

## Correspondence

Dear Sir,

In an otherwise carefully argued and serious essay ('Speak to the Earth . . .' *Science & Christian Belief* 8, 125–144 1996), Professor Nisbet twice records an unsupported condemnation of Creation Spirituality, a growing movement based on an attitude to nature and to issues of social justice that has much in common with his own thesis. I can only assume that this condemnation is based on unfamiliarity with, or misunderstandings of, the movement, for he writes '*Creation worship and creation spirituality are dangerous bypaths, attempts to bring down God into the narrowness of what we can see, measure and attempt to understand.*' (p. 131).

I know of nothing within the creation spirituality movement that, properly understood, could be equated with this. There are, of course, theological differences between Nisbet's uncompromising and iconoclastic view that '*God is not to be seen in the creation but apart from it, the creator of the ends of the earth.*' (p. 127) and the creation spirituality position that the creation mediates a revelation of god and is worthy of reverence. There is, however, no suggestion whatever in creation spirituality that the creation is coterminous with god or an object of worship. This is made clear by Matthew Fox's exposition of the (contested) term 'panentheism', and by the movement's adoption of Meister Eckhart as a kind of patron saint. Few are as insistent as Eckhart on the transcendence, as well as the immanence, of god. Similarly, the emphasis placed by Fox on the absolute necessity of the apophatic way is the antithesis of bringing god down to what we can measure.

This is all, of course, open to theological debate; but to bypass that debate with the associative slogan '*creation worship and creation spirituality*' is unworthy of your journal. I would argue that, far from being a '*dangerous bypath*', creation spirituality provides the essential praxis needed to integrate our emotions with intellectual arguments in favour of environmental protection and social justice. Without such integration, we cannot achieve the sustained practical political action to which the revelation of god in nature calls us.

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Dear Sir,

Chris Clarke objects to what he calls 'unsupported condemnation of Creation Spirituality' in the article by Euan Nisbet (*Science & Christian Belief*, 8:125–144). He is somewhat unfair, because Nisbet's comment (p. 127) is not unsubstantiated, but arises in an exposition of the nature of God, as part of a general argument.

However the proper response to Clarke's objection should not be simple pedantic sparring, but whether the interpretations upon which Matthew Fox derived 'creation spirituality' and established what Clarke describes as a 'growing movement' are legitimate, and especially whether Fox's abhorrence of so-called fall/redemption theology is justified. This goes far beyond the claim of many environmentalists, that traditional Christian understanding is lacking and should be replaced (or supplemented) on the grounds that God is within and transforming us, not distantly 'up there and out there'.<sup>1</sup> Even this lesser criticism is serious if it is true, and unfortunately there is certainly substance in it, epitomised by the Reformers' (and others) emphasis that the world is 'merely' the stage for God's saving work. This is the attitude pilloried by Lynn White in his influential and often-reprinted article 'Historic roots of the ecological crisis',<sup>2</sup> but it is wrong to assume that it was ever an official or majority view.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding, it is probably the reason why many people feel that traditional Christianity has an inadequate doctrine of creation. However and more importantly, it is a non-biblical attitude: Christ has reconciled all *things* to God through the cross (Col. 1:15–20; see also Rom. 8:18–25; Eph. 1:9–10, 22–23; Phil. 2:5–11)<sup>4</sup>; the world is not a neutral background for humanity ('God so loved the *cosmos* that he gave his only Son'); and God is clearly revealed as both transcendent and immanent, Charles Darwin having exploded the 18th century myth of deism<sup>5</sup>.

Matthew Fox rejects the authority of both Old and New Testaments as 'manmade word-books',<sup>6</sup> and this frees him to develop his own theses,

1 'Christianity, by taking the divine out of all that is earthly and lodging it in some distant and comprehensively male God-head, has managed only to endorse and indeed accelerate the pattern of ecological destruction that we now see' (Porritt, J & Winner, D. (1988). *The Coming of the Greens*, p. 242. London: Fontana).

2 White's paper was originally given at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. It was subsequently published in *Science*, 155: 1203–1207, 1967. Francis Schaeffer included it as an appendix in his book *Pollution and the Death of Man* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970), accepting White's argument that 'by destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects'. Sheldon cites 46 published responses to White's paper in *Rediscovery of Creation (American Theological Library Association Bibliography Series*, no. 29, 1992), pp. 24–27. He concluded 'The consensus is that White's scriptural analysis is deficient and thus [his] conclusion faulty. White based his case primarily on the single passage in Genesis dealing with dominion (Genesis 1:28) and failed to consider the numerous other Scriptural teachings on the concern, love and care for Creation'.

3 Attfield, R. (2nd edition, 1991). *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*. Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press. See also writings on the Celtic influence on Christianity, e.g. De Waal, E. (1991). *A World Made Whole*. London: Fount; Bradley, I. (1990). *God is Green*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

4 Faricy, R. (1982). *Wind and Sea Obey Him*. London: SCM.

5 Berry, R. J. (1993). Green religion and green science. *RSA Journal*, 141: 305–318.

6 Fox, M. (1983). *Original Blessing*, p. 38. Santa Fe: Bear (cited by Brearley, see n. 10).

unfettered by revelation, although somewhat ambiguously guided by his reading of 'Nature' (for him 'Mother Earth is a special word of God')<sup>7</sup>. It allows him to invoke native religions, drug-induced states, sexuality, and sundry other influences as his allies.

Clarke takes exception to Nisbet's statement that 'God is not to be seen in the creation' (p. 127). I must confess this phrase also caused me to hesitate, because the bible is unequivocal that 'the heavens tell out the glory of God' (Ps. 19:1, etc., see also Jb. 38-39 and many other passages)<sup>8</sup>. In fact the disagreement here is really about words: it is not God that we see, but his works. Nisbet is technically correct. But the point at issue is different: it is that when we fail to see the world around as God's creation, made and sustained by Him, we are in error. BUT we only recognize this by faith, for as Nisbet continues, 'We cannot discover God in the creation . . . once we have found God by faith, we can then see the hand that made us is divine' (p. 127).

In his writings Fox repeatedly rails against the dualism he finds in traditional theology, although he develops a major new diathesis of his own—between creation-centred and fall-redemption theology<sup>9</sup>. Unfortunately for him all the so-called creation mystics which he cites in his support (Johannes Tauler, Heinrich Suso, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Mechtild of Magdeburg, with the possible exception of Meister Eckhart) 'were deeply rooted within both the Church's institutions and the traditional God-centred theology of sin, redemption and imitatio Dei'<sup>10</sup>. Going beyond this newly-devised dualism, Fox's attempt to be consistent makes him want to eradicate what he calls 'the ultimate dualism'<sup>11</sup>, that which separates the Creator and His creation. This means for him that 'we have to move from theism to panentheism. Theism has haunted us for 300 or 400 years in the West and it basically says I'm here and God is somewhere else, and prayer is about getting to God or getting God here'<sup>12</sup>. However, Fox's anathema against theism is misdirected; it should really be directed against deism<sup>13</sup>. His objections are not so much to the God who reveals Himself in the bible as against the caricature portrayed in Paley's Divine Watchmaker and continued by Lynn White's history. In other words, his complaint is with a popular rather than a proper understanding of God; his alternative theology is insubstantial, because it is based on false premises about the divine nature.

In his letter, Clarke describes Creation Spirituality as a 'movement based on an attitude to nature and to issues of social justice that has much in common

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7 Fox, *loc. cit.*, p. 147.

8 See DeWitt, C. B. (ed) (1991). *The Environment and the Christian*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker; Prance, G. T. (1996). *The Earth Under Threat*. Glasgow: Wild Goose; Etc.

9 Fox tabulates the differences he sees between the two in an appendix to *Original Blessing*, pp. 316-319. See also Bishop, S. (1991). A fox in sheep's clothing. *Third Way*, 14 (10): 16-18.

10 Brearley, M. (1992). Matthew Fox and the Cosmic Christ. *Anvil*, 9:39-54.

11 Fox, *loc. cit.*, p. 89

12 Fox, M. (1991). From original sin to original blessing. *Resurgence*, no. 144, p. 24.

13 Goodall, M. & Reader, J. (1992). Why Matthew Fox fails to change the world. In Ball, I., Goodall, M., Palmer, C. & Reader, J. (eds). *The Earth Beneath: 104-119*. London: SPCK; West, A. (1993). *Matthew Fox: Blessing for Whom?* Croydon: Jubilee Group.

with (Nisbet's) own thesis'. Clarke does not describe his own approach to social justice, but Fox's route to justice is certainly different to that of Nisbet. Fox's way is through a postulated divine creative energy (or original blessing) which flows through and unites everything<sup>14</sup>. It is akin to Spencerian evolutionism (as distinct from biological evolution) which assumes illegitimately that everything is improving<sup>15</sup> once we ignore sin, the fall and other negative ideas<sup>16</sup>. He explicitly rejects the traditional stewardship model promoted by Nisbet, defining it as involving 'God as an absentee landlord and we humans as serfs running the garden for God; it does not appeal to the young or to our hearts—it is just one more duty, one more commandment to follow'<sup>17</sup>.

Although Fox and people who argue like him (the most influential being Thomas Berry)<sup>18</sup> claim to base their thought on combining ecological science with traditional religion<sup>19</sup>, they are in fact abusing (and misunderstanding) science for their own purposes. The divisions between inorganic and organic life, between carnivores and herbivores, between species, between non-humans and humans, are real; it is naive and doctrinaire reductionism to claim that they disappear at the molecular or quantum level. (Ironically, reductionism is also anathema to Fox.) As Christians we believe these distinctions were created by God (Gen. 2:19) and are therefore intrinsically good, and that as humans we are distinct because we alone are in God's image. But even (or perhaps, especially) non-believers are not prepared to assert that these distinctions are less significant than any underlying similarity.

Clarke objects to 'creation worship and creation spirituality' being labelled 'dangerous by-paths'. He is both wrong and partly right. They are indeed 'dangerous' because (*pace* Fox and Thomas Berry) they separate reason from religion, but they are not 'bypaths' because they open easy and wide ways, seductively leading away from both reality and revelation. It is good that Chris Clarke has opened up some important questions, but I am afraid I cannot agree with his approach to the answers.

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14 Fox writes, 'there is one flow, one divine energy, one divine word in the sense of one creative energy flowing through all things, all time, all space. We are part of that flow and we need to listen to it rather than assume arrogantly that our puny words are only the words of God. . . . The truly energetic word of God, Dabhar, will not be imprisoned, will not be locked up for long. Our spiritual task is to get out of its way enough that we might be filled with it and go about our task of healing, celebrating, and co-creating' (*Original Blessing*, pp. 38–40).

15 Berry, R. J. (1995). Creation and the environment. *Science & Christian Belief*, 7: 21–43; Gould, S. J. (1996). *Life's Grandeur*. London: Jonathan Cape.

16 Osborn, L. (1993). *Guardians of Creation*, pp. 75–80. Leicester: Apollos.

17 Fox, M. (1990). Lecture given at St. James's Church, Piccadilly, London.

18 Berry, T. (1988). *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club.

19 The approaches of Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry are compared by Clarke, T. E. (1989). Theological trends. *The Way*, 29: 68–80.