

Book Review

Review of *The Essential Spiral: Ecology and Consciousness After 9/11*, by Ian Prattis. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002, 280 pp.

Review by Richard Arnold

Richard Arnold, a native of Alabama, has lived on Vancouver Island, B.C. since 1985. He is a long-time explorer and defender of wilderness, belongs to several ecological societies, and teaches English and Environmental Literature at Malaspina University-College. His first collection of poetry was published in 2002 by Leaf Press (Lantzville, B.C.). Recent journal and anthology publications include *The Wayward Coast*, *Wind Magazine*, *Sunstone*, *Terrain.org*, and *the Trumpeter*.

Ian Prattis, Professor of Anthropology and Religion at Carleton University in Ottawa, has published a multi-disciplinary book with a title which will resonate for anyone who has been following current events—particularly as regards “terrorism”—for the past two years. In fact, the title is, in my opinion, the only real weakness of the book; it “hooks” the post-9/11 reader and promises something it fails to deliver. Ironically, what the book does deliver is far superior to any “news” stories, et cetera, about the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks on September 11, 2001. If Prattis publishes a second edition, I would suggest he either delete “After 9/11” from the title, or say more in the book about this topic. After all, a reader does expect certain things from a title, especially one as fraught as this one.

I will pick at two more nits that need to be fixed before the book goes to a second edition: first, the annoying use of the words “lead” and “mislead” when the correct spelling should be “led” and “mised” (past tense). I noted this throughout the book. And I wonder why the publisher did not use recycled paper? Surely we have come to the point where every ethical publisher should at least try to employ recycled paper. (New Society, in British Columbia, is one who does.) Otherwise, this is an attractive and satisfying production. The book begins, as does each chapter, with an abstract or overview of the subject matter. A

bibliography follows each chapter, and there is a comprehensive and helpful index. The layout is functional and sturdy.

Although one picks this book up expecting to read about the terrorist events of 2001, what one really finds is a book on “mindfulness.” The author stresses that we must attempt to cultivate this virtue in every aspect of our daily lives. He frequently cites the Buddha, and other teachers from the ancient as well as present world. The application to “9/11” thus gradually becomes revealed as the book goes on: the best way, perhaps only way, to combat evil in any form is to develop an extreme “mindfulness” about things. Prattis reinforces the theme—at least as old as Buddha—that any meaningful action must start with the self. If we really want to heal the earth’s ecological and political wounds, each individual must first heal him/herself.

Actually, this is a fascinating book, perhaps more so because, as earlier stated, it turns out to be different from what one expects on first seeing the cover. Ian Prattis explains the choice of title: “The Essential Spiral insists that Ecology and Consciousness are inseparable, akin to the double helix of DNA. To separate the double helix eliminates life. The same portent applies to Ecology and Consciousness” (viii). The “walking meditation” (30–35) is an exercise which I have already begun using, and is simple enough for virtually anyone to use every day. The crux of the book is Chapter 4: Meditation for Gaia. Here, the author stresses the theme of self-healing, saying that no matter how discouraged, angry, or dejected he gets over the current state of Earth, his “first choice is to be still.” The final chapter, Guidelines to Recreate our World, will be most interesting to students and practitioners of Deep Ecology.

This is an effective and useful synthesis of Buddhism, meditation, and the global political climate of the twenty-first century. The book concludes with a short parable entitled “The Merchant and the Diamond,” in which a rich man is given an unexpected gift that changes his life. If I may employ the language of that story, *The Essential Spiral* is the diamond, and Ian Prattis has the great heart that gave it to us. Thank you, good sir!