

# JOURNAL OF APPLIED EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL RESEARCH

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The government as well as the educationists should provide well ventilated classrooms, equipments, well equipped laboratories, modern teaching aids, improvisation and infrastructural facilities e.g. electricity, chairs and desks should also be provided for more effective learning and teaching process.

Law should be made by government that in a school, students should not be more than 30-35 in a class.

Parent-teacher relationship should also be emphasized.

The services of counselors, inspectors and supervisory staff members should not be over-emphasized.

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## A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF MATTHEW FOX'S CREATION SPIRITUALITY

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### Abstract

*Varieties of solutions to the question of the relationship between man and environment abound in Christian theology. One of them is Matthew Fox's Creation Spirituality. Fox advocates a shift in Christianity from an ethic of duty oriented stewardship to an ecological spirituality founded on mysticism and the cosmic Christ. In other words, ecologic or creation spirituality is presented by Fox as the principle guiding the relationship between humans and the environment. The question at this juncture is this: to what extent has the creation spirituality of Fox solved the question of the definition of the relationship between man and environment? What are the merits and demerits of creation spirituality? It is the position of this paper that in spite of the criticisms, leveled against Fox, his very important statement that environmental problem is a reflection of the inside of man can guide us in the search for solution to the environmental crisis.*

### Introduction

It is imperative we give brief sketch of Matthew Fox's background before we address the main issues. Matthew Fox was born in 1940. He was a Roman Catholic Priest and Professor of Religious Education at the University of St Thomas Houston Texas as well as Lecturer for Thomas More Association. He was silenced for a year in 1988 and removed by the Vatican from his post as director of the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality, Holy names college, Oakland California, because of his controversial views. Fox's writings have stressed a style of spirituality that emphasizes the wonders of creation and reduces the focus on sin and redemption. Fox, briefly was a priest



in the Episcopal Church and recently started his own University of Creation Spirituality in Oakland California.

Fox seeks to define an ecological Spirituality within the Christian tradition. Drawing on many earlier Christian scholars, including Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi and Julian of Norwich, Fox introduces a religious experience delight; it is a religion as if creation mattered.

Matthew Fox's aim was to proffer a solution to ecological problem which according to him mankind has been involved. From where does the solution come from? Not from religion says Fox but from mystic spirituality. According to him:

*In order to rediscover spirituality which is at the heart of any authentic and healthy religion, we have to be free of religion.<sup>1</sup>*

Spirituality according to Fox is:

*The praxis of the heart, the praxis of our living in this world. It means dealing with our innerselves and not just living on the level of outer organizations.<sup>2</sup>*

Mystic Spirituality according to Lester Brown means exploration of our inner houses and this means that "the soul is not in the body but the body is in the soul"<sup>3</sup>. The body is an instrument of our passions, of what we really care about, of our grief, of our wonders. Exploring the inner house of our soul means listening to the deep self. This exploring of the inner house, is not just one's personal inner house, but the inner house of our communities, the inner house of our nations, the inner house of our gender, the inner house of species. In other words, the inner house is not just part of an individual; our ways of life contains an inner house. It is because we are violent inside that our environment is dying all around us.<sup>4</sup>

According to Fox to retrieve the mystic in us we have to look at our own spiritual traditions which have often been condemned. The representatives of those traditions according to Fox are Hildegard of Bingen who was known as the greatest saint of the creation traditions and who was also ignored for seven hundred years.<sup>5</sup> Francis of Assisi was sentimentalized and put in a bird bath. Thomas Aquinas was condemned three times and then made a Saint, Meister Eckhart was condemned and is still on the condemnation list six hundred years

later. Julian of Norwich was ignored. Her book was not published until three hundred years after her death. The creation centered celtic people in the seventh century had their nature-mysticism smothered at the council of whitby<sup>6</sup>.

The above listed mystics according to Fox were steeped in a creation – centered spirituality – a spirituality that begins with original blessing instead of original sin. Fox contrasts Original Blessing with original sin. The idea of original sin is radically anthropocentric. Sin is only as old as the human race. Fox denies the prominence the Western Church has given to original sin. It has fed this anthropocentrism, it is so egoistic to think that religious experience begins with our sins.<sup>7</sup> Where then does religious experience begin? Fox says that religious experience begins with awe and wonder and that is the first step in the spiritual journey. Awe is the beginning of wisdom. Therefore our species has to redefine our relationship to nature including the wonder of our belonging here with the sense of awe.<sup>8</sup>

Why did Fox dismiss the Stewardship model in theology as being totally inadequate for the ecology era and an environmental resurrection? According to him, the Stewardship model tells us that God is "out there". God is an absentee landlord and we are here to do God's work. Therefore, we have a duty-oriented morality, but you cannot inspire people by the concept of duty. According to Fox, you make them feel guilty which tires people out.<sup>9</sup> The second reason given by Fox is that the Stewardship model reinforces duality, the proper model for Fox is mysticism, the cosmic Christ and the Garden in the song of songs where we realize that God is the Garden. That God is expressed in each "word", that the plants are, the animals are. And when these are being jeopardized, God is being crucified. When they are splendid and healthy, divinity itself is radiating its doxa, its glory. The cosmic Christ is radiating its glory in the glory of nature.<sup>10</sup>

Is Fox unconstructive in his critique of the Stewardship model? No! He proffers an alternative model. For Fox a shift from the duty-oriented Stewardship ethic to mysticism and the Cosmic Christ is the basis for an Ecological Spirituality – Fox quoted Meister Eckhart to support his position:



*This is the home the ecos in which we live, it is the divine home, God is here, it is we who have gone out for a walk.*<sup>11</sup>

According to Fox Divinity is everywhere, but our eyes have to learn to see again.

Also, Fox emphasises another dimension to Ecological spirituality which counters the idea of a God out there. This is found in the word environment. It comes from the French word *environ* which means around. The proper theology for ecology is not about a God out there somewhere it is about a God who is around us or in the words of Julian of Norwich "who is completely enveloping us".<sup>12</sup>

According to Fox this is Pantheism, it teaches us that everything is in God and God is in everything and that is the proper way to name our relationship with the divine.

Moreover, Fox says we should shed the sin of Acedia-refusal to begin new things.<sup>13</sup> It is the theology of blessing that is the proper response to acedia or inertia. It is when we get excited about the goodness of things that we are prepared to act for life and for the earth. It is like "falling in love" and this capacity for being in love according to Fox is about experiencing blessing.<sup>14</sup> According to Fox each person must recognize the glory and beauty inherent in the imperfections of ourselves and others and the world.<sup>15</sup>

Fox proposes four paths to a spiritual ecology. The first is to experience the Divine in terms of delight, awe and wonder at being present in the world, it involves the intuition that creation is a blessing and response of gratitude that is known as (via Positiva)<sup>16</sup>.

A second journey into a spiritual ecology comes through experiencing darkness, deprivation, suffering and pain (Via Negativa).<sup>17</sup>

Human experiences with these first two journeys leads to a rebirth of creativity (Via Criativa)<sup>18</sup> a third path; this involves identifying new ecological virtues for living such as vegetarianism, recycling, relearning the sacredness of nature, defending creation through political action and making new rituals to celebrate sacred places, times and being in nature.<sup>19</sup>

A fourth transformation to a more compassionate society in which all beings love one another, (Via Transformativa); such compassion includes the making of justice.<sup>20</sup>

Having highlighted and appreciated the salient issues in Matthew Fox's Ecological spirituality, it is imperative at this juncture to consider the shortcomings of Creation Spirituality as espoused by Fox.

According to Ian Carter, there are many modern approaches that invite us to embark upon a creation centered spirituality, the least of which is that described by Matthew Fox<sup>21</sup>. For Carter, if we look at these creation centered spiritualities, we often find there is a concentration on the word through whom all things were made and without whom nothing was made that was made and a neglect of the word of life who is atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for our sins but for the sins of the whole world.<sup>22</sup> The God presented in Creation Spirituality is often very different from traditional belief about God in orthodox teaching and especially is often lacking in its understanding of the place and meaning of the Cross.<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, Matthew Fox has been accused of being eclectic and unoriginal in his presentation. Margaret Goodall and John Reader opine that:

*Reading Matthew Fox is like consuming large amounts of Strawberry Jelly. It slips down very easily, giving an initial impression of something pleasant, but in the longer term, it offers little of real substance or sustainance*<sup>24</sup>

They went further to confirm Fox's eclecticism:

*Fox's writings is similar to his lectures, a bold array of glittering theological sparklers, culled almost at random from previous displays, combined with a number of highly attractive but contentious contemporary ideas to form a vivid but fleeting image of harmony and well being. For a moment there is light and anticipation but then the darkness returns... This is cheap grace, convenient and neatly packaged, but somewhat lacking in depth and integrity.*<sup>25</sup>

Margaret Goodall and John Reader Concluded that:



*He (Fox) may not be worth taking seriously.  
The man is an entertainer, not a serious  
theologian*<sup>26</sup>

Thirdly, Fox's use of the writings of people like Meister Eckhart and Julian of Norwich has been described as "somewhat dubious."<sup>27</sup> Fox is said to be certainly very selective in his choice of material and one sided in his interpretation of those less amenable to his arguments.<sup>28</sup>

Fourthly, Fox's Creation Spirituality has been described as elitist. What he writes is said to be "Sloppy romantic rubbish" which appeals to a certain type of believer, notably the affluent type who is shielded from political reality.<sup>29</sup> In other word, Fox's work according to Goodall and Reader is going to fail in its own terms because it will have a negligible impact upon those who make the vital decisions which affect the future of the environment.

Fifthly, Fox's Creation Spirituality has been described as essentially legitimating – What it seem to support is one of the latest American alternative lifestyles – 'living green'. His is an attempt to provide legitimation for this from within the Christian tradition hence his constant use of traditional sources, which otherwise would be irrelevant. It leads him to play fast and loose with certain elements of the tradition and this annoys serious theologians.<sup>30</sup>

Sixthly, Fox has been criticized on the grounds that he displayed superficiality in his use of scientific discourse when he suggests that it is possible to establish a new mysticism by combining science and cosmology. It is as if he wants to take scientific language as being literally true and then appropriate it to his own theology. Many scientists will disagree with Fox's simplistic approach, even the ones who are sympathetic religion. According to Goodall and Reader this is characteristic of the way that Fox works:

*He takes what suits him from whatever source seems fashionable and mixes it all up to produce his own personal cocktail. The end product is tasty and entertaining but ultimately unsatisfying. His work is a warning against the dangers of consumer religion.*<sup>31</sup>

Finally, Fox has been criticized for being pantheistic in his exposition of creation spirituality. For example, Fox says religion does not begin with original sin but with awe and wonder, he also says that God envelopes us'; that God is in everything and everything is in God and according to Fox that is the proper way to name our relationship with the divine.

Having considered the pitfalls in Fox's Creation Spirituality it is important that we consider the merits of his arguments.

Fox should be praised for proposing a shift from duty oriented stewardship to Creation Spirituality. In his exposition of Creation Spirituality Fox noted that our environment is dying all around us because human beings are violent inside Fox's submission is very fundamental as Schummacher noted:

The environment is a mirror for social attitude. Our outer world he says is a reflection of inner attitudes. If our environment is showing us an outwardly degraded condition (pollution, exhaustion and breakdown in nature-this is only the visible face of the invisible qualities within people.<sup>32</sup>

Based on the above observation, Fred Krueger asserted that :

The mobilization of more resources or different applications of technology can never eliminate these problems because they emerge out of the heart and soul. What has to change is the human heart. This is precisely what must be part of any comprehensive environmental reform.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

We have examined Matthew Fox's Creation Spirituality which he proposed as an alternative to a duty Oriented Stewardship. We also noted the demerits and merits of his argument and upheld his very significant statement that "our environment is dying all around us because we are violent inside". Lastly, we submitted that a comprehensive environmental reform must consider the question of the negative attitude of human beings to the environment.

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