

Earth Day 2017: The Return of Healthy Religion?

By Matthew Fox



There is such a thing as “fake news”; and “fake science;” and there is also, we must make clear, such a thing as “fake religion” and certainly of “fake Christianity.” I would maintain that all those persons and institutions political and corporate that are in purposeful denial about climate change are in direct contradiction to everything Jesus taught and tried to teach. (1)

As John’s epistle says, how is it possible to love God if you hate your neighbor? The Gospel celebrates the Good Samaritan who cared about his suffering neighbor. Our neighbor is not just our two-legged neighbor but other neighbors as well who face extinction today and who bear names we have assigned to them such as “elephants;” “tigers;” “polar bears;” “rainforests” and much more. If we are waging war against them by our narcissistic life-styles and anthropocentric agendas and are busy committing ecocide we are hating them. And of course in hating them and destroying them we are hating our own descendants, our own great grandchildren and many more humans not yet born.

When will the nonsense stop? When will the denial stop?

The nonsense will stop when religion wakes up to what its real job is. The real job of religion is this: To give thanks. To teach gratitude, a gratitude that is born of Awe, of what rabbi Heschel calls “radical amazement.” Were you radically amazed this summer to learn that science has now moved on from understanding the universe is several hundred billion galaxies big to being *two trillion galaxies* large? Isn’t that cause enough for awe and wonder? Heschel reminds us that “the universe is not just here; it shocks us into amazement.” (2) Are you shocked everyday by the wonders of our existence, the beauty of Mother Earth and her generous bestowing of diverse beings with which we

humans are invited to play and learn and delight and sometimes use wisely? Heschel teaches that there are three ways to respond to creation: 1. Exploit it. (We've been pretty adapt at that the past 300 years and we are now paying the price). 2. Enjoy it. 3. Accept it with awe.

It is this last option that is the spiritual option. You do not have to be a believer to travel that deep route. Many atheists have found this truth out on their own. But no religion is worthy of the name if it is not actively engaged in instructing its followers that this—accepting with awe—is the heart of what constitutes mysticism and healthy religion. As Mary Oliver put it in a recent talk in San Francisco: “I have learned three things about life and want to share them now that I am in my 80’s and an elder: First, pay attention. Second: Be astonished. Third: Share your astonishment.”

Some twenty years ago I was invited to deliver a talk at the Schumacher Lecture Series in Bristol, England. Preceding my talk Lester Brown, who was then head of Worldwatch Institute, spoke. He ended his talk by declaring that we had twenty years left to change our ways as a species or the planet would not recover from the damage we were doing. And he added: “The Number One obstacle to an Environmental Revolution was: Apathy.”

I was very struck by this statement since apathy is a spiritual problem. Indeed, it is one of the capital sins, what our ancestors called “acedia” which was far too narrowly defined during the industrial revolution as “sloth.” It is much more than sloth. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century defined acedia this way: “The lack of energy to begin new things.” This lack of energy has many names today; among them are: boredom; inertia; depression; despair; not-caring; indifference; apathy; and even “couchpotatoitis” (A word invented in our time because the sickness is so prevalent). Aquinas also offered the medicine for this sickness when he said “zeal comes from the intense experience of the beauty of things.” You can see here the deep connection between cosmology—an invitation to re-experience the deep beauty of things—and survival. Between cosmology and ecology (Thomas Berry says “ecology is functional cosmology.”)

Albert Einstein wrote that we are entering a third phase of religion and that is a *cosmic religion*. It is only this awakening, he felt, that would bring peace between nations and peace in our relationship to nature, a relationship that takes us beyond nationalisms and sectarianisms and anthropocentric projections onto Divinity. This is one reason the archetype of the Cosmic Christ is returning in our time—or ought to be.(3) A Cosmic Christ is a Green Christ just as certain as

“ecology is functional cosmology.” Carl Jung says that archetypes return when they are needed.

The word “return” is significant in this context because for decades lazy thinkers have been saying that a “Cosmic Christ” is something “New Age.” I beg your pardon! The teaching of the Cosmic Christ is found in the earliest Christian writings, namely in St Paul’s letters and in the Gospel of Thomas as well as other places and in all the most powerful events in the Gospels that early Christian movement enshrined into its biggest Feast Days. Think the Nativity, the Baptism of Jesus (after all the “sky opened up”), the Transfiguration, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, Pentecost — all these moments are set in a *cosmological context*. Far too often they have been interpreted in a narrow and narcissistic sense of “Am I saved?” How easily we have reduced religion to mere psychology when in fact it is essentially about cosmology (creation) and the sacred.

A number of years ago the great Biblical scholar Krister Stendahl came up to me during a workshop I was leading on Creation Spirituality and said, “Remember: The word *basileia* (which we translate as “kingdom of God”—a term that all agree lies at the heart of Jesus’ message and that carries deep political implications since it contrasts to the Empire of Caesar in his day) can be perfectly well translated as creation.” The Kingdom/Queendom of God is creation itself; and creation is the Kingdom/Queendom of God. Pre-modern thinkers like St Francis, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart and Thomas Aquinas knew this but few modern theologians have understood this. It was Aquinas who said Revelation comes in two volumes: Nature and the Bible. Nature is being despoiled today because religion has wrapped itself up in a Bible book and ignored the Nature book which of course we need scientists, not exegetes, to properly translate for us.

Thomas Aquinas teaches that to choose to be ignorant of what one ought to know about is a deadly (or “mortal”) sin. Meister Eckhart declares that: “God is the denial of denial.” What this means is that if we or our institutions—including political, media or religious institutions—traffic in denial God is absent. Truth is absent when denial reigns. And the sacred is no place to be found.

In my book on Evil, recently released with a new preface and a forward by Deepak Chopra, I make the point that the opposite of evil is not the good. The bad is the opposite of the good. The opposite of Evil is: The Sacred.(4) A society or religion that has lost its way because it is distancing itself from the Kingdom of God, from Sacred Creation, is complicit in Evil. The good news is that a time like ours is a time to awaken us to the revelation of the Sacred once again. To see every creature as

another Christ. As Thomas Merton put it, “Everything that is is holy.”

A New Reformation invites the church to shed its anthropocentrism and narcissism in favor of the true Kingdom/Queendom of God, sacred creation. In times like these our varied vocations take on special meaning. True religion’s task is not just to wake up to the Sacred but also to defend it. That is why an authentic spiritual adult today is both a mystic (lover) and a warrior (or prophet) who defends what one cherishes and stands up to Evil.

May this Earth Day 2017 give birth to many such mystics and prophets.

~ Matthew Fox

Read the essay online [here](#).

About the Author

Matthew Fox holds a doctorate in spirituality from the Institut Catholique de Paris and has authored 32 books on spirituality and contemporary culture that have been translated into 60 languages. Fox has devoted 45 years to developing and teaching the tradition of [Creation Spirituality](#) and in doing so has reinvented forms of education and worship. His work is inclusive of today’s science and world spiritual traditions and has awakened millions to the much neglected earth-based mystical tradition of the West. He has helped to rediscover Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Aquinas. Among his books are [Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh Transforming Evil in Soul and Society](#), [The Pope’s War: Why Ratzinger’s Secret Crusade Has Imperiled the Church and How It Can Be Saved](#) and [Confessions: The Making of a Postdenominational Priest](#)

Footnotes:

- (1) As an example of politicians being hypocritical, see my “Is Ryan a Religious Hypocrite? A Priestly Letter to Speaker Paul Ryan from Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox” in www.tikkun.org.
- (2) Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 1965), 87.
- (3) For a spiritual exercise to hasten the return of the Cosmic Christ see Bishop Marc Andrus and Matthew Fox, *Stations of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Tayen Lane Publishing, 2016).
- (4) Matthew Fox, *Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh: Transforming Evil in Soul and Society*

(Berkeley, CA: North American Press, 2016).