Creation Spirituality – an Other Gospel

Colleagues,

Once each semester the community here at the Overseas Ministries Study Center joins the Maryknoll Sisters, a Roman Catholic mission order an hour's drive west just across the border in New York state for a week of study together. It's home and home. So two weeks ago we went to their place. The Maryknoll campus is huge. There's also a Maryknoll order of priests. The Maryknollers are a distinctly American mission order, with an impressive track record for the 100 years of their existence. Orbis Books, leading publisher of mission theology from around the world, is a Maryknoll project.For these ecumenical visits the host chooses the topic and speaker. So for our week at Maryknoll it was "Christian Mission: What Can We Learn From Wisdom Traditions?" Our teacher was Marlene De Nardo, with long years of experience as a Notre Dame Sister in Latin American missions, and now administrator and professor at Naropa University in Oakland, California. Naropa offers a "widescreen" program of studies in world religions, yet it does have an operational credo in its Master's Program in Creation Spirituality. "Creation Spirituality," if the term is new to you, is a late 20th century movement linked to Matthew Fox, former RC monastic (Dominican, I think, but I'm not sure). For more info about it, read on.

Our OMSC community, from a dozen or so places and denominations around the planet, and most all calling themselves "evangelical," had a hard time trying to find Marlene' message on their own screen of Christian options. So when we got back home, discussion ensued. Below you have my contribution to the conversation.

Even though Christ's Good Friday and Easter doesn't get much attention in the "News from Naropa," I'll do as Melanchthon recommends: "When Christ's promise is missing in a text, add it."

Ergo Easter Peace and Easter Joy!
Ed Schroeder

OMSC Colleagues,
Here are some thoughts about our week at Maryknoll, March 11-15, 2002.

What we encountered:

1. Our teacher Marlene De Nardo was an evangelist for the "gospel" of the "Creation Spirituality" [hereafter "CS"] movement associated with Naropa University in Oakland, Calif. (where she teaches) and its proposals for dialogue with world religions. Drawing on the readings she gave us—from Donal Dorr and Matthew Fox—she proposed that the "CS" gospel was compatible with the Christian gospel.
2. Marlene represents a sample of one of the new movements these days coming from Roman Catholicism (prominent in the USA, but also in other continents—especially India). Marlene and the authors she gave us to read are "unhappy" Catholics. They are unhappy about their own "old" Roman church, and the bad things it has done and for many of them, keeps on doing. Some of them—Matthew Fox, for sure, I'd say, and perhaps Marlene too, are simply "burned out" on Roman Catholicism. For them dogma and doctrine and authority and other words associated with traditional

Roman Catholicism are “dirty words,” old fashioned, even oppressive, not uptodate and/or just plain wrong. How many times did Marlene tell us: “Let’s not talk about dogma and doctrine, but let’s talk about our religious experience.”

3. Yet there are aspects of the “old Roman Catholicism” that continue. Our OMSC colleague Bambang [an evangelical from Indonesia] told us last evening that he talked with Marlene about “justification-by-faith and Christ’s vicarious atonement.” And she didn’t know what he was talking about. Not faith-in-the-heart, but having a heart of goodness and doing-good-works is her priority. There is no need for justification or atonement. That is dogma and doctrine. Old, outdated religion. We’ve moved beyond that. “Works of goodness and charity and justice” are the bottom line. How many times did Marlene tell us that this was the essence of religion—all religions—even the Christian faith? That sounds like something from the Reformation era: what are the “grounds” of Christian righteousness—faith in Christ or “works of goodness and charity and justice”? And if the latter, Marlene’s choice, is correct, then, of course, a certain kind of dialogue is possible: speaking with one another about how do YOU/ how do WE promote such attitudes of “goodness” and get people to do such works?
4. To dialogue about faith, about who/what is at the center of our religion, whom or what we trust, was not encouraged. That is dogma, doctrine, systematic theology—always stuff of conflict, not friendly cooperation—she said. And yes, these topics do indeed bring up disagreements, often serious disagreements. It seems that a small amount of conflict is OK in Marlene’s dialogue notion—dialogue about goodness and justice —but not too much. She did not want to push the dialogue partners to serious wrestling with the “questions of the

heart—what people fear, love, and trust." We found it tough even to dialogue with Marlene about her own "new" Catholicism.

5. Marlene's response to Roel was very revealing. [Roel is a missionary from Manipur in the far northeast corner of India] She had just played for us a Hindu chant calling on the god Shiva and encouraged us to join in the singing. Roel said he couldn't. Hindus calling on Shiva have been killing Christians in Manipur. Many of the victims are Roman Catholic priests and nuns. Remember how Marlene responded to Roel: "I can see that your experience would not allow you to join in this chant, but mine does." Roel's experience was not her experience, so Shiva-mantras are OK for her—even when Roel pointed out that some of the victims were "her" people.That shows what happens when "my experience" becomes the yardstick for what is true and valid. Experience is always fickle, similar to "feelings," which sometimes go this way, and sometimes go that way. We can't deny our experience, of course, but to base our faith on our experience, instead of Christ's word of promise to us, is shaky indeed. Didn't Jesus call it "sand?" To make "experience" our god and build our faith upon it is another Gospel.
   Much of the time, perhaps most of the time, Christians trust God's promise AGAINST what they are experiencing, such as Roel's experience of Christians being murdered by Hindus. Or the experience of Yossa [Anglican priest/prof from the Congo] telling us of the 5 wars (sic!) that have roared through his life already. To build faith on such experience = despair. Jesus's own "Eli!" cry on Good Friday arises from experience; his "Father into thy hands" trusts the promise.

6. The easiest place to see the specifics of this "other

gospel," as I will call it, is in the readings from Donal Dorr [Mission in Today's World] and Matthew Fox [One River, Many Wells] that Marlene gave us.**FIRST DORR**

A. He proposes to replace evangelization with dialogue, which "at the present time seems more appropriate." So evangelization is ruled out as central to mission. Reasons for that: "mission has lost much of its glamour," evangelization is "unbalanced." He is really critical of the evangelization missionary: "crusading missionaries . . .preoccupied with the number of converts. . . secretly afraid that their missionary enthusiasm would be weakened by engaging in religious dialogue." He charges them with "insensitivity" that actually "undermines the missionary enterprise." Seems to me that this sort of reasoning is "ad hominem" argumentation. It says more about Dorr than about the validity of the position he's critiquing.
B. He then indicates his own theological premise, what I would call his own "systematic theology" with its unique "other gospel," p. 16
    1. It is a "fact that the Spirit (of God) is at work in the people being evangelized" by missionaries.
    2. The various religions "may be seen as attempts to give some institutional shape to such movements of God's Spirit and God's grace. In all of the religions we can find rituals, symbols and traditions which express . . . people's religious experience. These symbols and rituals evoke in people a sense of the loving, healing presence of God in their own lives and in the wider world." (p.17)
    3. In inter-religious dialogue participants "can

open themselves to the influence of the Spirit of God." (p. 18) Then comes a paragraph spelling out Dorr's "theology" of Spirit.

4. Seems to me that Dorr's theology of Spirit is not even close to Biblical theology of the Spirit of God, even less so of God's Holy Spirit as proclaimed in the N.T. In the early years of Christian history Dorr's Spirit-of-God talk was called "pneumatic gnosticism"—a "wind blowing" [=pneuma] that brought "wisdom, insight, knowledge" [=gnosis] to those who had been awakened to its energy. Dorr continues to promote such a pneumatic gnosticism throughout the 2 chapters of his book that we received to read.Seems to me the central point is: There is no necessity in Dorr's "gospel" for a crucified and risen Messiah. He doesn't need such a Messiah to get sinners reconciled to God, since the God he's talking about is not the sinner's critic, nor are sinners accountable to God. Nobody needs to be justified before God. Even apart from Christ, he says, people encounter everywhere the "loving, healing presence of God in their own lives and in the wider world." Is that really true of anybody's experience? You wouldn't guess it from just watching the TV news these days. Or from the report of the five wars Yossa told us about in his devotional homily at Maryknoll.
5. Already in St. Paul's letters to the Corinthians such Spirit-theology without any need for a crucified/risen Christ is rejected as contrary to THE gospel. In later church

history it is formally labelled “heresy.” Paul’s harshest words about such “other” gospels is that, if they are true, then “Jesus Christ died in vain.”

6. Dorr could possibly be helped to see this if we were to take his diagram (p. 22), the circle with its pie-segments of “Ten Deeper Issues” of religion, and ask him about the center. There’s no label for the center of his diagram. But the New Testament, of course, has one: the crucified/risen Christ, the center of all those items. Dorr would put his “Spirit” theology at the center, I imagine. But then the question is: which Spirit? There are lots of spirits, even supernatural ones, in the world. We are called upon to “Test the spirits, and see which ones come from God, the God who came to us in Jesus, the Christ.”

MATTHEW FOX

1. Seems to me that Matthew Fox’s “other gospel” is even more easy to see. He tells us directly what is at the center of the “wheel” of this theology: “the human is divine.” p. 171. That conviction is at the center of his “faith.” “It takes a lot of trust to recognize humanity’s divinity.” 184
2. By eliminating the distinction between Creator and creature, there is no “Outsider” to call us to account for the way we are living. God calling Adam and Eve to account, God calling us to account, is taken care of by simply eliminating any distinction between God and human creatures.
3. Fox dismisses sin as the central problem of humankind, namely, that we are God’s creatures, that

our relationship with God is broken, that God calls us to account, & that we are unable to “justify” our lives before God with our own resources. If that is not our problem, then what is?

4. Fox’s model for salvation looks like this, I’d say:
   PROBLEM: humanity has forgotten, lost, been led astray from, the knowledge and awareness that “the human is divine” and living on the basis of that “faith.” [“Churchy” religion is more often the cause, than the solution, to this problem.]**SOLUTION to the problem:** to get people to learn again, know again, experience again, that their own “humanity is divinity.” And then to urge and encourage the “lot of trust it takes” to believe this.
   WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO GET TO THAT SOLUTION? A teacher, a guru, who has already arrived at that knowledge and that “faith,” who can then help the rest of us to do it too. Some people say Jesus is such a guru, others say the Buddha, others point to other inspired teachers. Some (not only out in California) say Matthew Fox.

5. This is an even clearer example of the gnostic way of salvation. Most important (again) is that a crucified/risen Christ is not needed at all to get people “saved.” That is surely an “other” gospel.