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Goodbye to Gadamer? Classical Pragmatist Resources for the Philosophy of Religious Education in a Pluralist Age

Abstract: Instead of the Continental tradition exemplified in the hermeneutics of Gadamer, I suggest that a framework of classical American Pragmatist can make contemporary religious education both more intelligible, and more capable of meeting the challenges of contemporary life. I critique Don Browning’s *Fundamental Practical Theology* as overly dependent on this flawed hermeneutical model, with its metaphor of “conversing with texts” and its persistent and confusing dichotomies. In their place, I offer a triadic, semiotic hermeneutics as theologized by the late Donald Gelpi SJ. Gelpi’s pragmatist metaphysics of experience, his focus on pneumatology and conversion, and his openness to embodied creativity suggest a better metaphor for religious education: learning to improvise responsibly with traditions and texts.

Introduction

In this paper, I raise the possibility of a fresh framework for the philosophy of Religious Education. I argue that Don Browning’s influential text, “A Fundamental Practical Theology,” aptly frames Religious Education as a “strategic” moment within a broadly practical process of theological action and reflection. But by grounding that theological reflection in the traditions of Continental philosophy, Browning makes contemporary religious education more difficult – not easier – to understand and to practice.

I approach Browning by way of a metaphor. I propose that religious educators should abandon the popular metaphor of interpretation as a “dialogue” or “conversation” with the text. This metaphor exemplifies a philosophy that obscures the relationship among texts, persons, and interpreting communities. In its place, I propose a different metaphor: we should teach believers to “improvise responsibly” with Christian tradition and Scripture. Responsible improvisation, and the hermeneutic that makes it coherent, offers religious educators a clearer, more workable framework for the challenges of contemporary life.

I start with the work of Don Browning because his *Fundamental Practical Theology*,¹ has shaped religious educational thinking for more than a decade. Browning adopts the metaphor of

¹ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

“conversation with the text” from Hans Georg Gadamer,² taking with it some basic dichotomies from the broader Continental tradition. I point to the limiting effects of these philosophical dichotomies in the work of Browning and also of Tom Groome. I then sketch an alternative approach which sidesteps these troubling dichotomies.

As a Roman Catholic religious educator, I appreciate the value of reflection that links the *lex orandi*, the *lex credendi*, and the *lex agendi*. Thus I find the systematic theology of the American Jesuit Donald L. Gelpi (1934-2011) quite philosophically helpful. Gelpi’s pragmatist metaphysical system takes up the best parts of the North American cultural outlook: it is grounded in feeling, experience and practice; it is democratic and evolutionary in outlook; it is rooted in community, construction, and conversion.

Browning and Gadamer: Hermeneutical Trouble?

Browning argues convincingly that theology is a basically practical endeavor. Our “fundamental[ly] practical” theologizing has four distinct but mutually supportive moments: (1) thick description, (2) *resourcement* or the retrieval of historical resources, (3) systematic reflection on the “monuments” of our faith tradition, and (4) the strategies and tactics of responsible ministry and discipleship. These four movements are held together and underwritten by a process of “practical reasoning,” whose “overall dynamic” is interpretation and application.³ Drawing strongly from the writings of Gadamer,⁴ Browning adopts a key tenet of contemporary philosophies of practice – namely, that interpretation and application are always, inextricably linked.⁵ Interpretation is always grounded in bona fide questions and directed at bona fide challenges (even if the question is “Aren’t I right?” or the challenge is merely getting published). However, the *ways* that both Gadamer and Browning model the interpretive process make it harder for practical theologizing and religious education to work.

I begin with the dubious metaphor that interpretation resembles a dialogue between person and text. Browning believes that understanding requires a kind of “conversation” or

² This metaphor is close to the heart of Gadamer’s entire textual hermeneutics. Browning points out how Gadamer “has developed the idea” that all forms of human investigation are “rooted” in the fundamental dynamics of “dialogue” and “conversation.” Browning, 37. Gadamer himself, gathering up many of his key hermeneutical themes, writes that “in dialogue spoken language – in the process of question and answer, giving and taking, talking at cross purposes and seeing each other’s point – performs the communication of meaning that, with respect to the written tradition, is the task of hermeneutics. Hence it is more than a metaphor; it is a memory of what originally was the case, to describe the task of hermeneutics as entering into dialogue with the text.” Hans George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second, Revised Edition, trans. and revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald C. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 1989), 361-2. My point here is not at all to enter the convoluted discussion – stretching from Plato through Derrida – concerning the nature and relative value of written and spoken communication; it is to question the coherence and value of this metaphor, and to explore the conversational / dialogical nature of interpretation more clearly.

³ Browning, 10-11.

⁴ Gadamer is clearly a key source for Browning’s practical theological project. His name appears on the second page (2) and the second to last page (292) of *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, and in every chapter but one; and he features prominently in Browning’s discussions of understanding / practical wisdom (37-52), hermeneutics (80-82), psychoanalysis (83-85, 247-248), non-foundationalism (173-5), and Christian education (212-22).

⁵ “Our present concerns” always “shape the way we interpret the past.” Browning, 35; “Application is neither a subsequent nor a merely occasional part of the phenomena of understanding, but co-determines it as a whole from the beginning.” Gadamer, 321, cited in Browning, 39.

“dialogue” with the text.⁶ “The hermeneutic process aimed at understanding any kind of human action - a classic text, work of art, letter, sermon, or political act – is like a ... conversation.”⁷ By adopting this perspective from Gadamer, Browning underlines several salutary points. First, interpretation is always rooted in particular linguistic and cultural traditions;⁸ second, interpretation is an investigative process; third, this investigation proceeds via question-and-answer,⁹ via the iterative testing of our understandings. Many theologians join Browning in embracing this metaphor of hermeneutical dialogue between people and texts.¹⁰ For example, Thomas Groome uses it as one of several models to describe the movement of critical correlation in the process of Shared Christian Praxis.¹¹

⁶ “In dialogue spoken language – in the process of question and answer, giving and taking, talking at cross purposes and seeing each other’s point – performs the communication of meaning that, with respect to the written tradition, is the task of hermeneutics. Hence it is more than a metaphor; it is a memory of what originally was the case, to describe the task of hermeneutics as entering into dialogue with the text.” Gadamer, 361-2. “The hermeneutic process aimed at understanding any / kind of human action - a classic text, work of art, letter, sermon, or political act – is like a moral conversation, when the word *moral* is understood in the broadest sense.” Browning, 38-39, original italics.

⁷ Browning 39; original italics.

⁸ “Practical reason is always tradition-saturated.” Browning, 11.

⁹ Gadamer, 361-362, 370.

¹⁰ Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd edition (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999) writes, “The critical interpreter enters into a genuine dialogue with the text ...,” 175; “In [*Truth and Method*], pp. 387-389, ... Gadamer explains how the text, though not a person, can be taken up into the dialogical dynamic, the hermeneutical conversation ...,” 179 n. 29. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) writes, “hermeneutical understanding can be understood on the model of authentic conversation” 100-101; Tracy applies the model of conversation to “all true understanding (including, therefore, the reading of text, the reflections of a solitary thinker, ...” 102. For a reading of Thomas Groome that characterizes his critical-correlation theology as a “hermeneutics of conversation,” see the discussion by his student Tim O’Malley in “Educating for Faith Appropriation in a Pluralistic Context: The Theological Methodology of Shared Christian Praxis and Christian Practices,” Religious Education Association, 2009 Meeting Papers, http://old.religiouseducation.net/proceedings/2009_Proceedings/33OMALLEY.pdf. Katherine Turpin describes Groome’s method as a “conversation” between current action and the “theological categories and understandings” of tradition. Katherine Turpin, “Consuming,” *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. by Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Chichester: Blackwell, 2012), 72. Clare Wolfeich writes of “facilitating a critical conversation” between “classic texts” and “contemporary contexts.” Clare Wolfeich, “Spirituality,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. by Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Chichester: Blackwell, 2012), 330. My point is obviously not that all of these nuanced and thoughtful scholars embrace the Gadamerian Continental tradition in its entirety but rather to point out how easily and unremarkably the idea of a “conversation” between persons and non-persons crops up in our hermeneutical discussions.

¹¹ “Seen as conversation” Groome’s “movement 4 is a dialogue by participants between their own stories/visions and the Christian Story/Vision,” an “encounter with the text in which one recognizes oneself as interpreter and interpreted.” Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 251, 224. However, Groome clearly downplays the metaphor of “dialogue with the text” in favor of the more specific model of “critical reflection” (*passim*); for example, he describes movement 4 more precisely as “critical reflection by participants on some form of Christian Story / Vision.” Groome, 253. Nevertheless, it is not difficult for those who use Groome’s work to pick up on the metaphor of hermeneutical conversation with non-human partners; it may seem like a convenient shorthand to describe Groome’s method of critical correlation as putting people into conversation with the Christian tradition or its classical texts.

Where Browning and Gadamer get into trouble is by using this metaphor to make one further point: that interpretation is always an interpersonal project.¹² Here the metaphor becomes a distraction: people do not usually talk to their Bibles, and Bibles do not usually talk back. Of course, Gadamer is quick to admit this;¹³ but I am reluctant to let him off the hook. In the first place, the metaphorical slippage between texts and real people can “disguise and amplify” the power of interpreters.¹⁴ It is only persons (whether human or divine ones) who can forward interpretive agendas; a text merely produces effects. In addition, Kenneth Stickers points out a curious “absence of the other” in Gadamer’s hermeneutical reflections. Gadamer’s analysis of interpretation tends to focus on a *solo* scenario: the preacher composing a sermon, the scholar alone in his study, the lawyer composing a brief. As concerned as he is with community tradition, “the paradigm of Gadamerian hermeneutics often appears to be that of a solitary reader, alone with a text.”¹⁵ This metaphor starts to look like scar tissue. What is it in Gadamer’s program that recommends such an analogy, with its curious and dubious limp?

It may be that one of the reasons Gadamer connects interpretation with real-life conversations, is that for him the only alternative would be to understand textual discourse as a process of soulless, positivistic endeavor. Many have noted the profound dualistic dichotomies endemic to Gadamer’s philosophical tradition, stretching through much of Enlightenment, Romantic, and Modernist thinking.¹⁶ Dualism “distinguish[es] two interrelated realities in such a way that their real relationship to one another becomes subsequently” incomprehensible.¹⁷ When the European philosophical tradition imagines a gap between an utterly free human spirit and an utterly iron-bound natural law, it is not surprising that Gadamer places both persons and texts on the same side of that unbridgeable chasm. For Gadamer, texts belong under the rubric of “understanding” and humane conversation, not the rubric of mechanical, scientific “explanation.”¹⁸

¹² Browning observes that Gadamer has moved beyond the individualistic understanding of interpretation espoused by his mentor Heidegger, “bringing us to the threshold” of a fully communal and social understanding of interpretation as found in the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and Josiah Royce. Browning, 50.

¹³ “When we try to examine the hermeneutical phenomenon *through the model of conversation between two persons*, the chief thing that *these apparently so different situations* – understanding a text and reaching an understanding in a conversation – have in common is that both are concerned with a subject matter that is placed before them. Just as each interlocutor is trying to reach agreement on some subject with his partner, so also the interpreter is trying to understand what the text is saying.” Gadamer, 370, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Roy Herndon SteinhoffSmith, “Dialogue: Hermeneutic and Practical,” *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 45, no. 6 (1997): 442.

¹⁵ Kenneth W. Stickers, “Royce and Gadamer on Interpretation as the Constitution of Community,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 15 no. 1 (2001): 17; cf. Gadamer, 306-310.

¹⁶ On dualism in Western philosophy see Richard J. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2010) 140; Andrea Nye, *Feminism and Modern Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 45-46, 64-83 passim, 144.

¹⁷ Donald L. Gelpi, *The Divine Mother: A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1984), 17

¹⁸ On the putative difference between (scientific) “explanation” and (humanistic) “understanding,” see Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), Ch. II, “Interpretation,” 41-74. Proudfoot draws a stark separation between the “hard” and “humane” sciences. The pragmatist tradition that I adopt below seeks to erase this stark contrast between science and the humanities – not to make the humanities positivistic, but to undermine radical positivism.

Thoughtful believers, of course, are no strangers to these very same types of divisions: bifurcating humane understanding from the sciences, or equating humane understanding with a positivist image of truth. This is the path to religious and secular fundamentalism; to religio-scientific aporiai and historical-critical goose-chases; to no end of confusion and grief. Gadamer's metaphor and his broader hermeneutics offer scant help in addressing these challenges, whether for believers or for religious educators.

Does Browning address them any better? He notes that Gadamer's magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, was designed to clarify the nature of humanistic interpretation, to articulate its proper relationship with scientific method.¹⁹ He also notes rather wryly how Gadamer did not succeed: "Gadamer never really answers the question of the relation of hermeneutics to method. ... [In fact,] Paul Ricoeur ... questions whether 'the book ... ought not instead to be titled *Truth OR Method*.'" ²⁰ Browning seeks to articulate "a dialectical model" for understanding the "analogous" tensions between "truth and method," "interpretation and explanation," "hermeneutics" and the "harder empirical sciences." In a dubious move of his own, he extends the reach of this endemic dichotomy by adding one more antinomy: "narrative and theory."²¹

To overcome Gadamer's philosophical shortfall, Browning proposes a dialectic that is based on his own radical rethink of practical reasoning. For Browning, the process of practical reasoning includes an "inner core" and an "outer envelope." The core is an abstract, Golden-Rule type of ethic which provides "general principles" of orthodoxy and orthopraxy.²² This core is always sheathed in an outer envelope of inherited "narratives and practices" (e.g., the data of Christian and Old Testament history).²³ While sacred traditions and stories subtly "shape" the inner ethical core, it can always be "distinguished" from its narrative envelope.²⁴

Unfortunately, this is not so much a dialectic,²⁵ as a Kantian ethic informed by tradition.²⁶ Browning maintains a stark separation between abstract ethics and organic habits and narratives; he conceives of practical reasoning mainly as the process of abstracting a message.²⁷ The

¹⁹ Browning, 82.

²⁰ Browning, 82, citing Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 60.

²¹ Browning, 82.

²² "The reversible reasoning to be found in the love commandment that reads 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Mt 19:19 [cf. Lev. 19:18, 34; Mt 22:39] exhibits this inner core as does the analogous golden rule, 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.' (Mt 7:12, Lk 6:31)." Browning, 11; cf. 105-6.

²³ Browning 11, cf. 105.

²⁴ Browning, 11.

²⁵ Browning does point to a more properly dialectical movement when he describes the academic rigors of historical theology as "technical, explanatory and distancing maneuvers" or "temporary procedures" that are necessary part of the more humane "hermeneutical effort;" he cites the work of David Tracy and Paul Ricoeur as key proponents of such distancing tactics. Browning, 49. However, he does not use the back-and-forth between distancing and understanding as an overall dialectical model for practical reasoning.

²⁶ Browning says that his model of practical reasoning "blends certain strands of Kantianism with certain strands of Aristotelian teleology ... in such a way as to subsume the teleological to the more Kantian or deontological perspective." Browning, 11. His detailed descriptions of practical reasoning bear this out. Its inner ethic is loving, "reversible" and essentially universal, 10, 177-178; it is subtly shaped and made vivid and enticing by the religious narratives that convey it, 158-160.

²⁷ Browning speaks of the need to "abstract the theory from the practice." 6, et passim. He says of a particular congregational culture, "These practices have meanings or theories." 41.

metaphor of outer envelope and inner core merely reinscribes a Kantian dualism in late twentieth century terms.

Subtle Dualism in Groome's Movement 4

The problem of dualism that Browning cannot seem to escape is also at work in Tom Groome's Shared Christian Praxis. Groome reinscribes his own kind of dualism when he describes the process of "critical appropriation." For Groome, Jesus' proclamation and enactment of God's Kingdom is the eternal heart of the Christian tradition. Although he avoids an explicitly Kantian turn to universal ethical precepts,²⁸ Groome still insists that Shared Christian Praxis rests on a critical correlation between two "stories": the story of our own experience, and the Christian Story (with a capital "S"). This amounts to a dialectical comparison between two highly abstracted and thematized narratives (one of which represents an unchanging essence); the primary vehicle for this correlation is question and answer, dialogue, written and/or spoken word.²⁹ Groome affirms the place of the senses, the imagination, and creativity in the process Shared Christian Praxis; he affirms the importance of wanting, remembering, and dreaming.³⁰ But these dynamics do not find little place in the core movement of critical correlation. One way of painting this picture is to say that Groome's model of critical correlation reverses Browning's abstract Kantian schema; Groome places a narrative – not an ethic – at the "core."

Part of the trouble with Groome's appeal to "the Kingdom" is that it represents too univocal an interpretation of Scripture. The Bible comprises numerous genres (not only the gospels and narratives); it contains numerous testimonies and counter-testimonies about the way God has worked with God's people.³¹ By appealing to the Kingdom of God, Groome appeals to the culmination of Salvation History; but as Mary Boys pointed out long ago, Salvation History is too simplistic a biblical pedagogical rubric.³² Christians need a more spacious approach by which to interpret and teach their rich, varied, and often ornery Scriptures.

An Alternative Approach

Thus far I have made four (I hope, plausible!) critiques: that the metaphor of "conversing with the text" may be of more trouble than use; that our vision and educational style needs to undo the putative gap between humane and scientific approaches; that religious educators might want to be careful to avoid relying too heavily on words and abstractions; and that (at least certain parts of) our religious traditions are too rich to be conveyed via boiled-down, univocal expressions. Now I suggest that tradition of classical American Pragmatism may offer the tools to address each of these sticking points more adequately. I cannot do adequate justice to a full-fledged Pragmatist systematic theology. But I do hope this suggestive and general outline

²⁸ This may in part be due to Groome's pragmatist leanings. He also relies on the work of Bernard Lonergan, whose philosophy, despite its strong transcendentalist leanings, is deeply engaged with empirical processes and data. See Groome, 79-80, 116-121.

²⁹ Groome, 249-265.

³⁰ Groome, 85-131.

³¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

³² Mary Boys, *Biblical Interpretation in Religious Education* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1980).

entices further reflection and deeper investigation into the theological and pedagogical perspectives that this approach can offer to religious education.

The version of pragmatism I will employ has its foundations in the work of the nineteenth century scientist and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and of his disciple, Josiah Royce.³³ More recently, the late Jesuit theologian Donald Gelpi (1951-2011) has laid out a full-fledged systematic theology grounded in this classical American Pragmatism. In Gelpi's theology, unchanging essences and univocal traditions are replaced by evolution, by systems of emergent dynamics, and by the give-and-take of critical inquiry as part of the continual construction of experience and culture. Many traditionally minded Christian believers have been wary of such Process-like philosophical theology. The metaphysics of Process Theology have in the past seemed inimical to the thought of the (Greek) Fathers and the language of the classical creeds. In the Catholic tradition, the twenty-five year old assessment of John J. Mueller, SJ still holds true today that "process theology has not made significant inroads into the American Catholic theological community."³⁴ Mueller suggested that a process-oriented theological project might gain a more favorable hearing among American Catholics if it met two criteria. First, it must deal theologically and convincingly "with the foundational, systematic, and practical experiences" of faith-filled Catholic / Christian lives. Second, it should focus philosophically on the broadly empirical tradition of American thinking.³⁵ This two-fold agenda is precisely the project that Gelpi embraces.³⁶

Gelpi strives to root his theology in the Bible and the early Church Fathers. His model is thoroughly Trinitarian and pneumatological; it seeks to avoid the "Christo-monism"³⁷ of excessive reliance on external scriptural or ecclesial authorities. For Gelpi, it is the workings of God's Holy Spirit that keep us true to Jesus' vision of the Kingdom, and to the Father's plan for

³³ Its intellectual roots are multiple and ancient, including Aristotle, Scotism, and Native American thought. See Donald L. Gelpi, SJ, *The Gracing of Human Experience: Rethinking the Relationship Between Nature and Grace* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 137-172; Scott L. Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002).

³⁴ Mueller explains: "I would consider a significant inroad to include, but not be limited to, a Catholic faculty identifiably in the process camp, a Catholic publishing house using process material, an identifiable journal, a major Catholic theologian of national prominence providing leadership in process thought, or a popular groundswell calling for process insights." All this, despite the fact that "On all the evidence, process theology would seem to be a fortunate find in the Catholic community when the search for the inculturation of theology has arisen. It boasts American roots stemming from an identifiable American philosophy, offers Catholic theology in a time of growing pluralism a possible alternative to the historically dominant Thomistic and scholastic frameworks, draws on modern science as a vehicle of common world-wide discourse, supplies a philosophical support to speculative theology, and in general is in tune with a world that must live with constant and unavoidable change." John J. Mueller, "Process Theology and the Catholic Theological Community," *Theological Studies* 47 (1986): 414. One of the challenges for Catholics in embracing a process perspective comes from the fact that "Process theology depends directly upon process philosophy as expounded by Whitehead. ... From its conception ... process theology is the intellectual child of [Whiteheadian] process philosophy." Mueller, 420. As Mueller points out, in "what seems to be an emotional conviction rather than an intellectual position—when process theology is mentioned among the Catholic faithful, it is regularly greeted with strong negative feelings and even hostility." Mueller, 414.

³⁵ Mueller, 424-7, quote from 427.

³⁶ For the synopsis of Gelpi's thinking that follows, see especially Donald L. Gelpi, SJ, *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology* (NY and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1994); Gelpi, *Gracing*.

³⁷ On Christomonism, see Congar, Yves, "The Spirit, the Spirit of Christ: Christomonism and the *Filioque*," in *The Word and the Spirit* (London: Geoffrey Chapman and San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986 [French original 1984]), 101-121.

the healing of creation. The Father is source of all creativity, the Son is God's definitive saving action in the world, and the Spirit of the Son and the Father is God's forward-looking vision and force. She is not simply a dimension of intra-divine or universal connection;³⁸ Her effects are real and concrete. She is the interpretive Wisdom of God, nudging us forward into continuing and cumulative forms of conversion. For Gelpi, conversion means becoming responsible; it means holding oneself to account in light of the norms – intellectual, social, spiritual, and so on – that we as a community have uncovered over time.

Gelpi endeavors to undo the gap between S/spirit and matter by using a systematic root metaphor (a metaphysic) of “experience.” This pragmatist metaphysics of experience replaces the more traditional Greek metaphysics of essence, and the modern metaphysics of substance. For Gelpi, whatever exists at all (atoms, people, Scriptures, communities, God) exists as ongoing experience, characterized by its qualities, its impact, and its habitual tendencies. Thus, experience has three integral components: its flavor, its facts, and its patterns. God is the supreme experience, encompassing (experiencing) every creation's experience as well as God's own inner Trinitarian life.³⁹ With Gelpi, the question is not, *a priori*, how God's Spirit can nudge God's creations; the only possible questions are *a posteriori* as part of discernment: was that nudge from the Holy Spirit, or was it from something or somebody else?

What makes Gelpi's approach even more promising in the context religious education is that the practices of discernment, investigation, and interpretation all lie at the heart of his theology. For Gelpi, interpretation is always a three-fold process; that three-foldness can be viewed in a number of ways. For example, interpretation means taking an *old symbol* and generating from it a meaningful *new symbol* for the purpose of conveying *something important*. Similarly, interpretation means that *you* take a certain slice of *experience*, and attempt to convey it to *me*. Interpretation produces community. While “Gadamer assumes the givenness of tradition and community” and selves, Gelpi recognizes how all three are “continuously constituted and renewed through the processes of interpret[ing]” our experiences (including our experience of texts).⁴⁰

This process of interpretation is what Peirce called “semiosis”: the unending creation of “signs.”⁴¹ Whatever exists is a sign; it is an experience which can convey meaning. What is more, because experience is always tinged with emotion (with a feeling, a tropism, a for-or-againstness), interpretation is always evaluative. We evaluate experiences somatically, aesthetically, interpersonally, and abstractly/discursively. Discernment – pursuit of the truth – does not rely solely on discursive abstraction; instead, it relies on a process of constantly and

³⁸ Ormond Rush has characterized Her as the Spirit of “receptivity” in *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

³⁹ Gelpi characterizes himself as an orthodox Christian panentheist. See Gelpi, *Divine Mother*, 95.

⁴⁰ Stickers uses this language to describe the communitarian hermeneutics of Royce. Stickers, 14, 18. Gelpi adopts all these dimensions of Roycean hermeneutics. See Gelpi, *Gracing*, 137-194.

⁴¹ This Peircean model needs to be clearly distinguished from the Continental tradition of semiotics that arises from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's model is not triadic, but dyadic – it concerns only the “signifier” and the “signified.” Saussure's semiotic model falls easily back into the dichotomies I have already critiqued. See Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic / InterVarsity Press, 2012), 99-111.

honestly testing each interpretive gambit against our experience – a process like testing hypotheses against facts.⁴²

Gelpi's approach to interpretation opens up exciting new vistas. At the very least, it address the four points of interpretive trouble that I have described. First, interpretation is not so much about having a conversation with the text, as it is about constructing an inquiring community that is conversant with the text and its facts. The facts of the text are the data from which we generate new symbols and hypothetical gambits; they also serve as parameters against which we check our interpretations.

Second, discernment and testing hypotheses belongs to the rigorous evaluation of every type. While relevant data and norms of validity will vary from one field to another (physics, biology, history, Catholic practice, Buddhist community), the process of testing experience is constant across both the "human" and "natural" sciences.

Third, evaluation involves more than just words. Interpretation produces a symbol that is rooted in cultural tradition; these symbols can be statements or poems, artworks or rituals, choices or plans. Framing these creative productions as part of the dialectic of appropriation (rather than a separate movement of response or decision) helps us dethrone abstraction from its position of dominance; it opens the way to embracing nondiscursive expression, creativity, and craft as truly integral to the interpretive process.⁴³

Finally, a pragmatist hermeneutics of scripture attends to the ways that scripture is actually *used*. "The Bible exists as cultural material which we continually use, most often without identifying the source, along with other materials, to construct and reconstruct social reality."⁴⁴ Interpreting the Bible responsibly means improvising responsibly with all dimensions of the scripture – its genres, its verses, and its images. Interpreting Scripture produces both reasoned scholarly arguments, and popular mashups and riffs.⁴⁵ Whether these interpretations are right – whether they conform to the movements of God's Spirit – can only be discerned *a posteriori*, by testing them against standards of healthy conversion. Do they move us toward Pentecost-like freedom, toward diversity-in-community, toward boldness for justice and healing and love?⁴⁶

⁴² Gelpi describes this process repeatedly as the process of testing "hypotheses," e.g., *Gracing*, 285-6. But his approach is too abstract and discursive; as I will argue in my forthcoming dissertation, Gelpi shows a general tendency to downplay the creative dimensions of that are at the heart of the semiotic process. He acknowledges these dimensions, especially in the thinking of Dewey, but relegates them to the subcategory of "philosophy of art." See Gelpi, *Gracing*, 212-219.

⁴³ Rebecca Chopp speaks eloquently to this project of casting "theory" down from its throne and "setting up the courtroom in reverse" so that our poetical testimonies can interrogate reason / rationalization. Rebecca S. Chopp, "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony," in Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney and Kathryn Tanner, eds., *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (Oxford, New York: American Academy of Religion / Oxford University Press, 2001), 56-70, esp. 61 – 65.

⁴⁴ SteinhoffSmith, 442.

⁴⁵ Cf. Kathryn Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," *Modern Theology* 14 no. 2 (April 1998): 279-298.

⁴⁶ For all these characteristics as marks of the Spirit, see Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. by John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994 [German original 1992]). Gelpi would readily agree with these characteristics.

Conclusion

Pragmatist-oriented catechists will focus on training believers to improvise responsibly with traditions. Responsibility is the ability to respond with discernment and to move towards the norms of conversion. It includes focused attention to the ways in which teachers and students are continually constructing local interpretive communities. This means attention to power dynamics, including the power dynamics between religious “experts” and learners.

The present task of religious educators is not simply to help believers interpret reality, but to help them constitute viable religious communities of resistance that can contribute to a sustainable world. A Pragmatist model of catechesis, aimed at developing Spirit-led, responsible, and creative improvisation, is better suited to tackle this challenge than the models that Gadamer and Browning put forth.

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