

Matthew Fox

“Evolution and Creation Spirituality”

Episode 18 (transcript of audio) of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

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Note: *The 38 interviews in this series were recorded in December 2010 and January 2011.*

Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 18 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](#).” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via [EvolutionaryChristianity.com](#)—where we encourage you to add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Matthew Fox](#) (*also [here](#)*) is our featured guest. [Matt is the Founder of the Creation Spirituality Movement](#). He is formerly a [Catholic](#) priest, now [Episcopal](#), and he has been an inspiration to an entire generation of evolutionary Christians. He is the [author of twenty-eight books](#), including [Original Blessing](#), [The Coming of the Cosmic Christ](#), and [A New Reformation: Creation Spirituality and the Transformation of Christianity](#).

Here we talk about “Evolution and Creation Spirituality.”

Host: Hello Matthew Fox, and thank you for joining this conversation on Evolutionary Christianity.

Matthew: Hello Michael, good to be with you.

Host: Good to have you here. I’ve been looking forward to this, brother. So, Matt, if you can share a little bit of your story, your pilgrimage: How did you come to be where you are now, professionally and intellectually? And then how did you come to this place where you now embrace a creation-honoring version of Christianity and a “deep time” understanding of evolution?

Matthew: Well, I grew up in Wisconsin—Madison, Wisconsin—a university town. I was part of a large family and [Roman Catholic](#). My parish was a [Dominican](#) parish and I went to public high school, but I had a lot of debates with my Protestant, Jewish, and agnostic friends about religious things. I’d go to my pastor and he would feed me with kind of the intellectual tradition—have me reading [Thomas Aquinas](#) and [G. K. Chesterton](#), and so forth. And I really liked that dimension to my faith life. It certainly was not a fundamentalist upbringing at all.

Then I thought of joining the Dominicans because I attended a retreat as a senior in high school at their House of Studies in Dubuque, Iowa. I was very moved by this sense of

community, by the aesthetic experience of their chanting, the psalms, the office in Latin, and all, and by their intellectual tradition. So I did join them.

Host: What year was this?

Matthew: Oh, it was about 1958 that I went to college under their auspices. And then in 1960 I went to the novitiate, where you formally go through a rite of passage, which is a unique thing. Most men of my generation did not have rites of passages. But the Dominican Order did because they go back to the 13th Century. We didn't call it a rite of passage but that is what it was.

So, I had an education from them that was kind of unique, because we studied [Aristotle](#) and [Aquinas's Commentaries on Aristotle](#) at great length and great depth; so that took you out of the immediate world. But from the very beginning there was this quest to connect science and theology. Thomas Aquinas, who was a Dominican in the 13th Century: that was his great achievement, that he brought the best science of his day, which was Aristotle, into the 13th Century—and it was a very controversial thing to do. Fundamentalists said, “What do we need this pagan scientist for?” But Aquinas said that the God of nature is the God of grace, and you have to know nature if you are going to know God. In fact, he said, “*A mistake about creation results in a mistake about God.*” So, to me, that really elevates the role of science appropriately—that science is one of the doors for understanding God, because as Aquinas says, “*Every creature is God's work of art.*” To examine Divinity you ought to look pretty carefully at creatures. Aquinas had a lot of important observations. Here's another one: he said, “*Revelation comes in two volumes: the Bible and nature.*” 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.

Host: Amen.

Matthew: Of course, that again ennobles the job of the scientist. Also, it is an awakening to the fact that long before there was a Bible, people were still learning about the divine and the sacred through nature. We need to recover that thread because our anthropocentric culture has, of course, secularized, if you will, nature and taken a sense of the sacred out of it. So we're amiss at both ends—either religiously, if we leave out nature as a source of revelation, or at the other end, scientifically, if we leave out the sense of the sacred. This is very much my tradition as a Dominican, to connect science and spirituality. And, of course, we didn't spend all of our time in the 13th Century, but it was a big part of it there—the lesson was *had*, was certainly had.

Then after a couple degrees in philosophy and theology, I went to Paris to get a doctorate in spirituality. I wrote [Thomas Merton](#), the Catholic monk, who was alive at the time, about where best to go to study spirituality, and he said, “Go to Paris.” So, thanks to his endorsement, I went there and that's where I met my mentor, Pere Chenu [[Marie Dominique](#)

[Chenu](#), a Dominican theologian (1895-1990)], a wonderful French Dominican, who is the father, the grandfather really, of [Liberation Theology](#). He is the one who named the Creation Spiritual tradition for me, and how it brought together politics, social justice, eco-justice, and mysticism. That was very important to me that he named that tradition. Really, my forty years since have been about bringing that tradition alive again in the West. As he pointed out, it is the oldest tradition in the Bible; the first authors, in Genesis, were creation-centered.

My book that probably had the biggest impact, called [Original Blessing](#), which I wrote in 1983—that book demarcates the difference between what is called the Fall/Redemption (or an Original Sin-based Christianity) versus an Original Blessing-based Christianity. [No Jews have ever heard of Original Sin](#), and Jesus was a Jew. So, why have we pursued the Original Sin path so ferociously, when it was first used in the 4th Century by [St. Augustine](#)?—who was wrong about a lot of things, and I think that is one of them.

So, if we're really going to get back to Jesus' view of the world—today's scholars agree that Jesus was from the wisdom tradition of Israel, which is the tradition of nature as revelation of God. It's not Bible-based so much as nature-based. This was the path of Jesus himself, of the historical Jesus. So, there is a lot coming together now at this time in history—and, of course, science is part of it. But also, the creation spiritual tradition helps to clarify what our real roots are out of the wisdom tradition of Israel—which, by the way, was also feminist, because wisdom is feminine in the Bible as she is around the world—and the source of Jesus' own inspiration.

Anyway, that is a bit of my story. After returning with my doctorate, I taught in several colleges—the most influential probably being a women's college, [Barat College](#) in Lake Forest, Illinois, for four years. That was the early '70s, and that's where I was awakened to women's struggle, and also women's growing awareness of their own story, because I was teaching women for four years there. Then I started my institute at [Mundelein College](#), which offered a Masters Degree in Creation Spirituality, which went very well for seven years. [Brian Swimme](#) was on my faculty and others, but then we were outgrowing the space. So then we moved it to Oakland, California, where we flourished for ten or eleven years.

[The current pope](#), who was then Chief Inquisitor under [the previous pope](#)—he came after me for twelve years, trying to shut us down. He was not successful for twelve years but the twelfth year he was. So he expelled me from the [Dominican Order](#), and then I started my own university in downtown Oakland, called the [University of Creation Spirituality](#), which flourished for nine years. We had a doctorate of ministry program there, as well as a masters degree. But I handed that over to someone else a few years ago, and now I am doing other things. [I am working with inner-city kids, trying to reinvent education from the inner city out](#), using a [pedagogy](#) that I designed thirty years ago for my programs, which was very successful—[now] applying it to inner-city kids. And, we are having some amazing results.

Host: I would love to ask you a little bit more about *that* piece—the education piece and with youth—because you are really doing some cutting-edge stuff there. But before I do, I want to just note that in 1988 there were a lot of environmental issues that really became front and

center for a lot of people. And I wasn't finding my Christian tradition saying much of significance, at all, with respect to humanity's relationship to the Earth, to indigenous peoples, and even really a whole lot of significance with regards to how human cultures relate and religious traditions relate to each other. But, it was especially our relationship to the planet that I was really disturbed about. I just wasn't finding the Christian tradition at that time saying anything of significance. And it was your book, [Original Blessing](#), and one of [Sallie McFague's](#) earlier books on [Metaphorical Theology](#): I read the two of them within a period of less than a year (I think it was more like eight months or so), and I've got to honestly say, I was struggling deeply with my faith at that time, and you all allowed me—your book, *Original Blessing* and her book on metaphorical theology—allowed me to hold the Christian tradition in my heart and in my mind in a different way than I had ever been exposed to before. And it's not outside the realm of possibility that I would have just turned my back on at least certain core aspects of the tradition.

So, I just want to share some of my personal testimonial in that way, because it really did play [an important role for me]. Your understanding of [Creation Spirituality](#) and the fact that it was grounded in ancient understandings of the tradition itself: this wasn't just some contemporary reinterpretation. But it was grounded in some of the oldest elements of our faith tradition. So, I just want to publicly say, thank you for that, because it was really significant in the late '80s for me.

Matthew: I'm glad. And then my book, [The Coming of the Cosmic Christ](#), also very much grounds the Christian tradition in the issues of the Earth. In fact, I talk there about how we are crucifying the Christ all over again, because the Christ is the light in all beings according to John I. Therefore, 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. And so again, I think this ratchets-up the wisdom of our tradition. I mean, there's great wisdom in our tradition, but it's easy to wander from it.

Of course, I've been especially enamored of the medieval mystics. I have mentioned [Aquinas](#) here, but of course, [Hildegard of Bingen](#), [Meister Eckhart](#) and others—[Julian of Norwich](#), [Nicholas of Cusa](#). All these wonderful pre-modern thinkers of Christianity were very attuned to the "Christ in nature" because, of course, that is pre-modern thinking, whether you're a [Native American](#) or whether a [medieval](#) Christian. You live in nature, not above nature, not lording over nature—all that is very modern consciousness; that's not pre-modern. This is where many Protestant churches have so much to learn from the medieval mystics, because Protestantism grew up at the time of the modern consciousness. The inventing of the printing press, I think, is what really launched modern consciousness.

And while there are many pluses to that, there's a shadow to it too. The big shadow is that we tend to think that books and texts are what count, whereas context and the "book of nature" also count. And that's where we need to bring in a fuller understanding of the word of God. As Meister Eckhart said in the 14th Century, he says, "*Every creature is a word of God and a book about God.*" And if I spend enough time with a caterpillar," he says, "I would never have

to prepare a sermon, because one caterpillar is the foot of God.” So, it is the attention we give creation, and therefore the sacredness with which we relate to it, that brings forward the mystery and the holiness of nature all around us and through us.

Host: Yeah. One of my favorite songs from [Peter Mayer](#) (also [here](#)), who is a singer/songwriter that is deeply engaged in this movement, this sacred evolutionary understanding of reality—and one of my favorite songs of his is [Holy Now](#). He talks about “everything is holy now,” and how we can elicit that kind of consciousness on a day-by-day, moment-by-moment basis.

Editor’s note: You can experience online a music video of “Holy Now” by Peter Mayer, with captioned lyrics at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiypaURysz4> (And three others, [here](#).)

Matthew: I don't know that song but I love the title. “The Kingdom of God is among you”: that’s kind of *now*, isn’t it? He doesn't say it *will* be; he doesn't say it *has* been. But it *is* among you. So that’s that “now.” That is the same thing: the holy *now*; the kingdom *now*.

Host: Yes. So Matt, I want to move further into your understanding intellectually—but also your embodied experience—of this sacred story, this epic of evolution. I am wondering if you could share a little bit how you first encountered it, because you were responsible in many ways for helping the world to experience [Thomas Berry](#), and [Brian Swimme](#) too, in ways that they hadn't prior. How did you first meet them—each individually—and then [your] work together with them for so long?

Matthew: Brian actually started correspondence when I was running my program in Chicago. He had a story very close to yours. He said he had just about given up on reading theologians because he couldn't find any of them connecting to nature and the Earth—until he ran across my work. And then, he said, he really devoured my books. He even read [my big book on Meister Eckhart](#). In fact, I went to visit him on the West Coast, and I remember he pulled it out, and it was all marked up. And I said to him, “My goodness, I don't know any theologian who has taken this book as seriously as you have.” He attended a workshop I did out on the West Coast, and I had him doing circle dancing and all the things I do in my workshop. And it was fun having a physicist there. Then as it turned out, I had a faculty member named Ken Fite [sp?]. He was a marvelously gifted guy, but he died suddenly and it was just about time for the semester to begin; it was around late August. So I called Brian from Chicago and said, “I’ve got a slot open. How would you like to come out and join my faculty?” And he did.

Host: Wow.

Matthew: He packed his family in a car and they drove out. Then that January, I remember, he introduced me to [Thomas Berry](#), and we brought Thomas Berry to speak at my institute.

Host: What year was this?

Matthew: That would have been around '80 or '81, I think. I was working on Hildegard of Bingen at the time. I remember walking in the snow, in the slush, to dinner with Thomas Berry, and I brought up Hildegard—and he went on and on. He was the first human being I ever met who had heard of Hildegard. He was waxing eloquent about Hildegard. So, we hit it off at many levels.

Host: Another piece of the lineage I give you credit for, and that is that I first heard the universe story through [Albert LaChance](#), who was teaching a course in Boston on “The New Catholic Mysticism.” And he was awakened to it because he was in your program and experienced Thomas Berry and found it so profound that he walked up to Tom afterwards and said, “I need to study with you.” And Tom looked at him and said, “I guess you do, then.” And he studied with him for five years. So it was a result of Thomas teaching at your school that taught the person who ended up first exposing me to the universe story. So it’s a small world. It's really interesting.

Matthew: Yeah, I remember Albert LaChance. He was a very fine poet.

Host: Yes he is; an extraordinary poet.

Matthew: He was in our program the first year at [Holy Names College](#); that would have been 1983.

Host: I want to come back to what you were sharing before, because you have been doing what Connie and I both consider some of the most important innovations in education, which is really the deep-grounding of education in the body, in the arts, in music, and in all the various forms that get it beneath our minds and our intellects, and into our soul, into our emotions, into our feelings. So I would love for you to share more about both how you have done that in your Institutions, and then how you are doing that now?

Matthew: And we don't want to leave ritual out either.

Host: Exactly.

Matthew: The ceremony of ritual is the ancient way to teach the great stories. It's the shortcut—and it's the most fun. So, this is again kind of autobiographical, but when [the Pope](#) fired me, when Ratzinger expelled me from the Dominican Order, it just so happened I was finishing my book on [The Reinvention of Work](#), and the last chapter was on “Reinventing Ritual.” A month

after I handed the manuscript in to the publisher, there were seven young people from northern England who flew into a workshop of mine. It turns out they had been in [the rave movement](#) in Sheffield and they brought it into the church, into Anglican liturgy. I was very impressed because the elements of Rave—dance, and the body, and then the visuals, and the DJ-ing and all this—seemed to me an appropriate new language, postmodern language, for telling the ancient stories and not only the story of the universe but also the Christ story as well. So, I asked them, “How can I help you guys?” And they said, “Well, if you were to become an Anglican, you could run interference. You’re one of the few theologians who *gets* what we’re doing—and we are actually using your theology, especially the theology of the Cosmic Christ.”

So anyway, I prayed about what they talked about, and I realized, “Well, the Pope doesn’t need me anymore; he told me so. So I went to the Episcopal bishop of Northern California and I told him, “Look, I’d like to help these young people reinvent forms of worship, which I think is a very important issue today. To do so, I would like to become an Episcopal priest.” [Bishop Swing](#) said, “Great, go for it.” That’s when I became Episcopalian.

So, we’ve been reinventing that form of worship for the last thirteen years, or really fifteen years, with some very exciting results also. Reinventing forms of education and forms of worship is absolutely essential work today in order for us to “get out of the head” (because modern Western European consciousness is so rational) and into the world of images and dance and music, and so forth—which really is the language of this postmodern generation. We have had some powerful results. We’ve had over ninety [cosmic masses](#) now (*also here*), many here in Oakland but many in different cities as well—New York, Denver, Houston, Portland, Vancouver, Madison, Kansas City, Seattle, and so forth (*see video clip, here*). We’ve trained other people to do these masses. In fact, there was one last night in Ashland, Oregon. Anyway, I think this is very important work too.

Host: For listeners that aren't familiar with that kind of mass, with this rave kind of thing, could you describe it in a way that helps people feel what that’s about?

Matthew: Well, [Canadian television did a film of our mass](#). They scrunched it down to fifteen minutes, but they did a good job. We take [the Four Paths of Creation Spirituality](#), which really are the structure of most Christian liturgy. But instead of sitting in benches, you dance with the DJ and with a VJ. So you have images depending on what the theme of the mass is. We always pick themes that are in some way appropriate and universal. For example, we had a mass of the [Black Madonna](#). So we had [a lot of slides of the Black Madonna](#), and then we would dance for eighteen minutes or so in the presence of those slides. And that becomes the prayer. The emphasis is everyone is dancing—not just a priest up at the front or something. It’s very participatory.

Editor’s note: This first, dancing part of the ceremony represents the first path of Creation Spirituality: “[Via Positiva](#).”

Then there is also the [Via Negativa](#), which is a time of grief, of silence and grief. We always have grieving. Grieving is a very, very important practice today, because people are grieving all

over the world about the ecological destruction and many other issues. But our churches have really failed, I think—and the synagogue too—in providing us with practices that really get us into healthy grief work. When we don't do that healthy grief work, and do it together as a community, then our creativity is blocked-up. Frustration follows or we stay at that first level of grief, which is anger. There's a lot of anger, especially a lot of passive aggressivity among Christians in the world today. I think a lot of that is a failure to deal with grief.

Then following the *Via Negativa* comes the [Via Creativa](#), creativity, which is the Eucharist, the Communion, the serving of Communion. And then the last stage of the Mass is another dance, a second dance—a fifteen or twenty minute dance—which is essentially about getting your energy going in order to go back into the world to bring your transformative consciousness and be a servant of compassion and justice in the world.

Editor's note: So after Via Positiva, Via Negativa, and Via Creativa, the ceremony concludes with [Via Transformativa](#)—thus completing the “Four Paths of Creation Spirituality.”

So that's kind of the basic outline. We do have a web page, I believe, that's just the Cosmic Mass. We used to call it the Techno-Cosmic Mass, but we dropped Techno because that has evolved. But we just call it the Cosmic Mass, so people could look at my web page and see a link to that.

Host: So just cosmicmass.com?

Matthew: I think it is thecosmicmass.com, or just look at matthewfox.org and that would lead you to the Cosmic Mass.

Host: So Matt, I'm wondering if you could share a little bit about how a deep-time evidential understanding of reality—our best scientific understanding of reality—has in some way enriched or expanded or deepened your own faith?

Matthew: I think one of the first jobs of scientists is to awaken awe. In fact whenever I meet scientists—and I've had the pleasure of meeting many, and have written two books with [Rupert Sheldrake](#), the British biologist, who has a wonderful mind and a great heart—but 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.” Rupert 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.

There are other issues too, though, that science can help us with. For example: the wonders of our body. I mean, we all have a body. Often when people hear the word "cosmology" in the West, they think, "Oh, you've got to have a white coat and study the stars forever." But goodness gracious! When you're eating, you're eating the sun, eating sunlight. That's pretty intimate, and we all do it.

Host: Yes.

Matthew: Our bodies are our cosmic footprint that we share with so many other beings in the universe. So to get more grounded in our body, we really need science to help us learn where our body comes from—and its amazing wonders and its amazing achievements, such as the eye, or the liver, or anything else. I've often said that churches should shut down their order of worship for a year and just focus one whole year, fifty-two Sundays, on the body. You could have every organ of the body—you could have Bone Sunday and Liver Sunday. You would have a scientist talk about the heart, the liver, or the bones—and then a poet, to rediscover the wonder of our bodies. We don't have to go that far to be re-excited about the mystery and the gift of our being here.

Host: I love that thought. I was just having a conversation with somebody, and we were talking about how would I like to see preaching different? What I shared is that I would love to see every priest, every pastor, every preacher subscribe to [Science News](#). And not only preach from the Bible but preach from our best current understanding of this awesome universe that we participate in. And the guy I was talking with said, "Well, yeah, I actually do subscribe to *Science News*." But he said there's another place that people can go to for free every Tuesday: "Science Times." [The New York Times "Science Times" section](#) is a wonderful place to get inspiration for homilies and sermons. I thought that was a wonderful idea.

Matthew: Great!

Host: But I love your idea of going a year just focusing on the body.

Matthew: Well again, that takes us to Aquinas' insight: revelation comes in two books—the Bible, and nature. So we have to take nature seriously, and I couldn't agree more with your idea there.

Host: I've even 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 word.

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 evidence: historical, scientific, and cross-cultural evidence ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)). 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.

Matthew: Well, I agree, and of course, what does incarnation mean, if not that? Incarnation means the Divine present in flesh. And flesh is history, and flesh is matter, and flesh is all living things. So really, we are just filling out the deeper meaning of the mystery of incarnation, but also the mystery of creation. 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 “metacosmic”. And he says that no one was more metacosmic 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.

Host: Say a little bit more about that, because your book, [The Coming of the Cosmic Christ](#), was one of the first breakthrough books furthering that line of thinking. Could you say a little bit more about that here?

Matthew: Yes, well again, what's exciting is that the biblical scholars are coming along now. There are two recent books on Paul. One is [In Search of Paul](#), by [John Dominic Crossan](#), who's a very well respected biblical scholar. The other is by [Bruce Chilton](#): the book [Rabbi Paul](#). Both of them talk about Paul as a mystic—in fact, as a cosmic mystic. Crossan says for Paul, “You cannot be a Christian without being a mystic”—which is really interesting. I think with that

statement, we have to shut down about ninety-nine percent of the seminaries in the world because they are not deep into the cosmic mysticism...

Host: ... in terms of our *experience* of the divine.

Matthew: Well, that's right. [Mysticism](#) is about tasting; it's about experiencing. And that's what we did with our programs for thirty years. We had a [pedagogy](#) that allowed people to taste, and allowed the experiential to come through—along with the intellectual and the analytic. You can do both together; we've proved that. And it's a much more dynamic learning experience when you *do* do that. This is not something that is rocket science. We've demonstrated a pedagogy that really works.

Now I'm using it for inner-city kids, because 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. They also need a listening of their creativity, and some basic values by which to steer their creativity.

Host: Yes. I remember [Thomas Berry](#) gave me a copy of [Maria Montessori](#)'s 1948 manuscript, *To Educate the Human Potential*. Of course, she was arguing at that time, in 1948, that if you give kids the big picture first, if you give them [a cosmology, a creation story](#)—if you give them a way of thinking about the big picture then they have a way of holding all the scientific disciplines. They have a way of holding all the educational disciplines, and they get *who they are in this process*. They feel their connectedness, their relatedness to this whole thing (see *Neil deGrasse Tyson YouTube clips 1 and 2*). Then education becomes whatever they are fascinated by or turned on by—rather than trying to hold these disparate, separate disciplines and make sense of it all in a largely meaningless way. There are few things I think more important than giving kids a big picture early in life.

Matthew: Exactly, I couldn't agree more.

Host: In fact, [Connie \[Barlow\]](#) wrote a piece, "[Imprinting Is Not Indoctrination](#)" (*audio, [here](#)*)—and how important it is. Many liberal families don't want to *indoctrinate* their kids, so they don't give them a cosmology. They don't share a cosmology with them when they are young and at an imprinting age. They don't say excitedly, "Here is our best understanding of reality." They just try to expose them to a lot of different creation stories, but without saying, "What's our best understanding *now*?" And, of course, what often happens in their teenage years, they go to a youth camp, a fundamentalist camp, with their Baptist friend or whatever, and they imprint on that—because we're like ducklings. We will imprint on something. If you don't give them something to imprint on—namely, our best current understanding of the nature of reality—they're going to imprint on something at some point.

Editor's note: Excerpts of Maria Montessori's 1948 book can be found online, [here](#).

Matthew: Right, right.

Host: We've spoken in many [Unitarian Universalist](#) churches, and I've had countless [humanists](#) and [liberal religious](#) folk say, "You know, I raised my kid with good [freethinking](#) values, and now she's a [fundamentalist](#), or now he's a Bible thumper. What did I do wrong?" I think some of it has to do with not understanding the importance of imprinting and of giving kids an inspiring big picture early on.

Matthew: Yes, for that, of course, I will always be grateful for my Catholic roots. It did give me, to use your word, an imprinting—and also, an intellectual curiosity. Early I ran into a tradition, the Dominican tradition, which had that as part of its footprint. So I was blessed in that regard. Also, growing up in Madison—because there was an intellectual buzz there because of the university—that was a big part of my awareness as a kid. I'm certainly grateful for it.

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.

Host: Exactly. One of the reasons why Connie's and my core approach—our basic stance for how we present this [Great Story](#), this [Epic of Evolution](#) (*also 1, 2, 3*)—is that we come from the place of "May the best story win!" It is from a place of allurement. We're *not* saying, "This is the truth and you need to believe it." 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!”

Matthew: That's a fun phrase. I kind of like it. 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. One of my favorite creation stories from the Apache is that “First God created the dog; the dog was lonely, and so then God created man.” It kind of puts us in a humble place: we're here to befriend the dog.

There's a great deal of wisdom in that. And so, one story does not drive out the others. I think that, obviously, 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, really, of the world today. But that doesn't mean you have to throw out all the others.

Host: I completely agree. I'm glad that you made that corrective, because I didn't want to leave that impression. I'm reminded of a quote from [Joel Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams](#) in their 2006 book, *The View from the Center of the Universe*. (See [here](#) for Dowd and Barlow's favorite quotes from this book.)

Matthew: I love their work!

Host: Oh, I do too. They've become dear friends; we've stayed with them in Santa Cruz. Here's a great quote—Connie uses it all the time. They say, “*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.*”

Matthew: That is great. I respect so much their work. It's front-of-the-line work at this time.

Host: So Matt, in just sort of winding down, I'd love it if you could take a few minutes and share any new projects that you are working on, or how people can learn more.

Matthew: Well, I'm completing two books. One is on the Christian mystics; I have [365 quotes from about 35 mystics](#), from Jesus up through Thomas Berry and Teilhard de Chardin.

Host: So, this will be like a daily devotional sort of thing?

Matthew: Something like that—and with a commentary on each one.

So that's one book. And then [the other one](#) is a book on the pope, this present pope, and how he and previous Pope have destroyed Catholicism as we know it. So it's 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 think that religion has to be shaken up today. It's time to turn over the tables in the temple just like Jesus did.

And then I'm working on a movie to go with that book. I want to go around the world and interview about a dozen of the people who [the current pope] silenced. He silenced over 91 of us. Especially in Latin America: I want to interview people there—but Europe and North America, as well, and make a movie of it called, *The Silenced Ones*.

Host: Oh, that's a fabulous idea.

Matthew: These people are dying off. They were brave, noble people—many involved in Liberation Theology in South America. I want to get their wisdom on film before they die—and especially about the *future* of religion, not just the issues of the past, but the wisdom they are carrying in their hearts.

I do think that we're at a place, where so many of our spiritual traditions today could be linking up and creating a very strong force, a positive force, for justice and for celebration and for compassion—along *with* science. I see science as another wisdom tradition that is capable of contributing a lot to this.

Host: Yes, amen. Well, Matthew Fox, thank you so much for sharing your wisdom, your ideas, and your experience with us on the leading edge of faith.

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