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Matthew Fox talks obedience and courage, young adults and the church

Jamie Manson | Apr. 2, 2012 Grace on the Margins

This is the second part of Jamie Manson's interview with theologian and writer Matthew Fox.Part I can be found here[1].

You begin your most recent book, *The Pope's War*, by taking a look at the childhood of Pope Benedict XVI and his time in Hitler Youth. How do you think that experience might have impacted his view of the church?

In fascism, there is always an obsession to control and to make obedience the first priority. That's why fascism was allowed to thrive in Nazi times. As I point out in the book, the wonderful priest and moral theologian Fr. Bernard Haring, who was also conscripted into the Nazi army, did not learn from his experience that obedience is a primary virtue. He saw the horrible price that Europe paid for this distorted notion of obedience. So, he built his entire moral theology on the idea that the real meaning of obedience is responsibility.

We hear that there are some bishops who do not agree with the Vatican on some issues and who see how some of the Vatican's positions do harm to people, but they obey and cooperate with the Vatican anyway. Do you see parallels to fascism there?

So often it comes down to preferring one's job security or career advancement to the truth or to Jesus. Susan Sontag defines fascism as institutionalized violence: violence in the name of institution and the act of hiding behind an institution. A good example of this, of course, is the pedophilia crisis. I use the word fascism in the book because all fundamentalisms, not just the Catholic kind, are about freezing power.

John Paul II and Cardinal [Joseph] Ratzinger thoroughly opposed liberation theology and instead snuggled up to those who believed in absolute obedience. Fr. Marcial Maciel, the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, was very close to the Chilean dictator [Augusto] Pinochet. Cardinal Angelo Sodano, papal nuncio to John Paul II and now dean of the College of Cardinals, appeared on TV to support Pinochet, even as he was torturing and abducting people. Members of Opus Dei served as ministers in Franco's fascist government. The movements that were so attractive to John Paul and Ratzinger were authoritarian, rigid, patriarchal and fundamentalist. It's a pity because Vatican II was an attempt to learn from the sins of fascism and to override the history of extreme obedience.

What do you think is driving this fundamentalist strand in our church and our political discourse?

Part of it is fear. When people are fearful, they want some kind of support, some kind of clarity if at all possible. They are afraid of chaos, so law and order take precedence. But I think an even deeper strand to this fascism is misogyny. There is an anti-feminine bias to all of this. There is a dreaded fear of the feminine. I think it goes back thousands of years when the goddess was revered and integrated into the culture. When patriarchy took over around 500 BC, our myths changed. In the Babylonian myth, the feminine goddess, Tiamat, was also the

goddess of chaos. And the god Marduk killed her. The feminine was evil and chaos was evil. And the goal became to enslave or even kill the feminine and chaos. I think this has been played out for a long time, often in the name of religion or science.

Science as well?

Yes, but in the 1960s, science recognized that chaos is integral to all natural phenomena. So we ought to learn to live with it and celebrate it. I think that is the real underlying struggle of fundamentalism: How do you deal with the goddess chaos? One response is to lock it up or control it or kill it. The other is to honor creativity itself. The birthing process is always chaotic. Life is that way. Nature is that way. That becomes the spiritual question: How are we going to live with chaos and confusion and the dark night without going into lockdown mode? Courage and love are not compatible with fear and obsession. We must choose life, which is chaotic and unpredictable. Those who make obedience and order into gods are practicing modern-day idolatry. We have to be spiritual warriors. And the first sign of spirit is courage.

Most young adults seem less inclined to fight these battles with the institutional church and seem more inclined to create their own religious sensibilities. Can a lack of structure and rituals be a form of creative chaos?

If evolution teaches us anything, it's that forms come and go. They have their time and then they yield to historical unfolding. No form is absolute or immortal. That's the lesson of evolution, and it applies to church forms. The adulation of form is idolatry. To freeze form is a kind of idolatry.

The young don't want to put their energy into fighting the old institution, the old forms. They sense it's dead. And Jesus said let the dead bury the dead. And I frankly think the Vatican is a marvelous museum, there are wonderful pieces there to look at. But in terms of looking for spirituality and authentic religion, I think it is one of the last places on earth that young people would expect to find it. Unless they are fanatically fundamentalist. And that is a psychological problem, not a theological position.

Even though you see yourself as post-denominational and don't want to put yourself in a box, you still seem to care deeply about Catholics who are still in the institutional church.

On Pentecost weekend, we are putting on a retreat in Boston called "Occupy Christianity." It's for people who are in the institution, out of the institution and those who have one foot in and one foot out. I think the Holy Spirit speaks to all of us. There are people called to stay in. Great! But don't hide in your pew in denial. Take a stand. If you leave or only keep one foot in, you still have responsibilities.

What kind of responsibilities?

Recently I spoke to a group of graduates of Jesuit universities. They care as I care about the church. But their question is, Where do we go from here? What can we do to make things better? I don't think repeating calls for another council or a new pope is going to solve it. I think it's deeper than that. The Holy Spirit is calling us to something authentic. And we older people should be linking up with and listening to younger people. If the young say they don't want to fight these old battles, that's fine. The question then becomes, How will be invest our time together to create a community that is worthy of Jesus and our own humanity as well? There are many movements that can contribute deeply to this call of the Holy Spirit.

Where are you seeing these kinds of communities emerge?

I see it a lot in ecumenical settings. There is a genuine respect and appreciation of Jesus among those who have been deeply affected by his call to courage, justice and love. People like Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi,

Dorothy Day and others. They really put their lives on the line for the work of spirit. This generation of young people is already ecumenical. They are not stuck in religious boxes. I think this has the potential for a wonderful flowering of the Holy Spirit. I asked a guy on the Occupy Wall Street picket line why he was there. He said, "Because I am a Christian, and Jesus tells us to listen to the poor much more than the wealthy." I think there are many expressions of authentic Gospel practice, and I think young people have a knack for cutting through the ecclesial layers of distraction and getting to the heart of the matter.

What projects are you doing with young adults?

I'm doing a project with Adam Bucko, who is the executive director of a program in New York called the Reciprocity Foundation. He works daily with homeless youth on the streets of New York. We're doing a film and a book on young adults, activism and spirituality.

One of the reasons I became an Episcopal priest was to reinvent forms of worship. I felt the liturgy was stuck in a place that was modern but not postmodern. So I developed a liturgy called the Cosmic Mass. It involves dancing, sort of like a rave, that grounds into our bodies the deeper dimensions of the Mass. We've put on 90 Cosmic Masses and have been training people to do it all over North America. I like to work with DJs and rappers because these are the art forms that young people celebrate with. I think they are a marvelous gift to the church.

If church is ultimately about creating community and enabling transformation, do you think that we can create church without being explicitly religious?

I wrote in my book *The Reinvention of Work* that everyone who is doing good work in the world is a midwife of grace and is therefore a priest. Priests are, above all, workers. Once you start thinking that way, you realize that religious community is not restricted to a religious building. It's wherever people are healing, learning, being awakened. We need to recognize that our work worlds are worlds of spirit, and everyone is a priest in that context. That requires some spiritual awareness and education, but above all, it requires a realization of the dignity of our work and the importance and nobility of it. I think that's a whole other terrain where church is being redefined in our time.

We spoke in the beginning about the treasures of the Catholic tradition. Do you ever worry that the mystical tradition won't be passed to new generations because the institutional church is dying?

That's why I wrote the book *Christian Mystics* last year. In many ways, these mystical and prophetic figures were already dead within the church's grasp. They have been reduced to nostalgia, and nostalgia is not a virtue. I think by providing an understanding of these great souls and by making their lives applicable to our own lives, we assist new generations in keeping them alive. I think the communion of saints is with us in their prayer and in the work they left behind. Being part of a living community is to be in tune with these great voices of the past that are still speaking to us and calling us to a courageous future. We have to ask what these mystics and prophets would be doing if faced with the issues we have today. And I think we can all agree that they wouldn't be hiding in their boxes hoping not to be noticed.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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