Wrestling with God (review)

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WRESTLING WITH GOD. *By Paul O. Ingram.* Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006. 116 + xii pp.

Paul Ingram of Pacific Lutheran University is a long-time veteran of Buddhist-Christian dialogue and a generous contributor to the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies. His earlier book, *Wrestling with the Ox,* took the famous Zen ox herding pictures as an entry point for reflecting on the transformation of identity that can take place in Buddhist-Christian relations. The present book opens with the image of Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32 as a launching point for exploring religious diversity in a world ever more shaped by natural science. Ingram's thesis is that "Christianity is now in a process of decay and that dialogue with the world's religions—especially Buddhism—and Christian dialogue with the natural sciences are the two most important intellectual foci for thinking Christians" (p. x).

Relating his position to that of John Hick while questioning Hick's Kantian epistemology, Ingram proposes a pluralistic evaluation of the world's religious traditions—or at least some forms of them. Ingram seeks to be deeply rooted in the Christian tradition while being open to the legitimate variety of other religions. Nonetheless, Ingram has rather harsh words to say about "legalists and fundamentalists" without ever offering a precise definition of who is included in these terms. He describes fundamentalists in all religious traditions as "trapped in the conventional categories of their ideologies" (p. 21), but what counts as "conventional categories" or as "ideologies" is never fully clarified.

Ingram rejects any tradition's claim to have "the final or the exclusive or the inclusive Word about God" because this would be a form of idolatry, which Muslims call *shirk* (p. 19). Ingram's position would appear to condemn a very wide spectrum, including traditional Christians and Muslims who believe that their respective scriptures express God's final revelation. Such a grouping would appear to be far broader than those conventionally labeled "fundamentalist." For example, Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* expresses the traditional Catholic belief that Jesus Christ is the center of revelation and no further public revelation is to be expected before his Second Coming; the constitution also accepts historical criticism of the Bible and thus does not fit the usual model of "fundamentalism." Because "fundamentalist" is frequently not a contemporary form of self-designation, it would be helpful to have more specific guidance on how Ingram wishes to apply the term, especially to contexts that are not Christian. If all those who firmly hold traditional doctrinal views are included under this umbrella, Ingram's pluralistic thesis presents itself as firmly rejecting a considerable range of the world's religious traditions.

Citing Alfred North Whitehead and contemporary physics, Ingram finds plurality and interdependence to be at the heart of all forms of existence, "from sub-

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atomic particles to religious traditions to God" (p. 20). This is a clear rejection of the Muslim doctrine of *tawhid,* the radical oneness of God, which for Muslims excludes any notion of Trinity or plurality or interdependence in God. Even though Ingram clearly intends to include Islam among the community of acceptable religions, central Muslim beliefs in the oneness of God and the finality of the Qur'an appear to be unacceptable to his position.

If we ask about the criteria for distinguishing acceptable and unacceptable forms of religion, much in Ingram's discussion seems to turn on intuition and emotion. He tells us that the basis for a person belonging to one religious tradition rather than another is not rational argument; rather, "It all depends on what or who 'speaks' to you" (p. 31). While admiring a wide range of religious leaders, Ingram admits, "I don't 'experience' them. They don't 'speak' to me" (p. 31). Ingram acknowledges that his difficulty with fundamentalist Christians is strongly emotional: "Whenever I listen to fundamentalist Christians describe Jesus as a kind of best buddy, I feel a little creepy" (p. 32). Ingram is distrustful of claims of reason regarding religion: "You find yourself in a state of faith, that is you 'get' it—whether one is a Christian or a Buddhist or a Muslim or a Jew or a Hindu—the way you catch a cold, by contagion" (p. 32). Surely many persons who could be labeled "fundamentalist" have a strong sense of being "spoken to" and of "getting it."

The image of religion spreading by contagion raises further questions about criteria. In his wide-ranging theory of religion and culture, René Girard argues that mimetic rivalry and the surrogate victim mechanism work in tremendously destructive ways "by contagion." For Girard, mimetic rivalry is so powerful because it hides from consciousness, allowing people to think that their desires are spontaneous rather than imitative of a model. Similarly, in Girard's theory the surrogate victim mechanism depends on invisibility and spreads by contagion. For Girard, once people become aware that they are scapegoating an innocent victim, they can no longer make the same accusations in the same way; unmasking the mechanism weakens its effect. The journal of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, which studies and applies Girard's mimetic theory, is named *Contagion.* One need not accept all the claims of Girard's position to recognize that many violent forms of religion have historically spread by "contagion." It would be helpful to know more about Ingram's basis for accepting some forms of contagion while rejecting others.

At times Ingram's interpretations seem rather strained, as in his claim that "Mark teaches us that no human being and no religious community is greater than another human being or religious community" (p. 24). However, in the very opening chapter of the Gospel, John the Baptist does, after all, proclaim, "After me is coming someone who is more powerful than me, and I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mk 1:7–8).

Ingram also claims that "Buddhist tradition, Roman Catholic and Orthodox contemplative tradition, and mainline Protestant tradition agree: we have everything we are ever going to have and there is nothing to gain—absolutely

nothing—through practice, because practice and attainment are non-dual" (p. 38). Regarding the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, this claim is open to serious question. In the Roman Catholic tradition, those who have been redeemed by the grace of God given in Jesus Christ can, through the continuing power of God's grace, cooperate with God and contribute to their own well-being and that of others. In the language of Thomas Aquinas, grace gives the person a new *habitus,* a new power of operation that enables one to act in new, grace-filled ways that contribute to healing wounds and building up the common good. Greek Orthodox theologian Gregory Palamas advises his readers to not worry about intellectually understanding the process of deification *(theiosis):* "Attend rather to those works which will allow you to attain to it, for thus you will know it according to your capacities; for, as St. Basil tells us, he alone knows the energies of the Spirit who has learnt of them through *experience*" (*The Triads* III. i. 32). Again, the grace of God comes first, working a transformation; but humans can cooperate with grace in a process that leads to a changed condition.

Ingram also tells us that "Buddhists have not experienced the same degree of creative transformation as have Christians in their dialogue with Buddhist philosophy" (p. 91). While this is a judgment call that may well be true for many Buddhists, it is worth noting that the Kyoto school still stands as a landmark of creative transformation through dialogue with Western philosophy and Christian thought. A number of Buddhist participants in the second Gethsemani Encounter at Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, became interested in the monastic rule of Benedict and wrote an appreciative response, *Benedict's Dharma.* At the first Gethsemani Encounter, after chanting psalms in the choir with Trappist monks, Norman Zoketsu Fischer, former abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, posed a question about what it means for Christians to pray the psalms that seek violence on one's enemies (e.g., Ps. 140: "Let burning coals fall upon them"). While a number of the Christian participants struggled to reply, Fischer realized that there was more to reflect on. He studied Hebrew and a few years later published a book of Zen-inspired interpretations of the psalms, entitled *Opening to You: Zen-Inspired Translations of the Psalms* (Viking Compass, 2002).

Regarding dialogue with the natural sciences, Ingram draws upon the contributions of Alfred North Whitehead, Ian Barbour, John Polkinghorne, and Brian Swimme regarding scientific and religious models and theories. Ingram is hopeful that the development of scientific understandings of the origins and development of the universe can offer a persuasive response to postmodern thinkers who dismiss any universal claims. Ingram endorses Barbour's critical realism as a middle way between absolutist universal claims on the one hand and relativism on the other. Ingram is also concerned to respond to Buddhists such as Geoffrey Redmond and B. Alan Wallace, who claim that contemporary science harmonizes well with Buddhism by dismissing the need for a creator. In formulating his thoughts, Ingram draws variously from Whitehead and also from the very different perspectives of Augustine and Paul Tillich regarding God without ever fully clarifying his own position.

This book poses many of the most pressing questions and challenges facing

Buddhists and Christians in relation to each other and to the natural sciences. Unfortunately, the responses are not always the clearest, but they may prod others to think further.

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CHRISTIANS TALK ABOUT BUDDHIST MEDITATION; BUDDHISTS TALK ABOUT CHRISTIAN PRAYER. *Edited by Rita M. Gross and Terry C. Muck.* London: Continuum, 2003. 157 pp.

It is popularly assumed that meditation enhances well-being and relieves stress. In the West, Asian practices are taught to persons from mainly Christian and Jewish backgrounds as new forms of spirituality, often presented as dramatically different from monotheistic traditions. Yet some practitioners consider meditation and other forms of Asian spirituality as enhancing rather than replacing worship of God.

This book presents essays by twelve authors that explore similarities and differences between Buddhist meditation and Christian prayer. The book reprints pieces that originally appeared in the journal *Buddhist-Christian Studies* in 2001 and 2002. It is thoroughly dialogical in format. Part 1 contains five Christian reflections on Buddhist spiritual practice followed by two Buddhist responses, while part 2 consists of five Buddhist reflections on Christian spiritual practice with two Christian responses. Many of the contributors are connected with the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies. Importantly, they combine academic and experiential knowledge of the two religions. The collection is framed by an introduction by Terry Muck and a conclusion by Rita Gross, the book's editors, who are Christian and Buddhist practitioners, respectively. The symmetry of the chapter layout is pleasing and apt.

Sociologically, the major impetus for this dialogue is the fact that a growing number of Christians have found Buddhist meditation fruitful. However, these Christians have not left behind their original religious identification. As they interact with Buddhists, dialogue has emerged comparing the two traditions. Clearly for Christians practicing some Buddhism, the emphasis is on mutual appreciation and commonality. To examine the motivation for interreligious dialogue, it is fitting to ask, whose interests does the dialogue serve? First and foremost, the interests are Christian. While Christian authors have gained from Buddhist spiritual practice, Buddhists have not adapted Christian prayer techniques in return. But although the genealogy of dialogue has Christian origins, the editors intend to take a neutral approach. They frame the topic broadly and invite

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