to redress unwarranted forms of human suffering" (121), offering meaningful pathways "to help change the world" (110). *Liberating Spiritualities* is an intellectual and pragmatic feast, liberated from the constraints of rigid organized religion.

AGBONKHIANMEGHE E. OROBATOR, SJ
Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, USA
aorobator@scu.edu

Author's Response

What an honor it is for me to respond to these three insightful commentaries. Each reveals a rich horizon of background theories: Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator interprets my work through the pastoral vision of Pope Francis; Jacqueline Hidalgo places *Liberating Spiritualities* in the context of our politically fraught moment of imperial epistemologies and imperial religion; and Antonio Sison draws connections between my project and the theological work of two influential Catholic theologians, Edward Schillebeeckx and Stephen Bevans. In what follows, I will address some specific questions raised by these three perceptive readers, with the aim of widening the conversation for readers at large.

It might be helpful to begin with a word about the context in which I wrote *Liberating Spiritualities*. After I published *The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith: A Dialogue Between Liberationist and Pragmatic Thought* in 2014, I knew I wanted to continue to explore the methodological links between liberation theologies in the Americas and US pragmatism. In both works, I argue that philosophical pragmatism should not be reduced to a kind of crass utilitarianism, as the everyday use of the word "pragmatic" might suggest. Rather, the pragmatic tradition shares with liberation approaches a highly contextual and anti-foundational mode of thinking that values communal inquiry and social criticism. Furthermore, its starting point—lived experience—and its focus on the artful reconstruction of experience through habits and actions that are guided by embodied intelligence, provide compelling anchor points for theological method. Between the publication of *The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith* and *Liberating Spiritualities*, I was buoyed by the fact that other scholars, such as Lilian Calles Barger, Michael Hogue, and Michael Raposa, were

https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2025.10068 Published online by Cambridge University Press

finding fruitful convergences between pragmatism and liberation theology as well.[22]

But as I began to envision what *Liberating Spiritualities* would look like, I faced a conundrum. I knew I wanted to focus on liberationist thinkers in the Americas who could be read in a pragmatic light, but by focusing so intently on their intellectual contributions, I wondered whether I might be inadvertently downplaying questions of context and lived experience. I asked myself: How could I ground the theoretical contributions of these authors in more contextual ways? Three pathways presented themselves. First, I made a conscious decision to work with a publisher (Fordham University Press) that would support my desire to balance theory and practice. Second, I made sure to provide some biographical context for each of the six thinkers. My hope was to show that their theories were greatly informed by their lived, daily praxis, and vice versa. And third, over a period of several years, I came to see a connection between my "practical" work as a volunteer with detained immigrants and my "theoretical" work as a scholar of religion. I came to appreciate how they were but two sides of the same coin. By and large, *Liberating Spiritualities* is an attempt to shine light on the "theory" side of spiritual praxis, while never losing sight of its rootedness and concrete expression in everyday practice.

Sison aptly picks up on the back-and-forth quality of my work, and I find his pendulum metaphor quite helpful. *Liberating Spiritualities* does indeed oscillate continuously between theory and practice, affirmation and critique. I am grateful for the connections Sison makes between my work and Schillebeeckx's concept of political holiness, which involves protest, praxis, and promise, and Bevans's synthetic model, which draws on a variety of perspectives to forge a mutually critical and mutually enriching dialogue. Both of these resources capture well the spirit of *Liberating Spiritualities*, and it was helpful for me to see new ways in which the book may carry theological resonance. On a related note, Sison wonders if I should qualify that spirituality, though anthropologically centered, need not be anthropologically reduced. As someone who has long been crossing the disciplines of religious studies and theology, I appreciate this suggestion. From the angle of religious studies, I see spirituality as a fundamental quality, or dimension, of human experience. Yet, from the angle of theology, I would agree with Sison that the "mystery" of faith

[22] Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Michael S. Hogue, *American Immanence: Democracy for an Uncertain World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Michael L. Raposa, *Theosemiotic: Religion, Reading, and the Gift of Meaning* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2025.10068 Published online by Cambridge University Press

remains an open question. This is not a discussion that I take up explicitly in the book, but it is certainly one worthy of further consideration.

Orobator opens his remarks by drawing on Pope Francis's 2024 apostolic letter, *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, in which Francis sharply contrasts a "fundamentally contextual theology" with a "desk theology." Whereas the former is deeply engaged with the culturally specific daily lives of human beings, the latter remains "detached" and "impervious" to the world and its existential challenges. Elsewhere, Orobator reminds us of Francis's distinction between the interior life and outward action, which both Orobator and Francis invite us to conjoin.

Both positions offer valuable insights, but I would also invite us to probe each further. When Pope Francis contrasts a "fundamentally contextual theology" with a "desk theology," he is talking about two options that exist at the opposite ends of a common continuum of experience. Max Weber might refer to these polar opposites as "ideal types," which are no doubt useful in teasing out conceptual differences. But what often gets overlooked are the many connective tissues that bind ideal types together in the first place. Accordingly, we should ask: In what ways does a "fundamentally contextual theology" require at least some elements of careful reflection (i.e., some habits and practices that may be loosely associated with "desk theology")? And conversely: What does a desk theology look like when its starting point is precisely the "problems, wounds, and challenges" of concrete, existential situations? I can't help but think here of the different paths taken by Camilo Torres, the Colombian priest-turned-armed revolutionary who was killed in battle, and Ignacio Ellacuría, a Jesuit priest and liberation theologian who was also killed by right-wing forces but who was targeted largely for his acute social analysis and prophetic scholarship. Both men were champions of praxis, but their intellectual emphases and personal choices led them down different paths. Whereas Torres emphasized the active and material dimensions of praxis, Ellacuría spent more time probing its social, philosophical, theological, and theoretical dimensions. At the end of the day, it is worth considering whether Ellacuría may have done more for the cause of liberation from his desk than Torres did with his rifle.

One of pragmatism's great contributions is to show that any talk of the relation between theory and practice is incomplete without a robust account of how embodied intelligence both sustains each and mediates their interaction. Orobator lauds Gloria Anzaldúa's capacity to articulate "the interior life as the formation of an enduring, resilient, and mature spirituality." This is certainly one way to interpret her, but I myself hesitate to speak of "the interior life" as a "foundation" of a mature spirituality. Such a way of putting it may inadvertently leave the impression that spirituality has a static "core." Rather, I

https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2025.10068 Published online by Cambridge University Press

find it more helpful to approach spirituality as an ongoing and ever-changing adaptive activity that is itself a meaningful expression of human intelligence at work.

The central role that intelligence plays within spirituality also connects to what is arguably Orobator's most pointed question. He wonders how oppressed people, like those in immigrant detention, can practice a form of liberating spirituality when they lack access to the resources of philosophical pragmatism. To this, I would simply say: the detained immigrants with whom I met do not need philosophical pragmatism to engage a liberating form of spirituality, for in their own *cotidiano*, many are already living it out. That said, I would hope that *Liberating Spiritualities* can serve at least two purposes. First, for those who are interested in the practice and theory of spiritual praxis, I hope the book not only sheds light on how analytically useful pragmatism can be for liberationist thought, but also, how liberation thought, in turn, has much to teach pragmatists about the theory and practice of faith, particularly when it is tied to a preferential option for the poor and oppressed. Second, on a more pedagogical note, I hope that interested readers will creatively translate and share some of the book's central insights in ways that are appropriate for their own justice-centered contexts, which might include individual research projects, classrooms settings, church or book groups, and pastoral accompaniment venues. Paulo Freire did not have peasants directly read his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but he did share the book's core insights in more dialogical and open-ended ways that were appropriate for those settings. In a similar way, I see the primary audience of *Liberating Spiritualities* as educated readers who might creatively convey useful insights from the book within their own spheres of influence. This reminds me of a saying, often associated with the Jesuits, that goes something like this: "If you teach one person well, you potentially teach hundreds."

Whereas Orobator's comments broach pastoral concerns, Hidalgo homes in on the epistemological relevance of *Liberating Spiritualities* in our era of imperial religion and imperial epistemologies. If white Christian nationalism is an example of the former, certain imperial ambitions of the US tech industry are illustrations of the latter. As Hidalgo keenly observes, the contextually embedded and highly relational conception of knowledge offered in *Liberating Spiritualities* is "quite distinct from the aspirations for 'intelligence' that [Sam] Altman and other US technology leaders gravitate towards."

Hidalgo raises a number of queries that emerge from her own training on the study of Christian Scriptures with an emphasis on minoritized and Latine critical perspectives. First, she offers additional resources for thinking through the decolonial aspects of curanderismo and spiritual healing, which are, admittedly, only perfunctorily addressed in *Liberating Spiritualities*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2025.10068 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Second, Hidalgo names a struggle she has in voicing her own critical response. She asks: "How do all of us who have been trained inside setter-colonial institutions learn to resist settler colonial language in how we respond to others and try to articulate our own perspectives on knowing?" If I am reading her correctly, I detect here a suspicion about US pragmatism as a presumably "dominant," or even "settler-colonial," intellectual discourse. Such a suspicion might very well arise from the fact that pragmatism is often associated with the work of C. S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, who were, of course, white men of European ancestry, all with strong ties to New England. But rather than retreat to the assumption that pragmatism is some kind of imperial intellectual discourse, I urge readers to consider both the content and expanse of the pragmatic tradition. James and Dewey, for example, were outspoken critics of US empire and defenders of democracy as a way of life. More contemporary scholars, from Cornel West to Charlene Haddock Seigfried to Gregory Fernando Pappas, invite us to use pragmatism as powerful tool of social criticism. Even more broadly, Richard Bernstein encourages us to think of pragmatism not so much as a particular school of thought, but rather as a radically open posture toward life, or what Bernstein refers to as an ethos of "engaged fallibilistic pluralism."

Seen in this light, pragmatism can help us to address pressing real-world problems in a wide range of social, cultural, and political contexts. Three excellent recent books attest to this: Michael S. Hogue's *American Immanence: Democracy for an Uncertain World* (2018), Nathan Crick's *Dewey for a New Age of Fascism: Teaching Democratic Habits* (2019), and Albert R. Spencer's *American Pragmatism: An Introduction* (2020). For our present purposes, Spencer's work may be especially relevant. As Spencer explains, pragmatism is often understood as an embodied philosophy that places embodied cognition as a central driver of human meaning-making. Another common interpretation is that pragmatism is a philosophy of experience that upholds a fundamental unity between mind and nature. Drawing on the work of Scott Pratt, Erin McKenna, Vine Deloria Jr., and others, Spencer invites us to think of pragmatism also as a philosophy of place that is rooted in the American experiment with all of its soaring highs and tragic lows. Seen in this light, pragmatism represents a wide tradition of thinkers "who engage with problems that emerge from the complex and tragic effects of settler colonialism and from the racial contract hidden behind the veil of American exceptionalism."[23] It is worth noting further that pragmatist scholars such as Scott Pratt, Bruce Wilshire, and James Maffie, all of whom are critical of the deleterious effects

[23] Albert R. Spencer, *American Pragmatism: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020), vii–viii.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2025.10068 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of settler colonialism, illuminate intellectual convergences between pragmatism and Indigenous thought.[24] As they show, pragmatism can be a powerful conversation partner in resisting imperial logics and practices.

On a related note, Hidalgo inquires as to whether I do a disservice to Ada María Isasi-Díaz (and, to a lesser extent, Agnes Heller) by describing aspects of their work as "underdeveloped" and "incomplete," respectively. As Hidalgo puts it, "Tirres almost pits two different women's ideas against each other, suggesting that they would be made more complete through the intervention of male and Euro-North American interlocutors (Dewey in particular)." As none of us, myself included, are immune from settler-colonial and patriarchal logics, I take this critique seriously, and I resonate with Hidalgo's decolonial and feminist hermeneutics of suspicion. Yet I wonder if this critique is fully warranted because the dialogue that I forge among Isasi-Díaz, Heller, and Dewey is far from one-sided or unidirectional. I do indeed draw on the work of Heller and Dewey to help unpack what is analytically at stake in such a rich concept as a "conscientized *cotidiano*," but I also illustrate how Isasi-Díaz has much to offer both Dewey and Heller, whose work I similarly critique.[25]

One aspect that I did not explore—and that I am most grateful to Hidalgo for pointing out—is Isasi-Díaz's graduate school experience at Union Theological Seminary. Having discovered that Heller's concept of "the everyday" was an important resource for a Latin American and Latina articulations of "*lo cotidiano*," I may have focused a little too intently on this particular genealogical link, thereby overlooking some other valuable resources such as the work of Katie Cannon and other womanist scholars at Union, which would have undoubtedly added valuable insight to my analysis.

I wrote *Liberating Spiritualities* to explore and celebrate the work of six exemplary thinkers. From beginning to end, I tried to offer analyses that are fair and even-handed, as well as sympathetic and constructive. Each of the book's six core chapters aspires to these goals, and chapter 5 on Isasi-Díaz is no different: I identify a lacuna in her thought and attempt to move the conversation forward. That said, synthetic analysis is an art that demands much discipline

[24] Scott Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Bruce Wilshire, *The Primal Roots of American Philosophy: Pragmatism, Phenomenology, and Native American Thought* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014).

[25] As I make clear and develop further, "Whereas Heller and Dewey are, at best, ambivalent about the redeeming aspects of religion, Isasi-Díaz appreciates the ways in which *lo cotidiano* may productively intersect with religion, as well as with questions of gender" (96).

https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2025.10068 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and creativity, as Sison reminds us. How artfully (or not) I engaged this task is ultimately at the discretion of individual readers.

Needless to say, scholarship is an ongoing process. There will always be blind spots, lacunae, and areas in need of further explication. If nothing else, critique offers authors and readers alike pathways for engaging our work anew in the future. In these dark times, the stakes are especially high, and all of us who are engaged in this kind of work need allies *and* critical interlocutors. Orobator, Hidalgo, and Sison are shining examples of both for me, and for this, I am deeply grateful.

CHRISTOPHER D. TIRRES
Santa Clara University, USA
ctirres@scu.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2025.10068 Published online by Cambridge University Press