

Ananta Kumar Giri (ed.), *Pragmatism, Spirituality and Society: Border Crossings, Transformations and Planetary Realizations* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021)

In its ordinary use, “pragmatism” is almost a pejorative term, suggesting an efficiency-driven, no-prisoner-taken concentration on getting things done, without much or any room for deeper reflection or reconsideration. Philosophically, however, the same word recalls a US-born school of thought and, in particular, the work of “pioneering thinkers and savants such as Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey” (xi). These thinkers and savant, according to the book’s editor, aimed at rediscovering the ancient Aristotelian spirit of praxis-centred intellectual inquiry and the Hegelian one of purposeful social normativity, neither of which is inherently inimical to deep thinking and/or to openness to self-reassessment.

The book hereby reviewed is the third instalment in the editor’s series on “Practical Spirituality and Human Development” for the Asian branch of Palgrave Macmillan, but also the companion of a scholarly tome entitled *Pragmatism, Spirituality and Society: Consciousness, Freedom and Solidarity*. It is, in short, part of an original, multi- and interdisciplinary attempt at bringing together the much-neglected philosophical tradition of pragmatism and that streak of contemporary scholarship, in the humanities and the social sciences, offering erudite musings and insightful meditations on known forms of spirituality arising from Western, but above all Eastern, religious traditions. As such, it falls into the domain of religious studies that, in the history of *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*, have frequently found room in the published book reviews and in our readers’ cultural interests.

Moving between US pragmatism and relevant tokens of spiritual wisdom from the world’s religions, novel and somewhat unexpected intellectual bridges are built in this edited volume, linking together seemingly remote thinkers and conceptions of nature, the self, moral conduct, human knowledge, and/or the pursuit of a meaningful existence, at both the individual and collective levels. All these bridges, quite obviously, comprise building materials excavated clearly and conspicuously from the pragmatist tradition, but they do not limit themselves to this tradition.

Exemplarily, the second chapter of the book (the first chapter serving as an introduction to the book), i.e., Ananta Kumar Giri’s “Pragmatism and Spirituality: New Horizons of Theory and Practice and the Calling of Planetary Conversations”, establishes a possibly unprecedented theoretical conversation involving Sri Aurobindo, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. This is done, with great exegetical finesse and considerable creativity, so as to cast light on the fundamentally praxis-based institution of human language, the personal self, and the social context in which these two meet and interact magmatically.

A similar syncretism and a shared focus on (A) the composite nature of and, above all, (B) the many spiritual paths allowing for the construction of transient yet long-lived forms of

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consciousness by way of complex interplay between the actual individuals and their socio-cultural milieu, are to be retrieved in most chapters in Part II (of two) of the book. This is the case especially with regard to chapters nine (Alina Therese Lettner's "Peirce's Semiotic Pragmatism and Buddhist Soteriology: Steps Towards Modelling 'Thought Forms' of Signlessness"), ten (Richard Hartz's "Spiritual Pragmatism: William James, Sri Aurobindo and Global Philosophy"), twelve (Hans Bakker's "Gandhi, Hegel and Freedom: *Aufhebungen*, Pragmatism and Ideal Type Models") and fifteen (Kanchana Mahadevan's "Pragmatism, Spirituality, and the Calling of a New Democracy: The Populist Challenge and Ambedkar's Integration of Buddhism and Dewey").

The book's third chapter is entitled "Pragmatism, *Geist* and the Question of Form: From a Critical Theory Perspective". Penned by Pietr Strydom, it explores the German roots of US pragmatism. Thanks to this line of study, Strydom shows how much of the German notion of "Spirit" was preserved in its Anglophone, pragmatist rendition, and which avenues this rendition still opens up before us in order to connect, in a constructive and authentically spiritual manner, with the world of nature surrounding us, which German philosophy had frequently highlighted and prioritised in many of its Romantic expressions as well as in some of its later ones.

The ecological focus anticipated in this chapter continues in the fourth chapter ("Naturalistic Spirituality, Religious Naturalism, and Community Spirituality: A Broader Pragmatic View" by Ann K. Kegley) the fifth ("Pragmatism and the 'Changing of the Earth': Unifying Moral Impulse, Creative Instinct and Democratic Culture" by Julie Mazzarella Geredien) and, to a lesser extent, the sixth (Marcus Bussey's "Towards Spiritual Pragmatics: Reflections from the Graveyards of Culture"). Taken together, these chapters provide much food for thought with regard to our generation's greatest challenge, i.e., the planet-wide collapse of all life-support systems, natural ones *in primis* (e.g., unpolluted water aquifers, self-sustaining oceanic ecosystems), but often human-made as well (e.g., well-funded democratically elected authorities monitoring and controlling both national and transnational corporate businesses). As we all know, the wellbeing and, eventually, the very fate of humanity's future generations are currently at stake, probably like never before in history.

As to the remaining chapters, they address more strictly spiritual issues (e.g., Paul Hague's seventh chapter, "Mystical Pragmatics") or technical aspects of pragmatism and/or related disciplinary areas (e.g., Janusz Baranski's eight chapter "Pragmatism and Spirituality in Anthropological Aesthetics"), while retaining at large the book's overall syncretic character and multicultural body of expert references. As such, the book is bound to appeal to, and be approachable by, cultivated persons that are versant in both Western pragmatism and

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recent classics in Eastern spiritual traditions, notably Aurobindo, Tagore and Gandhi. Unsurprisingly, then, as far as the present reviewer is concerned, the eleventh chapter is the one that I was able to appreciate in greatest detail, for it chiefly addresses mainstream Western philosophical conceptions (i.e., Kant and US pragmatism) and the spiritual tradition that I am most familiar with (i.e., Roman Catholicism), showing how the neo-Thomist criticism of the modern metaphysical scepticism championed by Descartes, Hume and, above all, Kant, can be applied, plausibly if not successfully, to US pragmatism as well, given its anti-metaphysical stance, which has been purported most vocally, in recent decades, by the neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty.

The book's essential wisdom is, however, as simple to grasp as it is deep and relevant. In short, if we wish to save ourselves from the errors and the horrors of modernity, as patently displayed by the ecological devastation of our planet, then the most practical, pragmatic thing to do may well be to pay some serious attention to the cultivation of the spirit, which has been neglected, if not ridiculed and abandoned, by far too many cultures and individuals that recognise only a very limited set of contingent, this-worldly, and largely sensuous values as worth pursuing and maximising. Sometimes, new, good ideas and praxes are old, forgotten ideas and praxes.

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