

Review: DF109

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

CONFESSIONS: The Making of a Post-Denominational Priest

a book review of
Confessions: The Making of a Post-Denominational Priest
by Matthew Fox
(HarperSanFrancisco, 1996)

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When rumors emerged in 1994 that Matthew Fox had become an Episcopalian, I called Herb Caen, the recently deceased celebrity columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, to ask about perhaps the most famous victim of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Caen paused for an awkward moment. "Do you mean the actor?" he asked. Fame is a fickle lover, especially when a man changes from dissident Catholic priest to the latest icon of the Episcopal Church's self-advertised vast inclusivity.

For years Fox cultivated his image as a persecuted genius, suppressed by a monolithic church not sophisticated enough to appreciate the theological gold he had deposited in books like *On Becoming a Musical, Mystical Bear; Whee! We, Wee All the Way Home;* and *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. The Vatican had disciplined Fox with a year of silence in 1989-90. Fox then emerged from it, referring to his being "rudely interrupted" by the Vatican. Yes, he does stand-up, too!

Now Fox delivers the inside story on that year of silence, on his formation as a pantheist, and on his vision for a liturgy animated by the hallucinogenic music of Rave dances imported from England.

In the second paragraph of his introduction to *Confessions*, Fox admits that another theologian once wrote a book with the same title: "St. Augustine of Hippo was a psychological genius but a philosopher of dualism and a theologian of original sin. He is not my favorite theologian. I doubt that his and my book have an awful lot in common....But maybe, for the discerning reader, Augustine and I do have something in common. At least a willingness to tell our stories. And to try to look for the role of spirit therein" (p. 1).

If reading is one of the rewards of heaven, however, Fox probably isn't among St. Augustine's favorite theologians, either, since Fox spends so much space trashing him — and anyone else who embodies orthodox Roman Catholicism.

Fox and the Vatican were stuck with each other for most of his priestly career, and their protracted conflict does not make for pleasant reading. By March 1993, the Order of Preachers (the Dominicans) disciplined Fox for disobeying an order to leave Oakland and return to the order's headquarters in Chicago. Fox interpreted that order as another attempt to control his prolific work as the high priest of what he calls "creation-centered spirituality" (or pantheism — the belief that the creation is *intrinsically* related to God and thus divine).

Despite his oft-stated dream of a "post-denominational Christianity," Fox soon recognized that the Episcopal Church was his theological True North. Fox joined the Episcopal Church in January 1994.

Besides being part score-settling, *Confessions* is also part autobiography. Fox has a gift for narrative, writing affectionately about his Catholic childhood in Wisconsin, his enthusiastic studies in seminary, and his daring move to pursue a doctorate in Paris during the heady days of student revolutions. Fox's narrative gives way to a more self-righteous tone as he becomes immersed in creation-centered spirituality.

At Barat College, for example, Fox was "able to enter into the [spiritual] awakening" of many women. "I remember one day a young woman, who was fulfilling a class requirement by leading the group, came in with red tea. We sat around drinking it as she expounded on what it was like going through her menstrual period" (97).

During a road trip to New England, he also engaged in open-ended discussions of weighty ethical questions: "One of the women, whose husband was also there, raised the following question: 'My neighbor is a widower,' she said, 'and I feel sorry for his loneliness. I wonder if it would be a moral act on my part to sleep with him occasionally.' The entire group took up the discussion at that point, and at the end of the evening a visiting priest from Maine came up to me, staggered and obviously shaken, his eyes as big as grapefruits. 'In our parishes,' he said, 'the hot question has been whether to have communion in the hand or not!'" (92)

During the Vatican-ordered year of silence, Fox went on a quest filled with visions of animals, the Madonna and Child, and a very special guest in a cameo appearance: "*What is that up in the top of the tree? Is it he? Yes!*" It was Ernie, the *Sesame Street* character, smiling at me from on high" (191; emphasis in original).

All of this would merely be unintentional comedy were Fox not so deadly serious about his own ideas and about pronouncing other believers repressed, uninformed, or, worst of all, not in touch with their chakras: "Not one of the pastors preaching had anything to say about the meaning of Christmas today. One read his sermon, which was all platitudes about 'ideas becoming real' and words like 'peace' and 'joy' thrown around that had no grounding in a single chakra of our body or souls. That sermon gets a D" (222).

Even a casual observer of Fox may not be surprised that he dismisses the late Cardinal Cody as a "bully," describes Catholics United for the Faith as "an ideological group of thugs who attack by lies and innuendo anyone to the left of Attila," and caricatures Pope John Paul II as "authoritarian and sexist." Still, Fox reaches new lows in his contempt for traditional believers. He writes with clear satisfaction of eluding the request of a right-wing French woman to hear her confession in a moment of duress. He also concludes that some clerical martyrs of the French Revolution really had it coming, because they were "privileged ecclesiastics who were sucking the poor dry" (68).

By Halloween of 1994, while studying to become an Episcopal priest, Fox played host to 36 groovy young people from Britain, who staged a dance party-cum-Eucharist called the Planetary Mass (or Rave Mass) in the basement of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

"The posse was the priest," Fox writes in Rave Mass jargon. The posse also relied on the Rev. Chris Brain, a former manager for rock bands and an ordained priest in the Church of England. Brain presided over a service that reinterpreted Gospel passages into postmodern Political Correctness. When Jesus condemned sorcery, for instance, He couldn't have referred to neopagans and panentheists. He meant TV evangelists. Fox writes:

There was a plethora of gift giving at this mass, ranging from the four Sufi dancers who twirled in the four directions of the room throughout the mass, to the singers and the rappers who gave their gifts with abundance; from the mixers and deejays with caps on backward, to the wild young man dancing madly under the strobe lights; from the designers of the mass to the leaders of it. All sacrificed (many took a week off from their jobs to come and work on the mass in San Francisco). This was evident. It helped to make the occasion special and spiritual and pure. A night of deep prayer. (262)

Fox makes an oblique reference to a scandal involving Father Brain, which occurred within the following year: "A number of women [in England] have accused priest Chris Brain of abuse of authority going back twelve years" (289). That's something of an understatement: twenty women claimed that Brain seduced them into "nonpenetrative sex," all in the name of "developing a postmodern ethic of sex."

Fox distanced himself from Brain through a press release, saying the young parson's activities were "an antithesis of all that Matthew Fox has worked for [in] 30 years as a Christian priest and a Creation Spirituality theologian." Nevertheless, there's not a word in *Confessions* that would dissuade any reader from developing a postmodernist ethic of sex (nonpenetrative or otherwise). Fox unequivocally affirms homosexuality and other forms of nonmarital intercourse.

Indeed, Fox generously lists what he learned from practicing celibacy and from "letting go of celibacy." The latter list includes, in Fox's quirky language:

- fun
- giving and receiving
- body-soul-spirit continuum
- the presence of God in nature — our own human nature
- incarnation: Sophia made flesh
- cosmic mysticism enhanced
- lovemaking as art as meditation

To judge from Fox's work, one of Augustine's worst sins was making people feel guilty about their "lovemaking as art as meditation." That long-dead saint has been trumped in Fox's mind by the spirits who visited him during his vision quest: "I asked some questions of the spirits....'What about a life of intimacy for myself?' A beautiful sculpturelike leafy figure (Rodin-like) of a naked man [went] 'flying' through the air after another person. It was graceful and beautiful."

Matthew Fox has the exegetical and theological savvy to become a bishop in the postmodern Episcopal Church. You read it here first.

— reviewed by Doug LeBlanc