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Source: *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, Vol. 38, No. 2-3 (May-September 2017), pp. 167-178

Published by: University of Illinois Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/amerjtheophil.38.2-3.0167

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I. Introduction

Donald Gelpi, SJ (1934–2011) saw his life's work as an attempt to construct an integral systematic theology during a time when such projects were deemed passé and undesirable. Such attitudes did not deter him though, and he worked quietly in his office at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley for several decades developing such a system and teaching it in his classes and lectures. During those years, he produced works on theological method, sacramental theology, the Trinity, and Christology.

Grounding his systematic theology was a theological method defined by his fellow North American Jesuit, Bernard Lonergan. In his seminal work, *Method in Theology*, Lonergan articulated eight "functional specialties" for carrying out the various tasks in theology. He described the fifth function, "Foundations," as a normative account of reality that bridges the first four (Research, Interpretation, History, and Dialectic) and the last three (Doctrine, Systematics, and Communications). The concept of "conversion," for Lonergan, played an important role in the bridging function of "Foundations."

This article provides a basic overview of Gelpi's theology and focuses on how he integrates aspects of classical American philosophy into Lonergan's method. After providing some background for Gelpi's project, the article will detail his neo-Peircean metaphysics of experience and his concept of conversion. It concludes with an estimation of the import of Gelpi's project for contemporary theology.

II. Background

Gelpi had a synthetic and encyclopedic mind. A theologian steeped in the Catholic Christian tradition, Gelpi also wanted to explore the possibilities of inculturating this tradition in the thought forms of North America.[1] He studied theology in the Jesuit tradition both here in the US and abroad (Belgium).

1. For autobiographical details of Gelpi's life, see Donald L. Gelpi, *Closer Walk: Confessions of a U.S. Jesuit Yat* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2006).

American Journal of Theology & Philosophy · Vol. 38, Nos. 2–3, May–September 2017

The cornerstone of his theological education was the Neo-Thomism-Neo-Scholasticism and Transcendental Thomism that characterized Jesuit education immediately before and during the Second Vatican Council.[2]

During this period, Gelpi was profoundly influenced by the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner. Rahner was so central to Gelpi's early thought that he wrote a book on Rahner's theology before he finished his doctorate.[3] He especially admired Rahner's ability to reformulate traditional Catholic theological doctrine in terms of modern philosophical concerns and cultural sensibilities. Although Gelpi would eventually offer a serious critique of the philosophical foundations of Rahner's system, he nevertheless spent his early career largely trying to articulate Rahner's thought in terms of American philosophical insights. In this process, he would not only emulate Rahner but transform his theology.[4]

Although thoroughly schooled in European forms of theology, Gelpi believed that his most important contribution to theology lay in his ability to interpret theology in terms of North American and US modes of thinking, thus anticipating and pioneering so-called "inculturated theology."[5] To this end, he began his doctorate in Philosophy at Fordham University with a desire to further study the work of American philosophers like Charles Sanders Peirce, Josiah Royce, and William James. Gelpi eventually realized that the locus of a distinctively North American frame of reference derived more from the work of the great Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson than any other individual thinker. Gelpi's painstakingly detailed analysis of Emerson yielded a doctoral dissertation and eventually a book.[6]

The study of American sources also created in Gelpi an insatiable desire to learn even more about the work of the New England Puritans and especially the creative synthesis of the Calvinist preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards. He combined this with a thorough study of the American Enlightenment. The thought of the "founding fathers"—particularly Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and the authors of *The Federalist Papers*—

2. Gerald A. McCool, *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism* (New York: Fordham University, 1989), 257–64; Donald L. Gelpi, *Committed Worship: A Sacramental Theology of Conversion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 1:34–91.

3. Gelpi, *Committed*, 83. See also Donald L. Gelpi, *Life and Light: A Guide to the Theology of Karl Rahner* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966).

4. Gelpi, *Committed*, 83.

5. Steve Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1992); Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Markyknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1985).

6. Gelpi, *Committed*, 120–32. Donald L. Gelpi, *Endless Seeker: The Religious Quest of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991).

comprised a type of American rationalism that reacted both against the British monarchy and the Calvinism that came to its most stark formulation in the American Puritan movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[7]

Gelpi found in the work of this extremely diverse body of thinkers many common threads of thought that, woven together over time, created a uniquely American way of interpreting reality. Among the most important insights that links these thinkers is their understanding of and reliance on some concept of experience. American thinkers tend to privilege experience and find in it the basis for both rationalism and the dominant form of American religiosity. Experience generates the criteria to distinguish between theories that are authentic and genuine and those that are too abstract, hollow, superficial, or false. Of course, there is a wide variety of meanings given to experience in American thought. But Gelpi interpreted experience as a "root metaphor" that acted as both a foundational idea and a hermeneutical key to understanding American thought.

Besides experience, Gelpi also held that most American thinkers had a profound interest in the human ability to undergo deep and sustained transformation, reorientation, and growth in most dimensions of their lives. Beginning with the pioneering work of Jonathan Edwards, American thinkers have been interested in "conversion." Conversion refers generally to the ability of individuals to adapt to changing circumstances, to grow and develop new habits and skills, and to undergo dramatic personality shifts in response to deeply felt emotional and intuitive experiences.

For Gelpi, the idea of conversion, construed as the ability to develop and evolve over time, resonates through the work of Emerson, Parker, Peirce, James, Royce, and Dewey, as well as other twentieth century social theorists and psychologists.[8] Gelpi's own personal history and study convinced him of the centrality of conversion for theological reflection and urged him to a deeper analysis of the process of conversion and its special relationship to the American root metaphor of experience. In theological circles of the latter half of the twentieth century, the experience of conversion comes to its highest point of theoretical analysis in the foundational value assigned to it by Lonergan. Gelpi believed that Lonergan had revolutionized the understanding of conversion by showing that it comes in a variety of forms and need not only occur

7. Donald L. Gelpi, *Varieties of Transcendental Experience: A Study in Constructive Postmodernism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000).

8. Donald L. Gelpi, "On Perceiving the Human Condition North Americanly: A Strategy for Theological Inculturation," in *Grace as Transmuted Experience and Social Process and Other Essays in North American Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).

in religious contexts.[9] Lonergan demonstrated that there were "natural" forms of conversion like intellectual and moral conversion that were not necessarily dependent on any explicit religious sentiment or awareness.

Thus, over the last thirty years of his life, Gelpi developed two central ideas: one, a metaphysics of experience primarily based on the work of C. S. Peirce, but also in dialogue with the work of Kant, Emerson, Dewey, Whitehead, and G. H. Mead;[10] and two, a theology of conversion that integrated this metaphysics with aspects of the work of Lonergan. His metaphysics of experience grounded his theology of conversion in a way that he believed critically mediated the Christian tradition and the contemporary American cultural ethos.[11]

III. Experience and Conversion: Gelpi's Integration of Peirce and Lonergan

What exactly do we mean when we use the word *experience*? It is perhaps the most confusing term in theology and philosophy—Gelpi frequently called it a "weasel word" because its meaning often seemed so elusive and indeterminate. In the opening pages of his 1994 book, *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology*, Gelpi clarifies his understanding of *experience* by contrasting it with four other ways in which the word has been construed. First, in many situations, the term "often means the kind of practical wisdom that comes from more or less long-term exposure to some reality, mode, of procedure, or problem." We find this use of the term, for example, in the phrase, "Only experienced personnel need apply," or in the response, "What you say does (or does not) correspond to my experience."[12] Besides this common usage, Gelpi notes that some philosophers sometimes "restrict the term 'experience' to . . . knowledge yielded by what medieval philosophers called 'the powers of sense,' namely, the five external senses, proprio-sensation, emotion, imagination, and sense judgments."[13]According to Gelpi, other philosophers, including those more influenced by modern and/or Kantian thought (Gelpi cites Lonergan),

9. Gelpi, *Committed*, 162; Bernard Lonergan, *Method In Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 237–44.

10. Gelpi discusses experience in numerous books and publications, but his most thorough analyses of the theory are to be found in *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994); and "The Metaphysics of Experience" in *The Gracing of Human Experience: Rethinking the Relationship Between Nature and Grace* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 263–314.

11. Gelpi here is endorsing the work of Lonergan, *Method*, 131–32.

12. Gelpi, *Turn*, 2

13. Ibid.

also define it rather narrowly. These philosophers equate "experience" with "all uncritical cognition," thus contrasting it with what they identify as forms of critical cognition such as understanding, judgment, and decision. A final understanding of the term, which Gelpi identifies with John Dewey's thought, includes both the precritical and the critical forms of cognition that make up "the entire spectrum of human evaluative responses." This spectrum includes "sensations, emotions, imagination, judgments of feeling, hypothetical rational inferences, deductions, and the inductive validation or invalidation of deductive predictions." And yet, while this concept of experience is broader than others, Gelpi argues that it upholds an unsatisfactory distinction between "the 'what' of experience with its 'how,' equating the meaning of 'experience' with the latter."[14]

Gelpi then identifies what he takes to be the broadest philosophical approach to the term *experience*. He argues that this concept of experience, associated with Whitehead's process metaphysics, "includes both the what and the how of knowing . . . what one experiences stands within experience, not outside of it." Gelpi makes a case for this concept of experience over the others on the grounds that "the inclusion of both the what and the how in the meaning of the term 'experience' allows one to transform it into a metaphysical category, universally applicable in intent."[15]

But Gelpi does not fully endorse Whitehead's philosophy. First, he uses the term *experience* itself as the "root metaphor" for describing reality metaphysically, in contrast to Whitehead, who employs the metaphor of "organism." Insofar as this is the case, Gelpi's metaphysics of experience seeks to avoid defining reality along the lines of a self-contained entity. Gelpi finds severe philosophical shortcomings in Whitehead's process approach to experience. He calls attention to the fact that Whitehead's metaphysics, as inspired by William James, construes the most fundamentally real entities as drops or occasions of experience, as the "interrelation of concrete percepts and abstract concepts."[16] But by construing experience in this way, Gelpi argues, Whitehead "transform[s] ideas [i.e., concepts] into principles of being," and thereby commits the very fallacy of misplaced concreteness of which he is so critical.

Taking his cue from C. S. Peirce, Gelpi discerns in most constructs of experience one form or another of conceptual nominalism, meaning that they tend to divide experience into concrete *perceptions* and abstract *conceptions*.[17] Ac-

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 2–3.

16. Gelpi, *Gracing*, 279.

17. Ibid., 168–69.

cording to the critique, both aspects of experience, perception and conception, connote the subjectivity of experience. But if experience is only "real" for the individual who experiences it, it cannot necessarily be generalized or inferred to the wider community or universe, thus creating an ontological breach between subjective experience and objective reality.

Appropriating and expanding upon Whitehead, Gelpi defines experience as "a process made up of relational elements called feelings," and at the level of conscious experience, "one finds three generic kinds of relational feelings: values, decisions, and tendencies."[18] But he defends this construal of experience, and his choice of experience as a root metaphor for describing reality metaphysically, on Peircean grounds.[19] He claims that "the logic of [Peirce's] position allows one to identify a triadic construct of experience with the real."[20] As Gelpi interprets it, Peirce's triadic logic "avoids the fallacy of positing that essences exist in their own right in either concrete sensible things or in some transcendent Platonic realm," it asserts the "presence of laws," or "habitual tendencies to act or respond in specific ways under specifiable circumstances," and it "defends the mind's ability to grasp those laws rationally and inferentially."[21]

Peirce's triadic logic reflects a triadic metaphysics that includes, first, "particular, qualitative possibilities," second, "concrete actions and reactions, concrete imminent activities," and third, "real, habitual generality."[22] Whereas Peirce labels these categories as Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, Gelpi refers to them as Quality, Fact, and Law.[23] But the importance of this for Gelpi is that

18. Gelpi, *Gracing*, 278. For Gelpi, the term *feeling* in Gelpi's thought refers to the relational components or "variables" that constitute reality. The interactive total of these variables "make up" experience.

19. Ibid., 281.

20. Ibid.

21. Gelpi, *Turn*, 6.

22. Gelpi, *Committed*, 116.

23. For Peirce, every philosophy grounds itself on an account of one or more of these categories. For instance, Hegelianism is an instance where the category of Thirdness so dominates the other categories as to negate them (*aufgehoben*). Whereas pure Nominalists would believe that the first two categories are the only *real* aspects of experience, relegating the third category to *mere* thought. Cartesianism accounts for the second and third categories but denies that we can have any *real* knowledge of the first. Peirce believes that many forms of Post-Cartesian philosophy (including Kant) give full account to the second and third categories, but minimize or cannot fully account for the first (while acknowledging it to some extent). More precisely, Kant fails to realize the connection between Firstness and Thirdness because, by reducing all experience to percepts and concepts, he cannot explain how experience moves beyond a specific fact and the intellectual evaluation of that fact. This

a triadic metaphysics of experience overcomes the "subject-object" dualism so detrimental to modern thought, the nominalist construal of experience critiqued by Peirce, and helps to explain the real continuities and generalities in human experience.

Three different types of feelings constitute experience: "Each of the generic variables which give dynamic structure to the process we call human experience makes a different contribution to that process. Evaluation contributes a feeling of presence, of qualitative particularity and of possibility. Decisions make experience actual, concrete, and both environmentally and socially rooted. Tendencies endow experience with reality, generality, and a dynamic orientation toward the future."[24] "Evaluations" allow one to become actively present to oneself and one's world. In humans, evaluative responses range from basic sensation to emotions, memory, imagination, and critical/rational reflection. Evaluations always end in "decisions" or judgments. This evaluative process in fact generally terminates in decisions almost immediately, prior to rational evaluation. If one touches a hot pan, one decides immediately to remove his/her hand without going through an extensive process of evaluation before a response. For Peirce, most experiences in daily life exhibit this type of direct "responsive-ness." But every human experience connotes a real interaction with the world whereby one grasps, evaluates, and responds to stimuli. This interaction causes individuals to acknowledge both their individuality and their broader relationship to a vast web of relationships that enmesh their lives.

Insisting that what one experiences stands within experience and not outside of it, Peirce argues that experiences are interacting realities that "mutually interpenetrate" one another.[25] Experience is not discreet and episodic but is a continuous flow that can never be contained in any one moment or event. Every moment of experience occurs within other and wider forms of experience. And yet within the continuous flow of experience, Peirce distinguishes three distinct but interrelated aspects, thus giving his construct a triadic rather than a Whiteheadian dipolar character.

First, because experience is part of a continuum, there always exists a whole spectrum of possible evaluative responses to any stimuli. Second, experience always exhibits a specific evaluative response that usually takes the form of a

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means that there is no way to explain how experiences overlap or are shared, generalized, or communicated to others. Furthermore, without all three categories, there will necessarily be a break between a thought and a subsequent judgment to follow an habitual tendency of response or to engage in some different course of action.

24. Ibid., 291.

25. Ibid.

reaction, decisive action, resistance, or free collaboration when confronted with an "other." Third, within experience itself, there are "tendencies," habits, and patterns of evaluative responses that not only shape one's responses but in turn shape future responses so that there is genuine continuity within experience that can be understood and predicted. This third element means that one can predict what could have been (had conditions been different) and what could be (if certain conditions are met in the future).

This model of experience can be illustrated as follows. I am driving down a street one weekday morning. There are literally a thousand things calling for my attention: the cars in front or behind me, flashing lights and stop signs, the radio, the other person riding with me, the shops that we are passing, people walking along the street, birds in the trees, etc. Suddenly, a ball rolls out in the street in front of me. I react quickly by applying the brakes before hitting the ball. I turn instinctually to look for the child who I presume from past experience will be coming after the ball. The presence of this child makes it evident to me that I am passing a school and playground that I had not noticed yet. After the child has picked up the ball, I automatically proceed more slowly and with more caution because I always drive carefully when I am near a school or playground. Noticing the school, I recall my own childhood and ponder for a moment days when I used to play ball with great abandon. This nostalgic reflection cedes to a more immediate concern when I come to a four-way stop sign and determine my turn to cross. After checking to ensure that the way is clear, I proceed through the intersection noticing that one of the cars happens to be the exact one that I want to own. This pattern of perception and acting and reacting in habitual ways is the natural flow of experience.

Experience conceived triadically implies that it is more proper to say that I *am* an experience than that I *have* an experience or experiences. Selves are evolving experiences out of an ongoing and dynamic social process where experiences, while relationally distinct, exist within one another. Selves emerge out of dynamic interaction with one another. Gelpi asserts that an experience containing Law/Thirdness and acting autonomously denotes a self, and a self that is open to and capable of conversion denotes a human being. Because this self is both an open-ended emerging reality and a set of habits and tendencies that generally exhibits continuity over time and space, its existence does not need to be explained at some deeper or more basic level.[26] The character of

26. Gelpi, *Committed*, 116; over against "essentialists" who reify "ideas as metaphysical principles of being." He continues: "In Peirce's world, then, an essence does not exemplify a metaphysical principle of being but a qualitative sensation or perception abstracted from it senses or perceives and from the mind which does the sensing and perceiving. We do not discover essences in things; we create them through an act of abstraction. We do so when we

every finite self is defined not by some essential, metaphysical form (as earlier "substance" metaphysics suggests), but by its total history.[27] For Gelpi, this explains why a triadic construct of experience serves as a metaphysical category sufficient to describe reality in itself.

A triadic construct of experience also helps Gelpi clarify the relationship between "person" and "freedom." For Gelpi, a person is "an autonomously functioning self—endowed with continuity of life and capable of responding with self-conscious responsibility to entities like itself."[28] Human freedom emerges naturally though the conscious choice of a person to take responsibility for some aspect of his/her life, thus empowering personal autonomy and developing new dimensions of human nature. Given the overlapping and interpenetrating nature of experience, selves and persons are inherently social. All human persons share some Facts in common and potentially can relate organically over time. The richness of experience is that it requires the "other" in order that the person emerges as an autonomous and free agent within the constant flow of reality. For Gelpi, the divine community of God is among "others" to which one can respond. Only by self-consciously accepting the divine offer of a supernatural relationship on its own terms does the graced transformation of nature occur. Only human persons interact consciously with divine grace for Gelpi, even though God's gracious initiative effects and extends to all creation. All forms of existence, from electrons and protons, to plants and animals, signify emerging realities that demonstrate all three dimensions of experience to some extent. Plants have a range of possible qualitative responses out of which they act and react when confronted with certain kinds of stimuli (sunlight, water, wind, etc.). That they act or react in generally predictable way means that they too have habits and tendencies that are both stable and developing over time.

Human experience, however, is defined by self-conscious initiative and the capacity to act autonomously. Human beings are shaped by and in turn have the capacity to shape their tendencies, behaviors, and habits. They can consciously choose to tend to act one way rather than another, and over time the dynamic tendencies of an individual can emerge as an autonomous self who literally takes "responsibility" for his/her actions and reactions. When acting selves display self-control and take direct and conscious responsibility for their

prescind the way that we sense and perceive something from what we sense or perceive and our minds which do the sensing and perceiving. Having created essences, we then arrange them alphabetically in dictionaries."

27. Gelpi, "On Perceiving," 47.

28. Gelpi, *Gracing*, 301.

actions, we call them persons. Given this definition, the fullness of personality can only arrive with adult decision making, but children can be understood as emerging adults who are nonetheless making decisions and judgments with varying degrees of consciousness that will shape them as fully autonomous persons.

Gelpi refers to the decision to take adult responsibility for some aspect of subsequent growth and experience a conversion.[29] Conversion marks the movement from irresponsibility to responsibility in some dimension of human activity. One converts when one consciously decides to take control of some dimension of one's behavior and actions. There are of course a variety of different realms of experience over which one can determine to take control. Gelpi identifies these major areas or dimensions of experience as affective, intellectual, moral, sociopolitical, and religious. Furthermore, any initial decision will either be ratified or diminished by future decisions that impact the overall character of the person who is emerging over time. Conversion in one aspect of one's experience dynamically interacts with other aspects that may or may not have experienced conversion.

For Gelpi, conversions in each realm of human experience differ from one another by the normative criteria that one invokes to judge and develop responsible human behavior. In other words, each type of conversion denotes a fact in one's emerging experience that alters the evaluative process one uses to view all the possibilities that one can engage and creates new habitual tendencies that eventually become part of the ordinary and predictable pattern of one's life. Through his understanding of experience, Gelpi is able to consider not only how persons literally transform themselves in significantly new ways but also how different forms of conversion can dynamically affect and alter other dimensions of emerging individual experience. Because all experiences are relational and interconnected, each type of conversion conditions and shapes the other areas and levels of initial and ongoing conversion in one's life.

Each type of conversion can condition and shape the rest of one's experience either positively or negatively by their absence. Gelpi reflects systematically on what he refers to as the "dynamics" and "counterdynamics" of each type of conversion as they efficaciously interact with each other in the within the wider process of experience. By "dynamic of conversion" Gelpi means the way in which one form of conversion tends to foster and reinforce other forms of conversion. By "counterdynamic" he means the way in which the absence

29. For a more in-depth exposition of Gelpi's model of conversion, see John J. Markey, "Liberation as Conversion," in *Moses in Pharoah's House: A Liberation Spirituality for North America* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2014), 77–101.

of conversion at some level tends to distort and even subvert the presence of conversion at another level.[30]

IV. Conclusion

Donald Gelpi spent most of his career attending to an area of foundational theology that many of his contemporaries thought had been settled for Catholic theology in the years immediately preceding the Second Vatican Council. Various schools of thought (most notably, for Gelpi, the movement referred to as Transcendental Thomism favored by Karl Rahner and Lonergan, among others) found a way of both incorporating and challenging the basic premises of modernity so as to transform theology for a new historical, social, and cultural milieu. These doctrinal and systematic theologians developed methodologies that allowed a "turn to the subject" in Catholic theology that seemed to avoid mere subjectivism.

Gelpi found both flaws and fissures in this method, problems that he was anxious to address before they compromised the whole project of post-Vatican II Catholic theology. He turned to US pragmatism, and particularly the philosophy of C. S. Peirce, to reformulate these foundations in a way that addressed the shortcomings he discerned in post-Kantian thought. For Gelpi, this revised foundational approach also had the added benefit of offering a more receptive ground for US cultural and contextual theology. Without this philosophical clarity, Gelpi feared that a contemporary "turn to experience" was destined to end in incoherence and mere subjectivity.

Bernard Lonergan believed that the functional specialty he called foundational theology offered a means to adjudicate between competing claims of the tradition and to bridge the gap between differing social historical contexts, all the while communicating and fruitfully interpreting the revelation at the heart of the Christian tradition. Central to this process was the experience of conversion that represents the most fundamental Christian response to God's self-communicating offer of a personal and transformative relationship with all human beings. Central to this theological project, then, is the meaning of experience and conversion.

Donald Gelpi offers a metaphysics of experience that provides of a proper framework for Lonergan's concept of conversion. By suggesting that it is better to refer to persons as experiences than as having experiences, it is possible to think of human beings as fundamentally dynamic, social, and transformative

30. There are numerous places where Gelpi discusses the dynamics and counterdymanics of conversion, but for his most concise account, see *Gracing*, 294ff.

agents acting within a dynamic, social, and emerging reality. This experiential framework helps explain and contextualize conversion as the primary issue in foundational theology. A proper understanding and description of conversion is essential to developing foundational theology as the critical link between mediating and mediated dimensions of the theological enterprise. Without this critical link, it proves difficult, if not impossible, to properly interpret the Christian doctrines that serve as the basis for both systematic and practical theology. Without some critical method of analysis and authentication, the process of historical, cultural, and social contextualization of theology becomes mired in confusion and unintelligibility. Gelpi's project sought to avoid this by embedding Lonergan's concept of experience within a Peircean metaphysics of experience.