

Pragmatist Catholicisms

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Pragmatist Catholicisms brings together two great, still-vital philosophical traditions in critical and complementary concern to advance our understanding of aspects of our contemporary situation that have aroused profound concern among philosophers and fellow citizen-thinkers in the twenty-first century. These problems challenge us to reframe and to reground our faiths, our hopes, and our loves through new processes of reflection on both high and low points of our experience, through pluralistic collaborative inquiry about causes and cures for our current problems, and through value-focused transformative action to actualize more of the ideal possibilities that reflection and inquiry help us to imagine.

Some have framed the historical and contemporary relationships between Pragmatism and Catholicism as hostile and mutually exclusive. William James took some famous swipes at the Catholic Church. Certain passages John Dewey wrote can be taken as mocking key doctrines of the Catholic Church, such as this famous passage from *Experience and Nature* (1929): “Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful. That things should be able to pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to [humanity], and thereby to themselves; and that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales” (1981: 132). Some contemporary pragmatists take Dewey’s rejection of a two-realms metaphysics to be a rejection of the possibility of a God, of a final judgment of human conduct, and of an afterlife of any kind. Perhaps such a reading of Dewey motivated Pope John Paul II’s claim in *Fides et Ratio* (1998), that pragmatism, like postmodernism, like Marxism, and historicism, is incompatible with a commitment to truth and thus, with faith of the kind that contemporary people need in these troubled times. Or perhaps it was the global influence of Richard Rorty, who in a late-life conversation with Gianni Vattimo, repented of framing his “neo-pragmatism” as an “atheism,” when what he really intended was an “anti-clericalism.”

We see things differently, as do internationally influential philosophers like Hans Joas, Nicholas Rescher, and Charles Taylor, and some members of the rising generation of American philosophers who have presented papers at conference sessions we have organized during the past two years. The future “mellonistic” and “melioristic” transactions we imagine between these two schools of thought involve healthy, creative, and mutually transformative tensions. These can be framed by noting overlaps and differences among some of the key commitments of Pragmatism in the classical American tradition and Catholicism during the post-Vatican II period. Pragmatists in the classical American stream agree about:

- Non-dualistic, communicative continuities in experience;
- Evolving, richly ordered complexity as a possible tendency within nature, including for humans;
- A “divine” dimension within our experience that drives us to inquire about to seek this “more”;
- Experience-grounded and transformed intelligence advancing through problem-focused inquiry;
- The importance of communities of inquiry and of democratic living.

Catholic philosophers in the post-Vatican II period, amidst hotly debated differences, have emphasized:

- Vision and concern for “the whole”;
- Divine cosmic origins and immanent presence;
- Human incarnation of the divine, not only in the Christ, but in our lives;
- Transformative resurrection of our bodies;
- Loyalty to a dynamic tradition, including evolving understandings of *caritas* and social justice.

We hope to foster productive transactions between these two traditions, in which “public philosophers” within each will function as “liaison officers” promoting collaborative inquiry toward great ideal goals: health and wholeness for Planet Earth, peace among and within human persons, pluralistic inclusion of differences in more deeply democratic modes of living, fuller actualizations of *caritas* and social justice, richer experienced senses of purpose in living, and appreciative service to the sources of our being.