



Pragmatism, Spirituality and Society

New Pathways of
Consciousness,
Freedom and Solidarity

Edited by
Ananta Kumar Giri

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For Arvind Sharma, Peter Heehs and Paul Schwartzentruber who have helped us in finding new relationships between pragmatism and spirituality and cultivate creative pathways of consciousness, freedom and solidarity.

FOREWORD

Economic and technological forces connected to globalization have made us, inhabitants of the earth, an increasingly interconnected people. Thanks to the Internet, boundaries of time and space that held sway for centuries are now much more fluid and permeable, so that people in one part of the world can instantly be in communication with people everywhere and can access information globally. This fact of interconnection now runs up against the horizon of real ecological crisis and tangible threats to our planetary survival. These two fundamental features of our contemporary world, interconnection on the one hand and environmental danger on the other, transform the way we look at life and its organizing principles. In combination, they demand of us an ecological responsibility that issues in new ways of thinking about fundamental issues.

This volume with its many insights and provocations is fully up to that challenge. Among its multiple riches and offerings, I want to highlight four central contributions.

First, it deals at length and from many different directions with themes that are central to an ecological age: consciousness, freedom, and solidarity and their interconnections. It approaches each of these multifaceted themes from a variety of directions: philosophy, science and spirituality as seen in both the West and in the long, 4000-year-old Indian tradition, with their many branches. Consciousness, both as an ontological feature of reality and as a phenomenological fact, has deservedly got much attention in contemporary research and day-to-day discussion.

Philosophy, science and spirituality have different methods and approaches to the study of consciousness, and it is a real boon to have them brought into encounter with one another. Freedom, likewise, has many different meanings and significations. It is clear, however, that freedom, both negative and positive, is central to an ecological perspective. We have to free ourselves *from* deleterious modes of thought and living and *for* thought, experience and action that fosters universal harmony. Finally, it is good to see the idea of solidarity given its due in this volume. Many political and spiritual leaders from Antonio Guterres, the current UN Secretary-General, to the Dalai Lama have rightly called for the cultivation of universal responsibility. Solidarity is the virtue and social disposition that underlies such responsibility.

Second, it is good to have in this volume a genuine cross-cultural philosophical conversation. For too long, at least in the West, philosophy has been seen as an exclusively occidental preoccupation with its roots in Greece. This is both a distortion of history and an impoverishment. It ignores the two other major centers of philosophy, India and China, which have longer and more variegated philosophical traditions than the West. Moreover, there is much evidence that documents the influence that the Indian tradition had on the ancient Greeks. That this neglect is also an impoverishment is shown by the rich dialogue that is portrayed here, where William James, Martin Heidegger, Levi-Strauss, Jordan Peterson and Slavoj Žižek are brought into discussion with Swami Vivekananda, R. Balasubramanian and various Indian traditions to the mutual benefit of all parties. One instance, among many, of such benefit is to see the practical and performative character of philosophy, which has been a time-honored emphasis of Indian traditions being taken seriously by engaged (in the Sartrean sense) and action-oriented schools of Western philosophy, like Marxism and pragmatism with their emphasis on *praxis*.

Third, it is both refreshing and valuable to be presented with a volume that is truly and rigorously interdisciplinary in nature and scope. The modern university has also devolved into a multiversity, where various specialized disciplines exist and work in silos that have little to do with one other. One example, among many, of such fragmentation is how the idea of cosmology which, in the Indian traditions and in Dante, dealt with the order of things and the place of humans in the cosmos has now shrunk to a narrow scientific investigation within physics. The harmful consequence of such shrinkage is documented at length in the literature around the idea of the *Anthropocene*, where an exaggerated and unbalanced view of

the status and role of humans in the cosmos is at the root of climate change and other environmental disasters. What is as perturbing is the change in the very conception of the modern university from a center of broad learning, knowledge and research into an instrumental and functional space primarily responsible to the demands of the economy and the job market—hence the great prestige of the so-called STEM disciplines of science, technology, engineering and mathematics to the neglect of the humanities and social sciences. In sharp contrast, this volume concretely demonstrates the value of good interdisciplinary discussion. Reference is made in one of the essays of a “spiritual economy” and an “economics of solidarity,” ideas that are largely absent in most of the technical literature of present-day economics and yet which were part and parcel of the discipline through much of its history. It is instructive to be reminded that Adam Smith, widely considered the father of modern economics, was a Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh.

Fourth, this volume presents us with different varieties of pragmatism. Running through them are the common themes of uniting thought and action in the world, inquiry and participatory agency. Jurgen Habermas, for example, emphasizes the linkage of knowledge with social interests and thematizes social agency as communicative action. Here, he follows the lead of the American pragmatist, John Dewey, who speaks of the importance of “a common faith.” On the Indian side, both Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi see the potential of spirituality as a binding force for social cohesion, even though both of them are also aware of how divisive, and sometimes violent, institutional religion can be. This too is a vital question for our times. How does one go beyond the factionalism, tribalism and exclusivism of much contemporary religion, which has resulted in violence and strife, to a common faith and purpose in protecting and nurturing our planetary home? Oddly enough, mystics of different traditions point the way. By going deep into the wisdom and richness of different religious traditions, one touches a spiritual foundation that is shared, even though the traditions may describe that foundation differently with names like God, The Absolute, Buddha-nature, Emptiness, Ground-of-our-being, to mention a few. This is not to say that these terms are synonymous in any straightforward sense. They are rather what the Spanish-Indian philosopher-theologian Raimon Panikkar calls “homeomorphic equivalents,” that is terms that have a similar function in their

respective systems. This social and communicative aspect of spiritual practice serves as a corrective to the tendency to see spirituality in overly individualistic and private terms, and allows for a richer connection between a spiritual pragmatism and social solidarity, with consciousness acting as a mediating force.

It is my hope that this volume will be read and studied for these and other reasons. It is a *timely* book that not only contains essays of intrinsic interest, but which also equips us for our ecological responsibility. It is appropriate to congratulate the publisher, editor and contributors for a genuinely interesting and valuable volume. Heidegger, who in his important work charted aspects of being as seen from a Western perspective, was fond of quoting the German poet, Hoelderlin: “But where the danger is, there grows the saving power also.” This book illumines facets of both the danger and the saving power.

Joseph Prabhu

PREFACE

Pragmatism is an important aspect of intellectual movements in nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States which had had an influence on rethinking and transforming theory and practice in other parts of the world. It has both spiritual and pragmatic dimensions. We explored different dimensions of pragmatism, spirituality and society in the companion volume to this book from Palgrave Macmillan entitled *Pragmatism, Spirituality and Society: Border Crossings, Transformations and Planetary Realization*. In this volume, we explore issues of consciousness, freedom and solidarity as these relate to both pragmatism and spirituality.

This book has been long in the making. I am grateful to all the contributors to this volume for their kindness and patience. I am grateful to my dear and respected friend Professor Joseph Prabhu for his insightful Foreword. I am grateful to Connie, Li and Sara Crowley Vigneau of Palgrave Macmillan for their kind encouragement and support. I thank Vishnu Varatharajan for his kind help and support in preparing this volume.

We dedicate this book to Arvind Sharma, Peter Heehs and Paul Schwartzentruber—three creative seekers and scholars of our times. Arvind Sharma is a border-crossing scholar, thinker and seeker whose works into many fields of philosophy and spirituality are truly inspiring. I have been inspired by a work of him *Hinduism for our Times* almost two decades ago which had helped me to think of creative and non-dogmatic ways of travelling with our faith, religion and spirituality (Sharma 1996).

Peter Heehs is a dedicated, creative and silent seeker of our times whose life and work are a challenge and inspiration to many of us. Peter explored spiritual pathways of life which brought him to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. He nurtured the Archives in Sri Aurobindo Ashram. He also wrote books of poetry. He has written insightfully about modern Indian history and the freedom struggle. Then, he wrote a book called *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* in 2008. Some of the devotees of Sri Aurobindo felt offended at one or two lines in the book and took him to court but finally the Supreme Court of India dismissed the case against him. His life became mired in pain and suffering with so much anger unleashed at him in the name of Sri Aurobindo but he has lived a life of equanimity and dedication to knowledge with and beyond it. His two books after this, *Writing the Self: Diaries, Memoirs and the History of the Self* and *Spirituality Without God* help us charting new pathways of relationship between practice, courage to life and truth and spirituality in a creative and silent manner (see Heehs 2013, 2019). In his *Spirituality Without God*, Heehs helps to realize that it is possible to be spiritual without believing in God which has a deep resonance in many creative paths of pragmatism such as nurtured by American pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty. Heehs argues how an element of skepticism is essential for spiritual practice and here what he writes about Martin Luther is deeply significant: “Luther was as good a Greek and Latin scholar as most of the humanists of his time, but he opposed a central humanist idea: that philosophical scepticism was a usual way of dealing with contending dogmas. Yet scepticism was part of the fabric of the times, and Luther owed more to it than he was ready to admit” (Heehs 2019: 136). Both pragmatism and spirituality deal with the perennial and contemporary challenges of closure, absolutism and fundamentalism and here Heehs also challenges us to realize how our task is to be ever mindful in our each step not to fall a prey to closed-minded absolutism in thinking, practice and social organization. Here again what he writes in his *Spirituality Without God* helps us cultivate our journey with pragmatism and spirituality with creativity and courage:

To my mind the danger is not that individuals practicing spiritual disciplines will destroy whatever “integuments” may be holding society together but that society will reabsorb all nonconfirming individuals into its undifferentiated mass. It is remarkable and disheartening, that many of those who call themselves “spiritual but not religious” end up becoming as intolerantly religious as any fundamentalist Muslim or Christian. [...] Kierkegaard,

an extremely nonfundamentalist Christian, waged a lifelong battle against the Danish state church and, in more general terms, against what he called “the crowd.” He viewed the conflict between the individual and the crowd in black-and-white terms: “There is a view of life that holds that truth is where the crowd is” and another view “that holds that wherever the crowd is, untruth is.” He himself insisted that “The crowd is untruth” and the link between the two was so strong that people who had found some truth came together in a crowd, “untruth would promptly be present there.” The instruments of the crowd, in particular the press, could never “run down the lies and the errors.” (Fake news was just as slippery in nineteenth-century Copenhagen as it is in twenty-first century Washington.) The only suggestion he could offer was for individuals to form themselves into voluntary communities instead of amorphous crowds. The crowd, he said, is a collection of numbers summing up to zero. The community on the other hand is “a sum of ones” and also “more than a sum.”

Both Tolstoy and Kierkegaard were theists, but they were my kind of theists: dedicated to individual effort, at odds with institutions, suspicious of the mob. They are the theists I can learn from, though I still respond better to the ideas of nontheists such as Nagarjuna and Nietzsche. Finally, however, the crucial distinction is not between nontheists and theists, but between people who are open-minded and people who think that they have all the answers. The universe is large and full of surprises. The answers served up by the closed-minded today will look ridiculous tomorrow. (Heehs 2019: 236–237)

Paul Schwartzentruber is a creative scholar and seeker from Canada who has been engaged with many creative experiments in thinking and practice and voluntary open communities in the sense Heehs talks about in the above paragraph and what contributors such as Jacqueline Kigley and Julie M. Geredien in our volume call beloved community building on the works of Josiah Royce, John Dewey and Martin Luther King Jr. He has been a friend of Gandhi and India and has taken part in the Gandhian movement of Ekta Parishad. He has written insightfully on many issues in spirituality, social action and critical philosophy inviting us to realize both practice and spirituality as an ever wakeful walk with friendship. Pauls’ work, as well as those of Arvind Sharma and Peter Heehs, helps us finding new relationship between practice and spirituality and envisioning and embodying spiritual pragmatism creatively and differently.

Finally, I hope this book helps us cultivate new pathways of pragmatism, spirituality, consciousness, freedom and solidarity. I offer this poem which hopefully can be a companion in our journey:

A MILLION MOSES AND A MILLION SAVITRI

Ananta Kumar Giri

A Million Moses
A Million Savitri
Moses floating in the river
The soul taking him in
Is Savitri
But Savitri also receives the dead child in the shore
Now in the Mediterranean sea
On European shores
Children drowning and floating in the shores
Savitri doing a new Earth yoga
To receive them
Bring new life
Moses gets a commandment from God
He creates ten commandments
These commandments became commands
Mosaic distinction
Between Jews and Gentiles
Violence and arrogance of the chosen
The Chosen people
Our people
Mosaic distinctions create death
Savitri overcomes death
By creating new humus of life
Where Jews and Gentiles
Israelites and Palestinians
Dissolve their fences
And eat humus together
Seeing hearts in the walls
Creating a new temple
A temple, mosque, and synagogue
And a church of care
For the whole of humanity
Savitri sings to Moses
A new dance of Freedom,
Consciousness and Solidarity
A new life
A new eternity
Moses dancing with Savitri

A Million Moses
 A Million Savitri
 Dancing for a new symphony of life.¹

I also offer the following lines from Sri Aurobindo's epic *Savitri* where Sri Aurobindo challenges to us to cultivate "pragmatism of the transcendent truth" and wisdom in our works:

Her pragmatism of the transcendent Truth
 Fills silence with the voices of the gods [...]
 For all the depth and beauty of her work
 A wisdom lacks that sets the spirit free (Sri Aurobindo 1993: 196).

Chennai, India
 21 February 2020

Ananta Kumar Giri
 Maha Sivaratri

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¹This is from my forthcoming book of poems, *Alphabets of Creation: Taking God to Bed*. This was composed in the home of my friend David Sarnoff, James Island, Charleston, June 14, 2017. For David Sarnoff, friend and psychologist, who first told me about his idea of creating a million Moses.

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CHAPTER 1

Pragmatism, Spirituality and Society: An Introduction and Invitation to New Pathways of Consciousness, Freedom and Solidarity

Ananta Kumar Giri

Pragmatism invites us to cultivate new relationship between practice and consciousness, practice and spirituality, freedom and solidarity. This book explores different dimensions of pragmatism, spirituality, consciousness, freedom and solidarity. In our related volume on *Pragmatism, Spirituality and Society: Border Crossings, Transformations and Planetary Realizations*, I had discussed how Sri Aurobindo wants to transform pragmatism into a nobler vision and practice of pragmatism. In this volume as we deal with consciousness, freedom and solidarity the following thoughts of Sri Aurobindo are helpful to walk and mediate together with:

A pragmatic mentalism would not be in its essential principle other than the attempt already made by the race to make the intellectual Reason the

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governor of life, but this has been done hitherto by a reason preoccupied with the external fact and subjected to it; mind has attempted to read the law of life and its possibilities and organize anew within those limits by invention, device, regulation, mechanisms of many kinds, or it has attempted to govern life by mental ideas of an abstract order, such as democracy or socialism, and devise an appropriate machinery materializing that mental abstraction so as to make the dominance of the idea practical and viable. A subjectivistic pragmatic mentalism would try to act more subtly and plastically on life; it would seek for "truth of being," some idea or ideal of its perfection or practice or efficiency, right way of being or living, and attempt to let that grow in the individual and govern his nature, grow in the collective life and govern its formations. Or it would place the development and organization of the mental life of man as the primary consideration and life and society as a convenience for this true aim of human existence. A new civilization no longer vitalistic or mainly political and economic, but intellectual, cultural, idealistic, taking up the ancient ideal of man, the perfected mental being in an *ennobled* life and sound body, a great expansion of human mind and intellect, a mankind more mentally alive, even a human race grown capable of culture and not only of a greater external civilization, thus fulfilling on a large human and universal scale the tendencies which in the past appeared only in a few favored countries and epochs and even then imperfectly and mostly in a cultured class, might be the consequence of this change. That prospect has its attractions, and for the humanist and the intellectual it is in one form another their utopia of the future. But this would not really carry the human evolution farther; it would only give it for a time a larger, finer and freer movement in its widest attainable circle. If the mentality remained too pragmatic, too eager to rationalize or organise life according to the idea, the peril of mechanisation and standardization would be there. If the mental ideas governing the individual and social life took a settled form, became a cultural system of the mind, this system would after a time exhaust its possibilities and human life would settle down into a groove, satisfied and non-evolutive, as happened in the Graeco-Roman world or in China or elsewhere where the mental intellect became the predominant power of life. If this arrest were avoided either by the multiplication of different cultures – different peoples acting upon each other but escaping the tendency to replication and standardization which is the tendency of the human collective mind or by a free progressiveness of the human intelligence making constantly new ideas, new ideals, still the movement would eventually be in a circle or an ellipsis which could be a constant description of a new-old movement in the same field. In fact our external mind moving on the surface tends always to exhaust itself rapidly; if it expends