

Thoughts on Creation-Centered Spirituality Augmented by Readings in

**Matthew Fox's
*One River, Many Wells; Wisdom Springing
from Global Faiths*
(Tarcher/Putnam, New York, 2000).**

In several of my reviews under Part II I have mentioned my appreciation for "creation spirituality," or "creation-centered spirituality." Creation-spirituality is different from "salvation spirituality" which sees humanity as base and lowly and never being able to merit anything from a God far removed, who must be worshiped because 'he' has provided salvation by dying an unmerited and cruel death for us, or worse, having required his son to have made this self-sacrifice to satisfy his requirement for justice.

Salvation-focused spirituality is a very negative path in my estimation. It portrays God as inflexible and very distant. The inflexibility is toned down by the compassionate act of the son's vicarious sacrifice, but still, the fact such a sacrifice is needed shows an all-too-human type of justicial rigidity to prevail in heaven. I am under the impression that salvation-focused spirituality is the orthodox view of salvation and assumes the God-human relationship characteristic of normative Christianity.

I have noted in the past, and in some reviews in Part II, that

one reason I continue to think somewhat highly of my former religion, Mormonism, is that it does have a creation-centered spirituality at its heart although it is trying hard to look more orthodox and assume some the negatives of the salvation-centered path.

But any religion that keeps looking back to the Fall of Adam and Eve, and celebrates that act as a beginning of a blessing, reminds me strongly Matthew Fox's seminal book defining creation-spirituality called *Original Blessing* ([re-issued in paperback, Tarcher, 2000). The fall, in creation-spirituality, was not a tragedy but the start of a gift, an opportunity. In Mormonism it is seen as a necessary act making human life possible as God designed it to be. Creation spirituality moves God into humanity and erases some of the gulf set between the divine and human in orthodox thought. Mormonism goes further to say that God and humans are of the same species but at different stages of development, so it is creation-centered in its spiritual outlook.

Creation-centered spirituality is a positive outlook because it soundly rejects notions of 'original sin' and has humans feeling as if their quest to become (at least a part of) God is within reach. In a Christian context it acknowledges that this is all made possible because of the voluntary self-sacrifice of Christ, but it does not discount the role that humans play as co-creators in the ongoing creative work of God. It elevates humanity and its efforts. It is a positive way, largely, though it also recognizes the validity of other ways of being spiritually aware that are unavoidable at times in a normal life span.

It is time to move on to citing someone who (re)introduced

creation-spirituality to the world. What I have done here is to lift some words from the primary creation-spirituality website maintained by Fox. The website and page I am quoting from is at <http://www.creationspirituality.com/aboutus.html>

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. . . .

As you can see, the vision is of an integrating spirituality that can take all viewpoints. But there is more:

Ten principles of Creation Spirituality:

- 1. The universe is basically a blessing, that is, something we experience as good.**
- 2. We can and do relate to the universe as a whole since we are a microcosm of that macrocosm and that this relationship "intoxicates" us. (Aquinas)**
- 3. Everyone is a mystic (i.e., born full of wonder and capable of recovering it at any age; of not taking the awe and wonder of existence for granted.)**
- 4. Everyone is a prophet, i.e., a "mystic in action" (Hocking) who is called to "interfere" (Heschel) with what interrupts authentic life.**

5. That humans have to dig and work at finding their deep self, their true self, their spirit self; thus the role of spiritual praxis and meditation and community confrontation which can itself be a yoga. If we do not undergo such praxis we live superficially out of fear or greed or addiction or someone else's expectations of us. That salvation is best understood as "preserving the good." (Aquinas).

6. That the journey that marks that digging can be named as a four-fold journey:

Via Positiva: delight, awe, wonder, revelry

Via Negativa: darkness, silence, suffering, letting go

Via Creativa: birthing, creativity

Via Transformativa: compassion, justice healing, celebration

7. Everyone is an artist in some way and art as meditation is a primary form of prayer for releasing our images and empowering the community and each of us. Art finds its fulfillment in ritual, the community's art.

8. We are all sons and daughters of God; therefore, we have divine blood in our vein, the divine breath in our lungs; and the basic work of God is: Compassion.

9. Divinity is as much Mother as Father, as much Child as Parent, as much Godhead (mystery) as God (history) as much beyond all beings as in all beings.

10. That we experience that the Divine is in all

things and all things are in the Divine (Panentheism) and that this mystical intuition supplants theism (and its child, atheism) as an appropriate way to name our relation to the Divine and experience the Sacred..

Keep these things in mind (revisit as needed) as I pull some few good insights from Matthew Fox's *One River, Many Wells*. In that book, Fox attempts to do what I am attempting to do in this Item on my website: he attempts to convey an understanding of the spiritual base that underlies, and potentially unites, all religions and even the secular scientific understanding of ultimate reality.

I am only going to pull material from a few places. I recommend you get the book and read it, it is very good. I disagree with, and doubt, some of its statements and claims, especially relating to the scientific views expressed, but that is OK, a year from now I'll disagree with the assertions I make today, no doubt. I am going to focus on the positive here, and there is a lot of that in this book.

I will restrain myself and stay largely with the Introduction and Section 1, "Relating to Creation," which contains chapters one through four. I do not want to create a Readers' Digest version of the book, just want to pick a few illustrative points from it.

In the Introduction, on pages 2 and 3, is a statement of Fox's purpose (I left a misplaced comma out, otherwise it is an exact quote):

In this book I try to get to the core of human

religious traditions as we know them to find the spirituality that is there. It is clear that once we return to the depth or core of religion we find much more than dogmas, concepts, institutions, commands. We find a striving for experience of the Divine, however that can be spoken of, we find both form and formlessness, male and female, experience and practice. We also find that in their core and depth we do not encounter many different religions so much as one experience that is expressed variously and with great diversity and color flowing in the name of different traditions and cultures.

On page 3 he also hints that he will be bringing the thoughts of scientists into this mixture, as he asserts ought to be done.

Fox's next assertion of interest to me was his thought about spirituality being the experiential part of faith on page 4 (emphasis in original):

. . . what I offer here is hopefully an interactive book, a book that itself elicits experience—*an experience in experiential dimensions of faith, namely spirituality.*

He explains his modus operandi as being the grouping of citations from his varied sources under subject headings of potential interest to all. It is a good approach, it worked for me.

On page 7 Fox explains why he threw some scientists' writings into his "stirring together of the 'essence' of religion" (p. 6):

Among the sayings I chose, I also include today's science

along with many spiritual traditions, for many scientists in our time are seeing wisdom once again in a recognition of the mystery and wonder of the new cosmology. They are the teachers of nature's wisdom.

That is a bit optimistic and hopeful. I agree that Fox does the right thing in bringing some enlightened statements (and some not so much scientific as speculative) from scientists into this mix. But why then not do the same for political leaders with vision and international organization leaders with much practical experience with the human condition? They have also expressed spiritual insights, and have also shown themselves on occasion spiritually bankrupt.

But my real point is that focusing on scientists gives the impression there is something inherently spiritual in being a scientist. That would be very nice if it were true. Science, like any other human endeavor, has practitioners that span the entire range of human outlooks on things spiritual seen in every other grouping of human endeavors. This is not the time to resurrect the discredited myth of the 'noble savage' into the myth of the 'noble scientist.' As a scientist, I see normal humans as my co-workers, ranging, as do humans everywhere, from the clairvoyant to the blind where their spiritual vision is concerned.

The next point that piqued my interest was on pages 8 and 9 where mystics are discussed. I liked his quote from Carl Jung saying that "it is only the mystic who brings creativity to religion."

Fox suggests in that context that the continuance of the species

requires we rediscover the mystic in all of us. He says:

The format of this book is an effort to further the cause of mystical literacy. The mystics are fun, and they invite us to fun; they are also outlandish, and they invite us to play at the extremities of the heart. They are also prophets who urge us to rejuvenate our systems of education, economics, and all our work worlds and professions.

"Fun" is not a word I have ever applied to the mystics I have read, unless the ecstatic joy they describe can be contained by that 3-letter word. But be that as it may, Fox next tackles the accusation that he is a syncretist. This caught my attention since I was a bit taken aback by Huston Smith's personal vision of reality being such a syncretism of what he had heard and learned and felt from his study of and experience with other religious traditions. Fox rightly suggests that syncretism is just fine at the deep level where he is attempting to operate, the level of spirituality that belongs to all humanity and all faiths. The level that is the very core of human spiritual experience. Good enough for me.

I just looked at all the pages I dog-eared or marked in my copy of the book. I was obviously enthused at words on the co-creative assignment given to humans, the interrelatedness of all beings, anything said by Rumi or one of his fellow Sufi ecstatic poets, and several statements on the source of all things, some of which rang more true than others. So I had to make a hard choice. That choice, to restrain myself and stay focused on just the creation-spirituality part in Chapter 2, essentially.

On page 28 of that chapter Fox says:

When I speak of "re-discovering" religion's relationship to nature and Creation, I speak consciously. It is a re-discovery because our religions once knew these facts well. Surely the indigenous faith traditions are all grounded in Creation and enveloped by its wonder and beauty and grace. As we shall see, all of our faith traditions of even more recent vintage share a belief in the *sacredness of the universe* and of our role in it. But this Creation-centered perspective has often taken a backseat to other agendas, including building empires in the name of religion and using religion to exclude elements of Creation, including women, slaves, homosexuals, forests, waters, the sky.

I would have written the motives differently, I think the motives at the local levels for walking away from creation-centered, all-accepting theology reflects the natural (here is a problem for those who see nature as benign) but wrong-headed and un-spiritual tendencies to exercise power over others. The motive for seeking such power is often altruistic locally: to create an understandable, safe, homogeneous society by redefining others as less than human and excluding them.

Fox's reference at the end of that paragraph to the exclusion of parts of Creation itself is no doubt a slap at the tendency to use and abuse and pollute same. I agree that this is also a symptom of a human-spirituality-deficit.

SELECTED QUOTES FROM FOX'S ONE RIVER, MANY WELLS

On his page 29, Fox cites Thomas Aquinas, whom he characterizes as a thirteenth century mystic [where Fox cites someone in a paragraph, he used bold type, since my pages are all in bold, I changed his bold to italics, so, italics below are quotes by Fox]:

Perhaps it is the lack of cosmology in our culture that drives us to drink and to seek other ways of “getting high” that are self-defeating. Aquinas believes that *each and every creature exists for the perfection of the entire universe.*

Another citation is this (pages 29-30):

The ultimate end of the divine will is the divine goodness, and the nearest thing to that among created things is the good of the whole universe` Thus, among created things, what God cares for most is the order of the universe. Individuals and species serve this greater good, the order of the universe. The principle good in things themselves is the order of the universe. The diversity of Creation contributes substantially to its beauty and purpose. The whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any single creature whatever.

Aquinas recognizes the divine presence in all beings. *Every creature participates in some way in the likeness of the divine essence. All things love God. All things are united according to friendship to each other and to God.*

Aquinas is not one of my favorites among mystics. I usually shudder when people bring up the order of the universe or the divine order, because more often than not it is a thought supporting the acceptability, even the necessity, of some social inequity or other. But if I take away my prejudices, I can relate to this idea of all of us, as we mature and grow into our destinies, contribute to the perfection of the universe. I especially liked the last few sentences.

Fox makes a natural turn now to Meister Eckhart, who is discussed on pages 31 and 32. You need to read the book if you want the very nice verse from page 32. Here I will just relate a few highlights from page 31. Remember, my highlights would not necessarily be your highlights:

. . . all beings are words of God and books about God. My mouth expresses and reveals God but the existence of a stone does the same and people often recognize more from actions than from words. Moreover, Eckhart assures us that all creatures are gladly doing the best they can to express God. . . .

Meister Eckhart captures the full implications of this vision when he says simply, *isness is God*. To see the divine in all things is to begin to live, to begin to be awake and aware. It is to begin to understand the meaning of *Incarnation*, the reality that God has indeed *become flesh and pitched its tent among us*. (Jn. 1:14)

At first I had left off that last sentence, but then I realized that, for the sake of honesty, I need to show here that both Fox and Eckhart put these ideas into a thoroughly Christian

context. To read these types of contextual things, making for a Christ-centered/Creation-centered context, get the book. I will typically select things out of that context because I am trying to glean more naked insights into the nature of existence, and putting them into Christian imagery is simply dressing or costuming these naked insights.

One of my favorites, Hildegard of Bingen, is cited by Fox. I will restrain myself and cite only one of the passages I marked on page 33:

*God's Word is in all creation, visible and invisible.
The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all
creativity. . . .
The Word manifests in every creature
Now this is how the spirit is in the flesh—the Word is
indivisible from God.*

Note that it was Fox who shortened the second and third lines, not me. But the essence of the meaning of the verse is crystal clear. It was basically what Eckhart said, and perhaps Aquinas tried to say.

Fox cites Jewish scriptural and rabbinical sources on pages 34 through 37, and I seem to have liked quite a few that dealt with Wisdom as being necessary to Creation. I actually liked the idea I read elsewhere that Wisdom was and is the creative force of God, sometimes romanticized and objectified as God's female partner in creation. On page 36, Fox cites "an ancient rabbinic teaching about Creation:"

*Creation is the extension of God.
Creation is God encountered in time and space.
Creation is the infinite in the garb of the finite.
To attend to Creation is to attend to God.*

Page 38 cites the Qur'an (Koran) and the Sufi master Ibn Arabi. Pages 39 and 40 cite the Bhagavad Gita. From those citations I will only take one, and that is from "Hindu scholar Iyengar" who says that "*all creation is Brahman.*" *Siddhartha* would have said the same thing, I believe, and may have.

I have, to my surprise, only one critical margin note on pages 41 and 42, which brings in the perspective of scientists on the creation issue. All in all the idea that science supports Eckhart's notion that God's creative process continues is one I buy into wholeheartedly. The idea that by hurting the Earth we are eventually hurting ourselves, are ones I buy into generally, but with some reservations if one goes to extreme interpretations: the Stone Age is not where I want to be now or have the world return to eventually.

Both the science section and the Buddhism section that follow contain enigmatic statements that, when I am in the mood, are interesting to contemplate. But when I am not in the mood they irritate me. Like in the science section there is a gee-whiz statements about our bodies reflecting a lineage that is billions of years old, and in the Buddhism section on pages 43 and 44 there is a statement that is similar, to me, concerning all space and time being in our bodies. Well, OK. We are part of nature and dependent on the existence of the cosmos for our existence. Good.

Where the science section offended me just a little was in the “seething” of the universe with elementary particles suddenly emerging, etc. This is on pages 41 and 42 and attributed to Brian Swimme. Elsewhere I discuss how this is true enough, but only in specific locations where energetic conditions are just right. It is like saying life springs spontaneously from crushed rock. OK, from a very distant perspective you can say that. But the finer truth is that the sun is putting a lot of energy into this project of creation. It has caused the movement of water and vapor to cause weathering of rock, has made life possible in the first place and nurtured it along to where some newly formed soil will quickly become vegetated, etc. Oh, and it requires a planet of a certain size to assure water stays on it, and a certain distance from the sun to temper the power of the sun. Etc.

Creation as we experience it and are part of it is a phenomenal thing, a true miracle. Just as it is. Yet because we are already so used to it, to provoke ourselves into a state of wonder we invent things to ‘ooh’ and ‘ah’ at. In the end some of these invented gee-whiz items turn out to be somewhat defective in terms of reality. But the whole point is that this reality is already a magnificent mystery and miracle, and needs not be magnified at all to remain so. I think this is what I was getting from some of the Buddhist and also the African-American cites on page 47 and the Native American quotes on pages 48 and 49. Their basic message to me was to learn to appreciate the daily miracle of being alive and intimately a part of this natural setting, which is spiritual and divine at its every root.

It is only when we live with this latter realization, when it becomes a daily awareness in us, that we can truly “respect”

the world we live in (page 49) and that we can (page 43) touch “the ground of being.” Since I liked that citation in Fox on his page 43, I’ll give it here and close this review:

If you are not able to touch the phenomenal world deeply enough, it will be very difficult or impossible to touch the noumenal world—the ground of being.

There is much more in this chapter of Fox’s book. There is much more in his book. He cites my very favorite poem from my very favorite mystic, Rumi. But I am going to control myself here because I am trying to stay focused on the nature of our being, our existence. Or am I? After all, my favorite Rumi poem is on that exact subject, and I know that Rumi has several poems dealing with the exact same subject (it is the nature of ecstasy to revisit the same themes) so I was pleased Fox used another version in his book.

So I just talked myself into it. Without further comment I will leave you with this ecstatic insight from the master-Whirling-Dervish himself, Rumi (on Fox’s page 355):

*Think of your soul as the source and created things as springs.
While the source exists, the springs continually flow. . . .
From mineral substance you were transformed to plant,
and later to animal. How could this be hidden?
Afterwards, as a human being,
you developed knowledge, consciousness, faith.
See how this body has risen from the dust like a rose?
When you have walked on from human you will be an
angel . . .*

*Pass, then, from the angelic and enter the Sea.
Your drop will merge with a hundred Seas of Oman . . .
Although your body has aged, your soul has become
young.*

OK, so I have to add a word here. Fox says this is a poem that shows Rumi was a believer in a sort of reincarnation, since birth is a rebirth of matter that may have previously been part of another creature or even human. Evolution is also implied in Rumi's poem, according to some. However, I think Fox's quote from Thich Nhat Hanh on pages 354-355 has the same meaning as Rumi's poem does:

*As I look more deeply, I can see that in a former life I was
a cloud. And I was a rock. This is not poetry; it is science.
This is not a question of belief in reincarnation. This is
the history of life on earth.*

I do not know the greater context of Hanh's statement, but it reminds me of the words cited on pages 41 and 43 that suggested that all of creation's history is in us.

There are several chapters in Fox's book that contain many more insights than I have excerpted here. It is a great smorgasbord. I have but sampled from it in my own readings, and will continue doing so. It is good clean fun.