



Make a Joyful Noise

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THE PULSING BEAT OF INDUSTRIAL music thumps through an Oakland auditorium as a group of youthful revelers breaks into a conga line. Just finished: a sitar player chanting Hindu hymns and a rabbi singing prayers in Hebrew. Still to come: rap music and a group hug. “Let’s dance our diversity,” Rev. Matthew Fox implores from the stage. “Is there anyone who isn’t sweating?”

A better question might be, “Is anyone actually closer to God?” For as any of the 350 sweaty attendees would happily explain, what’s taking place in the We the People Auditorium this evening is a mass—a techno-cosmic rave mass, to be precise—and the man at the center of it all is the controversial Fox. Silenced by the Vatican in 1988 over disagreements about doctrine, then expelled from the Dominican order after 26 years, Fox has reinvented himself as an Episcopal priest determined to change the way people worship. “Most churches are very canon-structured,” explains Fox, 56, who organizes about 10 rave masses a year. “You sit, you stand, you do what you’re told, then it’s over. The spirit isn’t even allowed in the room.”

Just the opposite is true at Fox’s raucous masses, which have been attended by supporters including former California Gov. Jerry Brown and Body Shop founder Anita Roddick. The masses are an outgrowth of Creation Spirituality, Fox’s vision of a multicultural form of worship that borrows ideas from most major religions, Asian philosophies and even some pagan traditions (such as

the belief that trees have spirits). In Fox's "cosmic" world view, an active interest in environmental and social problems (overpopulation, unemployment) is more essential than secularized religious rituals. "Denominations are not that important," he says, "in light of the real issues." Fox has distilled that vision into several books, and it is the philosophical cornerstone of his Oakland-based University of Creation Spirituality, established in 1996 and attended by 119 students paying from \$6,600 to \$10,000 tuition a year.

But not everyone is raving about Fox and his raves. Douglas LeBlanc, editor of the Episcopal newspaper *United Voice*, has referred to one of Fox's masses as "a careless brew of paganism ... and environmentalist hysteria" and to Fox himself as "a goofy middle-aged priest lurching about on a dance floor." Undismayed, Fox bristles at the idea that he's just another New Age guru. "New Age is all about light and angels and levitating and going to expensive workshops in new BMWs," says Fox, who describes himself as a mystic. "The mystic is not satisfied to be just a lover but also a warrior, because when you love something, you defend what you cherish."

Scuffling has been a way of life for Fox, the fourth of seven children born in Madison, Wis., to George Fox, an Irish Catholic assistant football coach at the University of Wisconsin, and his wife, Beatrice. Stricken with polio at age 12, Fox spent months fighting his way to health and decided, he says, to "do something purposeful to show how grateful I am." A retreat to a Dominican training institute in high school convinced him to become a priest, and he entered Loras, a Catholic college in Dubuque, Iowa, in 1958.

He was ordained in 1967 and 10 years later founded the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality in Chicago. (He moved it to Oakland in 1983.) The Vatican insisted he sever his ties with the institute in 1988—he had a self-described witch on the faculty—but Fox refused and wrote a letter citing the church's "fascism." He was then sentenced to a year of public silence, after which he resumed his critical writing and lecturing.

In 1993, Fox was finally expelled from the Dominican order. He was ordained an Episcopal priest in 1994 (he performs no official church functions) and, having seen his first rave mass on a visit to England a year earlier, set out to popularize the idea at home.

Ironically the force behind those dizzying techno masses is hardly a high-volume extrovert. “He travels alone,” says an Institute faculty member, Luisa Teish. “He’s very quiet and likes things quiet.” When he’s not on the lecture circuit, delivering up to four speeches a month, Fox lives alone in a book-cluttered, Craftsman-style home in downtown Oakland, where he meditates and writes daily. If Fox misses being part of a larger church structure, it’s not obvious. “I don’t need the priesthood,” he says, “I have plenty of work without it.”

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