

4-1-1999

# Wrestling with the Ox: A Theology of Religious Experience, by Paul Ingram

James L. Fredericks

Loyola Marymount University, james.fredericks@lmu.edu

---

## Repository Citation

Fredericks, James L., "Wrestling with the Ox: A Theology of Religious Experience, by Paul Ingram" (1999). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 5.

[http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac/5](http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/5)

## Recommended Citation

Fredericks, James. "Wrestling with the Ox: A Theology of Religious Experience, by Paul Ingram." *Journal of Religion* 79, 2 (1999): 311-313.

rience of the everyday in its height and depth, in its tribulations and its hopes" (p. 104).

The drawbacks of this collection, arising primarily from Metz's choice of the essay as his primary vehicle, mirror those of Metz's corpus in general since his turn to political theology in the early 1960s. First, central concepts or themes are frequently alluded to rather than explicated. In the current work, "postmodern" and "hellenization of Christianity" might stand as examples. Regarding the latter, how far does this extend? Can the classic doctrines of the Church be separated and, hence, retrieved independently of their implication in an ontotheology? Is the rejection of "suffering" as an element of the divine life a remnant of some latent ontotheology on Metz's part? Given the constraints of the essay genre, it is hard to tell. A second weakness becomes visible when one compares Metz's work with that of Rahner. While Rahner risked—as Metz himself acknowledges—"talking about God" for the Church, Metz appears either reluctant or unable to proceed beyond "talk *about* talk about God." In particular, the claim that talk about God is circumscribed by theodicy raises significant issues regarding what Christianity can say about God, Christ, and the Spirit. While I think Metz is correct to reject the strategy represented by Moltmann, the essay form occludes any constructive parallel to that work. The danger here is the impression that a practical fundamental theology needs, but cannot support, a constructive exposition of the Christian faith. If that were to be the case, it might ironically represent the mark of the postmodern that separates these theological generations. Finally, for an author who has all too often been ill served by his translators, J. Matthew Ashley is to be commended both for his fine introduction to the text and especially for his felicitous translations.

J. A. COLOMBO, *University of San Diego*.

INGRAM, PAUL. *Wrestling with the Ox: A Theology of Religious Experience*. New York: Continuum, 1997. ix+246 pp. \$22.50 (paper).

For many years, Paul Ingram has offered distinguished leadership to the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies. In addition, he is the editor and author of several widely admired scholarly works. He now has written a book that appeals to a "pluralist" model of religious diversity as the proper basis for interreligious dialogue. Based in part on my own theological commitments and my participation in interreligious dialogues with Buddhists, I disagree with Ingram on the basic presuppositions of his book. The criticism of Ingram's work that follows should not lose sight of this point. I will try to be as clear as possible about these disagreements on fundamentals.

Ingram bases his book on what he calls a "primordial model" of religious pluralism. The roots of this model go back to Aldous Huxley and Ramakrishna. All religions, according to Ingram, are culturally and historically contingent interpretations of a transcendent absolute that is variously called the Dao, God, Brahman, Allah, Wakan, or Emptiness. Thus all religions offer differing paths that lead to the same ultimate reality, what Ingram calls "the Sacred," or more poetically, "the relatively inaccessible Ox" (a reference to the "Ox-Herding Pictures" of Zen). Ingram's primordial model has much in common with what George Lindbeck calls the experiential-expressivist model of religion. Not surprisingly, Ingram offers generally approving summaries of the positions of John Hick, Paul Knitter,

## The Journal of Religion

W. C. Smith, and Huston Smith. With this theoretical foundation, Ingram offers discussions of Whitehead (chap. 5), the environment (chap. 6), women's liberation (chap. 7), political and economic liberation (chap. 8), salvation (chap. 9), and the unity of "postmodern" religious experience (chap. 10).

The primordial model accounting for the diversity of religions offers the most honest and open basis for entering into interreligious dialogue in Ingram's view. More significantly, it is the basis for affirming the deep similarities that unify religions as paths to the Sacred. Given this affirmation of similarity, Ingram's description of his model of religious diversity as "postmodern" is surprising. Contrary to Ingram, I see the primordial model of religious diversity as an example of modernity's preoccupation with grand narratives that attempt to control differences. If postmodernity celebrates difference, Ingram celebrates the fundamental similarity that unites religious traditions. When religions are seen from the point of view of the Sacred, Ingram assures us, "distinctions blur" (p. 178). The notion of a universal but ineffable absolute that unites all religions despite their apparent differences should be seen as yet another assertion of what the deconstructionists call "full presence." Ingram, a historian of religions, speaks with the voice of the European Enlightenment. This is modernism, not postmodernism.

"Postmodern" is a vague notion at best. Even still, I do not believe my disagreement with Ingram over the postmodern status of his model of religion is a mere quibble. It is related to my dissatisfaction with the primordial model as a suitable basis for interreligious dialogue. Here is another basic point of disagreement. Entering into dialogues with non-Christians is a particularly promising way of doing Christian theology today. In my own case, friendships with Buddhists have enabled and required me to revise my understanding of Christianity. The primordial model, with its appeal to a metareligious absolute that is only dimly grasped by all the religions themselves, effectively excuses a Christian from the necessity of having to change her mind about anything of real importance. This is certainly not Ingram's intent, but it is the effect of his argument. The problem is often embedded within language that many will see as admirably tolerant. For example, Ingram thinks that "the sacred does not play favorites; all paths lead to the same summit . . . and it does not ultimately matter which path one takes as long as it is followed truly and authentically." If "authenticity" (sincerity?) is sufficient to justify the way one lives one's life, beliefs would seem to have very little to do with matters of religious truth. We are free to believe whatever we want. No Buddhist could possibly make a claim that could ever require a Christian to revise her beliefs. In any event, the differences that distinguish Buddhists from Christians are merely apparent anyway. Far from offering a suitable basis for entering into interreligious dialogue as Ingram argues, the primordial model is a major obstacle to it.

Is there a universal and ineffable religious "experience" that lies behind all the religious traditions? The most sensible response to this question is to stop asking it. Theologians and historians of religions should expunge the word "experience" from their lexicon. At best, this word is a useless vagary. At worst, the term leads us into the thickets of privatized discourse about religion. The question cannot be resolved and is not useful. The problem, however, is yet more serious. If one approaches religious diversity with the presupposition that there is no common ground in a transreligious experience, religions tend to be seen in terms of incommensurate difference. On the other hand, if one assumes along with Ingram that religions are linked by an ineffable and universal experience of the Sacred,

the significant differences that distinguish religions from one another are rendered theologically uninteresting. In this case, the encounter between religious believers is rendered uninteresting as well. In sitting down with a Buddhist, a Christian can expect to find only more of the same. Theologians interested in interreligious dialogue or in doing theology comparatively should turn away from the entire question of religious experience or metanarratives about religion in general in favor of concrete experiments in comparison. On this score, the work of Francis X. Clooney and Lee Yearly is exemplary.

JAMES L. FREDERICKS, *Loyola Marymount University*.

BYRNE, JAMES M. *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. xiii+253 pp. \$22.00 (paper).

James Byrne has done students of modern Western religious thought a valuable service by writing this clear, reliable, comprehensive, yet relatively brief, account of the fortunes of (Christian) religious ideas during the Age of Reason. Designed primarily as a textbook, *Religion and the Enlightenment* is suitable for college, seminary, and perhaps even introductory graduate courses. I found it especially useful as the background text for a recent undergraduate survey of the period in which I assigned primary readings from René Descartes, Blaise Pascal, G. W. Leibniz, Voltaire, Jacob Spener, J.-J. Rousseau, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. In its role as an interpretive companion and historical supplement to these challenging thinkers, Byrne's book supplies much of the material one would otherwise be tempted to pack into lectures. The pedagogical benefit is more class time for discussion and close readings of the primary texts. My students gave the book high marks, as do I.

The first two chapters are largely preparatory. After dealing with the problem of periodization, chapter 1 introduces some characteristic themes of the age (reason, skepticism, progress, modern science) that find repeated, but extremely varied, illustration throughout the rest of the book. This introductory treatment is entirely conventional until the end of the chapter where Byrne addresses two additional topics that command great interest today: the impact of the discovery of other cultures and civilizations on European self-understanding and the failure of the enlightened elite to live up to their own ideals of universal rationality, basic human rights, and toleration of difference in the cases of women and Jews. Chapter 2, "Enlightenment, Power, and Context," is a down payment on Byrne's sound aim throughout the book to "see ideas not as free-floating products of pure reflection but as embedded in a context, reflecting practical concerns and driven by the interests of a mixture of people with a wide variety of motives" (p. x). Toward this end, Byrne traces social and political developments, especially church-state relations, in Britain, France, Austria, and the United States. Given the book's focus on Europe and the importance of Leibniz, Pietism, and especially Kant in the narrative, he might have profitably substituted Prussia for the United States in this chapter. In the remainder of the book, full chapters are devoted to the thought of Descartes, Pascal, Rousseau, and Kant. Deism(s), the emergence of atheism, and the development of experimental science and materialism each receive a chapter of their own. Denis Diderot and the Encyclopedists receive more attention than usual in a book aimed primarily at students of theology, as does Pierre Bayle. These central chapters build nicely on, and frequently refer to, each