

"COMPASSION" AS GOD, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO

AN INSTANCE OF

THE VIRTUE-DEIFICATION PRINCIPLE ----- ELLIOTT #1783

Matthew Fox, a Dominican priest with a flashy, reason-disdaining style that would embarrass a Jesuit, has finished his trilogy. The first book, On Becoming a Musical, Mystical Bear: Spirituality American style, aimed at recovering our spiritual language. The second, Whee! We, wee All the Way Home: A Guide to the New Sensual Spirituality, preached our right to ecstasies, which are experiences of God--recovering the body and pleasure, the body politic and the sharing of pleasures making up our spiritual journeys. It was a study of passion preceding the study of compassion, which is the theme of the trilogy's last book: A Spirituality Named Compassion and the Healing of the Global Village, Humpty Dumpty and Us (Winston/79; here it is Jan/84 and I'm only now getting to review it--now that he's "all the rage" in some Christian circles).

1. MF drives me batty with his addiction to what I call the fuzzy-wuzzy "is": the predicate of his verb *to be* frequently, oh so frequently, makes no logical or metaphysical connection with its subject. The results are dismal: (1) Severe inflammation of the sememes (in other words, language inflation); (2) Overclaiming for his brilliant (?) insights; (3) Arrogance against his real and imagined enemies; (4) Blindness to lights that more level-headed, more honest thinking would open him to. I'm for colorful speech, but poetry need not conflict with honesty and careful thinking.
2. MF's fast-and-looseness with language is that of the "mystic," and one is not surprised to find him a devotee of Meister Eckhart (vii, note 6 on 271). Given the current American fascination with and appetite for mysticisms East, I'm grateful for MF's increasing the options with his mysticism West even though his writing is intellectually shabby.
3. The book has a messianic tinge: he's in the salvation business. How do we get saved? By (you guessed it) compassion: the doctrine of salvation by compassion--not by grace through faith as *process*, not by Jesus as *person*. Oh yes, you can't catch a mystic, whose claims are holistic and so his terms are bulbous. But you can nail the dirty pool of the mystic's having it both ways: claiming "poetry" as defense when accused of non-sequiturs and other outrages against the human mind, claiming "theology" as defense when accused of being merely poetic. No such trickiness in, e.g., Kenneth Clark, who is honest to both thought and feeling (though, as he says in his Foreword to *Civilisation*, "I cannot distinguish between thought and feeling"). You don't have to be soft-headed to be soft-hearted, sensitive to human feelings, joys, sufferings.
4. The roots of this spirituality? (1) Slightly biblical. (2) The Neoplatonic mentality of Christian monasticism, whose metaphysics is more Hellenistic-pagan than it is Hebrew-Jewish. (3) Western panentheism (cf. Spinoza), which he favors as "transparent," against theism, which he divides into immanent and transcendent. (4) Mysticism of the East (esp. Hindu and Sinic). (e.g., 45, 52). (5) The American Human Potential Movement, now using "Transformation" as holophrase. Not all bad, this mix. An adolescent monk ecstatically emerging from his monastic cocoon with understandably contagious enthusiasm. Understandable, too, that he speaks emotionally to the condition of many who are in that or other cocoons. (6) Recent and current liberationisms.
5. A big +: he's acutely aware that contemplation and compassion, devotion and justice, often are, and need not be, mutual enemies. His good heart and goodwill open him to Hebrew prophetism (largely indirectly) and to current militant humanisms (married to his natural and Dominican-acquired mysticisms). My church, UCC, is the reverse of MF: strong on militancy, weak on mysticism--so he's a good author for us! Ditto for strong on intellection, weak on art (here poetry, the word-art).
6. In current rhetorical paganism within the church, values and virtues are deified, declared central-salvific. "Love" (in MF, "Compassion") becomes the Goddess; "Life" (as in "pro-life" and antinuke single-issue pressurers) becomes the God. This old pagan (in our culture, Greek and Roman) custom is quaint as poetry, dangerous as politics.