

The Creation Centered Spirituality of Matthew Fox and his New Reformation of Christianity

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Introduction

Tonight I would like to tell about a remarkable modern Christian theologian named Matthew Fox. This man, a former Catholic priest, has spent decades arguing that Christianity must change in some very major ways. He argues that it must begin to see the Creation as the center-point for spirituality, that it must learn to see the feminine in the divine, and it must adopt what he calls a “deep ecumenism” that embraces the religious inspiration from traditions all around the world. He lives in Oakland California, making our state the birthplace of this remarkable new vision for Christianity.

The ideas of Matthew Fox are refreshing in an age when the term “Christian” usually conjures up fundamentalist ideologues. With Matthew Fox we find precisely the opposite – an engaging, thoughtful spiritual teacher who has spread his wings to embrace science and mysticism, nature and reason, as perfectly compatible with religion. He is outspoken in his criticism of both the Catholic Church and Christian Fundamentalism. For example, he wrote,

“I don't think that fundamentalism has anything to do with Jesus Christ. They call themselves Christians, but if that's Christian, count me out. Fundamentalism is built on fear and greed.”

By contrast, many of the ideas of Matthew Fox resonate with Unitarian Universalism. Virtually all his books and public statements represent quite strongly the UU approach to religion and ethics. Yet, as we will see, Fox insists that he is firmly rooted in the Christian tradition – he refuses to admit he is a heretic despite his rejection of so many of the teachings of both Catholic and Protestant churches.

Thomas Berry, author of *The Great Work*, *The Dream of the Earth*, and other works, says this about him:

“Matthew Fox might well be the most creative, the most comprehensive, surely the most challenging religious-spiritual teacher in America. He has the scholarship, the imagination, the courage, and the writing skill to fulfill this role at a time when the

more official Christian theological traditions are having difficulty in establishing any vital contact with either the spiritual possibilities of the present or with their own most creative spiritual traditions of the past. “

I'd like to tell you a bit more about his life, first; and then his thinking.

It is inspiring just to hear Matthew Fox's life story, and the intellectual battles he has had with the Vatican – including by the way, the man who became the current Pope.

The Life of Matthew Fox

Matthew Fox was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1967. He was a member of the Dominican Order for 34 years. He received Masters Degrees in both philosophy and theology from Aquinas Institute, and later earned a Ph.D. in spirituality, summa cum laude, from the Institut Catholique de Paris.

Seeking to establish a pedagogy that was friendly to learning spirituality, he established an Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality that operated for seven years at Mundelein College in Chicago and twelve years at Holy Names College in Oakland. In 1984, he established a non-profit organization, Friends of Creation Spirituality, whose goal was to educate the public about this philosophy.

For ten of those years at Holy Names College, Cardinal Ratzinger, as chief Inquisitor and head of the Congregation of Doctrine and Faith (called the Office of the Holy Inquisition until 1965), tried to shut the program down. Ratzinger silenced Fox for one year in 1988 and forced him to step down as director. Three years later he expelled Fox from the Dominican Order and then had the program terminated at Holy Names College.

Forced out of the Catholic Church, Fox was ordained an Episcopal priest.

Rather than disband his ecumenical faculty, Fox started his own University called University of Creation Spirituality nine years ago in Oakland, California. Its name has now changed to Wisdom University, and Fox is President Emeritus and a teaching professor there.

The principle objections from the Congregation of the Faith to Fox's work were that he is a “feminist theologian.”

The Vatican did not like any of these features of Fox's theological arguments:

1. He calls God “Mother” (Fox, in response, argues that the medieval

mystical tradition did exactly that);

2. He prefers the concept of “original blessing” to the concept “original sin;”
3. He associates too closely with Native Americans and people of the Wicca tradition;
4. He does not condemn homosexuals;
5. He has replaced the naming of the traditional Catholic spiritual journey as the 3 paths of Purgation, Illumination and Union, with the four paths of Creation Spirituality:

1. *The Via Positiva* – in which God is experienced in states of ecstasy, joy, wonder and delight;

2. *The Via Negativa* – in which God is experienced in darkness, chaos, nothingness, suffering, silence and in learning to let go and let be.

3. *The Via Creativa* – God is experienced in acts of creativity and co-creation; and

4. *The Via Transformativa* – God is experienced in our struggle for justice, healing, compassion and celebration.

Matthew Fox sees his work as renewing the ancient tradition of Creation Spirituality, not as something entirely new. Fox strives to reawaken the West to its own mystical tradition, by reviving awareness of important medieval mystics, especially Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, and the mysticism of Thomas Aquinas. A great deal of credit for the awakening of interest in the work of Hildegard of Bingen in recent years goes to Dr. Fox. He was the first to translate her work into English in *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*, 1985 and Hildegard of Bingen's *Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs*, 1997.

This tradition promoted by Fox is feminist, welcoming of the arts and artists, wisdom centered, prophetic and caring about eco-justice, social justice and gender justice issues.

He has led a renewal of liturgical forms with “The Cosmic Mass” that mixes dance, techno and live music, dj, vj, rap and contemporary art forms with the western liturgical tradition. This Cosmic Mass is ecumenical in its approach, combining the traditional format of the Roman Catholic Mass to Native American practices like sweat lodges and pagan practices like circle dances.

In Spring 2005, while preparing for a

presentation in Germany, Fox was moved to prepare 95 Theses of his own which he had translated into German. On the weekend of Pentecost, arrangements were made for him to nail these to the door of the Wittenberg church (the location where Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses in the 16th Century, the act which is cited as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. You see a photo of this action on our order of service tonight. *(photo on right)*



In his theses, Fox calls for a new reformation in Western Christianity. In his supporting book *A New Reformation*, Fox argues that there already exist two Christianities, and it is time for a New Reformation to acknowledge that, and to move the Western spiritual tradition into new directions.

Fox believes that by "reinventing work, education and worship we can bring about a non-violent revolution on our planet."

The Thinking of Mathew Fox

The heart of Matthew Fox's teaching is what is called "Creation Spirituality." The Friends of Creation Spirituality, which Fox founded in 1984, describes it like this:

"Creation Spirituality (CS) honors all of creation as an original blessing. Creation Spirituality integrates the wisdom of Western spirituality and global indigenous cultures with the emerging post-

modern scientific understanding of the universe and the awakening artistic passion for creativity which reveals the inter-relatedness of all beings. The Creation Spirituality movement seeks to integrate the wisdom of western spirituality and global indigenous cultures with the emerging scientific understanding of the universe and the passionate creativity of art.”

Fox says this Creation Spirituality is in many ways a return to pre-modern Christianity, yet it is in accord with modern science. He says,

“Protestantism and the printing press began at the same time, which is both a blessing and a curse. The idea that the 'Word of God is texts' is unbelievably narrow. Meister Eckhart said in the 14th Century, "every creature is a word of God". That kind of ecological, cosmological theology, where you read the text of nature as a revelation, is precisely what we need at this time of ecological crisis. Aquinas said in the 13th century, "Revelation comes in two volumes: nature and the Bible".

Well we've ignored nature. How many seminaries have a physicist or a biologist on the faculty? My school [Wisdom University] is still the only one, and it started 18 years ago.”

So, Fox says he is not a heretic. He says he is working within the Christian tradition, trying to restore some of the feminist theology found in the medieval mystics. But he does call for some major changes. He says:

“I would like to see Christianity move from being a religion, to being a way of life and spirituality again. It doesn't have to be religion anymore. The empires are over. What we need is an awakening of the human species, and the Gospels, along with the Christian mystical tradition, . . .they have a lot to offer. We need to become aware of the Cosmic Christ, which means recognizing that that every being has within it the light of Christ. This is a source of both revelation and reverence. If we have that awareness we can no longer take things for granted. If we had gratitude there wouldn't be an ecological crisis and there'd be celebration rather than boredom. People live their whole lives externally and this sets them up for addictions. We have an economic system based upon setting up addictions. We can do much better than this, and as a species we have to.”

Matthew Fox is author of 26 books. Even the titles of these books show the scope of his philosophy. I will highlight just a few of his books, which helps to explain the scope and importance of his thinking.

In his seminal 1983 book, “Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality” he

argues that rather than the Adam and Eve story that Man is depraved and must suffer for “original sin,” that the world – Creation itself – has been given to us as the “Original Blessing.”

Matthew Fox writes in that book:

“A creation-centered spirituality is cosmic. It is open, seeking, and explorative of the cosmos within the human person and all creatures and of the cosmos without, the spaces between creatures that unite us all. The more and more deeply one sinks into our cosmic existence the more fully one realizes the truth that there does not exist an inside and an outside cosmos but rather one cosmos: we are in the cosmos and the cosmos is in us. A John Muir put it: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.... The whole wilderness is unity and interrelation is alive and familiar.” All things are interrelated because all things are microcosms of a macrocosm. And it is all in motion, it is all en route, it is all moving, vibrant, dancing, and full of surprises. It is all a blessing, an ongoing and fertile blessing with a holy, salvic history of about twenty billion years.”

A second important book, published in 1988, is:

The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth And the Birth of a Global Renaissance.

Here he argues that God’s “begotten son” was not merely Jesus, but the Cosmos itself, as we understand it in all its glory of billions of years of cosmic evolution. In this view, the Cosmic Christ is the image of God in all beings. The corollary of this theology is that killing forests and other creatures is crucifying the Christ all over again.

In his Year 2000 book, ***One River, Many Wells: Wisdom Springing from Global Faith***, Fox embraces a “deep ecumenism” which celebrates and appreciates the diversity of religious inspiration from around the world. In this book, Fox brings together all the world spiritual traditions from African to Native American, from Buddhism, Sufism, Judaism, Christianity, Taoism, the Goddess religions, Celtic and today’s science - around 18 themes that unite instead of divide humanity.

This work has been turned into an active practice, in the “Cosmic Mass” which he regularly performs in Oakland, California.

Thomas Berry said this about this book, *One River, Many Wells*:

“Here he has given us abundant selections from the spiritual literature of the Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and the indigenous peoples of Africa and America to illuminate our understanding of Creation, the Divine, the Human experience of the Divine, and our way in to the future. Out of these sources, and with reference to discovery of an emergent universe by contemporary science, he has, it seems, created a new mythic context for leading us out of our contemporary religious and spiritual confusion into a new clarity of mind and peace of soul, by affirming rather than abandoning any of our traditional beliefs”.

His books also address the practical, such as: *The Reinvention of Work*, (1995); and *Creativity: Where the Divine and the Human Meet*.

In **The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood For Our Time**, Fox calls on the mystical teachings of world spiritual traditions, laying out the difference between a job and work and between inner work and outer work and how to fuse the two. In this book, he writes that we should not lament the loss of jobs in the automotive industry, for example, but should use the opportunity to perform new work – which is re-creating spirituality within human beings.

In **Creativity: Where the Divine and Human Meet**, Fox writes,

“I do not know any area of human potential more important [than Creativity] if we are to be a sustainable species again. Creativity, when all is said and done, may be the best thing our species has going for it. It is also the most dangerous... Creativity constitutes the very meaning of being human and our powers of creativity distinguish us from other species. Evil as well as profound goodness transpires through our creativity.

“Creativity is Spirit working through us in so profound a way that Eckhart says God becomes the space where we want to act. Creativity is not a noun or even a verb—it is a place, a space, a gathering, a union—a where—wherein the Divine powers of creativity and the human power of imagination join forces. Where the two come together is where beauty and grace happens and indeed, explodes. Creativity constitutes the ultimate in intimacy for it is the place where the Divine and the human are most destined to interact.

“I do not see any way out of humankind’s multiple dilemmas except that one route that got us here in the first place: Our powerful creativity. But to apply our creativity at the service of justice and

compassion—that is the lesson taught by all spiritual traditions and it is a lesson of survival for our times. As the Dalai Lama has put it, “we can reject everything else: religion, ideology, all received wisdom. But we cannot escape the necessity of love and compassion.

In this book I end up re-constructing Christianity and Culture around the number one survival issue of our time: the sustainability achieved when creativity is honored and practiced not for its own sake but for justice and compassion’s sake. This is the way of the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of Creativity and Compassion. And who was present hovering over the waters at the beginning of creation and is present still at the continuance of creation (Aboriginals call this the “Dreamtime”) and who is present in the mind of the artist at work—which is each of us. And is the presence that melts the Tower of Babel, that is, the divisions between cultures, religions and peoples.

“Hildegard of Bingen taught about this Spirit in the following manner:

“Who is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is a Burning Spirit. It kindles the hearts of humankind. Like tympanum and lyre it plays them, gathering volume in the temple of the soul....

“The Holy Spirit is the life of the life of all creatures...that gives existence to all form....

“The Holy Spirit resurrects and awakens everything that is.”

“May our species be resurrected and awakened by the Spirit of Creativity for this coming century. May we be ennobled to carry on the next stage of our evolution.”

His most recent book, published in 2005, is called “**A New Reformation!**” In it, he sets forth a list of 95 Theses, in conscious emulation of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses which proclaimed the Christian Protestant Reformation 500 years ago. Fox emulated Luther in the style of his presentation very consciously. He had each of his 95 points translated from English into German, to correspond in style with Luther. He even traveled to Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany, where Luther nailed his [95 theses](#). There, he symbolically nailed his 95 Theses next to the door of the church.

Fox writes:

“Like Luther, I present 95 theses or in my case, 95 faith

observations drawn from my 64 years of living and practicing religion and spirituality. I trust I am not alone in recognizing these truths. For me they represent a return to our origins, a return to the spirit and the teaching of Jesus and his prophetic ancestors, and of the Christ which was a spirit that Jesus' presence and teaching unleashed."

I would like to read to you the **first twelve of Fox's 95 Theses**, which will give you a taste of Fox's radical re-interpretation of Christianity and the importance of a spirituality focused on Creation instead of idolatry of either the Bible or the Papacy.

[See the [95 Theses by Matthew Fox](http://www.uuvisalia.org/pdf/95_theses_by_matthew_fox.pdf) at http://www.uuvisalia.org/pdf/95_theses_by_matthew_fox.pdf]

Conclusion

Matthew Fox is an inspiring theologian. He shows that there is a way to transform Christianity – and all the world's religions - to make them relevant to today's needs, which is to celebrate diversity and sustainability, creativity, and a true spirituality. Although he doesn't think of himself as an Unitarian Universalist, he really is one in spirit. I hope his thoughts will help inspire us all to appreciate a "deep ecumenism" that incorporates the best from all the world's religions.

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