemed to be holding on by a thread.

In my particular field of study, there was growing recognition among pastoral theologians of the spiritual and material costs of institutional demands in theological education—the "maceration" of faculty members—often if not always borne disproportionately (Miller-McLemore 2002). *The Feminist Wire* forum editors Aimee Meredith Cox, Aishah Shahidah Simmons, and Tamura A. Lomax summarized the strong resonance of readers with the online forum mentioned above with the declaration: "We exhaled into each 'peace' and they breathed back into us. We let the world know loud and clear: WE WANT TO BE WELL! WE WILL BE WELL!!" (Cox et al. 2012), echoing novelist and activist Toni Cade Bambara's haunting question in her novel *The Salt Eaters*: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?. .. Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well" (Bambara 1980/1992, p. 10). Just what does an institution of theological education that supports wellness equitably look like? And who decides? Colleagues who came to my mind in front of the copy machine had experienced much heartbreak and many conflicting narratives swirling in and beyond various communities, but this was not the last word. When the institution is slow to change, individuals can make declarations of collective wellness in public profession.

In interviews, Adele also declared wellness on her own terms, reporting that 25, her third album, was the making-up album after the heartbreak album 21 and her breakout record 19, each named for her age at the time of recording the album (Epworth and Adkins 2015; Adele

n.d.). The song “Send My Love to Your New Lover” is, like many Adele songs, set in a strong and confident voice, pointing to a coherent sense of self that is able to recover and reflect on relational dynamics gone wrong—or certainly hopes or pretends to do so while still carrying wounds of letting go of what once was. Adele’s song “Send My Love to Your New Lover” is described by the singer herself as communicating that she “can finally reach out a hand to my ex. let him know I’m over it” (Lamont 2015). While resolved, “Send My Love to Your New Lover” is not static but rather emotionally complex, evoking layers of movement (Bacle 2016). Truth-telling regarding both past heartbreak and future resolve, the lyrics charge a former lover to do better with their next relationship, to break a cycle of harm, to change. The song’s narrator describes the release that comes with letting go and freeing oneself from a toxic relationship that doesn’t support well-being.

I hear Adele’s lyrics not only in contexts of interpersonal relationships but also as descriptive of the general experience of individuals caught up in systems not structured to support their wellness who have to choose between either staying or protecting their well-being, especially when institutions fail to deliver on promises of change. Adele’s “Send My Love to Your New Lover” can be read as an anthem for unmasking individual risk in institutional conversion. The song’s lyrics can help clarify dynamics involved in institutional deep change. Moving from systemic harm toward institutional wellness is a kind of conversion process, leading me to interrogate Adele’s powerful sung call for change with scholarship on conversion. Lewis Rambo’s classic book-length treatment of conversion, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (1993), provides language for making sense of discernable aspects within the sometimes ambiguous and usually unending life-long process of conversion. Bringing Adele and Rambo together, I argue, offers particular insights for understanding and living in the midst of institutional change.

In the following sections, I will describe four elements of institutional conversion that flow from the conversation between Lewis Rambo’s decades of research on religious conversion and what I was hearing as a pointed call for change in Adele’s “Send My Love To Your New Lover.” I locate these insights in the realm of theological education, where I work, but imagine they could help illustrate similar dynamics in other areas of higher education and institutional life. Life is full of change and needs for change. The question is, do we want to marshal this change in the service of being well?

Thesis: Individual risk and institutional conversion

Theological education is in a precarious moment, wrestling with institutional, ecclesial, and cultural changes while being called to conversion to just, equitable, inclusive practices that honor and celebrate multiple diversities. In short, institutions of learning are presently in a decolonizing conversion process that is yet to be fully realized. Educational infrastructure built centuries ago to prepare young White men for mainline religious leadership in the United States and missionary service abroad now hosts an ecumenically and internationally diverse faculty, staff, and administration, as well as a diverse student body preparing to serve in a large variety of faith-based and other creative forms of leadership in a world increasingly recognized as globalized and interconnected. Tensions between tradition and innovation abound while corporate identity shapeshifts at the level of school, denomination, and beyond. Member schools of the Association of Theological Schools, whose mission statements often indicate aspirations of hospitality and inclusion, are being called to conversions through

transformations to inclusive, just, and prophetic policies and practices. There is not necessarily agreement on what this means, but it is increasingly clear that much is at stake. Practical theology and pastoral psychology are well positioned to help integrate theory and aspirational commitment with practice. Connecting popular religiosity with scholarly theology is at the heart of these disciplines that weave theory and practice, learning what works and doesn't work to support individual and collective well-being. Connecting Adele's "Send My Love to Your New Lover" and Rambo's study of conversion is illuminating.

Conversion scholar Rambo's theory of discernible elements within conversion processes can help assess where theological schools may be stuck or slowed in their decolonizing conversion process to more just and inclusive institutional practices. For the purposes of this paper, I use Marc Baer's definition of conversion as "an intensification of belief and practice of one's own religion... [W]here one did not give other than cursory thought or attention to the theology of one's faith or engage in keeping wholeheartedly to its requirements, one devotes one's mind and body fully to understanding and embracing the religion" (as quoted in Rambo and Farhadian 2014, p. 11). Using this overarching definition of conversion as "intensification," I consider Rambo's seven stages of conversion experiences in institutional settings, bearing in mind that "spiritual transformation affects work place culture" (Paloutzian 2014, p. 221; see also Sandage et al. 2012).

Within theological education at the institutional level, Rambo's first two stages of conversion, contemporary contexts and crises, are clearly present. His next three stages of conversion, what he names quest, encounter, and interaction, present sticking points in a decolonizing conversion to more just practice within theological education. Published reports from accrediting bodies, ethnographic studies, and theoretical engagements espouse wide agreement that present structures of theological education are not as just, inclusive, and equitable as they/we profess and aspire to be (Association of Theological Schools 2018; Muhs et al. 2012; Cox et al. 2012). Further, tenure and retention of diverse faculties hasn't changed much even while faculty hires have diversified (Association of Theological Schools 2018), it is clear that seminaries that want to practice more equity, inclusion, and diversity are not necessarily sustaining these aspirations over time at the level of faculty, whose responsibility includes embodying institutional mission through curricula. Like many stage theories, commitment and consequences, what Rambo names as the final two stages of conversion, come after addressing stuck places in earlier phases. A quick review of the mission statements of the seventeen institutions represented at the New Directions in Pastoral Theology meeting where I originally presented this paper suggest aspirational missions of transformative education; well beyond this sample, Association of Theological Schools member schools report "diversity" as one of the top six priorities for theological schools (Gin 2019, p. 3).⁴ What does it look like in practice to strategically prioritize diversities? What kinds of institutional change or conversion are required?

While reviewing Rambo's seven stages of conversion, it becomes clear that Adele's "Send My Love to Your New Lover" is one resource that can help put language to what is at stake in remaining stuck in the middle of a conversion process at an institutional level. Who bears more and who bears less individual risk of woundedness and wellness? To be sure, more minoritized scholars are often scapegoated along the way when theological schools that profess readiness

⁴ Research on theological school priorities show "diversity" as the sixth priority for "men," the fourth priority for "women," and the second priority for "racial/ethnic minorities," with "standards" as the first priority for all groups (Gin 2019, p. 3).

to inhabit more just practices that are hospitable to greater diversities find themselves/ourselves stuck or prematurely professing achievement regarding the fullness of conversion. In conversation with Rambo's work on conversion and with reference to three verses and the chorus of Adele's song as representing voices of more minoritized scholars, I identify four practices to confront frustrated change. Institutions who expand their welcome to include more previously underrepresented members—in an effort to become more just, diverse, equitable, and inclusive communities—can fall short of these goals and thereby cut the conversion process short by failing to sustain the hard work of deep change. Bringing Adele and Rambo into conversation, I distinguish four practices that could loosen institutional stuckness in order to motivate institutions who still want to keep moving through a decolonizing conversion process: (1) untangling initial inclusion from completed conversion, (2) truth-telling about desires not to convert, or resistances, (3) detangling toe-dipping from being in over our heads, and (4) (re)engaging a commissioning call and response in order to (re)commit to conversions in practice. Without engaging these practices in an institutional decolonizing conversion process, more minoritized community members are often left to shoulder a disproportionate measure of individual risk. Adele's song "Send My Love to Your New Lover" can serve as a fresh prophetic anthem for the limits and opportunities for theological schools engaged in a conversion process of transformations in just practice. A conversation between conversion scholar Rambo and music superstar Adele can lead to recommendations for strategic practices to inspire institutions and we who inhabit them to move more deeply into practicing the best of what is professed.

Lewis Rambo: What is conversion and why is it so difficult?

Rambo has been writing about conversion for decades. Across his abundant scholarship, conversion most simply means change and transformation. While conversion can and often does denote change from one religious tradition and set of practices to a different religious tradition or set of practices, conversion can also mean change and transformation within the same profession of faith. This latter aspect of conversion is my focus, "*intensification* [that] takes place within a tradition" and its "already available" practices (Rambo 1993, pp. 39, 172–173). Already complex as institutions, mission and identity statements of theological schools often have a prophetic character and calling, beckoning regular conversation and discernment at individual and institutional levels (Van Dyk 2002). How do schools that are committed to mission-driven theological education engage conversion from actual practice more deeply into aspirational mission?⁵ Such conversion involves interpersonal and intercultural interactions that unfold in both the foreground and background of lived human experiences. What exactly is institutional conversion? What does it involve? And, why is it so difficult?

Writing during a 1990s rise in religious practices alongside increasing recognition of pluralism, Rambo notes how institutional fraying co-exists with freedom to move across diverse religiosities (Rambo 1993, p. 1).⁶ With resonances with womanist and feminist calls for scholarly accountability also rising in the early 1990s (Russell and Clarkston 1996),

⁵ I am not explicitly focusing on Christian commitments in this paper as there is a quite a range of interreligious inclusion/exclusion across Christian schools that are members of the Association of Theological Schools. Hospitality in many forms, including interreligious and multiple religious belonging hospitality, is likely connected to conversions in just practice at the institutional level.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all references in this section refer to Rambo's 1993 book.

studying conversion involves reflexivity, professions of faith, and academic commitments (p. 5). By the 1990s, womanist and feminist theologians around the world were calling for conversion as an ongoing “seeing and acting in new ways in a fundamental process of transformation” (Oduyoye 1996, p. 57). By the 1990s in pastoral theology, scholars were also paying closer attention to systems, communities, and cultures, now identified as emerging communal-contextual and intercultural paradigms (Ramsay 2004). As a White woman who is partnered, a mother, a lay United Methodist, a U.S. citizen, and an employed academic pastoral theologian with international work experience and teaching and learning commitments across borders of identity and geography, my academic commitments are to pastoral theology’s intercultural paradigm, requiring ongoing assessment of practices at intersecting individual, communal, and global dimensions (Sharp 2019). This is the location from which I read Rambo’s work.

Using an interdisciplinary methodology, Rambo weaves academic discourses of psychology, anthropology, sociology, and religion with extensive interviews and ethnographic engagement around the world (1993, pp. xi–xii, 9). What is conversion? Conversion is many things. Rather than one hegemonic definition, Rambo delineates factors and energies, movements and moments involved in conversion as a process. Multidimensional, conversion involves empathy, personal experiences, human predicaments, careful observation within and across cultural contexts, and a deep desire for self- and communal understanding alongside conceptual explanation (pp. xiv, 18–19). Emotionally complex, conversion can elicit joy, astonishment, release, anguish, turmoil, despair, conflict, guilt, and more, often all at once (p. 9). Human yearnings, emotions, and moral commitments shape individual and collective discernment through what Rambo calls an emerald web of seven stages or periods of change (p. 17). In the following paragraphs, I will briefly summarize Rambo’s seven conversion stages—context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences—through the lens of the interplay between institutional conversion (intensification of already established religious commitment in practice) and embodied individual risks and vulnerabilities.

Context involves an internal and external “force field of people, events, experiences, and institutions [that] operate on conversion. .. the total environment in which conversion transpires” (pp. 20, 165–166). Complex and dynamic, context can dissuade and/or encourage conversion depending on how conversion may meet needs and yearnings within particular contexts (pp. 22, 23, 42). Context involves large multi-systemic forces and local daily life practices (p. 22). Context is a great resource for conversion, given that cultures are constantly in motion (p. 23) even while tradition and familiarity infuse common resistances to change. Rambo acknowledges that “most people say no to conversion” (p. 35). Contextual factors that make conversion difficult for groups of people include ways in which increasing religious choice is interpreted as a gift and/or threat of pluralism, as a gain and/or loss of identity, as fracturing and/or expanding capacities of persons and communities (pp. 28, 29, 31). What would it mean for institutions to enter a process of converting *to* pluralism, where religious mandates lead to practicing multiple diversities as a creative good (Bidwell 2018; Lartey 2013)? Further, when communal conversion does occur, however incrementally or slowly, how do groups of people reckon with ways that previous practices, even after being renounced and transformed, linger? Rambo reminds us that “even symbols. .. directly and explicitly rejected can remain a powerful part of [the] psyche” (p. 25). Conversion prompts many such conflicts and crises of faith within contexts.

Crisis, explains Rambo, forces “individuals and groups to confront their limitations and can stimulate a quest to resolve conflict, fill a void, adjust to new circumstances, or find avenues of

transformation” (p. 166). He notes that it can be hard to tell whether crisis precedes and leads to conversion or follows a glimpse of a different way of life than one is accustomed to practicing—or perhaps both (p. 44). Crisis is co-extant with new possibilities (p. 44) as “all conversions implicitly require a leaving-behind or a reinterpretation of some past way of life and set of beliefs” (p. 53).

Quest awakens the resourceful human yearning to make meaning and find life purpose (pp. 56, 167). Conversion can be very difficult because it involves grief, loss, sadness, severed relationships, altered rituals, disconnections, dislocations, and more (pp. 53–54, 90). “The past,” Rambo reminds us, “is powerful because that is the world in which we dwelt for years, and it lives on in our minds and hearts. There is no easy escape from the past, no easy transition to the future” (p. 54). No wonder conversion also includes a quest for meaning, a yearning to be persuaded that new possibilities will also bring release of tension and increase of joy. Motivated by a variety of complex and interacting factors, potential converts turn to communities of support for affirmation of new possibilities that are at once attractive and repulsive (p. 63). When it comes to institutional conversions, how long can groups reside in this threshold between recognition of loss and promise of release, and at what cost? Can tensions be held collectively rather than foisted on a few?

Encounter involves negotiations between advocates of transformative conversion and would-be converts who often co-reside in shared and/or overlapping contexts. In encounters, advocates for change meet advocates for remaining (p. 75). Within encounters, significant wisdom resides with “marginal persons [who] are often the earliest converts to a new movement” that promises to support more justice, meaningfulness, emotional gratification, practical wisdom, leadership, and power (pp. 80–81). Indigenous people, notes Rambo, often inhabit models of movement and are culturally pliable as a consequence of both internal commitment and outside force (p. 93). Within encounters, consulting others only goes so far as each person in such interpersonal dramas must find what is at stake for themselves “to enter personally into this new story, to own it” (p. 83). Encounters raise issues of trust, diverse affirmations of human dignity, and mutual curiosity, especially in complex institutions where forces of tradition meet forces of innovation.

Interactions that support conversion processes are mutually educational and therefore particularly important for schools. Following encounter, deeper interaction foregrounds learning and hospitality. “Potential converts,” writes Rambo, “learn more about the teachings, life-style, and expectations of the group, and are provided with opportunities, both formal and informal, to become more fully incorporated into it” (p. 102). Rambo points to multiple relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles evident in interactions. Because conversions are both deconstructive and constructive (p. 117–118), folks can struggle to speak and represent what is going on in the middle of change and transformation.

Struggle itself is a persistent theme of conversion and, like many conversion elements, can be cast positively and/or negatively, including struggle between self-awareness and self-deception. For example, while I have been shaped by reading literature by Black women academics such as Bambara mentioned above—learning what I’ve never been required to learn about my need to convert from complicities in oppression—as a White woman, I must both read and learn, never stopping at just reading and quoting. “Most white academics,” writes antiracist scholar Audrey Thompson, “do not read widely across races and, even if we do, we tend to use the writings of scholars of color to bolster rather than to interrogate our work” (2003, p. 13). Beyond mere encounter, conversion interactions challenge and/or affirm role expectations and role enactments (p. 121). Interactions go deeper.

Rambo powerfully reminds us that “people who convert and remain the same are not really on a spiritual path of transformation” (p. 163). Rather, conversion is deep change. Highlighting this theme, womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas calls institutions to convert in terms of who counts as a full person and to radically expand the notice of place (2015; see Sharp 2019 where I engage Dr. Brown Douglas’ profound work more deeply). A willingness not only to learn but indeed to be transformed by a learning process is required. Rambo puts it this way: “the relationship [that supports conversion] is based on one person knowing more and being willing to share it with an interested person who is seeking assistance, who is willing to play the role of novice” (p. 122). Persons who know more about what needs to be learned do not always have access to teaching roles denoted as more informed. Conversion interactions birth new relational networks, new rituals, new ways of speaking and listening, and new roles (p. 123). “Conversion of hearts is not enough,” declares ethicist M.T. Davila, commending the kind of learning interaction that will support lasting change. She specifies:

conversion of hearts for effective social and structural transformation requires listening to the people and the movements that most clearly call out the forms that structural sin take in today’s world. Convicted hearts receive extensive training in direct social action and advocacy, and they also engage in ongoing education about the ways the sin of racism continues to dominate many of our political and economic structures today (Davila 2019).

To underscore this point, other scholars had also correlated conversion and role change at the time of Rambo’s 1993 text. Also in 1993, ethicist Emilie Townes published *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, an edited volume that included 14 womanist theologians (Townes 1993). Across the chapters, contributors noted ways in which institutions as currently structured perpetuate structural evil and therefore must be engaged with bold resistance and suspicious ambivalence if and when theological schools and faith-driven institutions seek to be more inclusive. Roles in institutions don’t shift easily, but they must, argued novelist activist Toni Cade Bambara nearly 50 years ago. Why? Because we are “abusing each other, aborting each other’s nature—in the teeth of experiences both personal and historical that should alert us to the horror of a situation in which we profess to be about liberation but behave in a constricting manner” (Bambara 1970, p. 103). She called for conversion from sinful Western models that have distorted roles and are in need of transformation and recovery, “irresistible revolution” not outright rejection (Bambara 1970, pp. 103, 108; Bambara 1981/2015, p. xxxi). Conversion interactions negotiate, ritualize, speak about, and embody truth-telling and power. What kind of commitment can support such mutual investment, and how do we know that learning creates lasting change?

Commitment “is the fulcrum of the change process” (Rambo 1993, p. 124). Expressed in vows, contracts, covenants, and mission statements, commitment involves both word and deed. Practicing commitments, argues Rambo, involves decision-making, ritual promises, surrender, testimony, and moral wrestling with motivation (p. 124). Rambo’s training in psychology and religion is helpful as he aptly describes the deep soul wrestling involved in each of these elements of practicing commitments (p. 125). Decision-making involves reflection on one’s own life experiences, listening to and believing the life experiences of other people—both stranger and trusted friend—confronting desires and fears, and negotiating between questions of meaning and practical problem-solving (pp. 126–127). These practices need ongoing mutual accountability and support because individuals resist change while institutions can fall prey to substituting talk of change for transformed practice (p. 129). Power and control flow through

resistances and accountabilities, with promise and threat continually at play (pp. 131–134). Public profession and communal assessment support a commitment to conversion.

Often absent from revised mission statements and vows, commitment involves articulating what will be released to make room for changed ways of being. Rambo writes that such “surrender requires [a] person to confront directly what [they] will be giving up for the benefits of the new option. This process is never easy. . . anguish is keenly felt” (p. 134). While it can take a “leap of faith” to believe, surrender “is the very point at which energy becomes available for a new life” (p. 135). On an institutional level, backlash or what Sara Ahmed (2017) calls brick walls appear just when lasting change seems most promising. Why is institutional change so difficult? Rambo writes,

[O]n a more profound level, surrender . . . continues over a lifetime. It is an inner resolve to shift loyalties, and the process is never complete. Old urges return, sometimes with greater power than before. Few people experience surrender as a final achievement, without reservations or backsliding. Surrender is a process in which the person disconnects [themselves] from old ways and patterns and gradually is able to consolidate the new life into a firmer, growing commitment (1993, p. 136).

Space for and ritualization of public testimony remain important beyond any initial commitment or aspirational change. Testimony “becomes more than a story of individual change; it also reflects the ongoing process of institutional change” (p. 138). In the commitment stage, testimony is a cooperative truth-telling process about how conversion manifests not only the desire to change but also the intention to live into lasting consequences.

Consequences, according to Rambo, are the practiced effects of transformation and change, the living out of conversion experiences over time since “more profound changes may come in the months, and even years, after the initial conversion has taken place” (p. 146). For lives shaped by institutions, multiple conversions and multiple consequences unfold simultaneously. Rambo suggests practices of accountability around a simple question: what is “the quality of life produced by these institutions” (p. 147)? One assessment tool used by several institutions is the Crossroads anti-racist spectrum for institutions invested in multicultural affirming practices, a whole stage theory within the consequences stage. Crossroads’ development of practice moves from more exclusive to more inclusive practices described as exclusive → “club” → compliant⁷ → affirming → transforming → fully inclusive anti-racist organization in a transformed society (Crossroads n.d.). Rather than assess total conversion (not that that is likely or advisable), Rambo suggests using developmental moments as “lens[es] through which to observe conversion [where] one can make evaluations as to whether the convert has progressed, regressed, or remained the same developmentally as a result of conversion” (p. 157). Again, his advice to prioritize voices of more institutionally minoritized peoples in all stages of conversion is also relevant here. Institutions should find ways to assess quality of work life. Where do folks experience deeper relationships, relief from guilt/sin, celebration of communal belonging, better understandings of what is going on, authentic participation in a “profound revolution,” and increased courage, security, and peace (pp. 160–162, 170)? Deep and radical transformations take a long time and require multiple

⁷ Of note, Rambo also uses and critiques the category of a compliant institution: “There are, of course, situations in which there is change that is clearly more compliance with situational variables. In these cases, there is no inner or sincere change, but only an impetus toward self-protection or even direct exploitation or expediency” (1993, p. 163).

conversions; therefore, partnerships of accountability, regular opportunities for public witness and testimony, and periodic assessments of the quality of life together are warranted.

Rambo's seven interconnected stages slow down discrete moments in a long process of change, thereby showing why conversion can be so very difficult, even undesirable. These stages help organize change among diverse groups of folks and institutions that resist change. The transformative change of conversion, writes Rambo, "is precarious; it must be defended, nurtured, supported, affirmed [by and in] community" (p. 170). Institutions both support and dissuade conversions with processes, policies, and practices that "support systems and suppression, access and repression, encouragement and discouragement" (p. 173). Yes, conversion is possible and happens all the time "in all directions" (Rambo and Farhadian 2014, p. 1). And yes, conversion is challenging in the best of circumstances, requiring an ongoing investment in struggle for a purpose. Rambo both presents an in-depth study of conversion and invites conversation partners and new resources to contribute to the meaning of conversion and the phenomenon of change. This is similar to what I am doing in this article by highlighting a perhaps unlikely conversation partner, the pop singer Adele. While Rambo supports understanding conversion as a long-term process filled with as many if not more difficulties and reservations as possibilities and transformations, I have found the lyrics of Adele's "Send My Love to Your New Lover" help put language to what is at stake for theological institutions invested in long processes of conversion, especially institutions who need to slow down and assess where they are in change processes and who is more and who is less impacted in daily life struggles for transformation.

Adele: An anthem for what's at stake while waiting

Conversion scholars are still calling for expanding conversion studies to account for global forces, to include religious diversities, and to traverse geographies (Rambo and Farhadian 2014, pp. 11–12). Theological schools are also trying to be more diverse and inclusive. Schools should be able to support mutual learning processes of conversion, yet Rambo shows just how much folks in conversion processes often drag their feet in changing bits of tradition, from a meeting time to a convocation program, not to mention practicing radical transformation. Turning to the arts may help loosen our collective imaginations in what is at stake given that conversion is such a long and winding process, as Rambo helps us understand. Rambo invites such studies that highlight that "the importance of culture in shaping persons, communities, and religions must be given more weight in conversion studies" (Rambo and Farhadian 2014, p. 15).

Conversion scholar Diane Apostolos underscores that "as human beings we come to know through our natural and primary aesthetic sensibilities—sight, sound, movement—through icon, image, and illustration, through myth and story, through dance and ritual" (Apostolos 2014, p. 327). Further, she argues that "art impinges upon, narrates, and supports conversion" (Apostolos 2014, p. 331). Regarding the transformative power of art, Rambo notes that "the greatest testimony to the power of a work of art is its ability to elicit sustained reflection and engagement on many levels. ... [and] engage us intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually" (Rambo 2010, p. 51). As I described in the prelude, it struck me one day in front of a notoriously finicky copy machine that the lyrics to Adele's song "Send My Love to Your New Lover" may have such transformative potential.

Singing since age seven, Adele Laurie Blue Adkins grew up humbly in Tottenham, London, in a "very big family of a lot of women who did everything on their own"

(Robinson 2016). She transformed from a beloved local hipster singer to an international superstar known for stunningly made-up eyes and an even bolder voice, having already received some of the music industry's highest accolades by age 20. Before long, “[h]er music was the most-requested [*sic*] in karaoke bars, the most played at funerals, ‘the best for nervous flyers,’ ‘the most popular to fall asleep to’” (Lamont 2015). After her emotionally raw and resonant albums *19* and *21* (recorded when she was ages 19 and 21), Adele's album *25* “track[s] personal regrets, broken relationships and dashed expectations with. .. crushing emotional power” (NPR 2015). In her own words, Adele reflects that “my last album was a break-up record and if I had to label this one I would call it a make-up record. I'm making up with myself. Making up for lost time. Making up for everything I ever did and never did” (Adele n.d.). Adele describes seeking a co-writer to help her write what would become “Send My Love to Your New Lover” as a quest to have someone bring out of her the song she knew she could sing (NPR 2015). Although written during the aftermath of a love relationship gone bad, this song can also be read to examine other contexts. When read through the lens of stalled institutional conversions to just practices and the inequitable costs involved at the level of individual risk, four practices emerge that I believe could help loosen impediments to practicing the transformative change that theological schools so often profess.

In what follows, I will quote a few lines of “Send My Love to Your New Lover,” followed by a practice these lines suggest and questions they could raise for theological schools invested in transformation.

*This was all you, none of it me
You put your hands on, on my body and told me
Mmm, told me you were ready
For the big one, for the big jump
I'd be your last love, everlasting, you and me
Mmm, that was what you told me*

Untangling initial inclusion from completed conversion process This practice involves the temptation to be lured into believing that conversion can be quick and easy. “Conversion,” writes Rambo, “is very rarely an overnight, all-in-an-instant wholesome transformation that is now and forever” (Rambo 1993, p. 1). It is particularly dangerous to think about the start of change as the end of a conversion process. The same institutions that celebrate increasingly diverse students, faculties, staff, and community partnerships can end up being short-term gigs for the most minoritized community members. A celebrated new scholar can arrive, only to leave before long for what is often described in-house as a better opportunity, a better fit, a hundred reasons other than the institution's lack of hospitality to diverse thriving born of structural oppression. There is a difference between admission and retention, outlined poignantly in a 2018 Forum for Theological Explorations report that asked theological institutions to consider: “Are we measuring what matters? Are we asking the right questions? How might we begin to ask questions of our field and institutions that are not only concerned with whether people of color increase numerically, but that also call our attention to whether these growing numbers of students and scholars are thriving vocationally?” (Forum for Theological Explorations 2018). When schools seek to diversify faculties, expanding who is invited in the door in the first place is a necessary step. However, practices of learning and hospitality also need to pay serious attention to supporting a conversion process that leads to lasting institutional transformation. Inclusion is not enough to sustain a more diverse community. Understanding an institution's growing pains can be helped by interviewing the people who have left over the past

10 years, listening well and taking seriously what is heard, and being willing to respond in good faith even and especially when the leavings went poorly. I have heard this advice from colleagues in and outside of academia. As Adele’s lyrics above note, initial inclusion communicates readiness for change but doesn’t mean that institutions are ready for ongoing transformation.

The above lyrics highlight at least three aspects of conversion as it relates to the burden of individual risk often placed on more minoritized community members in institutions of higher education (Muhs et al. 2012): (1) aspirational organizational mission, (2) responsibility and accountability, and (3) embodied risks. First, I suggest that “the big one, the big jump” that is “everlasting” is descriptive of an institution’s aspirational organizational mission. In hiring processes, search committees often attempt to discern whether a particular candidate is committed to the school’s expressed aspirational mission statement. For current faculty, my school ritualizes collective missional recommitment in an annual convocation service in which faculty vow to support the school’s aspirational mission, promising to do so with collegiality and integrity. “That was what you told me” can serve as an assessment tool to measure a community’s practices in relation to its aspirational mission. The desire for education to be transformative drives mission statements that call on schools to also be constantly transforming, learning, growing, persuaded to the disciplines and accountabilities of lifelong learning. Whose fault is it when things go wrong? “This was all you, none of it me” is a difficult charge, painting a stark calculus of responsibility and placing the blame of harm solely on one party. Power and privilege can affect possibilities of mutual interactions when assessing desired and demonstrated change and transformation. At the same time, a growing chorus of voices is calling theological schools to dismantle structures of White supremacy that clearly oppress all persons yet can threaten and actually wound more minoritized scholars in acutely embodied ways (e.g., Hill Fletcher 2017; James Jennings 2011; Sharp 2016).

Who is responsible for the institutional conversion that can and should occur in theological schools committed to lifelong transformational learning? What are the reliable accountability practices when an institution is serious about midwifing change and experiencing conversions in justice and mutual concern? In addition to aspirational organizational mission and an assessment of responsibilities and accountabilities, conversion is also an embodied experience with embodied risks. Embodied risks can feel heightened for all in the enticing and terrifying professions of readiness for deep change and transformation, and yet it is simply the case that some bodies bear more risk than others in an institution that carries tenure, rank, salary, and load differences among the employed community and dynamics of grading, vocational discernment, and curricular decisions that determine the boundaries of learning and opportunities for the future between faculty and students. “You put your hands on my body.” Deep change and transformation of conversion to a more just, equitable, and inclusive community will require paying attention to the embodied risks of a community’s made more and kept more minoritized members, putting into place accountable practices that assess and uphold structures of thriving for all persons, and being willing to engage in the difficult yet transformative process of assessing the community’s current practices in relation to its aspirational organizational mission statements.

*I'm giving you up
I've forgiven it all
You set me free . . .*

Truth telling about desires not to convert, or resistances This is a second practice suggested in Adele’s song lyrics. It is not surprising that an institution with an aspirational, even prophetic, organizational mission falls short in its daily practice. Misunderstandings,

mistakes, apologies, and wrong turns are all predictable in long processes of conversion that are lasting and transformative. How do people who inhabit institutions remain steadfast in collective commitments, willing to hear and believe what is not working and committed to creating the conditions where all community members can, are expected to, and do thrive?

I contend that deep engagement with resistance to change is needed. When I researched empowerment, I quickly realized that recognizing personal and collective investment in disempowerment is a necessary first step to empowerment (Sharp 2019). Change that matters always elicits resistance because it is long and difficult work (Pressfield 2002). Grappling with resistance is important in contexts that can include grueling decision processes where community members who are not thriving due to structural racism and other forms of structural oppression decide to leave in order to survive.

Rambo notes that conversion requires learning and hospitality. Adele goes further. Conversion also requires freedom, freedom from oppression and freedom to thrive. Institutions more resistant to change constrain avenues of belonging and frustrate the collective labor of teaching and learning that conversion requires. The illusion of change can quickly become more compelling than the long labor of birthing change, including caring for tender newborn practices. Across the board, theological institutions across hundreds of Association of Theological Schools member schools desire to be more diverse. Hiring pools and invitations of initial inclusion have diversified. Yet, retention of historically excluded, more minoritized scholars has not changed much. Entire structures must shift along with every practice of the schools. To use a theological metaphor, it's not just pulling up more chairs to an old feast. When the institution and its internal relationships are toxic and wedded to old colonial models based on hierarchies of power, access, and relative worth, the healthiest choice can be to leave or divest and choose to be well, letting go and even forgiving oneself for falling for an institution for falling short of desiring to be changed through sustained conversion.

*I was too strong, you were trembling
You couldn't handle the hot heat rising (rising)
Mmm, baby, I'm still rising
I was running, you were walking
You couldn't keep up, you were falling down (down)
Mmm, there's only one way down*

Detangling toe-dipping from being in over our heads This is a third practice suggested by Adele's song "Send My Love to Your New Lover." Once, when I was crossing between two very different contexts and sets of practices, a mentor advised me to remember the feeling of "toe-dipping" because it quickly fades into the illusion of swimming in the deep end when we've not even waded beyond the water's edge. Toe-dipping is an embodied experience. As the analogy goes, the water is cold and, for a moment, one's body inhabits the in-between, bordering two realities. It is difficult to sustain toe-dipping and move unless movement is oriented along the water's edge. As Heidi Park writes, the water's edge is a place of great danger and postcolonial creativity in a world shaped and mis-shaped by borders from shore to wall (Park 2018). Sustaining toe-dipping requires practices of self-awareness, translation, advocacy, and movement across shifting, sometimes militarized ground.

Sustained toe-dipping, as my mentor advised me, can be an exercise in humility, a posture oriented toward learning and questioning, a place where insight is not blocked by any illusions of having already arrived. Yet, staying in toe-dipping unaccompanied by personal, communal,

intercultural, and global awareness and learning can lead to a total lack of movement on the one hand or a false narrative of arrival on the other. Adele's lines quoted above are illustrative for institutions who desire to be changed while still in early phases of change. The phrase "in over our heads" refers to Robert Kegan's book of the same title, written around the same time as Rambo's 1993 text. Kegan suggests that the support needed for negotiating the demands of "modern life" have lagged behind the challenges presented by it. "People grow best," Kegan writes, "where they continuously experience an ingenious blend of support and challenge" (Kegan 1994, p. 42). I can certainly relate to the feeling of overwork, overwhelm, and information overload, and I confront these dynamics in my colleagues, students, and communities. Is it possible for institutions of learning to sustain toe-dipping as an irresistible beginning of work instead of a premature conclusion to it? Are we really in over our heads in decolonizing and/or resisting change in the institutional life? To what extent? Conversion, Rambo reminds us, is a long process—the deep end of the work remains on the horizon for many. Rambo emphasized "*how far someone has to go socially and culturally in order to be considered a convert*" (Rambo 1993, p. 13, emphasis in original).

At the beginning of this paper, I made the claim that theological education may be stuck in a long process of conversion (or set of conversions) to decolonized practices of living and learning in communities that support wellness and thriving for the most minoritized community members and by extension for all people. While I join my voices with other theologians calling for such deep change (Sharp 2019), for the purposes of this paper, artists' definitions of decolonizing conversion processes are illuminating. Poet Nayyirah Waheed puts it this way in her poem "the release": "*decolonization / requires / acknowledging / that your / needs and desires / should / never / come at the expense of another's / life energy. / it is being honest / that / you have been spoiled / by a machine / that / is not feeding you freedom / but / feeding / you / the milk of pain* (2013, p. 84). Beautifully knitting feeding practices and processes of decolonizing transformation, chef/storyteller/gardener/land lovers Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel draw inspiration from indigenous practices to support the theory that decolonization is a multi-layered process of recovery—or set of recoveries. Conversion as recovery looks like moving from White supremacies and Americanization programs to respect for indigenous knowledge and cultural revitalization, from disavowal to blessing, from thoughtlessness to gratitude, from refined foods to whole foods, from wasteful to resourceful, from advertising and marketing fads to ancestral knowledge and oral tradition, from pesticides and monoculture to permaculture, intercropping, and organically grown, from GMO seeds to heritage seeds, from agribusiness to locally controlled fair trade, from food for profit to food to sustain life, and from assimilation to resistance and resilience (2016, p. 36). What could it look like to practice these kinds of multiple conversions within institutional theological education?

*Send my love to your new lover
Treat her better
We've gotta let go of all of our ghosts
We both know we ain't kids no more
Send my love to your new lover
Treat her better
We've gotta let go of all of our ghosts
We both know we ain't kids no more . . .*

(Re)engaging a commissioning call and response; (Re)committing to converted practices This constitutes a fourth practice suggested by Adele's song to support institutional

conversion without foisting individual risk inequitably within theological schools. Threaded throughout the three verses of this song is the chorus headlined by the song's title. "Send My Love to Your New Lover"—the love you had hoped or planned or promised to invest in me but that was not delivered—and deliver it the next time. Learn, turn, and give abundantly to the next person; treat them better. Adele models this refrain by breaking off a harmful relationship. In her music video for this song, Adele recorded 12 versions of singing the song that appear layered on top of each other all at once. The superimposition of multiple images expresses a range of emotions, signaling a complex layering of letting go of the ghosts that haunt relationships and embodying her artistry in a deeper way (Bacle 2016).

Extending the above lyrics to the context of institutional change, conversion that lasts recognizes and redresses harmful practices. As a call to conversion, imploring that folks do better next time invites institutions to engage in the work of conversion with accountability to consequences in practice so as not to harm future partners in the work relationship. Such commitment could make institutional change irresistible rather than make leaving and stress inevitable. Ghosts linger in this process. What relationships with ghosts could best accompany such a shift?

What could or would it look like to let go of the stranglehold of ghosts while acknowledging the hauntings that linger as motivations to change? Conversion scholars have studied this part of the conversion process. Decolonizing conversion into aspirational missions of learning to lead in love for transformation, both possible and precedented, involves "renunciation of cruelty and violence in favor of nonviolence and neighbor love" (Rambo and Farhadian 2014, p. 3). Adele sings a simpler yet still difficult song: learn from the past and do better next time. How will we who live and work in institutions know that we are ready to treat each other better? We will know when there are tangible and regular structures of support. When there is a tangible want or need alongside reliable doubt that the current system can support the challenge, transformation is made more possible through accessible and known contextual resources that can support conversion, with barriers to change identified and set apart or satisfied and with change that is implemented (Paloutzian 2014, pp. 222–223).

Bringing Adele and Rambo into generative conversation helps to clarify four practices of conversion for theological institutions who seek and need to change to align institutional practices with aspirational missions. The timing is urgent as schools profess a unified focus on increasing diversity as an institutional priority at the same time that many minoritized scholars still bear greater individual and professional risk in the change process. First, recognize the misunderstanding that the beginning of conversion is not its conclusion. Schools can do this by detangling rightly celebrated initial inclusion from the deep practices of learning and hospitality needed for retention and sustained change over time. Second, choose to tell the truth about desires not to change, institutional and human resistances that are part of every change process. Schools can do this by sharing the responsibility of confronting resistances instead of scapegoating new community members when difficulties arise. Third, detangle toe-dipping from being in over one's head. This practice reveals a catch that is part of deep change: forays into real change are embodied experiences and can disorient all community members. However, this initial border-crossing disorientation is not to be confused with swimming capably in the deep end of the work. Schools can work on this with dedicated practices of awareness and assessment, often needing sustained outside facilitation. Fourth, engage or re-engage a call and response process that recommits to conversion. Schools can ritualize ongoing

conversions in word and in deed with both public profession and accountability in practice. What could it look like to incorporate ongoing conversion into already existing annual rituals of convocation, commencement, and institutional cycles of self-assessment, performance review, and accreditation? Commissioning a reinvestment in conversion is a way for schools to believe in the possibility of conversion even here, even now. These four practices of conversion could help to loosen stuck places in change and share the risk and beauty of change more equitably to support institutional and personal workplace wellness.

Conclusion: Threshold of change?

An enduring question within the study of conversion as change and transformation is the basic question of religious ethics: “What is a human being? Is it possible for a human being to change?” (Paloutzian 2014, p. 209). I extend this question to ask whether it is possible for a group of human beings to change, why it can be such a difficult and long process, and what is at stake in the process of discerning and engaging this question in practice within institutions of theological education. Conversion is a long process with many elements that intertwine individual risk and institutional desire for transformation. As Rambo warns,

[A]t the same time that a potential convert may be attracted to. .. the new. ..., [they] may still be enmeshed in old ways of life. Vacillation between two worlds can be very painful. The decision to cross the line into a new life, on the other hand, can be an occasion for tremendous joy, for generating a new feeling of freedom that can itself be a powerful experience confirming the theology being embraced. (Rambo 1993, p. 126).

As participants in academic pastoral theology and psychology, we are involved in thresholds of life and death, processes of multiple conversions and divestments (Streib 2014, p. 271). Yet institutional conversions are warranted wherever individual risks differ based on intersectional embodied differences such as race, class, ability, gender, citizenship, and more, which are characteristic of so many contemporary institutions that dis/order our lives. Harmful institutional structures can themselves become earworms, involuntarily shaping the tunes we hum and believe about how our life together must be organized. Adele and Rambo can help imagine another way. The stakes are high in terms of living well together. Do we want to be well?

Acknowledgments I am grateful for and acknowledge the support I received for this paper through conversation with 2019 New Directions in Pastoral Theology Conference participants, conference respondent Kelly Bulkeley, Lewis Rambo, faculty colleagues at Columbia Theological Seminary, and writing group partners.

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