BOOK REVIEW

THE AESTHETICS AND ETHICS OF FAITH:
A DIALOGUE BETWEEN LIBERATIONIST
AND PRAGMATIC THOUGHT

Tad Bratkowski


From the title and subtitle of Christopher D. Tirres’s book, we already ascertain that the work addresses four discrete philosophic disciplines or traditions: American pragmatism, Latin American liberation, aesthetics, and ethics. And at first glance, each of the four does not evoke an immediate connection to the other three, but Tirres is capable of putting them into a genuine conversation. Tirres’s book is organized into eight chapters, with the first and eighth serving respectively as a succinct introduction and conclusion. I will analyze these eight chapters as three separate yet interrelated projects.

In the introduction, entitled “American Faith in a New Key,” we find a concise statement of his wide-ranging project of connecting liberation theology to pragmatism and aesthetics to ethics. He states: “The challenge . . . becomes how best to reconnect a vision of faith practice that takes seriously cultural identity and popular aesthetics, on the one hand, with a vision of faith practice that is tied to the idea of concrete change and civic activism, on the other” (7). In his second chapter, Tirres gives a detailed, practical description of this aesthetics of faith in action. He recalls his experiences as an observer of the Good Friday services at the San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas. The most elaborate of these liturgies is the *via crucis*, in which actors recreate Jesus Christ’s trial and crucifixion through San Antonio’s streets with thousands of onlookers. Yet Tirres pays just as much attention to a smaller service on Good Friday evening. In the *Pésame*, an actress portraying the Mother Mary grieves for her son and, in turn, consoles parishioners who lost family members in the past year. Through these liturgies “the aesthetics of ritual blend into ethical concerns” and they serve to “reference the resurrection less as a supernatural event and more as a recurring, everyday reality” (38). I will return to his practical account of ritual later to evaluate this project’s success.

In chapters 3 through 5, Tirres undertakes his bridge-building project between Latin American/American Latino theologies and classical American pragmatism. Chapter 3 centers on the thought of several Latino theologians, such as Alejandro García-Rivera, María Pilar Aquino, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, and Roberto...
Goizueta. Tirres ties these thinkers into the aesthetics of faith by noting that U.S. Latino theology takes an “aesthetic turn” in which these thinkers abandon “a ‘detached’ view of aesthetics or religion” in order to “root [their] work in particular histories, stories, artistic forms, and ways of life within the Latino/a context” (55–56). This chapter ends with an introduction to key concepts in pragmatism, such as habit, problematic situation, and instrumentalism. The focus of chapter 4 is Tirres’s fusing of pragmatic aesthetic experience with Latino theology’s religious experience. Dewey’s empiricism is nonreductive, consisting of qualitative moments in experience’s stream rather than atomistic sense data. Hence, Tirres notes that experience includes intermittent moments of aesthetic “undergoing” and moral faith as ethical “doing” (91–92). At the same time, “pragmatism offers a theory of religious faith that is not beholden to institutional forms of religion” (96). However, Tirres suggests that James’s and Dewey’s accounts of faith fail to disclose the social dimensions of religion, and on this issue, the Latino experience can help to strengthen pragmatism (98). This project continues in chapter 5, where Tirres turns his attention to the Latina ecofeminism of Ivone Gebara. Tirres once again builds mutually beneficial bridges. Pragmatic epistemology’s focus on inquiry complements Gebara’s contextualism and holism. At the same time, her unique insights can aid in projects pragmatists find favorable, such as deconstructing rigid doctrine, critiquing dichotomies, and finding creative solutions to practical problems (128).

Whereas the project of chapters 3 through 5 is building new pathways between pragmatism and Latino theology, chapters 6 through 8 endeavor to reconstruct old pathways. The sticky issue Tirres tackles is how to reconcile Deweyan aesthetics, which seems open to religious experience, to the hostility that Dewey himself shows in A Common Faith toward institutionalized religion and religious practice. Tirres proceeds in chapter 6 by drawing out the major themes throughout Dewey’s oeuvre that point toward the social aspects of the human community. Tirres notes that for Dewey “an individual gains direction from the community and is thus dependent on it” (130). This leads Tirres to Human Nature and Conduct “for a renewed appreciation of social customs and habits,” and, in turn, to Dewey’s view of education “to show how customs and habits may actually be transformed into social goods” (144). Tirres begins the actual reconstruction project in chapter 7. He brings to light bits and pieces of ritual practice that appear in Dewey’s naturalism, aesthetics, and ethics. After showing that there are openings for religious ritual in Deweyan experience, Tirres’s final task is to argue against Dewey’s critique of the religious institutions that have domain over said rituals. Tirres decides to read A Common Faith “in a more aesthetic light, wherein religious practice adds meaning to present experience and may serve as a springboard for better ways of living” (188). With this method, he is able to eschew Dewey’s concerns about supernaturalism by focusing on the ameliorative effects rather than the metaphysical bases of religion. Finally, in the concluding chapter, Tirres wonders if his reconstruction of Dewey’s thought on religion could still be called ”Deweyan.” Ultimately, he affirms that if “one sees in Dewey’s concept
of the religious a set of aesthetic, ethical, and educational concerns that are much wider than the question of one’s adherence to the doctrinal objects of faith, then efforts here will seem entirely Deweyan” (198).

The value of Tirres’s book to American philosophic scholarship is twofold. His bridge-building project fits in well with contemporary trends in pragmatist study that aim to bring new voices into the philosophic conversation. Tirres is careful not to label thinkers such as Goizueta and Gebara as “pragmatists.” Instead, he suggests that their views have common elements with this tradition, and both sides are strengthened through conversation. These bridge-building chapters constitute the book’s greatest asset for inclusion as a textbook in a philosophy course, such as a class on Latin American or Latino philosophy or contemporary pragmatism. The book’s reconstructive project on Deweyan religion is its greatest, and perhaps riskiest, scholastic endeavor. It can be a dangerous prospect to speak of a philosopher’s thought in the conditional tense, such as “Dewey would have believed this . . .” Then, it is doubly dangerous to say, “Dewey would have believed this . . . if he hadn’t actually written this.” Thankfully, Tirres avoids these dangers by sketching out a Deweyan account of meaningful religious practice. Though this viewpoint may not be properly called “Deweyan” in the sense of directly coming from Dewey’s written work, it is definitely Deweyan in expressing the spirit of Dewey’s ideas, which the contemporary community of pragmatists finds favorable.

A final word about Tirres’s most practical chapter: his discussion of the Good Friday liturgies at the San Fernando Cathedral is both the book’s highlight and its one shortcoming. The weakness here is not the shift toward practicality. To bring a practical, experiential account into a philosophic work is indeed a very pragmatic move. I am convinced by Tirres that these rituals serve as good examples of pragmatic aesthetic experience and thus provide useful counters to Dewey’s concerns with institutionalized religion. However, what weakens Tirres’s descriptions of these ceremonies is their particularity, limited as they are to a single church, on a singular calendar day, from a single religious tradition. I simply want to see more coverage of religious rituals, especially since the chapter on these rituals is one of the book’s shortest. For those of us theistic philosophers who stray from church services or feel disillusioned by religious ritual, more examples could help to convince us of organized religion’s ameliorative possibilities.

Overall, I find this work to be excellent scholarship, both as exegesis and reconstruction of John Dewey’s thought and as a bridge-building application of pragmatism to Latin American and Latino theologies. Perhaps the book’s only shortcoming is its practical discussion of religious practice, where Tirres lovingly recounts a few examples of their power and depth, but leaves his audience wanting more in terms of length and breadth.

Tad Bratkowski is a recent Ph.D. graduate from the Department of Philosophy at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. He began teaching as an adjunct instructor at McKendree University in fall 2015. Email: tbratko@siu.edu