

BOOK REVIEW

Wrestling with God: Ethical Precarity in Christianity and International Relations

by *Cecelia Lynch*

Reviewed by **Joachim Ozonze**



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Cecelia Lynch's *Wrestling with God: Ethical Precarity in Christianity and International Relations* is a profound exploration of the intricate intersections between Christian ethics and the political complexities of global relations. Rooted in International Relations (IR), but remarkably interdisciplinary, Lynch examines how Christian actors—both individual and institutional—have wrestled with their ethical commitments while engaging in international landscapes of war, alterity, justice, and peace.

At the heart of Lynch's exploration is the concept of "ethical precarity," a dynamic lens she employs to capture the ongoing negotiations and tensions between the interpretations of Christian ethics, the demands of political power, and the exigencies of pragmatic decision-making. Through a Neo-Weberian genealogical analysis of a wide range of strategically-chosen Christian ethical struggles across history, Lynch demonstrates how these negotiations are both contextual and contested, and fraught with contradictions.

Through her *wrestling* with intra-Christian ethical debates, Lynch challenges the reification of religion in IR, a tendency she argues lends itself to caricaturist

interpretations of religion. This oversimplification, she notes, leaves unexplored the "political implications of the wide range of Christian ethics at stake in international politics" (2). Going beyond scholars like Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, Lynch's *genealogy of wrestlings* in the West reveals the intertwined histories and ongoing entanglements of Christianity and modern politics, dismantling any notion of a thick line between religion and secularism, and urging her readers to grapple with the ethical ambiguities at the nexus of Christianity, secularism, and global politics (19).

One of Lynch's most compelling contributions is unpacking the provocative parallels between early missionary enterprises and contemporary humanitarian response. Whether these parallels manifest in the similarities between early missionizing efforts to save souls and contemporary donor proselytism, or the semblance between the civilizational rhetoric of contemporary humanitarianism and the epistemic violence of Christian paternalism in the early modern era, Lynch invites her readers to recognize how modern humanitarianism (whether secular or faith-based) mirrors the ethical precarities of earlier periods and provides an opportunity to critically reflect on the far-reaching consequences of ethical shortcomings today.

Thus, while Lynch's concern is not to provide "settled best practices" (235), her historically expansive and richly nuanced analysis offers profound insights for Christian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in development and humanitarian work. For one, Lynch's call to embrace ethical precarity challenges these organizations to reflect—reflexively—on their ethical assumptions and operational theologies, their partnerships and paradigmatic organization, their hermeneutic of responsibility and logic of success. The goal is not simply to arrive at fixed answers but to continually grapple with these ethical tensions in light of evolving sociopolitical contexts, the aid environment, and the meaning of Christ's injunction to serve "the least of these."

Lynch's *wrestling* prompts critical questions for Christian NGOs: Do their actions empower local

communities or perpetuate dependency? Does their purpose inadvertently reinforce structural violence or inequality? Are their theological commitments more focused on “compassion *for* and saving *of* those who suffer” or on fostering “mutual redemptive relationships”? What forms of suffering are prioritized, and why? How do they construct the “good” aid recipients, and who is left out? Wrestling with these questions challenges Christian organizations to not only recognize how Christian ethical principles can be co-opted in different ways, but also to adopt a posture of humility. This involves a deeply reflexive acknowledgement of ethical precarity—one that is courageous enough to relinquish the high moral ground and undermines justifications for epistemic and bodily precarity and violence (19).

In fact, *Wrestling with God* exemplifies this self-reflexivity—not only because Lynch reveals how her personal wrestling has shaped the book, but also through her disruption of Eurocentric and institutionalist narratives. The work challenges conventional imagination of the paradigmatic “Christian actor,” embodying a perspective that is more attuned to the complexities and diversities of global Christianity.

Yet, Lynch’s exploration leaves readers *wrestling* with an essential question: What is Christian? What constitutes the Christian core? This question is not only pivotal for evaluating who or what is included or excluded in her analysis of “wrestling,” but it also anchors the concept of ethical precarity, preventing it from devolving into an unending vortex of ambiguity. While Lynch, citing Korean feminist liberation theologian Chung Hyun Kyung, notes that “ethics are always in development,” it is debatable that their boundaries are infinite (227). This raises a critical point: what makes a humanitarian effort distinctly Christian?

Here, Christian theology provides valuable resources. Steven Battin’s (2022, 90–99) concept of salvation as God’s protocol of interaction with the world, as well as a reference point and model of interaction for all theological subjectivities that claim God as the centripetal force of their cohesion, offers a framework for Christian humanitarianism. It positions faith-based humanitarianism not as a saving venture, but as a praxis of solidarity and participation in the larger story of God’s transformative love in the world. This divine pattern is paradigmatically revealed in the incarnation and life of Jesus. Importantly, this incarnation is not merely a human event or, even, a solely Christ-event; it is fully a God-event that encompasses the entirety of the Godhead, all humanity, and all creation. Thus, rather than serving as an obstacle, this incarnational paradigm propels greater openness to cosmic-centered, Spirit-centered spiritualities and missiologies.

Shaped by this incarnational logic, Christian humanitarianism emerges not only as a way of being in the world rooted in humility and mutual care, but also as a framework that compels practitioners to ask fundamental questions: “Why am I here?” “Who am I and why am I able to be here?” “Whom do my actions serve?” This means that Christian humanitarianism, informed by the incarnation, is an intrinsically prophetic vocation—standing in solidarity with the marginalized, interrogating structures of violence and privilege, and challenging established political practices in ways that embody risk but ultimately moves toward more egalitarian commitments and transformative actions in the world (236).

Cecelia Lynch’s *Wrestling with God* is a landmark work. Seamlessly weaving together insights from multiple disciplines, it provides rich ethical frameworks with profound implications for both faith-based and secular humanitarianism. Lynch’s concept of ethical precarity challenges scholars and practitioners alike to embrace reflexivity, humility, and the courage to wrestle with complexity. By doing so, they can navigate the tensions and ambiguities of global humanitarian work with integrity and justice. Ultimately, *Wrestling with God* is not merely an exploration of ethical precarity, but a testament to the productive and transformative power of wrestling—with ideas, practices, and the limits of our understanding.

References

Battin, Steven J. 2022. *Intercommunal Ecclesiology: The Church, Salvation, and Intergroup Conflict*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

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