

Matthew Fox

“Evolution and Creation Spirituality”

Episode 18 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Matthew Fox is founder of the Creation Spirituality movement. Formerly a Catholic priest, now Episcopal, he was expelled from Catholicism in 1993 by then-Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI). A best-selling author (he has written 30 books), Fox is one of the most recognized and revered leaders in evolving the Christian faith in ways that honor both the tradition and the need for change.

HIGHLIGHTS

This conversation between Matthew Fox and Michael Dowd is **one of the most wide-ranging and thought provoking of all the dialogues in this series**. It is jam-packed with ideas and brief stories of their experiences that ground and exemplify those ideas. For this reason, it is highly recommended that students or participants in discussion groups be given an opportunity to not only listen to the audio but also to refer back to the actual transcript. The suggested questions offered for reflection or discussion on these study pages highlight **several vital faith issues that no other dialogue calls forth**. One such topic is the need for religious education to **provision children (and adults) with a “big picture”** that can help individuals face the challenges of living while maintaining hope and faith in this postmodern culture. Fox also directly labels as **“religious abuse” teachings of Hell** and other means of evoking fear. Because Fox is **the leading advocate of “Creation Spirituality,”** this dialogue explores ways in which the Christian faith can become a help, rather than a hindrance, to **solving the ecological crises of our time**. This is also the best dialogue for **hearing Dowd** expound on one of his own religious propositions: that continued focus on ancient biblical scripture as our best source of guidance and map of *what’s real* (how things are) and *what’s important* (which things matter) is actually a form of idolatry: **“idolatry of the written word.”**

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

This episode is essential listening for any Christian, secular, or interfaith group that is not wedded to literal interpretations of the Bible. This is a powerful interview for learning about this former Catholic priest’s doctrinal collision with the Catholic hierarchy that led to his expulsion.

And yet, Fox remains grateful for his Catholic upbringing, his training in the monastery, the continuing relevance of biblical scripture, and the long history of outspoken leaders in the faith. A popular teacher and writer, Fox focuses not on theology but on the practical and personal aspects of an evolving Christian faith. Accordingly, the suggested questions for reflection and discussion encourage participants to delve deeply into their faith and institutional religious experiences, with the aim of remembering, evaluating, interpreting, and perhaps even transforming their faith/worldview journey.

BLOG COMMENTS

Glenda says:

The idea presented today—that one story, one thought, one idea, one way, does not need to drive out others—is so in need of being heard in the Catholic tradition and in our culture today, be it politics, religion or scientific theories.

Pastor Andy Schottlekorb says:

I appreciated the discussion with Matthew Fox a lot. The connection with Thomas Aquinas and his focus on Natural Law was a good reminder.

Don Smith says:

Thank you, Brother Matthew, for your lifetime of work and for being “ahead of the curve” with your ideas and your patience, as we try and catch up!

KEYWORD TOPICS

Catholicism (institutional troubles within), **expulsion** (from institutional church), **Creation Spirituality**, **Thomas Aquinas** (role in bringing Aristotle into church doctrine), **original sin**, **original blessing**, **sin** (Christian understanding of), **God** (feminine face of), **wisdom** (as feminine in Bible), **Jesus** (as cosmic Christ), **Cosmic Christ**, **ecological crisis** (reinterpreting Christian doctrine in light of), **mysticism** (in Christianity), **Meister Eckhart**, **Hildegard of Bingen**, **Brian Swimme**, **Thomas Berry**, **Albert LaChance**, **education** (embodied, transformative), **ritual** (importance of), **Christian mass** (new forms of), **dance** (in Christian ritual), **Cosmic Mass** (invented by Matthew Fox), **imprinting v. indoctrination** in religious education, **religious abuse** (as inculcating a fear of Hell), **Hell** (teaching of as religious abuse), **big picture** (as crucial for education), **Maria Montessori**, **mentors** (role of), **crucifixion** (cosmic understanding of), **creation stories** (importance of), **archetypes** (in creation stories), **awe** (as evoked by science), **science** (role in evoking awe), **idolatry** (of the written word), **Joel Primack**, **Nancy Ellen Abrams**, **storytelling** (importance of), **children** (religious education for), **Rupert Sheldrake**

BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Fox is the founder of the Creation Spirituality Movement, formerly a Catholic priest, and now an adherent of the Episcopal system of church government. He was a member of the Dominican Order of Catholicism for 34 years. He holds a doctorate in the History and Theology of Spirituality 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. For ten of those years at Holy Names College, Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), as the Catholic Church's chief inquisitor and head of the Congregation of Doctrine and Faith, 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 order and then had the program terminated. Rather than disband his ecumenical faculty, Fox started the University of Creation Spirituality. Fox was president of UCS for nine years. He currently resides in Oakland, California, and is a scholar in residence with the Academy for the Love of Learning. He serves as president of the nonprofit he created in 1984, Friends of Creation Spirituality. He lectures, teaches, and is the author of 30 books, including *Original Blessing*; *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*; *Natural Grace*; and (published in 2011) *The Pope's War*.

Matthew Fox's website is: <http://www.matthewfox.org/>

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEO

A 7-minute video clip of Matthew Fox presenting on the topic of science and religion:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33NiGQF8Ozw>

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found at the following url:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/matthew-fox-creation-spirituality-jesus-style/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **Science and Faith.** Matthew Fox quotes 13th century theologian **Thomas Aquinas** several times — for example, “A mistake about creation results in a mistake about God.” Also, “Every creature is God’s work of art.” And, “Revelation comes in two volumes: the Bible and nature.” He then says, “In other words, we should be studying nature just as fiercely as we study the Bible, if we’re going to get to know God.” Fox thus finds consistency within his own religious

heritage of the nature-celebrating “Creation Spirituality” that he is best known for. Later on, he supports his advocacy of an expanded understanding of Christ’s crucifixion by calling upon the biblical writings by Paul. So **he is always tracing his ideas back to the Bible or to some scholar or scholarly phase within the Christian tradition itself.**

Question 1A: *If your religious or spiritual life is linked to a particular tradition, how important is it for new philosophical or theological ideas that you may encounter to be expressed as emanating from, being consistent with, or in some other way fully **linked to that tradition?***

Question 1B: *When you **learn about a new facet of science or a new discovery**, how important is it for you to seek a way to interpret the new finding in ways consistent with your spiritual or religious views? Please elaborate.*

Question 1C: *What, if any, aspects of our **current scientific understanding** of the universe, life, or the long human journey are you **still struggling with trying to make consistent with the faith claims** that are very important to you?*

2. **Mentors.** As with more than a few speakers in this series, Matthew Fox talks about the importance of meeting his mentor, an elder Dominican priest in Paris by the name of Pere Chenu. He credits to Father Chenu his understanding of Creation Spirituality as the *oldest* tradition of biblical Christianity.

Question 2A: *To what extent have mentors been important in **any aspect of your life** — or where do you feel a missing: some aspect where you are lacking the example or guidance of an elder?*

Question 2B: *Matthew Fox met his mentor, personally. Please share about someone you consider a mentor, even if they died before you were born or even if you only met them through their writings or other media.*

3. **Blessing v. Redemption.** Matthew Fox very briefly explains “**Creation Spirituality**” as being grounded in a concept of “**Original Blessing**” rather than “**Original Sin.**” It thus focuses on the Creation — on the gifts of the natural world — rather than on a promise of “Redemption,” as represented by **Jesus on the cross**. Later in the interview he remarks,

Luther said there are three Articles of Faith — **creation, redemption, and sanctification**. But we’ve skipped over the creation because we’ve been so preoccupied with sin and redemption. We have missed out on the ‘**Cosmic Christ of Creation**’. The early Christians did not miss out on that. Paul’s letters are amazing, cosmic hymns. In fact, one contemporary scholar has called them “meta-cosmic”. And he says that **no one was more meta-cosmic a writer than St. Paul was**. Paul was the first writer in the Christian Bible, and we have ignored his grasp that **Christ has a cosmic meaning. It's the pattern that connects all beings in the universe.**

Question 3A: *Have you encountered this shift of emphasis in Christianity before, this renewed concern for Creation, a reverence for all aspects of the natural world, which Matthew Fox calls “**Creation Spirituality**”? Whether or not you have heard of it before, do you find it an attractive expression of the Christian faith? Why or why not?*

Question 3B: *In the above quotation from the transcript, Matthew Fox uses the term “the **Cosmic Christ of Creation**” in his advocacy for reclaiming a concern for Creation in Christianity. Do you tend to agree with Fox that modern expressions of the faith overemphasize **sin and redemption, while neglecting to honor God’s Creation**? Why or why not?*

4. **Creation Spirituality and the Ecological Crisis.** The host, Michael Dowd, talks about how, in 1988, when environmental crises were coming to public awareness, his encounter with Matt Fox’s book *Original Blessing* was **crucial in his not giving up on his Christian faith**. Prior to reading that book, Dowd didn’t see that Christianity had much of anything to offer in encouraging Christians to become more environmentally concerned. But, for Dowd, the book *Original Blessing* profoundly changed that. Meanwhile, Matthew Fox explains how in the book he suggested **an expanded view of both “the Christ” and “the Crucifixion.”** Here he says,

When we are tearing down rainforests, we are crucifying the Christ all over again. Or when we're destroying species, we're crucifying the Christ. **The Christ is not just in Jesus; the Christ is in all beings and all of us.**

Thus, Matthew Fox bolsters his advocacy for greater ecological concern not only as an honoring of God’s Creation but also as an expanded interpretation of what is meant by “the Christ” and by “the crucifixion.”

Question 4: *Based on Dowd’s testimonial, and what Matthew Fox says in this dialogue, **are you inclined to want to probe more deeply into Creation Spirituality**? Have you, yourself, found current interpretations of your faith tradition to be deficient in meeting the ecological challenges of these times? And does Matthew Fox’s way of reinterpreting the Christ and the Crucifixion work for you? (Please discuss whichever aspects of the above questions most resonate with you.)*

5. **The role of mysticism in Christianity.** Early in the interview, Matthew Fox celebrates the medieval Christian mystics, including Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and Nicholas of Cusa. Later in the interview, Fox quotes a modern biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan, as reflecting on Paul’s ministry: “You cannot be a Christian without being a mystic.” Fox then explains, **“Mysticism is about tasting; it’s about experiencing.”**

Question 5: *How important is **experience** of the divine in your own faith walk? What practices or what circumstances are most fruitful in giving you a deeply felt experience of the divine?*

6. **Ritual for “telling the great stories.”** Matthew Fox says, “The ceremony of ritual is the ancient way to teach the great stories. It’s the shortcut—and it’s the most fun.” He also speaks highly of the arts, including **embodied arts such as dance**—which is a major part of the ceremony he helped create, which he calls “**The Cosmic Mass.**”

Question 6: *Are “ancient” rituals of your childhood or chosen faith tradition **important to you**? If yes, how so? If not, have you brought into your life any substitutes that work well for you?*

7. **Science and awe.** Matthew Fox talks about the importance of science and nature in evoking awe. He says,

I think **one of the first jobs of scientists is to awaken awe.** In fact whenever I meet scientists, I always ask the question, “When did you first know you wanted to be a scientist?” And invariably they stop and will say, “Wow, I haven’t thought about this for years.” And then they’ll say, “Hmm, I fell in love with a bush when I was five years old.” The biologist Rupert Sheldrake told me that, and then he said, “Oh my God, I have never thought of this: I did my doctorate on that bush!” Or another one of them will say, “I fell in love with stars when I was six.” One of them told me, “I fell in love with worms when I was five.”

It’s amazing! **It’s a love affair—that’s the vocation of the scientist.** And it is kind of a shame that no one asked them this question, because they all say the same thing: “No one has ever asked me that question.” But when they *get* to it, it’s about an experience of love and the *Via Positiva*—about falling in love, about awe and wonder.

Now, if this is what made the scientist vocation grow and seeded it, **then why shouldn’t scientists be seeding that same love for the rest of us?** So I think that’s a very big part of the work of science: to unwrap the awesomeness and the wonder and the beauty and the story of our being here. And, of course, the Creation story does that.

Question 7A: *Reflect on the aspects of your understanding of the universe or the history of Earth, as given by science, that **most provide you with a sense of awe.** Choose one example and briefly describe how it excites you — and (if you can remember) how you first came to learn about it in a significant way.*

Question 7B: *What opportunities in your childhood for experiencing awe in nature or in learning about the natural world are you **most grateful for**?*

8. **“Idolatry of the written word.”** The host, Michael Dowd, speaks very provocatively about, what he calls, “idolatry of the written word.” He says:

I’ve come to think that we may be in the **very early stages of a radically different kind of reformation.** For the **Catholic Church**, historically, where one went to—where the institution went to—for divine revelation, for God’s guidance, was **scripture** but also heavily the tradition itself and the hierarchy. And then the **Protestants**, of course, their big rallying cry was “*sola scriptura*”: only the Bible. And, of course as you pointed out, this was right after **the printing press**, which helped drive the Protestant Reformation. But there was this emphasis on the written word, which in some ways became an **idolatry of the written word**—not just the Bible, but all written words.

I think now we are in the early stages of what could be seen as an “**evidential reformation.**” That is, we’re seeing that how God communicates—how Reality is revealing itself today— isn’t just through the traditions, isn’t just through ancient books. But it’s through every fact discovered by science—all the evidence: **historical, scientific, and cross-cultural evidence.** And that, to the degree that we religious people begin to share what our best evidential understanding of the nature of reality is with young people in a way that’s fascinating, in a way that helps them make sense of what they are learning on the Discovery Channel and the History Channel and NOVA, and these types of things—this should legitimately be seen as **religious education.** Not just Bible stories and miracle stories, but it’s what evidence is showing us. I think we are going to see a real revival of religion in the Western world.

Question 8A: *What do you think — and feel — about Dowd’s characterization of literalist Bible-centered Christianity as “idolatry of the written word”?*

Question 8B: *What about his call to action for Christian forms of religious education for youth to deliberately bring in **the three forms of “evidence”** that he elevates as the ways in which God/Reality is communicating today: historical, scientific, and cross-cultural evidence?*

9. **A need for a Big Picture and sense of belonging.** Matthew Fox talks about developing a **teaching method** that fills out intellectual and analytic learning with an **experiential component.** He explains,

The reason so many inner-city kids are **dropping out of school** is that, frankly, they're bored. A lot of postmodern kids are bored in school, because they don't need facts anymore. They can get them on their palm machines in five seconds. **What they need is a sense of belonging to something great: to the universe.**

The host, Michael Dowd, expands on the urgency of giving kids a sense of belonging to something great. He cites **Maria Montessori** in this regard, and her advocacy that children be given a “big picture” that connects all that they will be learning—and that this be done in a way that helps kids to “feel their connectedness, their relatedness” to the whole. Later in the interview, Dowd recites a quotation from a 2006 book by **Joel Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams**, which says,

Without a **meaningful, believable story** that explains the world we actually live in, people have no idea how to think about the big picture. And **without a big picture, we are very small people.** A human without a cosmology is like a pebble lying near the top of a great mountain in contact with its little indentation in the dirt, and pebbles immediately surrounding it—but oblivious to its stupendous view.

Question 9: *Describe your own “big picture” — that is, what helps you make sense of all you have learned about the natural world and of all that is important to you in your faith walk. Does it give you a sense of belonging to something great? If not, does this conversation inspire you to want to seek out such a big picture — and does it give you a sense of where to begin?*

10. **Imprinting, indoctrination, hell, and “religious abuse” of children.** Host Michael Dowd talks about the importance of giving children a “big picture” — that is, a cosmology that makes sense of themselves and their world, of everything they learn about. He also advocates **offering that big picture in ways so attractive and meaningful that it actually “imprints” on the child.** Dowd distinguishes the process of responsible, big-picture “imprinting” from what is sometimes spoken about, in a negative sense, as religious “indoctrination.” Matthew Fox elaborates by labeling outright as “religious abuse” those religious teachings for children that inculcate fear of an actual Hell. He says,

I feel for these people who were raised on Fundamentalism, because there is such a thing, I think, as **religious abuse**—just like there's sexual abuse and physical abuse. **To give people the opposite of a big picture—to give them a small picture, a very rigid small picture—is devastating.** I remember one of my students who was bright and alive; he was raised Fundamentalist in a farming community. His father was a farmer in Nebraska. He told me that in all of his going to church every Sunday with his family, he never once heard any sermon that connected being a farmer with being a Christian. Instead he heard all about **the fires of hell.** And even in his thirties—even though he had been through my program with a masters degree, and he had a doctorate in theology—he would wake up in the middle of the night with nightmares, sweating about the sermons he got when he was nine years old about hell. So that's religious abuse. These stories that you get in place of a healthy story ... because, as you say, every child is just looking for a story. Every child is looking for meaning. And if it's wrapped up and dressed up in a toxic fashion: that's going to make it its imprint. And even in the thirties, even though you have a lot of intellectual medicine for it, that is not enough—because it seeps in as a child at many, many levels deeper than just intellect.

Question 10A: *What came up for you during this part of the dialogue? **Do you value the imprinting you acquired as a child,** or would you now consider it more along the lines of what Matthew Fox describes as “religious abuse”?*

Question 10B (for PARENTS): *If you are a parent, **what did your own children “imprint” on** — in terms of their sense of a “big picture” and the meaning of life? And did that imprinting occur because of something you intentionally did for them, such as enrolling them in a form of religious education?*

Question 10C (for PARENTS): *If you are a parent of grown children, **did your child or children retain their childhood imprinting of a big-picture understanding?** Did they rebel against it? Does it seem to you that their current sense of a big-picture — whatever that may be — offers them adequate support and direction for facing the challenges in life? (Please discuss whichever aspects of these questions most apply to your experience.)*

11. **“May the best story win!”** Host Michael Dowd talks of his itinerant evolutionary ministry as one in which he advocates religious acceptance of scientific understandings of evolution not merely because they are *true* but because they are also more inspiring and relevant. His call to

action is to **tell the story of evolution in ways that naturally invite listeners into this new big-picture understanding**. Dowd speaks in this way:

We're saying that this story is so phenomenally **exciting, and inspiring and empowering**, that any young person who really *gets* it is not going to be satisfied with a story that is less comprehensive, that is less grounded in **evidence** and less sacred.

A story that only focuses on miracles in the distant past, as though that's what God is all about, doesn't have a chance [against] a story that focuses on **dinosaurs and supernovas** and that speaks about God creating the very atoms of our bodies inside **stars** that lived and died before our Sun was born. This is a modern cosmology told in a sacred context, and so Connie and I say, **"May the best story win!"**

Question 11: *Have you yet encountered a telling of this **modern cosmology** that makes your heart and your mind sing? If not, does this dialogue, or this series of dialogues, allure you to want to seek such stories out? Alternatively, do you find something missing from the "**Creation Spirituality**" emphasis of Matthew Fox and from Michael Dowd's enthusiasm for the evolutionary story — and, if so, what? (Please elaborate.)*

12. **"Creation stories from other cultures."** Matthew Fox agrees with Michael Dowd as to the importance of the story that science tells of evolution. Fox says,

The creation story from science is so important because it is global — because it connects all the tribes and all the nations and all the religions of the world today. **But that doesn't mean you have to throw out all the others... I think people can balance several stories at once.** For example, there are many wonderful **Native American** stories that contain a lot of wisdom to them, as do the many **Bible creation stories**. And there are many Bible creation stories—not just the two in Genesis, but the Song of Songs is a creation story. All these stories about Christ in the manger, the Christmas stories: these are really creation stories, and they contain archetypes that are profound and have lessons in them.

Question 12A: *Have you encountered ancient stories outside your own culture that have touched you in important ways? If so, which ones, and what do they bring to you?*

Question 12B: *In advocating that we look for wisdom in more than just one story of creation, Matthew Fox says, "I think people can **balance several stories at once.**" Do you agree? If so, at what age can multiple stories be embraced? **Do you think that children can hold more than one creation story**, or will a child demand to know which one is actually true? And if a child does insist on being told which story is actually true, how can the creation stories of the **Bible** best be presented to him or her? (Feel free to address only those questions that you find most pertinent to your experience.)*

13. **"It's a great opportunity to start Christianity all over again."** Matthew Fox talks about his then-forthcoming book, *The Pope's War* (which was published in the spring of 2011, after this dialogue was recorded). Fox can speak boldly about what he regards as **deep problems in the Roman Catholic system of hierarchy** because, as he talks about in the beginning of this

interview, **he was expelled from the priesthood** for his religiously inclusive writings and actions. But he ends with a sense of **hope** — that this crisis in the Church is actually ...

... a great opportunity to start Christianity all over again. The last part of the book is about **pushing a restart button on Christianity**. The last quarter of it is really about the future of Christianity and the future of religion. I do believe the present papacy, and the most recent papacy before it, so undid the Catholic Church that we are at a position now to reinvent Christianity for the 21st Century. **This is not just a Catholic issue. It's a Protestant issue too.** I think we all have to reinvent religion. It has to travel much more lightly. It has to be more about spirituality and less about buildings—and we can do this.

I think it is time for a really profound reformation: the one that brings in the new insights from science, as well as the wisdom from other traditions. But we shouldn't underestimate our own wisdom traditions. We just have to get to know them better. The **Dali Lama** says, **"The number one obstacle to interfaith is a bad relationship with your own faith tradition."** Most Christians *do* have a bad relationship with their own faith tradition. We think a lot about sin and redemption, and we leave out creation and the sacredness of creation. **I just think that religion really has to be shaken up today. It's time to turn over the tables in the temple just like Jesus did.**

Question 13A: *Overall, are you grateful, wary, or unsure about the role that Matthew Fox is playing in his attempts to "turn the tables in the temple"? Please elaborate.*

Question 13B: *How do you see Christianity and the Church evolving in the 21st century and beyond?*

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