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Book Review

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Bringing Back the Ecstasy

THE COMING OF THE COSMIC CHRIST

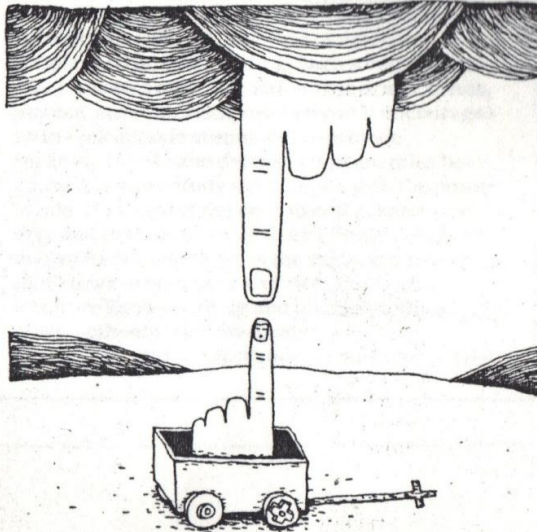
*The Healing of Mother Earth and
the Birth of a Global Renaissance.*
By Matthew Fox.

278 pp. San Francisco:
Harper & Row. Paper, \$14.95.

By Carol Zaleski

WORSHIP meets workshop in this, the 12th and most impressive book by a Roman Catholic priest whose feminist, "creation-centered" spirituality has been labeled "dangerous and deviant" by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, head of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. On Dec. 15, the Rev. Matthew Fox

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began a year of enforced sabbatical from teaching and lecturing, but those who saw his full-page New York Times advertisement, "My Final Statement Before Being Silenced by the Vatican," know Father Fox does not plan to retreat from his positions. In "The Coming of the Cosmic Christ," he presents himself as the embattled guardian and prophet of a long-suppressed tradition of joyful, sensuous, egalitarian, ecumenical and ecologically sensitive Christian mysticism.

What is creation spirituality and why is it so dangerous? Father Fox suggests it as the name for a potent subterranean current in the Western religious tradition. Mainstream Western religion, he maintains, is poisoned by patriarchal, dualistic and life-denying tendencies. In contrast, creation mystics throughout history, such as Hildegard of Bingen, St. Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, more faithful to biblical tradition, affirm the sacredness of the natural world and the maternal nature of its Creator. "The Coming of the Cosmic Christ" marshals a vivid array of witnesses to this outlook from the Bible, the fathers of the church and the medieval West.

Creation mysticism received its worst blow, ac-

According to Father Fox, when Western religion was taken captive by the Enlightenment. His book is therefore a rallying cry for "the dismantling of liberal religion"; it addresses precisely those longings that have gone unmet by contemporary forms of secularized religion. He knows his audience: his readers seek a religion rich in mystery and ritual, yet free from moralistic, authoritarian restraints. They are "closet mystics" who would rather think of God as a tender companion and inner presence than as a distant, disapproving Judge.

With this audience in mind, Father Fox has designed his "liberation theology for the first world" — delivering the privileged from boredom and alienation, and giving them permission for ecstasy and wonder. "The Coming of the Cosmic Christ" advocates "playshops" like those at his Oakland, Calif., Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality, where seekers realize their mystical potential through dance, clay, massage and storytelling. Despite his critique of the narcissism of the New Age, there is a decided New Age tint to his perspective on the coming millennium — with much talk of "birthing" and "empowerment," and with the Gaia hypothesis (which views the earth as a living organism), right brain/left brain theories and Jungian psychodynamics added in for good measure.

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Matthew Fox sees his work as part of a "paradigm shift" that will usher in a global renaissance of "deep sexuality; deep communication between young and old; deep creativity in lifestyles, work, and education; deep worship; deep ecumenism and interaction among all religions of the planet." More than just a cultural

movement, this renaissance is a new manifestation of the Kingdom of God (or divine ruling) in our midst, a Second Coming of the Cosmic Christ.

"No book I have ever written has shocked me more than this one," remarks Father Fox, and the book reflects his outrage at injustices he finds especially ruinous to youth: poverty, unemployment, sexual abuse, "spiritual abuse" by fundamentalists, homophobia and

The Ultimate Adventure

The denial of mysticism by churches and synagogues is a deep and enduring scandal that is no longer tolerable. . . . A civilization that denies the mystic is no civilization at all. It offers no hope and no adventure, no challenge worthy of sacrifice and joy to its youth or its artists. It offers no festivity, no sabbath, no living ritual to its people. And no deep healing. Such a culture actually promotes negative addictions: drugs, crime, alcohol, consumerism, militarism. It encourages us to seek outside stimulants to provide meaning for life and defense from enemies because it is so woefully out of touch with the power inside. It relegates the poor to still greater poverty and the comfortable to an infinite deluge of luxury items, and those in the middle to resentment toward both poor and rich. For such a culture knows nothing and teaches nothing about authentic empowerment.

From "The Coming of the Cosmic Christ."

other forms of intolerance, destruction of the environment, and pervasive "adulthood." Alarming statistics fuel apocalyptic rhetoric: "If current rates of destruction continue, within the next one hundred years there will be no living species left on this planet."

True to his apocalyptic theme, he identifies the great beast: patriarchy. The institutional church is "a giant, patriarchal dinosaur that is dying." "The crucifixion of Jesus was the logical result of his frontal assault on patriarchy." There is a visionary — some might say paranoid — coherence to his analysis of the patriarchal and matricidal roots of every social iniquity, every psychological affliction, every institutionalized sin.

Far from rejecting the reality of sin, as critics of his earlier works have charged, "The Coming of the Cosmic Christ" redefines sin as the repression of creativity, leading to addictive patterns of behavior. Father Fox is not the first theologian to give the drama of sin and redemption a modern context, and he does so in a powerfully moving way. But his crusading zeal leads him to polarize the Christian spiritual tradition unnecessarily — and anachronistically — as if there were no middle ground between the earthy saints whose mysticism celebrates creation and the bloodless angels whose asceticism seeks to transcend it. Perhaps, once the furor surrounding him dies down, Matthew Fox will re-evaluate his position on pastoral grounds; there may be many who share his values but would be alienated by his ideological stance. Still, the aims Father Fox espouses are glorious: to recover our sense of the sacredness of the cosmos, to resurrect the psyche and imagination, to soften our institutions with maternal values. It is difficult to see the heresy here. □