

98:7-9).⁷⁷ Nevertheless, there is a distinctive aspect to Revelation's treatment of this theme. It lies in the phrase to which I have already drawn attention: 'those who destroy the earth' (11:18). The coming of God's rule on earth will not only liberate people from evil, but will liberate the earth from those who are destroying it.⁷⁸ If the non-human creation fails to glorify God as fully as it might, this is not due to itself. Unlike humans, it glorifies God simply by being itself, as God made it to be. But powers of evil, superhuman and human, can despoil its glory and muffle its praise. Our human responsibility in this respect is not, as some argue, to voice creation's praise for it or to mediate its praise to God, but to let it be itself. Humans and other creatures are made to be partners in praise, like the four living creatures.

9.

Creation Mysticism in Matthew Fox and Francis of Assisi

In this chapter we shall study and compare two examples of 'creation mysticism' in the Christian tradition. The work of Matthew Fox provides probably the best-known contemporary example, while Francis of Assisi is without doubt the greatest nature mystic in the Christian tradition, and some would say the first.¹ I shall argue that Francis's form of creation mysticism is a more authentically Christian form than that of Fox, who moves away from elements central both to the Christian tradition in general and to Francis's spirituality in particular.

Matthew Fox

Matthew Fox, former Dominican friar, is well known as the proponent and exponent of what he calls 'creation-centered spirituality' (or, more briefly, 'creation spirituality' or, sometimes, 'creation mysticism'). We can appropriately call this a form of mysticism, partly because Fox's thought is deeply inspired by several of the medieval Christian mystics, especially Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen and Mechthild of Magdeburg, but also because he believes that 'creation spirituality liberates the mystic in us all'.² 'A basic teaching of all in the creation mystical tradition,' he claims, 'is this: everyone is a mystic'.³ The mystical is the repressed

¹ Sorrell, *St. Francis*, ch. 4.

² Matthew Fox, *Creation Spirituality* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 105.

³ Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 48.

⁷⁷ For the important allusions to these psalms in Revelation, see Bauckham, *Climax*, pp. 286-9.

⁷⁸ See Bauckham, *Theology*, p. 51-3.

shadow side of the western personality, which only the recovery of a sense of belonging to a sacred cosmos can liberate. Thus Fox is not interested in a mysticism that is only attained by a spiritual elite, as the great mystics of the Catholic tradition have sometimes been seen, and certainly not in a mysticism which offers mystical experience only as the culmination of a long and arduous process of ascetical practice. Much as he looks to some of the great Christian mystics, those he sees as creation mystics, for inspiration, his concern is with a mysticism that can be experienced and lived by ordinary people in experience of the cosmos, in new and revitalized forms of meditation and ludic ritual, in all forms of artistic creativity and imagination, and which is inseparable from the practice of prophetic justice in relation to the earth and to the poor. When he speaks of his extensive experience that 'all kinds of persons are waking up to the mystic within them today',⁴ we can easily recognize the cultural reality to which his understanding of mysticism corresponds.

Essential to mysticism as he sees it are awe and playful wonder and celebration in relation to a cosmos seen as sacred.⁵ Also definitive of mysticism for him are the themes of unity and wholeness:

Our mystical experiences are unitive experiences. They may occur on a dark night with the sparkling stars in the sky; at the ocean; in the mountains or fields; with friends or family; with ideas; in lovemaking; in play; with music and dance and art of all kinds; in work; in suffering and in letting go. What all mystical experiences share in common is this experience of nonseparation, of nondualism . . . [As] Julian of Norwich put it, 'Between God and the soul there is no between' . . . Here Julian is celebrating the end of the primary dualism – that between humans and divinity. The mystics promise that within each of us there is a capacity – the experience of the 'no between' – to be united and not separate. Mysticism announces the end of alienation and the beginning of communion, the end of either/or relationships (which form the essence of dualism) and the beginning of unity. Yet the unity that the mystics celebrate is not a loss of self or a dissolution of differences, but a unity of creativity, a coming together of different existences.⁶

This view of 'nondualism' is central to Fox's thought and we must return to it. Not unconnected is the definition of mysticism, borrowed

⁴ Fox, *Coming*, p. 42.

⁵ Fox, *Creation Spirituality*, pp. 29–30; cf. *Coming*, p. 51.

⁶ Fox, *Coming*, pp. 49–50.

from Josef Pieper, as 'an affirmation of the world as a whole'. This is 'to embrace a cosmology' which, in spite of human degradation of the world, affirms the goodness of the cosmos as a whole and therefore finds the cosmos a source of sustenance.⁷

Fox's creation spirituality can be situated both in its present cultural context and in relation to the Christian tradition of the past. While Fox writes deliberately within the Christian tradition, there are many features of his work which connect with that very diverse and characteristically post-modern religious phenomenon known as the New Age movement. 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. 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 that is at the same time a return to forgotten, ancient wisdom. In Fox's case the ancient wisdom is the so-called creation-centred tradition of spirituality within Christianity, though he is quite

⁷ Fox, *Coming*, pp. 51–2.

prepared to draw on, for example, Native American traditions and to emphasize the spiritual wisdom of traditional peoples. The global renaissance will be a move beyond the alienation of religion, science and art, to a newly holistic outlook that 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).

A particular understanding of the history of the Christian tradition, with a resulting discernment as to what can be retrieved and what we should discard, is integral to Fox's project. This is a process of 're-visioning' history in order to allow 'the best and most often forgotten and repressed elements of our tradition . . . to come to the fore'.⁸ Fox presents the tradition of creation spirituality as the alternative to what he calls the fall/redemption tradition of Christian spirituality, which has been more dominant especially in the modern period. 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 spirituality⁹ 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.

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. 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'.¹⁰ 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. A world-rejecting and body-hating asceticism is a prime characteristic of spirituality in this tradition. By contrast, the creation-centred tradition emphasizes 'original blessing', concerns itself with the people of God and the cosmos, is aesthetic rather than ascetic, emphasizes thanksgiving, praise and creativity rather than guilt, redemption and obedience.

Many critics have challenged this typology of the two traditions as a misleading view of history.¹¹ Of course, the western Christian tradition is such a complex historical phenomenon, subject at many points to very varied influences, spawning many different schools of thought and traditions of spirituality, that almost any contemporary Christian thinker will be able to find precedents with which he or she can closely identify, as well as examples of what he or she thinks the most aberrant or deleterious forms Christianity can take. But the fact is that most of the thinkers and mystics of whom Fox approves lived and worked within the same broad theological framework as those of whom he disapproves, that is, a framework in which creation, fall and redemption are closely related. (We shall see later how this is true of Francis of Assisi.) The variations occur within this common framework rather than constituting two opposed traditions.

In fact, even Fox's own work throws doubt on the way he polarizes the two traditions. It might seem as though Fox himself has no place for sin or salvation, but in fact he has his own definitions of sin, such as the damage humans do to creation, and of salvation, such as the

¹⁰ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 48.

¹¹ E.g. T.E. Clarke, 'Theological Trends: Creational Spirituality', *The Way* 29 (1989), p. 77; B. Newman, 'Romancing the Past: A Critical Look at Matthew Fox and the Medieval "Creation Mystics"', *Touchstone* 5 (1992), pp. 5–10 (I owe this reference to Lawrence Osborn); M. Goodall and John Reader, 'Why Matthew Fox Fails to Change the World' in *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology* (ed. Ian Ball, M. Goodall, Clare Palmer and John Reader; London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 115–16.

⁸ Fox, *Creation Spirituality*, p. 33.

⁹ Fox, *Original Blessing*, Appendix A, pp. 307–15.

healing of creation in which we help to establish cosmic harmony. Indeed, he even has a substitute for the Augustinian understanding of original sin that he rejects: dualism, 'the dualism that human, sexual, racial, economic exploitations are all about', is 'the basis of all sin'.¹² Dualism 'is what the creation-centered tradition considers to be original sin or the sin behind sin'.¹³ Another major flaw in Fox's historical typology is that he misses the extent to which the depreciation of the material world and the introspective turn to the spiritual within, real tendencies in much of the tradition of Christian spirituality, were due, not to the fall/redemption doctrine as such, but to the quite different influence of Platonism in the Christian tradition. Finally, he also leaves secularization and the loss of religious belief largely out of his account of what has gone wrong in modern western history. He joins in a popular contemporary game of blaming on the Christian tradition or part of it such things as the modern project of technological domination of the world that have in fact coincided with the progress of western rejection of the Christian tradition.

Rather as New Testament scholars in the first half of the twentieth century tended to use first-century Judaism as a foil to set off the virtues of early Christianity, attributing to Judaism precisely the faults which Christianity remedied, so Fox's account of the fall/redemption tradition is little more than a means of highlighting all the attractions of the creation-centered tradition by contrasting it with everything it was not. How else can we read, for example, Fox's exhortation 'to let the preoccupation with human sinfulness give way to attention to divine grace?'¹⁴ – as though Augustine and the Reformers (among others), seriously as they took human sinfulness, did not give at least equal attention to divine grace! Fox's work is best read, not as the recovery of a lost tradition, but as his own eclectic creation, drawing on many sources in the tradition and the contemporary world.

Fox's work is too wide-ranging to be adequately summed up here. Instead, I shall pick out some features which seem to me of special interest for pursuing a comparison between Fox and Francis of Assisi, who is widely considered the first and the greatest 'creation mystic' in the Christian tradition. Are there aspects of Fox's thought which positively correspond, in a helpfully contemporary way, to aspects of Francis's spirituality? Are there aspects which seem more problematic

¹² Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 296.

¹³ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 210.

¹⁴ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 26.

from the position centrally within the Christian mainstream that Francis, for all his remarkable exceptionality, certainly occupies, as we shall see? I shall briefly discuss two themes in each of these two categories.

Creation as well as Salvation

The Christian tradition has always understood salvation as the restoration and renewal, as well as completion, of God's good creation. When Fox insists that salvation loses its meaning if creation drops out of view,¹⁵ he is representing, not a minority tradition of creation-centred spirituality, but the mainstream of the Christian tradition, which, incidentally, has never denied that the goodness of God's creation is more fundamental than the sin that has damaged and distorted it. It may well be the case that in the modern period, Christianity of several types has taken creation for granted just at the juncture of history when it could no longer be taken for granted, and focused too exclusively on human salvation, whether in an individualistic way or in terms of a social gospel of reforming society. In the long run, the loss of a sense of creation has undermined the meaningfulness of salvation, while the understanding of God as Saviour without an equally strong sense of God as Creator has unwittingly colluded with the general loss of a sense of God in our time. It is for the sake of God and the gospel, as well as for the sake of the earth and its non-human inhabitants, that Christian recognition of the world as God's good creation and ourselves as part of that creation is urgently needed. As Fox knows, such recognition is not a merely intellectual matter, but a deeply experiential way of relating to God and creation.

Gift and Gratitude

To such an experience, as Fox stresses, the themes of blessing, gift and gratitude are central: the blessing of creation in God's continuous and extravagant lavishing of goodness on it, the giftedness of creation, including ourselves, as given to us, and thankfulness and praise as the wellspring of life ('a thanks from the depths of the cosmos that we are for the cosmos in which we live').¹⁶ Fox rightly identifies 'taking for

¹⁵ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 108.

¹⁶ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 115.

granted' as one of the peculiar afflictions of modern western humanity and a prime source of its ills,¹⁷ and one could add that a false estimation of achievement, rather than being given, as what matters, an unwillingness to recognize that every achievement is deeply indebted to what we are given, is a closely related failure. Though Fox does not say this, one way in which salvation is related to creation in experience is in the sense of being given oneself and the world afresh in 'grace' (which means God's generous gift) – a redemption from 'taking for granted' such that all of life becomes experience of gratefulness. Once again, one does not have to polarize the Christian tradition in order to recover this: it runs through the whole tradition and has been lost through secularization rather than Augustinianism.

Theism, Pantheism and Dualism

One of the most important of the differences between the two traditions as Fox constructs them is the difference between theism and pantheism. This is also, in terms of Fox's key category of dualism, a difference between a dualistic understanding of the relationship of God and the world and a non-dualistic understanding of that relationship: 'The idea that God is "out there" is probably the ultimate dualism, divorcing as it does God and humanity'.¹⁸ Fox makes the common mistake of supposing that theism posits God's transcendence as distance between God and the world, whereas the true meaning of transcendence is difference between God and the world. This is a mistake of very considerable significance for the way Fox thinks about God. For theism he substitutes pantheism, which certainly does, as he claims, distinguish God from creation without separating God from creation: 'everything is truly in God and God is truly in everything'.¹⁹ But what gets lost in Fox's particular version of a move from theism to pantheism is a sense of God's personal otherness and a sense of God's surpassing God's creation. The former seems to be flatly denied in the statement that pantheism 'does not relate to God as subject or object'.²⁰ The latter is from time to time affirmed, but generally lacks relevance to experience.

¹⁷ Fox, *Creation Spirituality*, pp. 92–3.

¹⁸ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 89.

¹⁹ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 90.

²⁰ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 90.

The more one reads Fox the more striking, by comparison with the whole Christian tradition, is the lack of inter-subjective relationship with God and the lack of an awareness of God in which God is distinguished from the creation. These things have been abandoned in the repudiation of dualism, but it is far from clear why they should have been. The passage quoted near the beginning of this chapter about mystical experience as unitive rather than dualistic²¹ clearly states that lack of separation does not mean denying difference, that the opposite of dualism is not identity but communion. So why may a non-dualistic experience of God not be one of intensely intimate relationship to God as personal other? The statement that pantheism 'does not relate to God as subject or object'²² seems to result, by a *non sequitur*, from the claim that all 'theisms are about subject/object relationships to God'.²³ Dualisms in Fox are about subject/object relationships, which are *ipso facto* oppressive.²⁴ But subject-to-subject communion of persons is not oppressive. This has been left out of the possibilities of relationship to God by sleight of hand, not argument.

The lack of inter-subjective relationship with God appears, for example, in what Fox does with such traditional elements of the spiritual life as faith and forgiveness. He, quite appropriately, translates faith as 'trust' and makes a great deal of this theme, but trust is almost always a matter of trusting the cosmos²⁵ or of trusting ourselves²⁶ or simply of trusting *tout court*,²⁷ almost never a matter of trusting God (the only instance I have found is at *Original Blessing*, p. 283, where it may well equate with trusting ourselves as God's image). This must be a deliberate avoidance of the traditional language. Similarly, forgiveness is a matter of 'letting go', of forgiving ourselves, and of forgiving others, not of being forgiven by God.²⁸ What is operative here and elsewhere is a fundamental assumption that relationship to God is nothing other than relationship to oneself and the cosmos. Because God is in all things and all things are in God, our relationships to all things certainly are relationship to God. Fox is neither an atheist nor a pantheist. But in his work there is no

²¹ Fox, *Coming*, pp. 49–50.

²² Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 90.

²³ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 89.

²⁴ Cf. Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 119.

²⁵ E.g. Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 203; *Creation Spirituality*, p. 99; *Coming*, p. 53.

²⁶ Fox, *Original Blessing*, pp. 120, 259, 260; *Coming*, p. 49.

²⁷ E.g. Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 164.

²⁸ Fox, *Original Blessing*, pp. 163, 171.

distinguishing of God from creation, such that to trust God amounts to anything more or other than to trust the cosmos. Relationship to God simply is the right kind of relationship (e.g. trusting rather than fearing) to the cosmos. A curious effect is that while personal language about God is sparse in Fox, he is not averse to personifying the cosmos.²⁹

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'.³⁰ 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.³¹ The latter point is entirely spurious, since although the canticle does not mention Jesus, it invokes God by name in every single stanza. 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 requires distinguishing God from creation. They recognize God in the creatures precisely as the creatures refer beyond themselves to the God who made them and surpasses them.

A section called, 'What is Creation?', in the first chapter of Fox's book *Creation Spirituality*, is instructive. From a traditional Christian perspective in which creation is distinguished (not separated!) from its Creator, in which creation is the gift and God the giver, in which creation reflects its Creator but in such a way as to distinguish itself as creation from its Creator, this section of Fox's work describes creation in terms some of which are appropriate to creation, some of which are appropriate only to the Creator. Thus, for example, on the one hand, the cosmos is 'sacred',³² because it is God's creation, and the 'gift' of the Creator, but also, on the other hand: 'Creation is the source, the matrix, and the goal of all things – the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega. Creation is our common parent, where "our"

²⁹ Fox, *Creation Spirituality*, p. 10.

³⁰ Fox, *Original Blessing*, pp. 90–1.

³¹ Oddly, Fox in his own, later exposition of the canticle, takes the 'Lord' and the 'Most High' to whom the canticle is addressed to be the Cosmic Christ (*Coming*, p. 112).

³² Fox, *Creation Spirituality*, p. 9.

³³ Fox, *Creation Spirituality*, p. 11.

stands for all things. Creation is the mother of all beings and the father of all beings, the birther and the begetter.³⁴

The terms applied to 'creation' here are mostly scriptural terms which in Scripture and tradition refer precisely to the uniqueness of the one God who alone brought all things into being and who alone is the goal of all things (for 'the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega' see Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12; Rev 1:8,17; 21:6; 22:13). It is hard to see what Fox, who certainly knows their biblical usage, means by applying them to creation, since 'creation' is, by definition, the sum total of 'all things' created by God. What does it mean to call *creation* the creator of all things? That Fox can speak without apparent difficulty of 'creation' both as creator of 'all things' and as itself 'all things' that are created by God is significant. Despite a formal distinction between the Creator and the creation, what Fox is primarily concerned to express is the divinity of the cosmos, the cosmic whole, to which all particular creatures relate as those who owe their existence and their reverence to this cosmic whole. In thus relating to the cosmos, rather than in acknowledging the cosmos to which they belong to be the creation of the transcendent One who made it, they are relating to God. It is odd that Fox uses the term 'creation-centered spirituality' for a spirituality in which the *createdness* of the cosmos plays so negligible a role.

In such a theological context, is the 'gratitude' of which Fox so importantly speaks (see above) directed to God or to the cosmos? In the place Fox gives it³⁵ in his discussion of 'the new creation story' (i.e. the contemporary scientific account of the origins and development of the universe) God is unmentioned and gratitude to the cosmos seems the appropriate meaning.³⁶ The distinction is clearly not significant to Fox. Yet why should we feel the awe and gratitude of which Fox speaks simply from learning from this story 'how gratuitous our existence is'? Why should we not feel the absurdity of our existence as a meaningless accident in a cosmos without purpose or meaning? The scientific story of the universe, simply as a scientific account, is precisely *not* a 'new creation story', for it does not speak of a Creator. For us to respond to our 'gratuitousness' with gratitude there must be intentionality and love to thank. Gratitude must be directed either to the one Creator of all things, transcendent beyond his creation (as in the whole Christian tradition), or to the universe conceived mythologically as itself a

³⁴ Fox, *Creation Spirituality*, p. 10.

³⁵ Fox, *Creation Spirituality*, p. 28.

³⁶ Fox, *Creation Spirituality*, pp. 27–9.

purposive, intentional being. What Fox calls 'living cosmology' is really a cosmic myth of the latter kind, with occasional support from the biblical and Christian faith in the transcendent Creator.

Jesus and the Cosmic Christ

In *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* Fox makes a notable attempt to reappropriate the notion (and experience) of 'the cosmic Christ' found in the New Testament and the theological tradition, and to give it a key role in his creation-centred spirituality: 'The coming together of the historical Jesus and the Cosmic Christ will make Christianity whole at last.'³⁷ As this quotation suggests, Fox is aware that in the New Testament and the theologians and mystics who have spoken about the cosmic Christ, this Christ in whom all creation coheres should not be separated from Jesus of Nazareth, the figure whose human life is narrated in the Gospels. In arguing that the modern 'quest of the historical Jesus' now needs to be supplemented by a quest for the cosmic Christ, he acknowledges that a 'theology of the Cosmic Christ must be grounded in the historical Jesus, in his words, in his liberating deeds . . . in his life and orthopraxis', and speaks of a dialectic between the two: 'a dance between time (Jesus) and space (Christ); between the personal and the cosmic; between the prophetic and the mystical'.³⁸

The relationship between the two is evidently that Jesus is one form of incarnation of the Cosmic Christ: 'Wisdom [a term for the cosmic Christ] has been made flesh not only in Jesus the Christ but in *all expressions of the Cosmic Christ*'.³⁹ This means that the divinity suffused throughout the cosmos (the cosmic Christ) imparts divinity to all creatures,⁴⁰ and especially comes to 'birth' in the lives of humans, who consciously mirror the divine qualities: 'A theology of the Cosmic Christ is not embarrassed by the deification of humans.'⁴¹ One of the messages to us that Fox puts into the mouth of the cosmic Christ is: '"Be still and know that I am God"' (Ps. 46:10). And you are too.'⁴² In this sense, Fox's use of the idea of the cosmic Christ is another expression of his wish to avoid a 'dualism' of God and creation: 'divinity' is

³⁷ Fox, *Coming*, p. 7.

³⁸ Fox, *Coming*, p. 79.

³⁹ Fox, *Coming*, p. 147, italics original.

⁴⁰ Fox, *Coming*, p. 145.

⁴¹ Fox, *Coming*, p. 109.

⁴² Fox, *Coming*, p. 142.

really a quality of things, rather than a way of naming the One to whom all things owe their existence and their goodness. The purpose of the incarnation of the cosmic Christ in Jesus of Nazareth is therefore to reveal the immanence of the cosmic Christ 'in the sufferings and dignity of each creature of the earth'.⁴³ Quite remarkably Fox takes the Johannine Jesus' use of the 'I am' declaration, that in the biblical tradition indicates the mysterious uniqueness of the one God, as a 'challenge to name (or claim) our lives and beings in a similar fashion'.⁴⁴ Jesus claims the unique divinity of the one God in order to encourage us all to do the same.

But Fox's most original contribution to Christology is his proposal for 'naming the paschal mystery anew for the third millennium of Christianity'.⁴⁵ The paschal mystery is the Christian story of the passion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Fox proposes that for our age of ecological destruction: 'the appropriate symbol of the Cosmic Christ who became incarnate in Jesus is that of Jesus as Mother Earth crucified and rising daily'.⁴⁶ As not infrequently, it is hard to pin down Fox's language to a precise statement. Having spoken of Mother Earth's 'crucifixion' as a 'symbol' of Jesus,⁴⁷ he goes on to speak of it as how we are to understand the paschal mystery. In his fullest summary of the new naming of the paschal mystery, he claims that:

matricide, mysticism, and the Cosmic Christ name the Paschal story we have understood as the death, resurrection and second coming of Jesus the Christ. The death of Mother Earth (matricide) and the resurrection of the human psyche (mysticism) and the coming of the Cosmic Christ (a living cosmology) name the mystery of the divine cycle of death and rebirth and the sending of the Spirit in our time.⁴⁸

This is how Fox conceives the 'resurrection' of Mother Earth as occurring through a worldwide renaissance of mysticism and 'living cosmology' (i.e. understanding and experience of the cosmos as sacred). It is not at all clear how this relates to the particular story of Jesus of Nazareth, other than as a more universal playing-out of the cosmic

⁴³ Fox, *Coming*, p. 155.

⁴⁴ Fox, *Coming*, p. 154.

⁴⁵ Fox, *Coming*, p. 162.

⁴⁶ Fox, *Coming*, p. 145.

⁴⁷ Fox, *Coming*, pp. 145, 149.

⁴⁸ Fox, *Coming*, pp. 162-3.

principle that was made known to us through its particular occurrence in Jesus' case.

Much as Fox wishes to retain a significant place for the human story of Jesus of Nazareth, he treads a fine line between attributing universal significance to the particular historical man Jesus and his story (as any Christology must) and dissolving that particularity of Jesus into a universal divine presence. It is a line between a spirituality that focuses on Jesus in his relationship to the whole cosmos and a spirituality that focuses on the divinity of the cosmos. Perhaps there is room to read Fox in both ways, but the overall trend of his thought pushes in the latter direction.

With a view to ways in which we shall see that the mysticism of Francis of Assisi differs significantly from Fox's creation-centred mysticism, we could summarize the last two sections by saying that there is a strong tendency in Fox for the transcendence of God to be reduced to the cosmos and for the particularity of Jesus to be dissolved in the cosmos. While Fox does retain some qualifications from the Christian tradition that mitigate these tendencies, on the whole the trend of his thought is to a spirituality of cosmic divinity, to which neither the transcendence of God as Creator nor the particularity of God's incarnation as Jesus are important.

Francis of Assisi

It has become commonplace to lament that Francis's attitude to the non-human creation, remembered in some of the most attractive stories of his relationships with animals, has been sentimentalized and thereby trivialized in popular perceptions. The stories are important, because, as with the Jesus of the Gospels, much of what we know of Francis is found in the stories told about him, and it is primarily these that convey the irresistible attractiveness of Francis, a figure like few others in the history of Christianity. We cannot understand Francis's 'nature mysticism' outside its context in the extraordinary intensity, self-giving and joyousness with which Francis lived his whole life in his devotion to God and his compassionate 'being-with' God's creatures, human and others. Leonardo Boff lists 'his innocence, his enthusiasm for nature, his gentleness with all beings, his capacity for compassion with the poor, and of confraternization with all the elements',⁴⁹ and considers his

⁴⁹ Boff, *Saint Francis*, p. 18.

'communion and confraternization with all of reality such as has never been seen since'.⁵⁰ Though Francis was no theologian in the academic sense, his attitude and relationships with the non-human creation reflect a profoundly theological vision of the community of God's creation in relation to its Creator. They also belong to an integrated ideal of life and praxis, which included a particular vision of the ascetic life, including absolute poverty, radical humility and constant prayer. Humility and poverty were the radical alternatives to status, power, possession and domination, removing these from all of Francis's relationships with humans and other creatures. By not valuing them as objects of possession, power or gratification for himself, he was freed to treat them all 'fraternally',⁵¹ as fellow-creatures with the value they have for God their Creator. With the poorest of the poor, such as the lepers he tended, and the lowliest of God's creatures, such as the worm and the cicada, Francis was able to be brotherly and compassionate only because of the rigorous asceticism through which he was freed from other desires. Of course, there was also the ecstatic joy in God and God's creation that has led to the view that he was the first true 'nature mystic' in the Christian tradition.⁵²

⁵⁰ Boff, *Saint Francis*, p. 19.

⁵¹ The word is unfortunately gender-specific (at least in its etymology) and has no feminine equivalent, but I use it to refer to the way in which Francis considered all creatures as sisters and brothers.

⁵² In this section the abbreviations I use for Francis' works and the early biographical literature about him are those used in Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short ed., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vo. 1: *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999), p. 32. Quotations in the text are from this volume (AHW), for works it includes; otherwise from Marion A. Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the life of St. Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983) (Habig). The Abbreviations are as follows:

Adm *The Admonitions*: AHW 128–137

AP *The Anonymous of Perugia* (= *Legend of Perugia*): Habig 957–1101

1C *The Life of Saint Francis by Thomas of Celano* (= *First Life*): AHW 171–297

2C *The Remembrance of a Desire of a Soul* (= *Second Life by Thomas of Celano*): Habig 357–543

C1C *The Canticle of the Creatures*: AHW 113–114

ER *The Earlier Rule*: AHW 63–86

ExhP *Exhortation to the Praise of God*: AHW 138

LFI *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*: Habig 1267–1530

LMj *The Major Legend by Bonaventura*: Habig 627–787

2LtF *The Second Letter to the Faithful*: AHW 45–51

LtOrd *A Letter to the Entire Order*: AHW 116–121

OP *The Office of the Passion*: AHW 139–157

It is important, first, to recognize that Francis does not at all conform to Fox's 'two traditions' model of Christian history. Theologically, he stands unequivocally in the mainstream, with a balanced and integrated view of creation, fall, sin and redemption:

You have created everything spiritual and corporal and, after making us in Your own image and likeness, You placed us in paradise. Through our own fault we fell. We thank you for [...] as through Your Son You created us, so through Your holy love with which You loved us You brought about his birth . . . and You willed to redeem us captives through His cross and blood and death (ER 23:1–11).

God, for Francis, is the Trinity, 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator of all, Savior of all who believe and hope in Him, and love Him' (ER 23:11). Creation and salvation belong together in God's relationship to the world. Francis's strong sense of human sinfulness ('by our own fault, we are disgusting, miserable and opposed to good, yet prompt and inclined to evil' (ER 17:7); 'nothing belongs to us except our vices and sins')⁵³ by no means impedes his delight in God's good creation.⁵⁴

One aspect that holds creation and salvation together is Francis's strong sense of God as the Giver and all good things as God's gift:

Let us refer all good to the Lord, God Almighty and Most High, acknowledge that every good is His, and thank Him, from whom all good comes, for everything (ER 17:17).

PrOF *A Prayer Inspired by the Our Father*: AHW 158–169

PrsG *The Praises of God*: AHW 109–111

SalV *A Substitution of Virtues*: AHW 164–165

⁵³ Fox, in *Original Blessing*, p. 275, blames Bonaventure's *Life of Francis* for conforming him to the fall/redemption theological tradition, but the quotations from the above paragraph are all from Francis's own writing. Fox is here probably following Lynn White, 'Historical Roots', pp. 1203–7 (and subsequently reprinted in several edited collections). Against White's claim that Bonaventure suppressed Francis's views on creation, see Sorrell, *St. Francis*, p. 148.

⁵⁴ Waddell, *Beasts* is a collection of some of the best of the Latin stories in translation. Many of the stories about the desert fathers can be found in translation in Norman Russell and Ward, *Lives*. Some of the stories of the Celtic saints are retold in Van de Weyer, *Celtic Fire*. Studies of the stories include Bratton, 'Original Desert Solitaire'; Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 19–27; and especially Short, *Saints* (I am grateful to Dr Short for providing me with a photocopy of this book, which is unavailable in Britain).

[L]et us all love the Lord God who has given and gives to each one of us our whole body, our whole soul and our whole life, Who has created, redeemed and will save us by His mercy alone, Who did and does everything good for us (ER 23:8; and also 2Ltf 61).

There is no ambiguity in Francis as to whether it is to God or the cosmos that we owe creation and ourselves. All creation is gift of the transcendent and only ultimate Creator, the only ultimate source of good (since he 'alone is good' (Ltf 62; ER 23:9) in the sense that all other good is by derivation and gift from God). The Creator alone is therefore worthy of all thanks and praise. Francis finds God in all things, but he finds *God*, the Creator and Saviour of all, only by at the same time distinguishing God from all things, by finding all things the gift of the God who exceeds and surpasses them.

We should now begin to be able to see that Francis's spirituality is really neither creation-centred nor anthropocentric, but *centred on God*. His own writings contain remarkable passages of praise and devotion which require the dedication of the whole person to God alone and that God should be the only goal of human desire (e.g. ER 23:8–11; PrsG; PrOF 5; LtOrd 50). This does not demean the creatures, but gives them their true dignity and worth as precisely creatures of the one Creator. As such they are loved and honoured by those who love God. By thus ensuring that the devotion of the whole person is owed to the one who surpasses creation Francis rules out the idolatry that divinizes creation and expects of it therefore what it was never able to supply: a true object of total, all-encompassing trust and devotion. Instead, the creatures can be for Francis truly themselves, his creaturely brothers and sisters, forming a community of mutual dependence, assisting each other in their common praise of the Creator who made them all and values them all, each in its own distinctive reality.

Francis and the Non-Human Creation

The many stories of Francis's delight in the companionship of animals and his loving care for animals are not at all unprecedented. There was a long tradition of stories of saints and animals (doubtless some historical and others legendary) reaching back to the desert fathers and including especially the Celtic saints.⁵⁵ We do not know whether Francis

⁵⁵ Listed in Sorrell, *St. Francis*, p. 44.

knew any of them, but they have in common with Francis a context in the ascetic tradition of hermits who went to live (permanently or temporarily) apart from human society in order to devote themselves entirely to God. Because they deliberately sought out places remote from human habitation, these hermits lived amid wild nature, closer than most people to nature unmodified by human use. Alone with the non-human creatures they came to love them and to value them as fellow-creatures of God. So it was with Francis, who spent long periods alone or with a few of his friar brothers in places where they would have close experience of wild creatures. Since Francis and his friars did not *own* animals, even as pets, relationships of mutuality with wild creatures were the easier to form. Many of the stories show Francis's care for animals in ways that are relatively traditional, though not exactly paralleled in the stories of other solitary saints. Like other saints, Francis fed and protected his fellow-creatures. He wanted Christmas Day, a festival of special importance to Francis, to be honoured by the provision of abundant food for birds and more than the usual amount of food for domestic animals (2C 200). He saw to it that bees were provided with honey or wine lest they die of cold in the winter (1C 80). Several stories portray him saving animals from danger or harm, freeing animals that had been caught and brought to him, returning fish to the water, even removing worms from the road lest they be trampled.⁵⁶ Many of the stories stress the reciprocity of Francis's relationships with the creatures: they are tame and friendly as he is gentle and concerned.

A feature of many of the earlier stories of saints and animals that continues in those about Francis is the theme of the restitution of paradise. Because these saints are living closely with God their dealings with animals reflect the originally intended relationship of humans to the rest of creation. One aspect of this is that the friendly and non-violent harmony of paradise is restored. Another, closely connected, is that the saints exercise the human dominion over other creatures, given in creation, as it was originally intended. This introduces a hierarchical element into the relationship, but it is one in which the animals willingly serve and obey the saints, and in which the saints care for the animals. The hierarchy is one of mutual service and care. In the stories about Francis, he frequently acts with authority to command the animals.⁵⁷ The fierce wolf which was terrorizing the town of Gubbio was tamed and became friendly under Francis's influence

(LFI 1:21). Animals serve him, like the falcon, which during Francis's residence in his hermitage at La Verna used to wake him in time for matins, but showed such consideration for the saint that when Francis was tired or ill it would delay waking him until dawn (2C 168). Like many of the stories in the earlier tradition, this one emphasizes the affectionate friendship between the saint and the bird. The creatures respect Francis's authority, but they do so lovingly and willingly, as friends rather than slaves.

Francis is reported as saying that 'every creature says and proclaims: "God has created me for you, O man!"' Although this reflects the medieval theological commonplace that the rest of the material creation was made for humanity, the context should be noted. Francis was telling the brother gardener not to plant vegetables everywhere, but to reserve part of the garden for plants whose scent and flowers 'might invite all men who looked at them to praise God' (AP 51). Thus Francis refuses to limit the value of the rest of creation for humanity to its practical usefulness but sees it as consisting also in its assisting humanity's praise of God. But his principle (expressed most fully at the end of his life in the *Canticle of the Creatures*) was that because the 'creatures minister to our needs every day' and 'without them we could not live', therefore we should appreciate them and praise God for them (AP 43). Thus the theme of human dominion is understood theocentrically rather than anthropocentrically. The creatures' service of humanity is properly received only as cause for praise and thankfulness to God. Therefore the human dominion over the creatures becomes for Francis primarily a matter of dependence on the creatures, with whom humanity shares a common dependence on the Creator. The creatures on whose service we depend are not to be exploited, but to be treated with brotherly/sisterly respect and consideration.

This means that in Francis the sense in which humanity has been given a special place in creation is only to be understood in relationship to his overwhelming sense of the common creatureliness that makes all creatures his 'sisters' and 'brothers'.⁵⁸ This linguistic usage seems to be distinctive of Francis. The Celtic saints had called the animals who befriended them their brothers in the monastic sense. Francis regards all the creatures (not only animals, but also fire and water, sun and moon, and so on) as brothers and sisters, because they are fellow-creatures and fellow-members of the family of those who

⁵⁶ Examples listed in Sorrell, *St. Francis*, p. 43.

⁵⁷ Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 66, 127-8.

⁵⁸ See Sorrell, *St. Francis*, pp. 69-75.