



Rupert Loydell

# A fox in sheep's clothing

**Steve Bishop** believes that Matthew Fox's 'creation-centred spirituality' is seriously flawed

**W**estern Christianity, because of its emphasis on dominion, has often been charged with paving the way for the current environmental crisis, consequently theologians and writers have attempted to defend Christianity against this unjust accusation. One such attempt is what has been named 'creation-centred spirituality'. Matthew Fox, an American Dominican priest and theologian, is the foremost representative of this recently developed spirituality. His basic premise is that we need a new religious paradigm: one that replaces the old dualistic and patriarchal 'exclusively fall/redemption spirituality'; that seeks to place humanity within the creation; that celebrates creation's beauty and our cre-

ativity; that affirms our bodies. A creation-centred spirituality, Fox believes, is one such appropriate paradigm.

Fox's writings on 'creation-centred spirituality' include *Original Blessing*<sup>1</sup>, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*<sup>2</sup> and his most recent *Creation Spirituality*<sup>3</sup>; these have been influential among Catholics and Protestants alike, and further afield. He appeals to Christians who are seeking a spirituality that affirms rather than denies the creation, because he uses theological terms and is theologically literate. He also appeals to some greens who are searching for a spirituality to explain the principles of human awareness and existence and interconnectedness. Creation-centred spirituality, because it has roots in

a wide range of spiritual traditions and religions, resonates with others of different cultures and beliefs. Fox has been accused of 'pure Taoism' and of being 'aboriginal'; his is the ultimate ecumenicalism!

So is his creation-centred spirituality benign? Is it, as he claims, orthodox and supported by the Bible?

## **A silenced prophet?**

Despite his popularity not everyone is happy with Fox's teachings. In December 1988 he was silenced by his Dominican Order for one year; ironically this had the effect of increasing his popularity. A panel was set up to examine his work, and came to the conclusion that he

was not heretical. Commenting on this, Fox says: 'I have done my homework and have proven that what I am saying is part of the mystical Christian tradition.'<sup>4</sup>

It is indeed important to Fox that his teachings are seen as part of the Christian tradition: tradition distinguishes a spirituality from a cult.

He has never sought confrontation with the Vatican, but that does not mean the Vatican is totally happy with Fox's work. In an interview with Satish Kumar, the editor of *Resurgence*, Fox remarks: 'I have always written for the people [as opposed to the Vatican], and tried to speak to the people, and that is what I will continue doing, and if it means that I will be expelled from the priesthood, then that is the price I will have to pay. I will not leave the priesthood voluntarily because I have spent twenty years proving that this is our tradition; it is in the Bible, it is our mystic tradition.'<sup>5</sup>

### The mystic tradition

This 'mystic tradition' which Fox sees as part of the Christian heritage, however, involves a highly selective view of Christian history on his part. In particular he draws on the 'Rhineland mystics', whom he sees as 'champions of an ecological spiritual consciousness.'<sup>6</sup> These include Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Mechtild of Magdeburg (1210-1290), Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1327) and Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1415). Technically the latter is not a 'Rhineland mystic' but Fox feels she deserves to be called one. He makes use of the works of Francis of Assisi (1181-1225) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).<sup>7</sup>

However, Fox's handling of these mystics is open to criticism. Simon Tugwell OP, in a review of Fox's *Breakthrough*<sup>8</sup>: a translation of and commentary on Eckhart, observes: "It is difficult to avoid the feeling that the mistranslation is deliberate, intended to minimise anything that would interfere with the alleged 'creation-centredness' of Eckhart's spirituality."<sup>9</sup>

Tugwell also notes that Fox 'repeatedly insults his readers with bland assertions which it would be very difficult to substantiate, with tendentious half-truths, or with downright falsehood.'<sup>10</sup> He concludes that *Breakthrough* 'seriously misrepresents Eckhart.'

### Creation-centred spirituality

Fox's creation-centred spirituality, which 'considers the environment to be a divine womb, holy, worthy of reverence and respect',<sup>11</sup> is a backlash to what he sees as the poverty of Western spirituality. Fox is opposed to the subject/object dualisms that have dominated theology, at least according to Fox, since Augustine (354 - 430);<sup>12</sup> and he rejects the emphasis - again through Augustine on fall/redemption theology.<sup>13</sup> It will be

worth looking at both these in turn. Before doing so a brief comment on Fox's use of Augustine is called for.

The blame for our current spiritual poverty is laid, almost solely, at Augustine's door. 'The creation-centred spiritual tradition offers an alternative to much of Christian history for it delineates the truth that hellenism and its dualisms regarding the body, feeling and spirit is not Jewish or Biblical thinking and that Augustine's dualistic interpretation of Christianity was a distortion of Jesus' spirituality. Since vast proportions of both Catholic and Protestant church life and polity have been constructed on Augustine's dualistic Neoplatonic world view, spirituality in the West must let go of Augustine's thought if it is to immerse itself in the profound wellsprings of Biblical spirituality and contribute to creating a global civilisation.'<sup>14</sup>

Lawrence Osborn points out the irony of Fox's vehement attack on Augustine. Fox 'relies heavily upon the mystical tradition of his own religious order: a *mysticism which is steeped in Augustinian influence*' (my emphasis).<sup>15</sup> It is this selectivity of the truth that characterizes much of Fox's scholarship; this is not to say it is deliberate: Fox's world-view - as does everyone's - colours his perception of reality and his choice of 'facts'.

### Dualism

Fox is only partly correct when he notes that 'Subject/ object dualisms have characterized the mainstream of spirituality in the West from St. Augustine to Jerry Falwell and points in between'.<sup>16</sup> Dualism was also rife pre-Augustine: Plato (427-347 BC) had a form/ matter dualism that characterized all his philosophy, which in turn had an enormous impact on the early church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215), Origen (c. 185-254) and Basil of Caesarea (c.330-79). It was through Augustine, under the influence of Plotinus, that dualism 'received its ultimate theological legitimation'.<sup>17</sup> However, the mystics that Fox draws upon were not free from dualism. Aquinas in particular was responsible for a nature/grace dualism that paved the way for Descartes' radical dualism of mind/matter.<sup>18</sup> This mind/matter dualism is the root of the desanctification of nature,<sup>19</sup> the very thing Fox wants to avoid!

Fox is so keen to eradicate all dualism that he obliterates any distinction between the Creator and his creation. This distinction is described by Fox as 'the ultimate dualism'.<sup>20</sup> To do this he does not embrace pantheism (God is everything and everything is God) but the closely related pantheism (God is in everything and everything is in God).

'... we have to move from theism to pantheism. Theism has haunted us for 300 or 400 years in the West and it basically says I'm here and God is some-

where else, and prayer is about getting to God or getting God here. This encourages subject/object relationships. Carl Jung said that there are two ways to lose your soul and one is to worship a god outside of you.'<sup>21</sup>

For some theologians pantheism can be a subset of theism; for Fox it is more a subset of pantheism: 'I am proposing a new theology of creation in which God is not an absentee landlord. God is the creation.'<sup>22</sup>

He is vehemently opposed to what he calls 'theism': '... theism is by definition dualistic'.<sup>23</sup> However, his use of the term theism is misleading. Most of his criticisms of theism apply to deism but not to theism.<sup>24</sup> He regards theism as naive compared with pantheism:

'Moving from a theistic ('God out there' or even 'God in here') to a panentheistic theology ('all is in God and God is in all') is a requisite for growing up spiritually. . . . A theistic imaging of God is essentially adolescent for it is based on an ego mind-set, a zeroing in on how we are separate from God.'<sup>25</sup>

In attempting to undermine this 'dualism' he falls into the trap of monism: all is one. Fox's pantheism is an attempt to do justice to the involvement of God in his creation and to undermine any desanctification of creation. It fails because it does not distinguish God from his creation: it deifies the creation; consequently humanity becomes divine and paradoxically no different from the grass. A more biblical way to deal with the problem of God's involvement with creation is through the traditional theistic categories of transcendence and immanence. The few Bible verses that Fox cites (out of context) for pantheism prove to offer no support (Luke 17.21; John 15.5; Acts 17.25).<sup>26</sup>

### Fall/redemption theology

We can now turn to Fox's trenchant criticism of what he calls fall/redemption theology. Fox hopes to replace this with a creation-centred theology. Any attempt to marginalize the fall is immediately confronted by the problem of how to explain evil, death and imperfection. For Fox, death is a natural event and imperfection is integral to creation. Further, in rejecting a fall/redemption theology, he bypasses the cross as the means of reconciliation. The cross is seen as a symbol of 'letting go'.<sup>27</sup> This reduction of the cross is (at best) sub-Christian. Fox, in bypassing the redemptive function of the cross, ceases to offer a Christian spirituality and exits from the Christian tradition.

In discussing the 'fall/ redemption' tradition Fox shows misunderstandings and commits several errors. The following factors undermine his position.

His phrase the 'fall/redemption' tradition is a misnomer; it is best characterized by the term 'creation, fall and redemp-

