

**Original Blessing**  
**An Introduction to Matthew Fox & Creation Spirituality**  
**By**  
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With the renowned priest and theologian, Matthew Fox coming to our pulpit in two weeks, I want to take the opportunity now to say a little about him and the movement he started. I won't go into his entire biography, just what he's become most known for, Creation Spirituality, and how it came to be. For Fox it probably began a lot earlier, but for most of us the Creation Spirituality movement began with the publication of his bestselling book, *Original Blessing* in 1983.

Contrary to the doctrine of Original Sin, Creation Spirituality is about what Fox calls "The first law of Creation," the belief that the world is good. After completing it, *Genesis* says, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."<sup>1</sup> Creation Spirituality also emphasizes another verse from the first chapter of *Genesis*, "God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."<sup>2</sup> The idea the world we live in is good and that humanity looks just divine obviously contradicts the more entrenched Doctrine of Original Sin, that the world is fallen and human beings are born evil. Hence the title of Fox's book, *Original Blessing*. "Original blessing," he insists, "is far more ancient and biblical a doctrine and ought to be the starting point for spirituality."<sup>3</sup>

Fox isn't alone in his analysis of the Bible. He cites, for example, Hebert Haag, a former president of the Catholic Bible Association, who wrote, "The doctrine of original sin is not found in any of the writings of the Old Testament."<sup>4</sup> This is similar to what one of my favorite mystics, Erich Fromm once said, "The Old Testament does not take the position of [humanity's] fundamental corruption. Adam and Eve's *disobedience* to God are not called sin; nowhere is there a hint that this disobedience has corrupted [humanity]."<sup>5</sup> The concept of original sin, rather, was invented by Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and didn't become official Church doctrine until it was adopted by the Councils of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

No matter how well substantiated, nor how uplifting and inspiring his argument, however, the Church authorities didn't look upon all that Fox had made and conclude "it was very good." At the time, Cardinal Ratzinger, who would later become Pope Benedict, was head of the Congregation of Doctrine and Faith, formally known as the Office of Holy Inquisition until

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:31

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:27

<sup>3</sup> Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1983. p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Heart of Man*, Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1964, 1980, p. 19.

Vatican II in 1965. In 1984, Ratzinger silenced Fox for a year, eventually fired him from his teaching position at Holy Names College in Oakland, California, and ordered his expulsion from his Dominican Order in 1993. Although he has since been embraced and ordained in the Episcopal Church, Fox still considers Catholicism his faith tradition.

As for Creation Spirituality, let me begin explaining what it is not. Creation Spirituality has nothing to do with *Creationism*, the belief the world was literally created in six days and is only 6,000 years old. On the contrary, Creation Spirituality fully embraces science, including evolution, and by “creation” refers to the entire 13.7-billion-year history of the entire Universe and everything in it. The second half of the phrase, “spirituality,” is a little more complicated, at least for me. In general, the word *spiritual* refers to disembodied or nonmaterial things. For most, spirituality is about transcending this world and its woes, but Creation Spirituality is all about being both *in* and *of* the world. It’s about appreciating, caring for, and improving the material world. Creation Spirituality is rooted in empiricism, which almost makes it a contradiction in terms.

Perhaps it’s easiest to grasp by understanding the root of the word *spirit* is also the root of the word *spear* and means “breath.” Anything that deeply enters us, moves, and gives us life, is a kind of spirit. Creation Spirituality is spirituality speared and inspired by nature, all of it, the entire Universe. It’s not about disembodied spirits, or about having certain beliefs and ideas. It’s about letting nature and the wonder of the Universe, the empirical world, which is often dismissed as sin or illusion by various other spiritualities, inspire us, move us, and give our lives meaning.

Nor is Creation Spirituality anthropocentric. It doesn’t begin with human origins just 6,000 years ago like Creationism does, nor even 250,000 years ago as science tells us, but with the Universe story almost 14-billion-years ago. As Meister Eckhart said, “Every creature is a word of God and a book about God.” Creation spirituality embraces the wonder of everything, the stars and planets, the gluons and quarks, the amoebas and fruit flies, and all the animals on Earth, including humans who have only been part of the story for a very short time. Humans are neither the core nor apex of the Universe story.

This is why the mystic, Hildegard of Bingen said, “This Word manifests itself in every creature,”<sup>6</sup> and why Mechtild of Magdeburg said, “The truly wise person kneels at the feet of all creatures,”<sup>7</sup> and why Francis of Assisi prayed, “All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars; All praise be yours, My Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air; All praise be yours my Lord, through Sister Water.”<sup>8</sup> It is why the *Quran* says “Wherever you turn, there is the face of Allah.”<sup>9</sup> ...it is he who spread out the Earth, and set thereon mountains standing

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<sup>6</sup> Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 68.

<sup>9</sup> Surah 2:115

firm and flowing rivers, and fruit of every kind he made in pairs, two and two; He draws the night like a veil over the day. Surely these things are a sign for those who look.”<sup>10</sup> And it’s why in the Islamic Hadiths, Allah himself says, “I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known: That is why I created the world.”<sup>11</sup>

So, Creation Spirituality is not creationism, it is not an unearthly spirituality, nor is it anthropocentric. What Creation Spirituality fundamentally is, however, is a form of mysticism, meaning it doesn’t portend to have all the answers. Rather, as Fox says, “religious experience... begins with awe and wonder.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is deeply ecumenical in its approach to finding truth. It embraces many religious traditions, as well as nonreligious disciplines, like science and philosophy. Again, as Fox says in his aptly titled book, *One River, Many Wells*, “There is one underground river, but there are many wells into that river: an African well, a Taoist well, a Buddhist well, a Jewish well, a Muslim well, a goddess well, a Christian well, and aboriginal wells. Many wells but one river.”<sup>13</sup>

In this sense, Creation Spirituality is no more a theistic belief than it is a purely Christian belief. It’s possible for agnostics and atheists to embrace Creation Spirituality, as much as it is for the believers of any faith or those of little faith at all. I know because I am both an atheist and a Creation Spiritualist, and personally studied at Fox’s University of Creation Spirituality several years ago. It was during a class there that I was required to read *The Essential Kabbalah*, by Daniel Matt, which contains one of my favorite theological statements of all time, “Every definition of God leads to heresy; definition is spiritual idolatry.”<sup>14</sup>

Like traditional mysticism, which is based upon three paths, *illumination* (awakening to the beauty around us), *purgation* (letting go and going through), and *unification* (being at one with all that is), Creation Spirituality has four paths, which Fox has identified as the *via Positiva*, *via Negativa*, *via Creativa*, and, *via Transformativa*, otherwise known as the Positive Way, the Negative Way, the Creative Way, and the Transformative Way. I’m about to go into these at more length since they are the crux of Creation Spirituality, but first, keep in mind, Matthew Fox didn’t invent Creation Spirituality or its four paths. Rather, it was while studying various mystics that he discovered these common qualities among them, which he then named in order to better articulate them to the rest of us.

The first of these paths, the *via Positiva*, occurs when we awaken to what the Navaho call *hozhoni*, meaning, “surrounded by beauty.” “The Earth, its body is my body, *hozhoni, hozhoni*; The Earth, its thoughts are my thoughts, *hozhoni, hozhoni*; The Earth, its speech is my speech, *hozhoni, hozhoni*; The sky, its life am I, *hozhoni, hozhoni*; The mountains, its life am I; The Sun,

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<sup>10</sup> Surah 13:4

<sup>11</sup> Fox, *One River, Many Wells*, *ibid.* p. 143.

<sup>12</sup> Fox, Mathew, *Wrestling with the Prophets*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1995, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Matt, Daniel C., *The Essential Kabbalah*, Quality Paper Back Book Club, New York, NY, 1995, p. 32.

its life am I; White corn, its life am I; Yellow corn, its life am I, The corn beetle, its life am I; *Hozhoni, hozhoni, hozhoni.*"<sup>15</sup> Matthew Fox says the *via Positiva* occurs, "In the awe, wonder, and mystery of nature and of all beings, each of whom is a 'word of God,' a 'mirror of God that glistens and glitters...'"<sup>16</sup> It is in the "mountaintop experience," the feeling of being both overwhelmed by and at one with the beauty of nature, the beauty all around us. Rabbi Heschel called it "radical amazement." That's the *positive way*, looking into nature, even into our own nature or the nature of another, and being amazed! That's why science can be such a tremendous gateway into Creation Spirituality, because, as Einstein said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. [One] to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead."<sup>17</sup>

The *Via Negativa*, the negative path, reminds us that darkness, silence, mystery, and even pain and suffering and grief are necessary for our spiritual health. This is what Saint John of the Cross referred to as a "Dark night of the soul." Creation Spirituality requires us to go through the things we often wish to avoid, overcoming our fears and grief by facing them. Sometimes doing what we believe is right can get us in trouble, but we need the courage to do it anyway. Sometimes it leaves us feeling all alone, like Dr. King, who once felt such despair he was ready to give up and retreat into anonymity. "It seemed at that moment," he said, "that I could hear an inner voice singing to me, 'Martin Luther stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth and lo I will be with you even to the end of the world!'"

But the *via Negativa* isn't just facing difficulties and going through them. It's also about going into the darkness for rest and comfort. Darkness can be soothing and motherly. That's why Buddhists meditate, Jews observe the Sabbath, Taoists practice *wu wei* (doing without doing), and Christians teach us Grace, the idea we don't have to do anything to be saved. In this sense, the *via Negativa* is the mirror opposite of the *via Positiva*, which means they look a lot alike. Instead of being awed and enraptured by nature, however, the *via negativa* is the breathtaking experience of nature, and we all know what can happen if our breath is taken away for too long.

The *via Negativa* is also about letting go and letting be. Sometimes we're wound up too tight and need to let go, let ourselves feel the music, let ourselves dance. To be a good dancer we have to embrace the negative path, the path of letting ourselves go, letting it all loose. This is what John Denver is getting at in his song, *Sweet, Sweet Surrender*, "Live, live without care. Like a fish in the water. Like a bird in the air." It's what the French get at when referring to sexual climax as *la petite mort*, the little death. Sometimes letting go is one of the best feelings there is. The *via Negativa* means surrendering to life, letting go and letting be. As San Juan de la Cruz said while journeying through the wilderness, "Let your sight and beauty be my

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<sup>15</sup> Harvey, Andrew, ed., *The Essential Mystics*, Castle Books, New York, NY, 1996, p. 7f.

<sup>16</sup> Fox, Matthew, *Creation Spirituality*, *ibid.* p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Einstein, Albert in *Living Philosophies* Simon and Schuster, New York 1931.

killer.”<sup>18</sup>

The *via Creativa*, the creative way, is what I like to call the *visionary path*. For it is not enough to remain drunken by the wonder and awe of nature’s majesty; nor forlorn, lost, or secluded in the quietude and rest of her sweet mystery. These experiences are like caldrons and wombs creating something new in us, a new vision for our lives and our world. Matthew Fox describes this as the experience that helps us, “make a choice of what images to trust,”<sup>19</sup> and, “in our imaginative output,” he goes on to explain, “we trust our images enough to birth them and ride them into existence.”<sup>20</sup> So, ultimately, the creative way, the visionary path, is about realizing creation is still occurring and that we are co-creators of the Universe and that our vision of the world, our visions for the world, matter.

But they only matter if we materialize them, which leads to the fourth path, the Transformative Path, the *via Transformativa*. I always like to begin my explanation of this path by saying it isn’t at all about inner transformation. It’s about outer incarnation. It’s about living our values and making our visions real, making our dreams for the world come true. It’s about transforming the world by making it more just for everyone. The *via Transformativa* is the prophetic way. It’s about social justice and social witness and social action. It occurs only in service to others and to the world. It is a selfless act that reminds us our place is not in the heavens but here, creating Heaven on Earth.

Far too many spiritualities are taken like drugs to numb us to the painful effects of life, avoiding the negative path, but the Creation Spiritualist, having embraced the darkness, the negative way, is no longer afraid to take her head out of the clouds and ground herself firmly upon Mother Earth. “...Creation-Centered Spirituality,” explains Fox, “considers that a consciousness of faith needs to include a social, political, economic awareness that is critical and that offers workable and creative alternatives.”<sup>21</sup> It is the practical awareness, as Meister Eckhart said, that “compassion means justice,” and that in both this world and in the next, we are responsible for “all our relations.”

That’s Creation Spirituality in a very tight nutshell, or, perhaps, I should say, in a seed. For Creation Spirituality isn’t something to be understood, but to be lived, and by living it, to let it grow. In a couple weeks, on the 29<sup>th</sup>, when Matthew Fox is here, we’ll have lots of guests from our larger community here too, and he probably won’t talk a lot about Creation Spirituality. Instead he’ll be sinning, multiple times, by exploring different names for God, something, again, the Kabbalah calls *heresy*. That’s great! Our pulpit is the best place for heretics, and I look forward to adding Fox’s name to the long list of heretics who have

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<sup>18</sup> De Nichols, Antonio T., *Saint John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, Paragon House, New York, NY, 1989, p. 121.

<sup>19</sup> Fox, *CS*, *ibid.*, p.75.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Fox, *ibid.*, p.156.

occupied it. But today I wanted to introduce you to the heretical idea that got him excommunicated from the Catholic Church, the radical idea the Earth is beautiful and good, and that each one of us is innately beautiful and good, and that it is only by recognizing hozhoni, the beauty and goodness all around us and within us, that we become capable of mirroring its beauty by transforming our world.