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Converting the Imagination: Teaching to Recover Jesus' Vision for Fullness of Life

by Patrick R. Manning

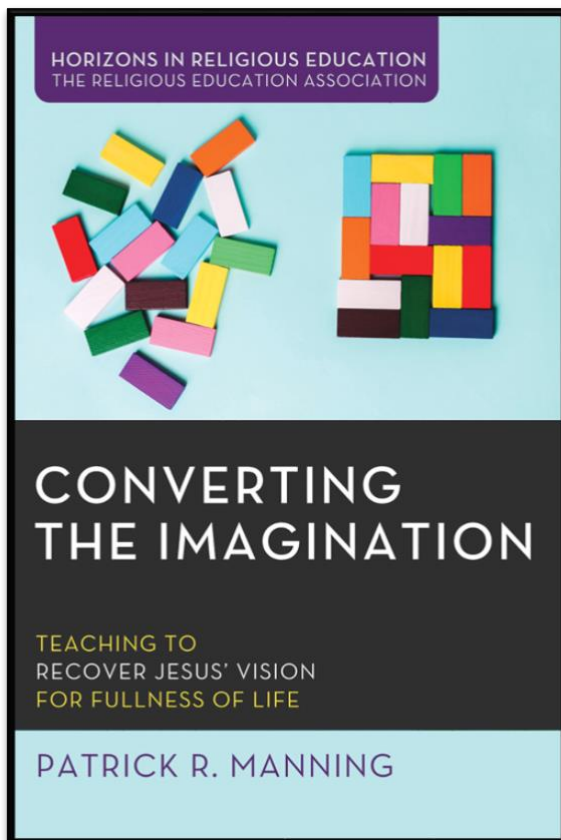
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New Title from Patrick R. Manning

Converting the Imagination: Teaching to Recover Jesus' Vision for Fullness of Life



For two thousand years countless people around the world viewed reality through a Christian lens that endowed their lives with meaning, purpose, and coherence. Today, in an era of unprecedented secularization, many have ceased to find meaning not only in Christianity but in life in general. In *Converting the Imagination*, Patrick Manning offers a probing analysis of this crisis of meaning, marshalling historical and psychological research to shed light on the connections among the disintegration of the Christian worldview, religious disaffiliation, and a growing mental health epidemic. As a response Manning presents an approach to religious education that is at once traditionally grounded in the model of Jesus' own teaching and augmented by modern educational research and cognitive science. *Converting the Imagination* is an invitation to transform the way we teach about faith and make sense of the world, an invitation that echoes Jesus' invitation to a fuller, more meaningful life. It is sure to captivate scholars and practitioners of religious education, ministers seeking to reengage people who have drifted away from the faith or to support young people suffering from existential anxiety, and anyone in search of deeper meaning in their religious traditions or in their own lives.

Patrick R. Manning is Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology and the Chair of the Department of Pastoral Theology at Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology at Seton Hall University. His teaching and research are focused in the areas of religious education, pastoral ministry, theological anthropology, and generally making sense of human beings and how we can live life more abundantly together.



1. What is *Converting the Imagination* about?

Our society is undergoing a crisis of meaning. Living in an increasingly pluralistic and overwhelming world, many people today are failing to find meaning in their religious traditions and in life in general. But we don't need to be resigned to this. There is more to life. My hope is that this book will assist Christian communities – especially the people responsible for teaching the faith – to address this crisis of meaning by engaging people with Jesus' vision for a life of joy and abundance.

2. What prompted you to write this book?

I have taught in various contexts – a high school, parishes, universities – and over the years I have become increasingly concerned about two trends: the declining mental health of young people and the increasing numbers of people abandoning their faith traditions. What I read in the sociological research and heard from my students all made clear that many people today do not find Christianity meaningful or relevant. Their experience is certainly not that Christianity leads to “life in abundance,” as Jesus promised. Yet, having witnessed firsthand how Jesus' teaching has utterly transformed the lives of many others – people who seem truly alive – I was convinced that the problem was not that there is nothing meaningful in the Christian tradition. The problem is that Christian communities have not adapted adequately to the changing times and therefore are not doing a good enough job leading people into a transformative encounter. We need to do better, and we can do better.

3. Who would be interested in this book?

This is a scholarly book, but one written for a broad audience. The primary audience is religious educators—teachers, catechists, formation directors, and anyone tasked with handing on the faith. However, it may interest anyone with a concern for the future of their faith community and for people who are struggling to find meaning in their faith tradition or life in general. I write in a way that is deeply rooted in my own Catholic Christian tradition yet with an openness to the implications for other faith traditions.

4. What is meant by “converting the imagination”?

To live a meaningful life we need to imagine or envision that kind of life for ourselves. In the most basic of terms, “converting the imagination” means transforming the way we see or make sense of reality. Jesus was constantly inviting his audience to see things differently and, more specifically, to see how God's reign was breaking in around them. My aim in this book is essentially the same. What is novel about my approach to converting the imagination is how I propose to respond to the ways the contemporary world complicates our meaning-making and therefore necessitates new ways of imagining.

5. What is the “SEE” approach that you present in this book?

The SEE approach is an educational response to the present crisis of meaning. It involves a set of pedagogical habits that are grounded in learner psychology and cognitive science and that I personally have found to be effective for helping learners develop habits of meaning-making that enable them to better live out their faith in today’s world. Taking a cue from Jesus’ teaching (especially his parables), this approach progresses through three movements: First, stimulating the imagination – activating learners’ thinking on the imaginative level where deep meaning is generated. Second, expanding learners’ imagining by engaging them with thought-provoking questions, texts, images, stories, and experiences that suggest new ways of seeing things. Third, embracing new ways of imagining, that is, inviting learners to adopt new ways of making meaning that might be more adequate to the challenges they are facing in life.

6. What will readers gain from reading this book?

First of all, I hope this book will help people to better understand our present cultural situation. As a society, our mental health is declining, many people are exiting their faith communities, and almost all of us are overwhelmed by life in the modern world at least some of the time. The early chapters of *Converting the Imagination* shed some light on these issues by drawing insights from current research in sociology, psychology, and related fields. Secondly, the book offers faith communities a practical pedagogical approach and resources for responding to the challenges and opportunities of life in the 21st century. Teachers in particular will find concrete guidance for what they can do in educational settings to help learners recover a sense of the meaningfulness of life.

An Excerpt from *Converting the Imagination: Teaching to Recover Jesus' Vision for Fullness of Life*

An allegory may help to illustrate the present situation of Christians like Serena. During her maiden voyage, the young church sailed for a time upon tumultuous waters. Her founder had launched her promising to send favorable winds, and, indeed, after some centuries the Christian ship had not only weathered the storm but had even made safe harbor in a time and culture that proved more hospitable. As more time passed, there built up around her a robust port where she received lavish attention and honor. All that remained to the crew was to scrub the decks from time to time and make an occasional short cruise. In recent years, however, the shore has receded, and the church once again finds herself out to sea. This time she faces not only stormy waters but also enemies who would purge the world of her presence. No longer able to count on the support of a hospitable port, the crew must relearn how to navigate the ship, how to adapt to changing and often unfavorable conditions, and how to make repairs as needed.

No longer able to count on the support of a homogenous Christian culture and confronted by constant criticism and distraction, contemporary Christians must help one another again to see the world through Christian eyes and to keep Jesus' vision of the reign of God alive. In other words, they must evolve to a post-critical form of meaning-making that enables them to regenerate continuously a Christian worldview for themselves. Living well depends upon a vision of life. If contemporary Christians are to enter into the fullness of life that Jesus offers, they must first be able to imagine it.

Up to this point I have been employing this rather technical language of pre-critical, critical, and post-critical meaning-making (or consciousness) as a means to the end of illuminating the causes underlying our present crisis of faith and meaning. Nevertheless, the reader should not think that post-critical meaning-making is some esoteric theory. The characteristic capacities of post-critical meaning-making—attentiveness to one's psychic needs, the union of critical reasoning and tacit knowing, awareness that meaning-making is always co-authoring—are the means by which significant numbers of people make sense of their experiences every day. In its most basic terms, what I have been describing here is a new deepening of the interiority to which Christianity has always invited its adherents.

When we understand post-critical consciousness in these more basic terms, a recovery of faith and meaning does not seem so impossible. Indeed, I am writing this book because I have witnessed people growing into this new interiority, and I see the possibilities it opens up for them and for our faith communities. The problem is that our faith communities have not yet established the structures, processes, and cultures needed to promote this new form of interiority with any consistency. My hope in this book is to offer a vision of how to change this.

Praise for *Converting the Imagination: Teaching to Recover Jesus' Vision for Fullness of Life*

“When Jesus began a parable—as he so often did—with ‘the reign of God is like . . .’ he was surely engaging people’s imaginations, inviting them to begin with their own reality and to imagine from there their way forward into the reign of God. This is the pedagogy that Pat Manning favors in *Converting the Imagination*. In our era, when people find ‘reasoning’ less persuasive, engaging their imaginations is a crucial strategy for educating-in-faith. Manning does this very well!”

—**Thomas Groome, Professor of Theology and Religious Education, Boston College**

“In this thought-provoking book—a must-read for all who are interested in the intersection of faith, pastoral practice, and contemporary culture—Dr. Manning shows how present-day Christian religious educators can tap the imagination to foster conversation and ongoing personal and social transformation. In the process, he discusses how we can develop a sustaining religious vision for our lives as we navigate the turbulent waters of pluralistic, postmodern culture.”

—**Harold D. Horell, Professor of Religious Education, Fordham University**

“Patrick Manning has synthesized a practical three-part educational approach to the Infinite. Inviting educators to trust the power of [religious] symbols, he shows them how to reenchant the imaginations of learners. While he takes into account relevant writings in philosophy, theology, Scripture, transformative learning, developmental psychology, religious education, and imagination, Manning’s ground is always his students—real people struggling to navigate meaning in a postmodern world. While intended for religious educators, this book will also serve arts and literature teachers.”

—**Eileen Daily, Lecturer, Director of Doctor of Ministry Program, Boston University**

