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2015 REA Annual Meeting, Nov 6-8

Participating in God’s Imagination: Classical Pragmatism, Trinitarian Theology, and Religious Education

Abstract: This essay explores how a theology based in Classical Pragmatism might be used to develop pedagogical practices that align human imagination with God’s Holy Spirit. Theologically, it depends on the work of Donald Gelpi, SJ. Gelpi used metaphysical categories originally explicated by Charles Sanders Peirce (sc., “Firstness”, “Secondness”, and “Thirdness”) to interpret the economic and immanent Trinity. By using Peirce’s semiotics – his theory of sign-making-and-interpretation – to interpret God’s Holy Spirit as fundamentally imaginative, creative, and discerning, it suggests that close attention to Scripture, art-making, and data collection may be integral elements for our fuller “participation” in the life of God.

Introduction: Exploring a Theological Hunch

This essay explores possibilities. As an exercise in philosophical inquiry, it explores how Pragmatist categories might describe the connection between human imagination and God’s Holy Spirit. As an exercise in pedagogical reflection, it explores how such a description might sharpen the theory and practice of religious education, especially in North American and other Anglophone settings.

Classical Pragmatism can speak cogently in modern-day settings because concepts like scientific inquiry, evolution, and pluralist democracy are part of its intellectual DNA. Classical Pragmatists articulate continuities between matter, habit, and thinking; between scientific method, philosophy, and the arts. For many years, Process theologians (often liberal Protestants) were the principle inheritors of this tradition in theological circles. More recently, Catholic,¹ Anglican,² Pentecostal,³ and Evangelical⁴ theologians have begun turning to Classical Pragmatism to understand Christian experience. Perhaps the most systematic of these has been the Jesuit theologian Donald Gelpi (1934-2011). Gelpi’s metaphysical framework leaves behind

¹ Paul D. Murray, *Reason, Truth and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2004).

² Ben Quash, *Found Theology: History, Imagination and the Holy Spirit* (London: T&T Clark, 2013); Andrew Robinson and Christopher Southgate, “Semiotics as a Metaphysical Framework for Christian Theology,” *Zygon* 45, no. 3 (2010): 689-712.

³ Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2002).

⁴ Crystal Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

concepts like subsistent relation, essence, form, and accident, describing Trinity in terms that are arguably more Biblically resonant and more intelligible in present-day life.⁵

Imagination is the power of creativity – the power to put things together in new and useful ways.⁶ In this essay, I unpack one of Gelpi’s key hypotheses: that it makes sense to interpret God’s Spirit under the same Pragmatist category that encompasses imagination, creativity, discernment, and mind. I then unpack the pedagogical corollary: that teaching students to participate in God’s Holy Spirit means helping them become more imaginative, more creative, and more discerning.

If these hypotheses prove coherent and cogent, the pedagogical and intellectual payoffs could be significant. This reasoning could open up lines of inquiry that link philosophy, theology, religious education, scientific method, and theories of creativity. It could help teachers to frame accounts of spirit and Christian faith formation in ways that make better sense to contemporary minds. And it could strengthen ecumenical dialogue on the basis of shared teaching strategies and practical pneumatologies.

A Pragmatist Account of the Imagination

At its most basic, imagination is the mental leap that connects one image or thought with another. Without it, we could not solve problems, use symbols to communicate, set goals, or teach and learn. The theory of sign-making-and-interpretation (“semiotics”) developed by the early Pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) can clarify how imagination relates to mind, to faith, and to moral action.

Peirce argues that signs have a *three-fold* nature. A sign is not merely a signifier + a signified (e.g., “Jerusalem” → that Judahite city); it is always a three-fold relationship (e.g., *Psalm 122* extols *Jerusalem* to the *reader*).⁷ Acknowledging this three-fold-ness makes context, history, and ethical purpose integral to semiotic analysis. It also gives “semiosis” (sign-making) an *emergent* dimension: a sign is always “something by knowing which we [come to] know something *more*.”⁸ For Peirce signs evolve as parts of nature,⁹ and they are fundamental to human thought. In his system, “we have no power of thinking without signs:”¹⁰ to have self-consciousness is to imagine ourselves and our own stories; to reason is to imagine things and symbols in ever more complex ways.

⁵ See especially Donald Gelpi, SJ, *The Gracing of Human Experience: Rethinking the Relationship between Nature and Grace* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007); idem, *Encountering Jesus Christ: Rethinking Christological Faith and Commitment* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009); idem, *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).

⁶ For a thorough exploration of creativity and imagination, see R. Keith Sawyer, *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation*, 2nd Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁷ Downing, *Changing Signs*, 198-204.

⁸ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 8.332; cited and discussed in Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 28, where Eco calls this “a fundamental principle in Peirce’s semiotics.”

⁹ For example, “biosemiotics” explores biochemical and biological processes as emergent systems of self-organizing communication. For a suggestive review see Victoria N. Alexander, review of “Essential Readings in Biosemiotics: Anthology and Commentary” by Donald Favareau, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 28, no. 4 (2011): 412-414. For a more comprehensive review, see Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, “Review Article: Biosemiotic Scenarios,” *Semiótica* 195 (2013): 373-408.

¹⁰ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.262; cited in Gelpi, *Gracing of Human Experience*, 140.

Peirce identifies three kinds of human reasoning: the ability to induce, to deduce, and to “abduce.”¹¹ Induction is the most basic: it is the hunch that the $x+1$ th iteration of a certain behavior will follow the pattern that has held for all these x -many times. In deduction, the imagination turns signs and symbols this way and that to work out concepts that are already implied. In “abduction,” the imagination takes flight by proposing plausible scenarios. Abduction scans the context and links disparate pieces of evidence to suggest some emerging pattern or situation that may make actual sense. Of course, human abductions are always fallible. Hence in human problem solving, emotional or cognitive dissonance and a period of (often subconscious) incubation give way to an imaginative insight; a diligent truth-seekers will work out its implications, share it in community, and verify it for real-life applicability.¹²

To experience abduction is to experience mind. Abduction allows us to “read” faith traditions and present experience in light of some (third) interpretation that illuminates future significance. It allows us to move from what we see (or seem to see, or are conditioned to see), to what might be, or could be, or should be the case. Abduction lies at the heart of everyday sense-making, of rigorous inquiry, and of lasting conversion, as several religious educators have pointed out.¹³

“Thirdness” as a Metaphysical Category

Most important for our purposes of trinitarian reflection, Peirce connects abduction with the fundamental metaphysical category of Thirdness. Peirce developed his metaphysics to clarify the nature and function of thinking at the broadest and most comprehensive levels. His analysis of formal logic and phenomenology led him to a grand philosophical abduction: there seem to be three dimensions inherent in all experience, which he called Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.¹⁴ Firstness means the quality of an experience (e.g., its smoothness, its attractiveness, the impression it makes as a holistic self). This “particular suchness” of an experience can be relatively simple (e.g., “red”) or simultaneously holistic-yet-complex (e.g., “Jesus,” or “the experience of Mahler’s 5th Symphony”). Firstness suggests quality unbounded by form or by pattern, unstructured potentiality, and freedom; it is the pool from which experience wells forth.

Secondness is the facticity of the experience (there it is, hitting you in the face). Secondness marks some potential suchness as a concrete reality with an impact. It can be a force or image that impinges upon us; it can be a limit that constrains our behavior. Secondness suggests specificity: not anything, but this particular thing.

Thirdness is the tendency of the experience. It suggests emergence, direction, mediation and communication. Thirdness becomes evident when we relate two concepts or images in terms of a common characteristic; it becomes evident as we read qualities and impacts *by means of* the signs we perceive or create. Examples of Thirdness include quantum probability and natural laws, ingrained habits and personal character, life-giving or death-dealing social dynamics,

¹¹ For a succinct summary of Peirce’s three forms of inferential reasoning, see Quash, *Found Theology*, 201-208.

¹² Sawyer, *Explaining Creativity*, 58-70.

¹³ Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 93-95; James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 87-89; Sharon D. Parks, “Imagination: The Power of Adult Faith,” in *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 104-126.

¹⁴ For Peirce’s categories and the rationales and history of their development, see Christopher Hookway, *Peirce* (London: Routledge, 1985), 80-117; Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ*, 64-72.

acquired skills, patterns of healthy development. Thirdness is most fully developed in the habit of semiosis that we speak of as “mind.”

No one can have an experience that lacks Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness; and they are not reducible to each other in any logical way. At the same time, they never exist “by themselves” – they coinhere with each other as the necessary dimensions of every experience. For Peirce, these three categories constitute a metaphysics of experience; we cannot get any more “real” than when speaking of First, Second, and Third.

Thirdness and the Imagination of God

Gelpi’s grand theological abduction is that a metaphysics of experience can also be used to interpret the Trinity: that it can interpret how we experience God’s salvation (the “economic Trinity”), and the way that we understand God’s life in itself (the “immanent Trinity”). In a theology based on this metaphysics, all that there is, is experience. God is the “supreme” experience; that is, God experiences everything: the experiences of human and non-human creatures, plus the experience of God’s unique, inner-trinitarian life. In this way, Gelpi lays out a form of panentheism that seeks to retain meaningful distinctions between God’s life and our creaturely freedom.¹⁵

For Gelpi, the Father is a model of Firstness – loving wellspring of all possible qualities and experiences, the source to which the revelation of Christ and interpretive gist of the Spirit refer.¹⁶ The Son is a model of Secondness – the Word of God (Hebrew: *Dabar*; Greek: *Logos*) who dwells among us as God’s action, decision, and fact. The Son is the concrete self-communication of God’s saving purpose; the particular pointer to who God really is.¹⁷ Rather than identifying *Logos* with God’s perfect mind, Gelpi echoes a more biblical tradition that can be traced through Theophilus, Irenaeus, Basil of Caesarea, and Victorinus: the Word is God’s power, efficacious (Gn 1) and active (Heb 4:12), accomplishing that which God sets out to do (Is 55:10-11).¹⁸

Finally, the Spirit is a model of Thirdness. Spirit is evident when creation blossoms in diverse complexity; when individual gifts and capacities are awakened; when beings communicate; when prophetic insight touches humanity; when disparate people are brought together in like-minded community.¹⁹

Just as Thirdness is spirit and mind among humans, Gelpi suggests that God’s Spirit can be seen as the “mind” of the Godhead who “searches everything, even the deep things of God” (1 Cor 2:10).²⁰ The Spirit is wisdom and “mind” of the Father: “When [God] marked out the foundations of the earth, then [Wisdom] was beside him, like a master worker” (Prv 8:29-30).

¹⁵ Gelpi, *The Divine Mother: A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 91-101; idem, *Gracing of Human Experience*, 351-352; idem, *Encountering Jesus Christ*, 467-471.

¹⁶ For the correlation of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, see Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ*, 474-7; idem, *Divine Mother*, 83-123; Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 91-96.

¹⁷ Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ*, 476.

¹⁸ Gelpi, *Divine Mother*, 60-66; idem, *Committed Worship: A Sacramental Theology for Converting Christians*, vols. 1-2 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press / Michael Glazier, 1993), 1.170-171; Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 126-147.

¹⁹ Gelpi, *Divine Mother*, 50-6.

²⁰ Cf. Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ*, 466.

The Spirit is “mind” of the Son: ““For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). If human consciousness is fallible and easily hobbled by bias and physical limitations, God’s discernment is always on target, attuned and attentive to each emerging dynamic and self in the cosmos: prospering those in line with God’s vision, compassionate to creatures in travail, directing and corrective to the wayward, drawing forth patterns that our own human planning could never anticipate or contrive.²¹

Crossing Theological Red Lines?

While this essay mainly explores the pneumatological dimension of Gelpi’s theology, he also develops a full-fledged Christology and soteriology based on Peirce’s categories and on the scriptural witness. For some, Gelpi’s grand abduction may seem to cross theological red lines. Substance metaphysics has long been at the heart of trinitarian theology (since Nicaea) and of Catholic Eucharistic theology (transubstantiation); is it wise – or even orthodox – to abandon it? Gelpi’s pantheistic leanings can disturb Reformed thinkers especially, who insist on the radical difference between a broken creation and a sovereign, gracious God. The similarities to Process theologies will unsettle others. Many Christians find it hard to recognize the God of the Process philosophers: a deity who is neither fully conscious or personal in Godself, nor sovereignly “in charge” of creation.²²

Those who argue a priori that true Christian faith *requires* a Greek substance metaphysics may be overreaching, in light of the cultural and intellectual diversity of present-day world Christianity. But it is a perfectly Pragmatist question to ask whether Gelpi’s interpretations *ring true* for Christians who are seeking to understand their own faith. One test case, for example, could involve the work of John J. Mueller. Mueller offers a dispassionate account of the reasons why Process Theology has failed to capture the imagination of most Roman Catholic thinkers and believers.²³ If a plausible case could be made that Gelpi’s work addresses the “challenges” that Mueller lists (I think it can), then religious educators in Catholic settings might feel empowered to try on Gelpi’s concepts for fit.²⁴

Participating in God’s Imagination: Four Pedagogical Practices

If imagination, creativity, and discernment all go together; if they are all dimensions of mind and spirit; and if they are integral elements in the trinitarian life; then helping others to participate in God’s imagination is a worthy goal for religious educators. I conclude by suggesting four practices that would characterize such a pedagogy of participation: (1)

²¹ See J. C. Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, *Faith in the Living God: A Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress 2001), 72-73, 76-77, 96-97; cf. Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 259.

²² For a succinct review of Process Theology, see David L. Smith, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 150-64.

²³ John J. Mueller, “Process Theology and the Catholic Theological Community,” *Theological Studies* 47 (September 1986): 412-427.

²⁴ As Gelpi notes, even if his Pragmatist metaphysics lead to “new theological blunders of its own, ... at least the resulting errors would have the interest of speculative novelty instead of simply rehashing the same tired old heresies” of tritheism and modalism to which substance interpretations of the Trinity are perennially prone. Gelpi, *Gracing of Human Experience*, 165-66.

investigating the Biblical witness; (2) remaining fundamentally open to new data and emergent schemas; (3) cultivating the heart of an artist; and (4) creating strong “holding” environments..

(1) Turning to Scripture to help us identify the characteristics of God’s Thirdness / Holy Spirit can lay the groundwork for inquiry and cooperation that crosses Christian denominational and cultural divides.²⁵ A pedagogy for participating in God’s imagination takes seriously the descriptions of Spirit which emerge from the witness of Scripture.²⁶ Scripture suggests that God’s Spirit is creative (Gn 1:2), life giving (Ez 37:1-14; 1 Cor 15:45), and renewing (Ps 104:30). It suggests that She is prophetic (Is 42:1-4; Jl 2:28); that She liberates and restores broken communities (Jgs 3:7-11, 6:33-35, 11:27-29; 1 Sm 11:6-7); that She stands in judgement against oppressive regimes (1 Kgs 22); that She fosters diversity and orchestrates harmony (Acts 2:1-18). It suggests that She helps us to interpret sacred traditions (Jn 14:26); that She helps us testify to the truth (Mt 10:19-20). She is no “ghost in the machine”:²⁷ She sets things in motion, “driving” (Mk 1:12), “conceiving” (Lk 1:31, 35), “bringing to birth” (Jn 3:5). The pedagogy that I am describing invites students to investigate Scripture rigorously so that they can develop and begin to test their own hypotheses about what God’s Spirit is really up to in the world.

(2) As Ben Quash argues, a theological method that honors the Spirit takes up new findings and new articulations, discerning in retrospect whether and how they may fit in God’s plan.²⁸ A pedagogy for participating in God’s imagination cultivates openness to what is new and emerging. It remains open to unexpected new facts (Secondness), and to emerging interpretations and ethical schemas (Thirdness). “I am about to do a new thing, [says the Lord]; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Is 43:19)

When believers take Secondness seriously, they acknowledge historic realities that once seemed unthinkable, but now attest to God’s glory: for example, the Spirit is poured out upon gentiles (Acts 10-11); abolishing slavery becomes a Christian ideal. They also acknowledge the facts and feelings of their own experience. A pedagogy attuned to God’s Spirit opens up spaces where teachers and students can practice the art of “telling it like it is.” Such a pedagogy cultivates the virtue of *parrhēsia* – “frank and honest speech” – which Scripture portrays as a gift of the Spirit (e.g., Acts 4:31).²⁹ Paulo Freire and other critical educators suggest some ways of

²⁵ This is the contention of Jack Levison, *Inspired: The Holy Spirit and the Mind of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 201-204, 221-27.

²⁶ For a broad-ranging, textually detailed, and thoughtful reflection on the Scriptural witness concerning spirit / Holy Spirit, see Levison, *Inspired*, and Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994; German original, 1992).

²⁷ “A coherent theology of the Spirit requires us to reconsider the nature of divine agency.” Molly Truman Marshall, “Participating in the Life of God: A Trinitarian Pneumatology,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 149.

²⁸ Quash, *Found Theology*, esp. 18, 27-28, 275-78.

²⁹ Cf. also Acts 9:17 with 28. On *parrhēsia*, see Stanley B. Marrow SJ, “*Parrhēsia* and the New Testament,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (1982): 431–446; and further, John P. Falcone, “Do Not Quench the Spirit: Rainbow Ministry and Queer Ritual Practice in Catholic Education and Life,” in Christine Firer Hinze and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, eds., *More than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity in the Catholic Church, Volume I: Voices of Our Times* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 121 and 206-7 n. 7.

shaping this kind of classroom: by loving our students; by practicing education as the critical co-investigation of our shared reality; by speaking openly about race, gender, class, and power.³⁰

When believers take Thirdness seriously, they look out for new schemas that explain data better, and for new models to guide future action. For example, as Willis Jenkins has cogently argued, none of our human traditions are today “morally competent” to tackle climate change, pollution, and global economics: these challenges are more complex, more intergenerational, and more interactive than any tradition has heretofore faced. A pedagogy attuned to God’s Spirit invites learners to take up and re-express religious traditions. Assignments invite students to write, create artworks, and pursue projects that grapple with intractable, real-life problems. Through prayer, mystagogy,³¹ and creative ritual, students call to God’s Spirit to raise up the new lifestyles and new solutions that they and all humans will need to survive.

(3) Just as artists put words, colors or musical timbres together in compelling new ways,³² the Spirit brings different creatures together into wholesome, richer, and unexpected new harmonies.³³ A pedagogy for participating in God’s imagination cultivates sign-making-and-interpretation, and an “artist’s heart.” This means giving students the space and the tools to create “codifications” of their religious, personal, and social experience, codifications which they can then critically explore to make sense of their lives.³⁴ It means making rich materials available and accessible: Scripture and rituals, theological texts, natural objects, and artworks both religious and secular.³⁵

In this pedagogy, assignments and exercises guide students as they explore the possible meanings and the potential affordances that these varied materials provide. Teaching “scaffolds” their writing, artworks, and in-class or service projects; curriculum trains students to express their religious thoughts and commitments in fresh and compelling new ways. Like good artists, students are encouraged periodically to step back and evaluate their compositions (whether

³⁰ For an excellent introduction to the spirit of critical pedagogy, see Peter Mayo, *Echoes from Freire for a Critically Engaged Pedagogy* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

³¹ Mystagogy: prayerful, structured reflection on ritual experience that occurs *after* a ritual has been experienced. See Kathleen Hughes, *Saying Amen: A Mystagogy of Sacrament* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1999).

³² “To compose” a poem, painting, or piece of music: from the Latin *componere*, “to put or place one thing next to another.”

³³ For this section on the pedagogy of artistry, see Maris Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987). Two others who see religious education in terms of teaching artistic creativity are Derek Webster (see discussion in Joyce Miller, “Using the Visual Arts in Religious Education: An Analysis and Critical Evaluation,” *British Journal of Religious Education* 25, no. 3 (2003): 200-213), and Heather Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection* (London: SCM, 2014), esp. Part IV: “Poetics, Theology and Practice,” 131-185.

³⁴ The language of “codification” comes from Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2007 [original 1968]), 114-24. Freire’s classical method requires teams of visiting and local investigators to create codifications that his students in turn could investigate. The Freire-inspired “Theatre of the Oppressed” provides a model in which the students themselves create and explore their own codifications. See Marie-Claire Picher, “Democratic Process and the Theater of the Oppressed,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 116 (Winter 2007): 79-88; Toby Emert and Ellie Friedland, eds., “*Come Closer*”: *Critical Perspectives on Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

³⁵ A pedagogy rooted in God’s imagination fits well with Mary Boys’ view that religious education “makes traditions accessible” and helps students to discover and express those traditions’ transformative power. Mary Boys, *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions* (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 1989), 193-218.

privately, in groups, or with expert/teacher input). At the end they are invited to discern (as Quash says) whether their “flight of imagination” has landed “upon a *sanctifying* effect.”³⁶

A good way to learn the skills that are required for good artistic coaching is to undergo basic training in an unfamiliar art medium oneself.³⁷ Learning to express ourselves in even one new medium can teach us how to free up our own creativity; it can teach us how to free up our students.

(4) The psychology of art and play therapy underlines how creativity requires a robust “holding environment,” where freedom and security are in healthy balance. D.W. Winnicott was the first to articulate how such an environment allows for the emergence of play-like processes like art-making and fantasy by avoiding both too much chaos and too much dominating control.³⁸ Attentive grownups³⁹ can establish a good holding environment simply by being present to youngsters in a mature, thoughtful, non-dominant way. Teachers can “hold” the learning environment by articulating expectations or setting formal guidelines; in time these can produce well-worn, healthy habits by which the students learn to “hold” space for themselves.

When tackling fraught issues that cut close to the bone, solid frameworks can sequester anxiety and free up attention so that investigation, abduction, and discernment can take place. These frameworks might consist of prayer and ritual, for example, praying through a series of women’s biblical stories before and after a class session on sexism. They might be highly formalized rubrics of performance, like the skits of Bibliodrama⁴⁰ or the social analysis games and *tableaux vivants* of Theatre of the Oppressed.⁴¹ The more often one employs a good holding framework, the more quickly a group can learn to enter into it, and the more deeply they may be able to work. A pedagogy for participating in God’s imagination can prepare its participants for deep and lasting gestalt shifts, that is, for moments of real conversion.

...

The practices I have described here – close reading; openness to new data and schemas; training for artistry; building holding environments – are good pedagogical tools in themselves. Are they perhaps also integral to a pedagogy of Christian *theosis*?

³⁶ “It might be said that the business of searching (and finding) in the Spirit ... legitimates ‘any flight of imagination’, provided this imagination ultimately alights upon a *sanctifying* effect.” Quash, *Found Theology*, 232, original emphasis.

³⁷ As a religious educator, I have experimented in collage, poetry, liturgics, and drama/performance. In her *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, Harris describes how self-consciously learning to paint, to dance, and to clown can deeply shape the educational sensibilities of teachers and ministers.

³⁸ D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989). On the holding environment in religious education, see Carol Lakey Hess, “Educating in the Spirit,” *Religious Education* 86, no. 3 (1991): 383-398.

³⁹ In the tradition of Winnicott, these are often described as the “good enough mother” or “good enough parent.”

⁴⁰ Peter A. Pitzele, *Scripture Windows: Toward a Practice of Bibliodrama* (Los Angeles: Torah Aura / Alef Design Group, 1998).

⁴¹ Picher, “Democratic Process.”

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