



## The Matthew Fox Phenomenon

JANE E. STROHL

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

One Friday last winter I confided guiltily to a colleague that I had nothing either academic or ecclesiastical on my calendar for the weekend. While my students toiled in the library stacks and the rest of the faculty prepared to publish, I was going to a yoga workshop. My friend responded that he was making the first of several scheduled cross-country skiing trips. He commended the pursuit of such activities, which he described as “sheerly doxological” and which, he assured me, require no apology.

The “sheerly doxological” is one keynote of Matthew Fox’s paean to a renewed and reformed Christian spirituality. There is no doubt that he has struck a responsive chord in the hearts of many spiritual seekers, both within and without the institutional church. A recent issue of the *Yoga Journal* featured an interview with Fox and carried the headline “Original Blessing: Matthew Fox Takes on the Vatican.” The very title reveals the ambiguous feelings harbored by many people toward the Christianity that formed them and the extraordinary role Fox is able to assume in their struggle to make their peace with their spiritual origins. In an introduction to the above-mentioned interview, the editor writes:

Many of us, in the last decade or two, have explored Eastern paths. We have practiced Hatha Yoga and Vipassana meditation, studied Taoist healing, puzzled over Zen koans, and consulted the *I Ching*. Nevertheless, a full 50 percent of our readers still consider themselves Christians. The tradition in which we have been raised, it seems, continues to exert a powerful hold on us! How rewarding, then, when we find that our own tradition continues to renew itself, through the work and experiences of certain key individuals, individuals who look beyond the external trappings to the essence of the tradition—individuals like Matthew Fox....Fox, a Dominican priest, is proud to count himself among a long line of Dominican renegades, including St. Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart. Taking the Catholic mainstream to task for its emphasis on sin, redemption, asceticism, and guilt, he has rediscovered an alternative within Catholicism itself—what he calls “creation-centered spirituality.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Stephan Bodian, “Editorial: Creation Spirituality,” *Yoga Journal* 71 (November/December 1986) 4.

Matthew Fox offers himself naturally as the champion of the dispossessed, those who feel themselves alienated by ecclesiastical teaching and practice which they experience as oppressive. He does not speak as a disgruntled former churchman but as a critic from within. Fox

understands himself to be an authentic Catholic, wresting the truth back from the hands of a disfiguring hierarchy and clearing the air for many who are suffocating spiritually, Catholic and Protestant alike. His Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality carries ecumenism to new lengths with a curriculum that includes offerings in the Native American tradition, goddess spirituality, and such social concerns as the peace movement and deep ecology.

Needless to say, someone who prides himself on being a renegade is bound to encounter opposition, and Matthew Fox is not without his critics. They have questioned the characterization of his theology as a renewal of the Christian tradition and regard it rather as a deformation of what it purports to purify. They have rightly criticized his portrayal of fall/redemption theology as a tendentious caricature. And still their students, parishioners, and colleagues delight in his work. The bluntness of Fox's attack, the flippant jive of his prose, and the charisma of his personality account in good measure for his appeal. Matthew Fox sounds off the way many of us have wanted to do when the church seemed determined to turn the flame of joy down low on everything from celebrating the Eucharist to making love. His puerile sassiness can be liberating; it can also be tiresomely offensive. However, it would be wrong to let his style divert us from the substance of his message, just as the offense given by Luther's polemics is not adequate grounds for ignoring the gospel of justification he proclaims. Fox is right on target when he champions ecstasy as an indispensable and neglected part of Christian experience.

As the admiring editor of the *Yoga Journal* states, "Perhaps the most exciting thing about Fox...is not what he thinks or does, but what he causes to happen around him."<sup>2</sup> The Matthew Fox phenomenon is more than the articulated theology found in the man's writings. Having said that, this author acknowledges the limitation of her sources. I have not had the opportunity to participate in one of Fox's workshops or visit his California institute. My reflections are based on my reading of his three major works, *On Becoming a Musical Mystical Bear: Spirituality American Style* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972); *Whee! We, wee All the Way Home: A Guide to a Sensual, Prophetic Spirituality* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1981); *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1983);<sup>3</sup> and the interview in the *Yoga Journal*.

This essay will discuss the attitudinal change called for by Fox and the shift of focus in spirituality from the fall to creation which is at the heart of his message. Then it will explore the place of sin and grace in Fox's theology.

## I. ATTITUDES AND FOCUS

To center religion on the fall into sin and redemption from it is for Fox to be

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Hereafter these works will be cited as *Bear*, *Whee!*, and *OB* respectively.

hopelessly turned in on oneself. Indeed, according to Fox, this very concentration on sin is sinful because it both trivializes human wrongdoing and compounds it. Fall/redemption spirituality reduces the mystery of life to the problem of morality. It inculcates pessimism and cynicism by emphasizing human limitations and ignoring our God-given creativity. This in turn provides an escape from accepting responsibility for the condition of our world and our lives; we excuse ourselves as the victims of our inherited sinfulness. For Fox the hostility of fall/redemption

spirituality to sensuality and passion leads necessarily to the demise of compassion as well. A spirituality that denies the pleasure of created existence knows no compulsion to insure that all persons share in that pleasure. By seeing evil lurking in our delight and enjoyment, and leading inevitably to excess, we become one-sided, uptight, and hung up (Fox's synonyms for concupiscent). This defensive posture hardens the heart against the neighbor and the creation, while its supposed antagonist, hedonism, is an illusory threat.

Nor should we be deterred from the pleasures of natural ecstasies because we fear what the hedonist within us might do....Life itself has its ending and its limits, as do all the joys within life. We do not have to play patrolman or God and project our puny limits onto the Creator's beauties.

The hedonistic fears we harbor are invariably manufactured fantasies. As such, they tell us more about the repression within ourselves than about the way to experience the beauties of life. If we were to live our fantasies more and manufacture them less, we would become realists overnight. And far less fearful. And much more loving of life. And willing to allow others to enjoy the pleasures of living. (*Whee!*, 67)

Fall/redemption spirituality further aggravates human sinfulness by making man the measure of all things (this brand of spirituality is, according to Fox, hopelessly patriarchal). It breeds a human chauvinism that demeans the rest of creation by effectively ignoring it. "Fall/redemption theology has ignored the blessing that creation is because of its anthropomorphic preoccupation with sin!...Nineteen billion years before there was any sin on earth, there was blessing" (*OB*, 46). One tragic result of this shortsightedness is humanity's inability to recognize its grievous sins against the non-human creation.

Fox acknowledges that fall/redemption theology may have served a valid purpose at some point, but even if such was once the case, it is so no longer. He presents creation spirituality not as an innovation but as a strain of Christian tradition whose time has come to effect a "Copernican revolution in religion" (*OB*, 26). Theology is to orient itself around "[t]he universe itself, blessed and graced" (*ibid.*). This shift in perspective requires of the Christian a new self-understanding. He or she is no longer preeminently a fallen creature under God but a co-creator with God. All human beings (creation spirituality is not the preserve of a pious aristocracy) are called to be agents of transformation in the world. The emphasis cannot be on our limitations and failures if we are to accomplish the work entrusted to us. Preoccupation with sin and mistrust of the world as the source of temptation must yield to love of the creation and the desire both to enjoy and increase its goodness, so that we may bear God into the world.

To suggest that Mary and ourselves birth God is to suggest that God can be a baby, a child, a new creation. It is to suggest that in some sense God is not born yet. And that is indeed the case. Wherever compassion and wisdom are lacking, wherever justice and delight are missing, there the full presence of God does not yet exist. In the creation-centered tradition there is ample awareness of the childhood of God. But patriarchy, if it has acknowledged God's childlikeness at

all, has done so only in the sentimentalized context of a “sweet baby Jesus.” Its truer meaning, that God must be born and must be allowed to grow up into human society and social structures, and that humanity is responsible for the birthing and the nurturing of God—all this has for rather obvious reasons not been heralded as integral to the Good News of late. But in fact it is among the Best News one could imagine. (*OB*, 225-26).

According to Fox’s analysis, the problem facing humankind is largely an attitudinal one. If we think of ourselves as inherently frail and/or fractious, we shall act accordingly. If we think of ourselves as blessed, we shall be so.

Fox adamantly rejects the idea that sin is inherited and inevitable. Human beings may prove to be the source of the creation’s travail, but they are by nature “original blessings.”

Whatever is said of original sin, it is far less hallowed and original than are love and desire, the Creator’s for creation and our parents’ for one another. Our origin in the love of our parents and in their love-making, and the celebration of creation at our birth, are far, far more primeval and original in every sense of that word than is any doctrine of “original sin.” (*OB*, 50)

The longing of women and men for one another, sensually as well as spiritually, and the joyful satisfaction of that desire in acts that may beget life as well as share it are for Fox not the means whereby some contagion of sin is spread. Rather, if sin is fundamentally dualism or separation (*OB*, 49), then our origins are the very opposite of sinful.

## II. SIN AND GRACE

While chastising the purveyors of fall/redemption theologies for generating a market for their product, Fox does not, however, deny the reality of sin. If it did not regularly follow our auspicious entry into the world, there would be no need for Fox’s appeals in behalf of justice and compassion. Sin manifests itself as loss of compassion for the world and the neighbor and rejection of the self, all variations on the theme of separation caused by neglect of the gifts for sensual, imaginative, ecstatic living with which God has endowed us. We end up struggling for the salvation of a shadow of our true selves, “an individualized and atomized and quite puny...soul” (*OB*, 78), when it is the cosmos we are to be redeeming.

According to Fox, human beings are free to reject original blessing, that is, they are free to sin, but they are also free not to sin and to recover their original state of goodness. He is anxious to impress upon his readers not only their responsibility for the creation but their capacity to do what is needful, even at the expense of the grace of God.

The greatest weakness of redemption spiritualities is that in them human persons are never given credit for cooperating with the Creator but instead are told that “the Lord did it.” (*Whee!*, 75)

Indeed, the grace of God made available to us through the cross and resurrection of Christ, at

least according to those who adhere to fall/redemption theologies, finds little place in Fox's creation spirituality. It is telling that he writes of cooperation with the Creator rather than the Redeemer. Grace is equated with providence; it is defined as the gift of life itself, and faith becomes the corresponding trust that life is a gift. In another place Fox identifies grace with the ecstasy which is the experience of God. It is not the giving and receiving of forgiveness, just as the Eucharist is not presented as God's celebration of reconciliation but rather as an opportunity for us to say thank you for the banquet of our lives (*OB*, 113).

In discussing the person and work of Christ, Fox does suggest in at least one instance that the cross constituted a unique universal victory over the power of sin: "The death of Jesus on the cross was meant to be the last instance of human violence toward the beauty of creation and toward justice-making, compassionate persons. 'In his own person Jesus killed the hostility' or the dualism that makes one group of persons chew up another group" (*OB*, 301). However, for the most part Jesus appears in Fox's theology as a salutary reminder to us of the life of original blessing which is within our reach. He "invites" us to renew the tarnished image of God which we are (*OB*, 242); Jesus "plays with his audience and with his enemies, trying to love them and trust them into their own conversion" (*OB*, 243). He serves as a model of how the true child of God comes as an artist to rouse others from their slumber and death (*OB*, 240). Fox emphasizes the fact that Jesus has freed us from the fear of death rather than from death itself. The eschatology born of Christ's objective triumph over sin and the grave has no place in this spirituality, which seeks to establish the "kingdom/queendom of God" here and now. If it comes, it will do so by our agency.

If we do not create a global civilization where peace and justice reign and where the spirit of delight and celebration can be made to happen, then we have no one to blame but ourselves. For we do choose the religious and social structures we prefer, and we choose the gods and idols we worship. (*OB*, 251)

### III. CRITIQUE

Here is where Fox's note of jubilation begins to sound sour. The assurance that we have the ability to make the right choices does not guarantee that we have the will to do so. Our propensity for turning away from the world and in on ourselves is not simply caused by defective spiritualities, although it may be fostered by them. Dealing with sin takes more than the power of positive thinking. Fox is justifiably outraged by those who have harmed the children of God by feeding them an unbalanced spiritual diet—too much sinfulness and too little grace. To the church's shame, there are a lot of people out there who have been scarred by their exposure to this perversion of the gospel. However, the balance

is not redressed by revelling in original blessing. To suggest that we can be as good a creation as God intended us to be if we put our imaginations to it is, in my opinion, an invitation to despair rather than hope. What eludes us is that very turning of the heart, that opening of the eye, that leads us out of ourselves and into the world, that lifts us above the experience of our selfishness and cruelty to a lovelier vision of life. Fall/redemption theology at its best offers that turning as the gift of God, the first fruit of redemption in Christ. Matthew Fox rightly opposes any

spirituality that encourages retreat from responsibility for the creation or undermines the confidence of those who would take on the world's problems. However, it is not clear why he insists that the source of our hope must lie in the divine grace of creation rather than in the grace of the resurrected Savior.