



# Whitefield BRIEFING

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## *How Not To Do Environmental Theology: Matthew Fox and Creation Spirituality*

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In 1966, American historian Lynn White delivered a paper on "The Historical Roots of the Modern Environmental Crisis." Published at a time of rising awareness and concern about the global environment, White's argument identified Christianity as the prime suspect. The Christian values of progress, human domination over nature, and the 'desacralisation' of nature laid the created order open, once technology allowed it, to unlimited exploitation.

Despite the flaws in his argument, White set a cat amongst the theological pigeons, and the pigeons have been fluttering to earth ever since. Evangelicals, Orthodox, Catholics and liberals have all revisited their traditions in search of ecological guidance, and green 'saints' from the Celts to St. Francis have been acclaimed. Just about every conceivable Christian response has been proposed.<sup>1</sup>

Among the most well known is the work of Matthew Fox. Fox is best known for his book *Original Blessing*, and strongly influenced the Nine-O-Clock Service in Sheffield, whose 'Planetary Mass' took its cue from his thought. Global sales of Fox's books (23 so far) comfortably top ½ million, and his advocates include everyone from Anglican bishops to Pagan priestesses.

### **'Original Blessing'**

Fox's 1983 book *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* remains the cornerstone of his thought. In it Fox lays the blame for the ecological crisis at the door of Christianity. Specifically, the problem is dualism: the separation of God from world, spirit from matter, heaven from earth, man from woman, and human from non-human. Each of these dualisms is hierarchical, exalting God/spirit/human at the expense of world/matter/non-human. (This analysis picks up from feminist theology, which identifies the male/female dualism as the central problem).

The ecological crisis is therefore a spiritual crisis, which results from our spiritual paradigm. Fox proposes a new paradigm, 'creation-centred spirituality', which is, he claims, what authentic, biblical Christianity used to be before dualistic Greek thinking got hold of it. The modern Christian task is to re-create Christianity within the new paradigm, and to re-read the Christian tradition accordingly. Fox therefore goes to great lengths to demonstrate the creation-centredness of the Bible, Jesus, and Thomas Aquinas (Fox was a Dominican monk before the Vatican forced him out), as well as Eckhart, Hildegard and various other Christian mystics.

The fundamental elements in creation-centred spirituality (or 'creation spirituality', for short) are as follows:

- a) The replacement of Genesis 1-3 with the 'new creation story' discovered by science about the origins of the universe, which teaches us that we have common origins with all creation, and that all things are interconnected.
- b) God is most fundamentally the Creator, and titles such as 'Lord' or 'Father' are rejected as dualistic and patriarchal. God is constantly creating, and we, made in his image, are called to be co-creators with him. Human creativity is the image of God in us.<sup>2</sup> To exercise our creativity is therefore to be like God, and to express our 'divine' nature.
- c) God is in everything, and everything is in God,<sup>3</sup> the perspective of panentheism. God is not 'out there' to be addressed, but around and in us, to be explored and entered into. Therefore every creature expresses God, and is a revelation of God. Fox sees any attempt to separate God from creation as dualistic (and therefore anti-ecological), and so he finally does away with God's transcendence altogether.
- d) Dualism, not fallenness, is the source of sin. The world, and ourselves, are basically good. Salvation (meaning healing) lies in recovering our interconnectedness with creation.
- e) The spiritual life consists of mysticism and prophecy. Mysticism is about entering into the reality of things to find God there, and to discover our interrelatedness to all things. It involves the use of ritual, creativity, and learning to love life and creation. Prophecy is action to secure justice - justice for oppressed groups and the planet.

### **Fox's Ecology**

For Fox, creation is fundamental. It is the primary revelation about God, "a book about God",<sup>4</sup> and Fox repeatedly (and selectively) deduces the nature of God from the character of creation. The planet is the main object of salvation: in his 1988 book *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, the passion of Jesus is reinterpreted as the death and resurrection of the earth in modern times. Fox's eschatology is based around the possible demise of life on the planet rather than the judgement of God at the end of history.

What this represents is, in part, an attempt to restructure the entire Christian faith around the

ecological agenda. It is pendulum-swing theology. Creation replaces Jesus as the focus of revelation, salvation, the nature of God, human nature, the future, and the spiritual life. As one might expect, attempts to reconcile this with Scripture and tradition fail painfully. Fox's selective readings of Scripture delete all references to God as Father, to human sin, and to anything which might suggest a God 'out there', distinct from His creation. Some of his work on the Christian tradition is extremely misleading and inaccurate, yet has had significant influence on many people.<sup>5</sup>

### **How Fox Fails**

Fox's work not only fails to be authentically Christian, it also falls down as green theology, and points to the fault-lines in many other attempts to chart an ecological path for the church. What are these fault-lines?

#### **1. God in creation**

Fox argues that we must reject a God 'out there' (echoing John Robinson's phrase from *Honest to God*) for a God within all things, which in turn is the basis for the supreme value of creation. We must respect and delight in creation because "Divinity is everywhere".<sup>6</sup> But, paradoxically, if creation and individual creatures have value because they express God and embody God, this makes God the *real* centre of value, and creation has no intrinsic value of its own. Thus Fox's attempt to restore value to creation fails.

However, it must be said that Fox doesn't believe in God as a separate entity from creation. He repeatedly rejects any attempt to conceive of God apart from creation, and explicitly identifies God with the cosmos/creation at several points. For Fox, 'God' is a symbol for those aspects of creation which he most values: beauty, creativity, harmony etc. To paraphrase Karl Barth's criticism of liberalism, Fox talks about God by talking about creation in a very loud voice. And if this is so, then such a 'God' cannot add value to creation, and all we are left with is the unsupported assertion that creation is supremely valuable. It is an appeal to the imagination, nothing more.

The biblical alternative is to know that creation is valuable because God has made it and called it good, and blessed it. And this can only be so if God is real and distinct from creation, and if

he is Lord over all creation and thus the final authority on it. Ironically, the more closely God is identified with creation, the less able we are to declare that creation is good and valuable.

## 2. *Creation-centred revelation*

Fox's writings reveal a preference for creation and human experience over scripture as the primary revelation about God. But within creation he creates an uneven playing field - only certain aspects of it reveal God's nature. Thus Fox calls for us to 're-imagine' God "from experience, learning to trust our experiences of awe, wonder, darkness, nothingness, creativity, compassion, justice, celebration."<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, this interesting list shapes the God who emerges from the re-imagining process. One could just as well 're-imagine' God from experiences of pain, guilt, conflict, destruction, boredom, etc, which would also be 'creation-centred', but doesn't serve Fox's agenda quite so well!

This exposes a problem for all ecological theologies which lean too heavily on general revelation, that is, the revelation of God through creation and human experience. In a broken world, these things are untrustworthy messengers. Creation is a blend of beauty and destruction, the world is not as it should be, human experience is warped. Therefore, we need some *other* source of revelation to tell us what reflects the cosmos as it should be, and what elements will pass away in the fullness of God's purposes. Without such a revelation, there is nothing (other than wishful thinking), to interpret the broken world for us. Furthermore, there is nothing to tell us that our treatment of the world is un-Christian. Without such a revelation, general revelation can provide no foundation for a green ethic, and environmentalism can only be based on pragmatic concern for our own future.

## 3. *Romanticism*

Fox picks up on many of the themes of the Romantic movement of the early 1800s. He dreams of a harmonious relationship with nature, and repeatedly decries anthropocentrism (i.e. ascription of supreme value within creation to humans). Nature can be trusted, and pain, though part of the natural order, is either the result of injustice, or a means of spiritual growth.

Such sentiments could only be written by a prosperous modern urban dweller. Further-

more, Fox depends on an hourly basis on the human subjugation of nature: air conditioning, clean water, tap water, cooked food - all are means of controlling nature to make it safe or more convenient. Human dominance over nature is unavoidable, and the harmony of humans with nature need not be a harmony of equals. Biblical thought envisages such harmony, and in Jesus' ministry the brokenness of nature (storms, scarcity, disease) is healed through the assertion of Jesus' *Lordship over*, not *kinship with*, the natural order. Fox, however, is obsessed with egalitarianism, and regards any assertions of God's power or lordship as sinfully dualistic.

## 4. *Resacralising*

White's argument - that the Church stripped nature of sacredness, and thus respect, is picked up by Fox. He argues that if we take a more animistic view of nature, seeing it as alive and pulsing with energy, then we will treat it better. This reworks the old 'noble savage' myth of simple folk in harmony with nature, and Fox commends Native Americans and the ancient Celts as examples for us.

The reality of the situation is somewhat different. The respect given to nature by animistic peoples was as often out of fear than any other motive. Pan, the ancient Mediterranean nature deity, brought both ecstatic sex and panic, nightmares, and terror. Even within the examples Fox prefers, there are problems. Celtic Christianity has a strong demonology and bases harmony with nature firmly within the sovereignty of God. Native American religion is much more diverse than its New Age popularisers admit, and Fox has to ignore quite a lot of it in order to create his ecological saints.

### **The Solution: A Biblical Corrective.**

These faultlines are not confined to Matthew Fox's work. They can be found in the green thinking of modern Pagans, feminists, New Agers and some Christian theologians. The correctives to all of them can be found in a biblical approach to creation and revelation.

- Maintaining the otherness and sovereignty of God allows us to value creation on the basis of the divine word of Genesis 1, and the repeated biblical assertions of God's care for his creation.

- The personal revelation of God in Christ stands in judgement on natural theology, and allows us to interpret an imperfect creation as a revelation of God.
- The doctrine of the fall allows us to be honest about brokenness in creation, and the ministry of Jesus provides us with a pattern of one who paid attention to the world around him and appreciated it, though he was Lord over it.
- Finally, Christianity, in freeing entire cultures from Pagan animism, allowed the study and exploration of nature, and all the benefits (as well, it must be admitted, the curses) of modern science. It allows us to be realistic about God's world. We can value creation without bowing down to it.

Ultimately, Fox's work is a Trojan horse for Paganism. Despite his use of Christian vocabulary, Fox rejects a personal God in favour of a living creation and 'divine' humanity. Ultimately, the environment becomes the thin end of a theological wedge - if you're concerned about it, argues Fox, then you have to embrace creation spirituality. But this is wrong on two counts: as we have seen, not only is creation spirituality not an option for the Christian, it shouldn't even be an option for the environmentalist.

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#### REFERENCES

1. But this has taken some time. Initial responses to White were few and far between, and 'green' theology has caught on only in the last 10 years. Both White and Fox, despite the weaknesses in their solutions, give evangelicals much to grapple with in their analyses of the roots of ecological problems.
2. Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*. (Santa Fe:, Bear & Co, 1983) 175
3. *Original Blessing*. 90
4. *Original Blessing*. 9, and repeatedly stated in his other works.
5. For example, Fox repeatedly bases his emphasis on natural (as opposed to revealed) theology on one phrase from Aquinas: 'a mistake about creatures results in a mistake about God' [see Fox, *Sheer Joy*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992) 75.] The relevant passage in Aquinas is actually a warning *against* ascribing divine characteristics to creatures, and asserts the supremacy of humanity over the rest of creation. These both count *against* Fox, not for him, but he never presents the remarks in context.
6. Fox, Matthew, *Wrestling With the Prophets*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995) 38
7. Fox, Matthew, *Confessions: The Makings of a Post-Denominational Priest*. (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1996) 272

#### Further Reading

Matthew Fox	<i>Original Blessing</i>	(Santa Fe: Bear & Co, 1983)
Matthew Fox	<i>Confessions: The Makings of a Post-Denominational Priest</i>	(New York: Harper San Francisco, 1996)
Richard Bauckham	'The New Age Theology of Matthew Fox' in <i>Anvil</i> 1996, Vol. 13 (2) p.115-26	
Margaret Brearley	'Matthew Fox and the Cosmic Christ' in <i>Anvil</i> 1992, Vol. 9 (1) p.39-54	
Tim Cooper	<i>Green Christianity</i>	(London: Spire, 1990)
Michael Northcott	<i>The Environment and Christian Ethics</i>	(Cambridge: CUP, 1996)
Lawrence Osborn	<i>Guardians of Creation</i>	(Leicester: Apollos, 1993)
Francis Schaeffer	<i>Pollution and the Death of Man</i>	(London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970)

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