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The New Age Theology of Matthew Fox: A Christian Theological Response

RICHARD BAUCKHAM

ABSTRACT

Richard Bauckham examines the popular New Age theology of ex-Dominican, now Episcopalian, Matthew Fox. He values Fox's theological focus on the goodness of all of creation and the themes of gift, blessing and gratitude that spring from such a recognition. However, he offers a critique in two areas: first, over a reading of theological history that offers a simple binary division between pro- and anti-nature traditions, which, claims Bauckham, did not exist. Secondly, he warns against the tendency to confuse Creator and creation; a proper valuing of creation will come from a reappropriation of creatureliness, not a divinization of ourselves and the cosmos.

MATTHEW Fox, proponent and exponent of 'creation-centred spirituality' (or, more briefly, 'creation spirituality'), is a prolific writer, probably still best known for his *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality*, first published in 1983.¹ This remains the fullest and most systematic account of his theological approach. More recent works on which the account of Fox's thought in this article also draws are *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*² and *Creation Spirituality*.³

My title describes Matthew Fox's work as a 'New Age theology'. This requires explanation because he does not call it that himself, and because the New Age movement is generally understood to be a religious movement outside the Christian tradition, whereas Fox writes very deliberately within the Christian tradition. By calling his work a New Age theology, I have no intention of denying his claim to be a Christian theologian. I use the description in rather the same way as the work of Origen is often called a Platonist theology. Origen does Christian theology in a Platonist mode to such a degree that the extent to which Christian and Platonist elements finally determine the result is extremely debatable. In Fox's case, we might judge that the core of his theological approach derives originally from a few of the medieval Christian mystics, Meister Eckhart especially, and that this inspiration from a part of the Christian tradition somewhat outside the mainstream of the tradition has proved particularly amenable to transposition

- 1 M. Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality*, Bear, Santa Fe, New Mexico 1983.
- 2 M. Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance*, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1988.
- 3 M. Fox, *Creation Spirituality*, Harper Collins, San Francisco 1991.

into a New Age key. The New Age movement, of course, is itself highly eclectic, and, while opposing institutional Christianity, is not at all averse to taking up material from the Christian tradition and even to giving a central place to certain images from the Christian religious myth, reclaimed from institutional Christianity for non-dogmatic symbolic use. For example, David Spangler's book, *Reflections on the Christ*,⁴ which derives from the Findhorn community, offers an explicitly New Age version of Christology, in some respects strikingly like Fox's Cosmic Christ. Remembering that the meaning of Jesus Christ has been illuminated, in the Christian tradition of the past, from a wide variety of cultural and philosophical perspectives, we should not rule out *a priori* the possibility that the reality of Jesus Christ might be illuminated from a New Age perspective.

General characteristics which Fox's thinking shares with that very diverse phenomenon known as the New Age movement are as follows. There is the turn from anthropocentric thinking, focusing on the human apart from the rest of nature, to a focus on the cosmos and nature and the human in relation to nature. There is the turn from rationality to imagination, or at least an attempt to balance analytic and logical thinking with imaginative, intuitive, and mythic thinking. There is the turn from dualistic to holistic thinking, from compartmentalizing reality to appreciating the interdependence and connectedness of all things. There is the turn from divine transcendence beyond the world to divine immanence within the world, even to the divinity of the world. There is the attempt to see justice and peace in human society as equivalent to harmony in nature and harmony with nature. There is the appeal, against patriarchy, to the allegedly feminine principles of intuition and imagination, connectedness and relationality, bodiliness and fertility, embodied in images of the divine as female (the divine motherliness), the earth as female (Mother Earth), and the neologism 'birthing' as a constantly recurrent metaphor. There is the aspiration to a new synthesis of the three factors which western history is said to have artificially and tragically sundered: religious spirituality, art (with an emphasis not on high culture but on the creativity of ordinary people), and science (or at least the new physics with its cosmological and, it is claimed, mystical affinities). Of course, many of these features are not confined to the New Age movement, but can be found in other contemporary trends of thought such as feminist theology and Green thinking. They express a certain kind of cultural (or perhaps one should say: counter-cultural) mood, into which Fox taps with something of the eclecticism of the New Age movement itself.

Finally, there is the common sense of the dawning of the new age itself. Fox calls this the birth of a global renaissance, or, using Christian mythical imagery, the coming of the cosmic Christ. This he envisages, much as New Age thinkers do, as an emerging paradigm shift in religious conceptuality, sensibility and world view, a paradigm shift which is at the same time a return to forgotten, ancient wisdom. In Fox's case the ancient wisdom is the

4 D. Spangler, *Reflections on the Christ* (3rd edn), Findhorn Publications, Findhorn 1981.

so-called creation-centred tradition of spirituality within Christianity, though he is quite prepared to draw on, for example, Native American traditions and to emphasize the spiritual wisdom of traditional peoples. He writes:

‘It is precisely the despair of our times that convinces me that a renaissance is right around the corner, that a renaissance is the only answer to the depths of our dilemma. It is either renaissance or planetary extinction. There is no middle ground.’⁵

The global renaissance will be a move beyond the alienation of religion, science and art, to a newly holistic outlook which Fox calls a living cosmology. In this will coalesce science (in the form of the new creation story which contemporary science tells, a universal cosmological story to replace the creation stories of the various religions); mysticism (in the form of a new awakening of the human psyche’s potential for unitive cosmic imagination); and art (as the new form of meditative religious practice in which our awe at creation is expressed).

The Creator and the Gift

Of such an ambitious and visionary synthesis there are many different kinds of critical questions that could be asked.⁶ This article can certainly not be a comprehensive response to Fox’s ideas. I shall first of all indicate some of the respects in which Fox’s work seems to me valuable, before moving into the main line of critique that I wish to offer. First, Fox is absolutely correct in his claim that Christians urgently need to recover a sense of the world as God’s good creation and ourselves as part of that creation. This is a vital need not merely because of the ecological crisis, but for the spiritual health of humanity. A Christian focus on personal salvation or redemption to the exclusion of creation is a dangerous distortion of the Christian tradition, since it is only in connection with creation that salvation can be understood. What Christianity calls salvation is the restoration and renewal of creation. Without creation, salvation becomes purely psychological or moralistic, and in the end as meaningless as it seems to be to many people today. Even more seriously, unless we understand God primarily as Creator, and as Saviour only because he is in the first place Creator, awareness of God as truly God decays. The God who is the mysterious source of all being degenerates into a cosily accessible genie in a lamp or into some principle of moral behaviour. Fox tends to attack a concentration on purely individualistic personal salvation, but the social Gospel which focuses exclusively on human life in

5 Fox, *Cosmic Christ*, p 162.

6 For various criticisms of Fox, different from those advanced in this article, see M. Goodall and J. Reader, ‘Why Matthew Fox Fails to Change the World’, in I. Ball, M. Goodall, C. Palmer and J. Reader ed., *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology* (SPCK, London 1992), 104-119; W. Carr, *Manifold Wisdom: The Churches’ Ministry in the New Age* (SPCK, London 1992), 65-68; L. Osborn, *Guardians of Creation: Nature in Theology and the Christian Life* (Apollos, Leicester 1993), 75-78; M. Brearley, ‘Matthew Fox and the Cosmic Christ’, *Anvil* 9:1 (1992); idem, ‘Matthew Fox: Creation Spirituality for the Aquarian Age’, *Christian Jewish Relations* 22/2 (1989).

society is equally deficient at this point. The neglect of creation in both cases is actually in unwitting collusion with the general loss of the sense of God in our time. Without an emphasis on creation, God will never be known truly as God.

Secondly, Fox is right to stress that what a sense of creation involves, theologically and existentially, are the themes of blessing, gift and gratitude. Of course it is true that, as Fox argues in *Original Blessing*, the goodness of creation as given by God - the blessing of creation in God's continuous, extravagant lavishing of goodness on it - is more fundamental than the marring of creation by human sin and evil. No one in the orthodox Christian tradition has ever denied this, but Christians today need to appreciate it. We need a sense of the gratuitousness of everything as God's gift. We need to know both ourselves and the rest of creation as the gifts of God's sheer generosity. This alone will dispel the taking-for-granted attitude to the world which is the peculiar affliction of modern western humanity and one of the main sources of its current ills. The sense of nature as merely what we must master, control and use, and of knowledge as power over nature, must give place to awed awareness of the goodness of the world, to the reverence that goes with thankfulness to the God whose generous love is the source of all things. Only with such a renewed sense of life and the world as God's gift will we begin to be able once more to make sense of salvation as God's generous giving back to us the same creation, redeemed from the damage we have done to it.

Though I have expressed these two points in my own way, essentially they are key points in Matthew Fox's message which I think deserve warm appreciation. A third point concerns Fox's use of the Bible. In many ways this is open to serious criticism: it frequently approaches a quite uncontrolled appropriation of the biblical material for purposes established on other grounds. However, Fox's highlighting of the cosmic breadth of the biblical story is extremely valuable. It rightly corrects the strong tendency of modern biblical interpretation to subordinate nature to history and creation to salvation, and to reduce the Bible's sense of humanity's place in the cosmos to an anthropology that ignores the non-human creation. Though I cannot follow much of Fox's exegesis in detail, the general thrust of his approach is one that biblical scholarship is just beginning to take seriously.

Having indicated where I think Fox's work is valuable, I now offer two major criticisms of his approach. The first is essentially a historical criticism of the way that Fox interprets the history of Christian theology and spirituality, though the implications are more than purely historical. The second concerns the way he understands the relationship between God and creation.

History and theology

First, we must consider Fox's historical argument. He presents creation-centred spirituality as the alternative to what he calls the fall/redemption tradition of Christian spirituality. Christian theologians, mystics and spiritual

writers in the western tradition from Augustine onwards he assigns to either one or the other of these two traditions, one of which, the fall/redemption tradition, has promoted a negative view of creation, while the other, the creation spirituality tradition, has maintained that positive view of creation which Fox sees himself reviving. In Fox's now notorious family tree of creation spirituality (Appendix A in *Original Blessing*) he lists a very diverse range of people he approves of and evaluates them with stars, as though they were hotels. Only Jesus gets five stars, but three people get four stars. These are Fox's favourite medieval mystics: Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi and Meister Eckhart. The other tradition, the fall/redemption tradition, stems from Augustine of Hippo, whose vast influence over the western Christian tradition Fox seems to evaluate as indiscriminately regrettable. Augustine acquires almost the status of an Antichrist figure in Fox's work, mainly because Fox sees him as anti-nature.

Fox sometimes identifies the fundamental fault of the fall/redemption tradition as dualistic thinking - a rather slippery term in his as in other people's usage. Dualistic thinking sets up oppositions between matter and spirit, between body and soul, between humans and the rest of creation, and (apparently the most pernicious of all) between God and creation. (This last point - the alleged dualism between God and creation - I shall leave aside now, but return to it in my second major criticism of Fox, which concerns precisely this issue of the relation between God and creation.) According to Fox, the various dualisms inherent in the fall/redemption tradition promote a kind of anthropocentrism in which human beings consider themselves apart from the rest of creation and seek God not in the cosmos but introspectively within their own souls. This disastrous tendency is further promoted by Augustine's doctrine of original sin, which, according to Fox, 'grew to become the starting-point for western religion's flight from nature, creation, and the God of creation.'⁷ In place of the fundamental goodness of creation, human and non-human, the fall/redemption tradition is obsessed with the fallenness of human and non-human nature, and seeks liberation from sin and guilt in purely personal spiritual salvation, understood as redemption from this fallen, material world.

This polarization of two traditions, one focusing on the goodness of creation and finding God in creation, the other focusing on the fallenness of creation and finding God introspectively in personal salvation, has been the object of severe criticism, especially by the experts on medieval mysticism⁸. But it also needs to be exposed on a broader front as a wholly misleading picture of western Christian history. The point is not merely academic, but goes to the heart of Fox's enterprise, which is based on the premise that the root of our problems is the dominance of the fall/redemption tradition in western Christianity and that therefore the remedy is the revival of the creation tradition. I think Fox has seriously misidentified the problem, and this false diagnosis throws doubt on the adequacy of his remedy.

⁷ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p 48.

⁸ See the articles by Brearley cited in n. 6 above.

In order to introduce my argument, I offer first some quotations. Here is a theologian extolling the beauty of the created world:

'Ask the loveliness of the earth, ask the loveliness of the sea, ask the loveliness of the wide airy spaces, ask the loveliness of the sky, ask the order of the stars, ask the sun making the day light with its beams, ask the moon tempering the darkness of the night that follows, ask the living things which move in the waters, which tarry on the land, which fly in the air... - ask all these things and they will answer thee, "Lo, see we are lovely". Their loveliness is their confession. And these lovely but mutable things, who has made them, save Beauty immutable?'

Here is a theologian claiming that the whole created world reveals God as a work of art reveals its maker:

'Whatever pleases you in a work of art brings to your mind the artist who wrought it; much more, when you survey the universe, does the consideration of it evoke praise for its Maker. You look on the heavens; they are God's great work. You behold the earth; God made its numbers of seeds. its varieties of plants, its multitude of animals. Go round the heavens again and back to the earth, leave out nothing; on all sides everything cries out to you of its Author; nay, the very forms of created things are as it were the voices with which they praise their Creator.'

Here is a theologian using the very common Christian metaphor of nature as a book in which we can read of God:

'Some people read books in order to find God. Yet there is a great book, the very appearance of created things. Look above you; look below you! Note it; read it! God, whom you wish to find, never wrote that book with ink. Instead he set before your eyes the things that he had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that? Why, heaven and earth cry out to you: "God made me!"'

And here is the end of a long passage expounding the beauty of the human body, as the expression of the goodness and beauty of its Creator:

'Now if it is true (and it is scarcely a matter of debate) that there is no visible part of the body which is merely adapted to its function without being also of aesthetic value, there are also parts which have only aesthetic value without any practical purpose. Hence it can, I think, readily be inferred that in the design of the human body dignity was a more important consideration than utility. For practical needs are, of course, transitory; and a time will come when we shall enjoy one another's beauty for itself alone, without any lust. And this above all is a motive for the praise of the Creator, to whom the psalm says, "You have clothed yourself in praise and beauty".'

All those quotations are from Augustine of Hippo⁹, the great despiser and distruster of creation, according to Fox.

9 The sources are (1) *Serm.* 241: translation from R. G. Sorrell, *St Francis of Assisi and Nature* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988) p 86; (2) *Enarr. in Ps.* 26 2.12: translation from V.

Finally, the following quotation is a fine example of a medieval writer putting the doctrines of creation, fall and redemption in the balanced relationship which is typical of the whole western Christian tradition. Addressing God the Father, the author says:

You have created all things spiritual and corporal and, having made us in your own image and likeness, you placed us in paradise. And through our own fault we have fallen. And we thank you, for as through your Son you created us, so also, through your holy love with which you loved us, you brought about his birth as true God and true human ... and you willed to redeem us captives through his cross and blood and death.

That quotation is from Francis of Assisi,¹⁰ four-star advocate of creation spirituality, untainted by the fall/redemption tradition, according to Fox.

What a few quotations can prove is limited, though they cannot, like statistics, prove anything. But quotations of this kind could easily be multiplied indefinitely, and what they prove is this. There are not two traditions. There is a common theological framework, in which creation, fall and redemption are closely related, which is common to virtually the whole western Christian tradition. Of course, within that framework emphases vary and sometimes so much that serious distortions occur. But the view, for example, that nature reveals the glory, the wisdom and the beauty of God is a platitude of the whole tradition. From the Protestant tradition, for example, to which Fox gives little attention, it would be easy to document the point from Calvin, the Puritans, the Wesleys, or almost any major writer. By no means all theological and spiritual writers have been especially interested in this feature of the tradition, but none have denied it.

Moreover, while it is undoubtedly true that there have been trends in the Christian tradition which have tended to devalue nature, Fox misunderstands and exaggerates them. Three such tendencies can be mentioned. First, Platonist influence - on Augustine, for example - promoted an hierarchical view of the world, in which spirit ranks higher than matter. Platonic mysticism, therefore, begins by appreciating the goodness and beauty of the natural world, which reveals God so far as it goes. But then, in order to come closer to God, the mystic must leave aside the material creation and turn inward to the reflection of God in his or her own spirit. This introspection has nothing at all to do with original sin. It is moving from the visible creation, which is good, to the invisible creation, which is better.

Secondly, the combination of Platonism and the doctrine of original sin created an ascetic tradition in which the human body was treated with great

J. Bourke ed., *The Essential Augustine* (New American Library, New York 1964) pp 131-132; (3) *Serm.* 126.6: translation from Bourke ed., *The Essential Augustine*, p 123; (4) *De Civ. Dei* 22.24: translation from Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, translated by H. Bettenson (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1972) p 1074.

10 *Regula non bullata* 93: translation from *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, ed. R. J. Armstrong and I. C. Brady (Classics of Western Spirituality; Paulist Press, New York 1982), p 130.

suspicion as the source of temptations to be resisted and overcome. However, the ascetic tradition was generally much more negative towards the human body than it was towards the rest of nature. Fox can quote some examples of saints who thought that enjoying the beauty of nature was an indulgence of the flesh to be shunned, but much more typical were saints who treated their own bodies with ascetic severity but delighted in the goodness and beauty of the natural creation.

Thirdly, there is in the medieval mystics a very profound theme which can, at first sight, look like a negative view of creation and which I suspect Fox has not appreciated at all. This is the teaching that, in order to come to love God above all things, we must learn to see all created things as of no value *by comparison with God*. Until we do this we have not loved God as God, as the incomparable Good who infinitely surpasses the goodness of his creation. However, the goal of this teaching is not that we should not love creation. It is that we should progress from loving creation *instead of God* to loving creation in God. However, I think Fox would be able see this only as an unacceptably dualistic distinction between God and creation. To love God and to love creation are, he seems to be saying, the same thing. I shall return to this point.

Fox exaggerates the tendencies to devalue creation in the tradition. But more serious than this is the fact that he identifies them as the source of our present problems. I think it likely that, however much these tendencies should be deplored, they have rather little to do with our present problems. Much the most important root of our present problems is not an introspective flight from nature but, rather, a particular concept of humanity's supremacy over nature, which gives us the power and the right to dominate creation, to use it and to shape it and to recreate it for our own purposes. Religious people who turned in on themselves in order to mourn for their sins or in order to seek mystical union with God in their inner being were surely harmless compared with other people - the pacemakers of a whole civilization - who put all their energies into subjugating and refashioning the whole creation. Fox is amazingly silent on this issue. Western culture since the Renaissance has not been a flight from nature, but a massive project of dominating and remaking nature. It has not so much evaluated nature negatively, as seen nature's value purely as potential for human creativity to work on. Fox, I think, makes an odd mistake when he contrasts the anthropocentric (human-centred) attitude of the fall/redemption tradition with the creation-centred approach of his alternative tradition. By anthropocentric he means concentrating on the human to the exclusion of the rest of creation. Creation-centred spirituality, by contrast, sees us in relation to the rest of creation. But he thereby neglects the kind of anthropocentricity which is very concerned with the relationship of humans to the rest of creation, but views creation anthropocentrically. This kind of anthropocentricity, for which the rest of creation exists for us humans to turn into something of human value, is the root of our present problems, a root which Fox ignores.

What happened, very briefly, was this¹¹. The Christian tradition had long had a sense of humanity's supremacy in creation, but in the medieval period it was strongly balanced by a sense of humanity's place within creation. All creation exists for God's glory. In relation to God the Creator we are creatures of God alongside our fellow creatures. It was Renaissance humanism which first upset this balance. Renaissance humanism removed us from our place within creation and set us entirely above creation, subordinate only to God and resembling God far more than we resemble creation. Distinguished from all creatures by our likeness to God, we were then endowed by Renaissance humanism with godlike powers to be ourselves creators. The world was no longer a God-given order with value other than its value for us, an order within which we have a place. The world became raw material for our godlike creativity to refashion to our own design. The human project became one of recreating ourselves by recreating the rest of the world. We had the freedom of God to make anything of ourselves and anything of the world. With such an outlook, any sense of being ourselves creatures dependent on a Creator or of the world being created by the Creator inevitably fades, and Enlightenment thinkers therefore took a natural step in dropping reference to God altogether. Modern secular humanity stepped into the position once occupied by the Creator.

Modern Christianity accommodated itself in various ways to this ideology of creative domination of nature. Accommodation followed not only the ideology, but also its vast practical result: the fact that most modern people live in an industrialized, urbanized world. In this world created by humans and permeated by an ideology that stressed its creation by humans, it is not surprising that any lively sense of the doctrine of creation - of being ourselves created by God and fellow-creatures with the rest of God's creation - declined. And so it is in this modern period that the loss of a strong sense of creation and, with it, the disastrous tendency to disconnect salvation from creation occurred. What Fox traces back to Augustine has a much more modern source. In the modern world, the doctrine of creation no longer seemed very relevant, but for a while salvation, in various forms, individualized and social, still made sense. But the loss of a really existential sense of creation undermined the meaning and reality of belief in God, and thereby salvation has also begun to lose its meaning.

So the Christian sense of creation was not lost by introspective piety in flight from nature (the so-called fall/redemption tradition); it was destroyed by the human assumption of godlike supremacy and creativity in relation to nature (the Renaissance humanist and Enlightenment tradition which has actually created the modern world). This is where Fox's misreading of history has led to a major mistake. It follows that an introspective obsession with our personal sin or ascetic attitudes to our own bodies are really not the problem. (In any case there is not much evidence of them in contemporary Christianity.)

11 For a fully argued version of the thesis sketched here, see R. Bauckham, 'Attitudes to the Non-Human Creation in the History of Christian Thought', in S. Bishop ed., *Stewarding Creation*.

The need is rather to moderate our aspiration to divinity by recovering a sense of our creatureliness. We need to find our place once again within a creation which owes its being and its goodness entirely to God and which exists for God's glory. The remedy for our disastrously anthropocentric view of the world is to recover the sense of ourselves and nature precisely as *creation*, to take our place alongside other creatures in a *theocentric* (God-centred) world. One of the most important expressions of this view in the Christian tradition was the idea that all creatures praise their Creator, and our praise of God is our participation in the worship of the whole creation. In such a vision of creation it is obvious that the rest of nature does not exist merely for us; it has value for God and therefore for itself quite independently of us.

Distinguishing God and creation

Such a theocentric vision of creation requires that we distinguish ourselves and our fellow-creatures from God. Certainly we find God *in* all things, as the artist who has put himself into his creation, but we find *God* in all things only by distinguishing all things from God, distinguishing the work of art from the artist, distinguishing the gifts from their giver, distinguishing the creatures themselves from the divine source of all their being and goodness and beauty. And so here I come to my second major criticism of Fox, which is that there is a strong tendency in his thought to obscure this distinction. It is never really clear whether Fox's rejection of dualism between God and the world is a rejection of *distance* between God and the world or a rejection of *distinction* between God and the world. Fox does not help by once again caricaturing the tradition, this time by setting up the Aunt Sally of a view that supposedly understands God to be outside the world. No reflective person in the Christian tradition has ever supposed God to be outside the world. Of course, God is intensively and intimately present within his creation, as well as surpassing it. That is not in question. The question is whether God is distinguishable from creation.

My purpose here is certainly not to adjudicate Fox's orthodoxy. I am not accusing him of pantheism, which he repudiates. My concern is with a *tendency* - not a fully consistent tendency, but a tendency in his thought which seems to me to threaten precisely that recovery of a sense of creation which we need. Let me mention a number of aspects of Fox's discussion of the relation of God and creation.

First, there is much to suggest that for Fox our relationship to the cosmos simply is our relationship to God. Approaching the cosmos with awe and wonder and gratitude we are encountering God. There is no more to knowing God than this. It is not that the cosmos reveals to us and points us to its Creator who surpasses it, its glory suggesting the greater glory from which it derives, but rather that the glory of the cosmos is God for us. For example, the notion of trust bulks large in Fox's spirituality: it is his - entirely proper - translation of 'faith.' But although Fox speaks frequently of trusting ourselves and trusting the world, and even of God trusting us, he only once

in *Original Blessing* speaks of trusting God.¹² I presume there is nothing to trusting God which is not already said by trusting ourselves and trusting the world. In fact, Fox is capable of saying an extraordinary amount about mysticism without mentioning God. At one point he justifies this: 'As one grows more deeply into a panentheistic awareness, one's need to invoke the actual name of God becomes less compelling.'¹³ But in support for this statement he can only observe that the biblical books of Esther and the Song of Songs never name God, and that Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Creatures* does not mention Jesus Christ. The latter point is entirely spurious, since although the *Canticle* does not mention Jesus, it invokes *God* by name in every single verse. In fact, the idea that mystical awareness of God in creation reduces the need to refer to God has no support from the Christian spiritual tradition at all, not even from Fox's own favourite mystics. Those who find God in creation feel the need to say so, because finding God in creation is distinguishing God from creation.

Secondly, Fox freely and frequently uses the language, not only of God in creation, but also of ourselves and nature as divine. Up to a point such language has respectable precedent in the Christian tradition. But in combination with my first point, the impression it creates is that Fox's creation mysticism is less a matter of finding God in all things than of finding all things to be divine. Divinity has become a quality of things, not a naming of the one to whom all things owe their being and their goodness.

Thirdly, Fox is particularly free with the language of our divinity, which comes to expression in our creativity.

Perhaps the most gross of all dualisms is the dualism between the divine and us. As if we hold no divine blood in us, as if we are creatures only and not creators. Co-creators with God.¹⁴

Admittedly, creativity for Fox is artistic, not technological; nature-friendly, not ecologically destructive. But still any talk of our divine creativity ought now to be subject to a vigorous hermeneutic of suspicion. It smacks of the same expansive hubris that fired the whole Renaissance/Enlightenment project to subjugate and recreate the world - precisely the attitude from which we need to be weaned. We are not co-creators with God. We are creatures who derive from God a wonderful ability to make something of what God has given us.

Fourthly, Fox proposes that nature - the non-human creation - is a source of moral values for us. Fox apparently has learnt nothing from those who have appealed to nature as a source of moral values in modern times. If nature teaches moral values, it teaches the survival of the fittest, the expendability of the individual, the need for selfishness and cruelty - or, as Fox suggests, with supreme moral insensitivity:

12 Fox, *Original Blessing*, p 283.

13 Fox, *Original Blessing*, pp 90f.

14 Fox, *Original Blessing*, p 236. For other examples of this theme, see *Original Blessing*, p 184: *Creation Spirituality*, pp 8, 18, 22, 47, 58.

All suffering may well be sacrificial suffering, a gift of our very being for others.... Whole species have been called upon to lay down their lives for others, and they have done so.¹⁵

Such species, of course, had no say in the matter, any more than the Jews had in the Holocaust. One thing nature cannot teach us is morality. But Fox's need for it to do so follows from his tendency to equate our knowledge of God with our knowledge of the cosmos.

Conclusion

It seems to me that in its tendency to equate God and creation, Fox's creation spirituality disappointingly falls short of providing what today we so desperately need: a recovery of the sense of God as Creator and of nature as creation. For the sake both of God and of creation we need to distinguish God and creation. The creatures reflect and glorify God when they refer us to the one who made them. Even as we recognize God in them they point beyond themselves to the God who surpasses them. We do not know or love God as God until we recognize him as the one who always surpasses his creation, who can be the inexhaustible source of being and goodness only because he always surpasses all that he makes and gives.

Conversely, we rob the creatures of their real integrity as creatures if we require them to stand in for God. Certainly, the divine Artist puts himself into his works and we can recognize him there. But he also creates beings who are not just bits of himself, but genuinely other than himself, free to be themselves, not God, having a value he gives them precisely as themselves. We should beware of the suggestion that we can reverence, respect and value God's creatures only if we see them as divine, as though they do not have God-given value in themselves as creatures. What we need to reverence and respect is the strange and particular way in which each kind of creature is itself, in all the extraordinary diversity of God's creation. It is not at all clear that this is what happens when nature is divinized. What people tend to treat as divine is the numinously impressive, the beautiful and the terrifying. They worship trees, not potatoes; pythons, not fleas.

So when Fox quotes Meister Eckhart as saying, 'God loves all creatures as God.... God enjoys all creatures, not as creatures, but enjoys the creatures as God',¹⁶ that seems to me not an affirmation but a contradiction of creation. The Creator creates because he loves and values creatures as creatures, not as God. So should we. Then we shall be able to rejoin them all in their praise of the God who made them.

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15 Fox, *Creation Spirituality*, pp 51f.

16 Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, p 123.