

## 670 Francis of Assisi

worship, which are structured like a Mass including techno music and multimedia. What he is perhaps most well known and notorious for, however, is having been expelled from the Dominican order. The reasons for this expulsion are the same reasons he is important when considering religion and nature.

Fox had been an ordained priest since 1967, but in 1991, as a result of extensive research by the Catholic Church, he was ordered to leave his California school or face dismissal from the Dominican order. The Vatican objected specifically to Fox's refusal to deny his belief in pantheism, his denial of original sin, for referring to God as "mother" and for promoting a feminist theology. There were additional scandals, one of which was caused by Starhawk's presence as a staff member at the University of Creation Spirituality. Fox has now found a home within the Episcopal Church.

Fox focuses on reinventing worship, art, human sexuality and most importantly embracing wilderness, both internal and external. He emphasizes the need for humanity to change its relationship to the Earth, or else risk losing it completely to pollution and environmental destruction. One of his most potent and fascinating ideas related to this idea is presented in *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. He suggests that we rethink and reacquaint ourselves with the concept of the Cosmic Christ and the crucifixion story of Jesus Christ in a way that is relevant to the global environmental crisis. What he suggests is a paradigm shift, which he defines as a new Paschal Ministry for the third millennium.

This paradigm shift can be described in one way as a shift from the quest for the historical Jesus to a quest for the Cosmic Christ. The historical Jesus is the individual whom we encounter in the Bible. Fox explains that Jesus was, among other things, a mystic. He specifically cites Jesus' *Abba* experience, or his nondualistic experience of God. This nondualism is exhibited in John 10:30, when Jesus states, "The Father and I are one." This is not a mysticism of the Fall-Redemption tradition, which favors mysticism of the sacraments. It is creation-centered mysticism, which is an act of reentering the mystery of the universe and human existence in it. Power is not elsewhere, outside ourselves, but is within us, just as it was within Jesus Christ the man.

In defining the Cosmic Christ, Fox makes the basic assumption that the Cosmic Christ is cosmic, preexistent wisdom. Among the many books of the Old Testament and New Testament that he says contain passages referring to the Cosmic Christ are Job, Baruch, and Proverbs, Philippians, Romans, Colossians and Ephesians. The Cosmic Christ is not an individual, anthropomorphic character, but rather an eternal, penetrating and changing energy that has the potential greatly to affect our world and our human lives. Most importantly, Fox states that the emergence of the Cosmic Christ will usher in a paradigm

shift: a shift from the Enlightenment mentality, which denies mysticism and lacks a cosmology, to the new paradigm, which represents a return to mysticism, a reinvention of work, sacred sexuality and an immanent rather than transcendent creator.

Fox makes what the Catholic Church sees as a radical leap when he suggests that we see and understand Mother Earth as Jesus Christ crucified, as well as the "mother principle" being crucified. By mother principle, he means that nurturing and mystical part of ourselves that is intimately connected to the Earth. By proposing this, he writes that he is invoking the ancient Jewish, and Christian tradition of the Paschal Ministry, meaning, the resurrection and ascension of Christ, the salvation foreshadowed in the Old Testament and the sacraments. Fox suggests that in a Cosmic Christ context, the Paschal Ministry takes on new power, deeper meaning and moral passion. This occurs because the Paschal Ministry will be understood as Mother Earth conceived as Jesus Christ, crucified, resurrected and ascended. "It is the life, death and resurrection of Mother Earth" (Fox 1988: 149).

Fox's vision is about collective not personal salvation. It occurs on an earthly, if not universal level. Fox believes that the Cosmic Christ will usher in a new era of self-expression and "the reinvention of the human." What follows is an inevitable compassion for all creatures and the Earth itself.

Andrea A. Kresge

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See also: Berry, Thomas; Cathedral of St. John the Divine; Christianity (2) – Jesus; Christianity (7e) – Creation Spirituality; Gaian Mass.

## Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181–1226)

Francis of Assisi through the centuries has been one of the Catholicism's most popular and inspirational saints. His embrace of a life of poverty, simplicity, and charity has inspired many both inside and outside the Roman Catholic Church. But he is perhaps best known for his exuberant stress on our kinship with animals and all of creation. Francis' life was chronicled by his followers in *The Little Flowers* and in biographies by Thomas of Celano and later by Bonaventure. These hagiographical accounts are

replete with stories of Francis preaching to “my little sisters the birds,” to fish, and to wild flowers of their need to praise God. In another famous story, Francis addresses a fierce wolf at Gubbio as “friar wolf” and miraculously persuades him to cease killing and to live in peace with his human and animal neighbors. Though these accounts mix myth and legend with biography, they remain the primary vehicle through which each generation has envisioned Francis and associated him with a vital sense of kinship with creation. Preaching was central to Francis’ mission, and the image of Francis preaching even to nature underscores a sense of identification with all of creation. Likewise the stories of Francis’ ability to speak to animals and to tame wild ones fit a common medieval hagiographical motif that sees the holiness of saints as allowing a brief recovery of the peaceableness and harmony between the species once enjoyed in Eden but lost in humanity’s fall (see Sorrell 1988: 52–4).

Francis was born in Assisi, Italy, to a wealthy cloth merchant and his wife. Francis received some liberal arts schooling and as a young man fought in Assisi’s war with Perugia. He was captured in battle and imprisoned for almost a year. He suffered a long illness and, on recovery, joined a military expedition to Apulia in the south. We are told that after a vision in a dream, he returned to Assisi and embarked soon thereafter on following the example of Jesus. After a dramatic break with his father, Francis committed himself to poverty, begging, and preaching. He gave away his (and many of his father’s) possessions, withdrew from his family and friends, served lepers and the poor, and repaired a church. A growing band of companions joined Francis and the pope gave his official blessing to the new order. This small band of friars grew over the centuries into today’s array of Franciscan orders.

In recent decades, growing environmental concern has prompted many to look to Francis’ powerful sense of kinship with nature for inspiration. Pope John Paul II in 1979 proclaimed Francis to be the patron saint of ecology. Some have called Francis a pantheist, but that misses how deeply traditional his religious views were. His vision was primarily theocentric, not ecocentric. His core focus centered on Christ, giving praise to God, and love and service to humanity. He expressed his affection for, and closeness to, animals and the rest of nature with rare exuberance, but he never wavered from the medieval church’s teachings on the hierarchy of creation with humanity as its crown.

A number of influences may have helped Francis to stress the goodness of creation. His era saw a growing interest in the observation and artistic depiction of nature. He was deeply impressed by the ideal of chivalry and he loved a number of popular French troubadour songs and poems that praised both knightly virtue and the beauty of nature. He came to refer to his friars as “God’s

troubadours.” He may well have heard stories of the lives of Irish saints which commonly depicted even animals as recognizing a saint’s gentleness and authority. Francis’ decision to become a wandering preacher and frequent hermit meant that he had close and sustained contact with nature and animals. He and his companions often lived in caves, hovels, and forest huts, and these stays likely deepened his identification with nature and its species.

Early and medieval Christianity had long emphasized the goodness of creation, but an equal emphasis on human superiority tended to undercut any emphasis on humanity’s kinship with the rest of creation. Francis and a few other Christian nature mystics were distinctive in celebrating God’s presence throughout the natural world and humanity’s kinship with the animals and the rest of nature. Francis employed chivalric and familial terms of address to animals and natural elements to emphasize the intimacy of the communal bonds between humanity and the rest of creation. For example, in *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, (also known as *The Canticle of the Creatures*), Francis spoke of “Sir Brother Sun,” “Sister Moon,” “Brother Fire,” and “Sister Mother Earth” (in Armstrong 1982: 38–9). Some interpret the *Canticle* as a call to humans to praise God for the goodness, beauty, and usefulness of creation, while others read it as an exhortation to all of nature to praise God for God’s blessing upon it. In either reading we are left with a strong sense of our need to respect the entire community of creation (Sorrell 1988: 128).

The intimacy of our connections to the rest of creation is emphasized in a number of Francis’ other writings. Francis’ prayer, *The Praises to be Said at All the Hours*, is primarily a collection of diverse biblical praises, many from the Psalms. It exhorts both humans and all of nature to praise God. Another important prayer, *The Exhortation to the Praise of God*, was at least partly written by Francis and is a compilation of biblical passages attesting to our relatedness to the rest of creation. “Heaven and Earth, praise Him (cf. Ps. 68:35). All you rivers, praise Him (cf. Dan. 3:78). All you creatures, bless the Lord (cf. Ps. 102:22). All you birds of the heavens, praise the Lord (cf. Dan. 3:80; Ps. 148:10)” (in Armstrong 1982: 42–3).

What inspires is not so much Francis’ corpus of writings, which is quite sparse, but the charm of the accounts and legends of his exuberant energy celebrating the whole of creation. Francis’ writings have not had much of an impact on the development of mainstream Catholic theology or ethics, for he had no great *Summa Theologiae* to impress later generations of the learned, but his great text was his life, which has continued to inspire many across the ages. He lacked the education to invoke Aristotelian or neo-Platonic metaphysical understandings of the natural cosmos, but he did have a literalist power in his direct appropriations of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially

Psalm 148, and the Gospels concerning specific birds, animals, fish, stars and planets. Francis was a medieval friar; not an ecologist. But it is not surprising that many today who are ecologically minded find in him a kindred spirit.

William French

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See also: Christianity (5) – Medieval Period; White, Lynn – Thesis of.

**Frazer, Sir James** – See Introduction to the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*.

### Freeport (West Papua, Indonesia)

The site of the richest gold and copper mine in the world, Freeport lies where the rugged southern slopes of the West Papuan Highlands approach the coastline. The removal of entire mountains has been extremely lucrative for both the American mining company Freeport McMoRan and the Indonesian Government, yet devastating to local inhabitants and their natural environment.

The mountains of the region are the source of intricate belief systems that link the Amungme and Nduga people to the natural world. For these peoples, each peak and valley, and all the forests and rivers, are repositories of the ancestors. Indeed, the ancestors shaped the spine of the central mountain range with their bones and their heroic endeavors created the rivers and gorges. They also released the first humans from the ground and grew the first food plants. The ancestors' spirits – the traveling female creators Situgimina and Ugatame, and Manu the

creator snake, and others, such as the guardian spirit Dingiso, a tree-kangaroo – inhabit trees, rocks and pools. Though seldom seen, they are always there. The landscape created by the ancestors and all its valued elements must be maintained in order for life to continue. This is the responsibility of the people and the elders who are entrusted with the task of ensuring that the proper rituals are performed.

Even what is worn personally, by way of feathers, fur, bone and teeth, deliberately denotes connection to the ancestors and embodies experience of the land they created. No ceremony, moreover, is complete without the slaughter of pigs, their blood expressing the health of the land, their flesh imparting prosperity to all partaking of it.

The outside world came relatively late to the mountains with the arrival of Dutch Franciscan missionaries in the 1950s. Whereas they came barefoot with only a few essentials, starting educational and health facilities, American fundamentalist evangelists badly damaged local leadership structures and the possession of local knowledge during the next decade. Still worse was Indonesia's takeover of Irian Jaya (1963–1969), and American mining to remove mountains for gold, copper and other minerals at Grasberg near Timika (from 1967 onward).

The physical assault upon the mountain, the military assault upon its people and the undermining of their spiritual knowledge is a familiar story of devastation. And yet the cultural and religious lives of both the Amungme and Nduga have proven remarkably resilient and adaptive. Even those among them who work in mining towns continue to participate in initiation ceremonies, funerals, marriage exchanges, hunting, fighting, and trading expeditions, and thus take periodic refuge in village life. Independence fighters, members of the OPM (Organisasi Papua Merdeka) who resist Indonesian control over West Papua, also frequent the forests above and around the mine, and join the local people in affirming the ancestors and the land itself as powerful protectors and weapons of defense against environmental despoliation. The OPM groups seem more comfortable in combining their ancient beliefs with helpful passages from the Bible and new rituals dedicated to bringing about West Papua's independence. Efforts at resistance against the mining, however, have been put down ruthlessly, with the use of Indonesian or American helicopters (the mining company paying protection money to the Indonesian government).

Mark Davis  
Alexandra Szalay

#### Further Reading

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