

True 'Creation Spirituality': Original Blessing and Original Sin

~ a critique of Matthew Fox's theology ~

Who is Matthew Fox?

The book *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* was published in 1983. Its author was a Roman Catholic priest and Dominican, living in California, named Matthew Fox. In 1990 he was expelled by the Dominican Order, and invited into ordination in the US Episcopalian Church (part of the world Anglican communion). Since then Fox has continued speaking and writing, and has founded an institute for 'Creation Spirituality' at Holy Name (R.C.) College, where he teaches.

My aim is to set out Fox's main ideas in a way that is helpful even to those who have not read any of his writings.

Why is he important?

Matthew Fox's approach attracts many Christians who are searching for a more 'creation-friendly' spirituality and liturgy. However although Fox is correct in identifying defects in some streams of Christianity, his response leads him into serious doctrinal errors.

To me, the book *Original Blessing* is like a river. A myriad ripples enliven the surface, and each is interesting. Some are beautiful, some are of value, some less so. Creation Spirituality is the obvious main current of the river, but there is a dangerous undercurrent which is not immediately apparent to those who see only the surface.

Fox coined 'Original Blessing' as a counter to the idea of Original Sin, and he sees it as an antithesis and antidote to what he calls a 'Fall-Redemption' view. I aim to show that Fall and Redemption are both necessary to any true 'Creation Spirituality'.

The Four Paths

Fox proposes 'Four Paths' to delineate what he feels is important in the light of the ambivalence of some streams of Christianity in their attitude towards God's creation. The language of 'paths' should be understood in the context of Christian mysticism, which historians define as an approach to God comprised of a threefold path: preparation, illumination, and union. Fox argues that this categorisation does not do justice to the true mystical tradition, in that it leaves out a delight in creation, and omits a concern for justice.

Matthew Fox's 'Four Paths'

a) Via Positiva:

"Befriending awe and wonder."
Celebrate creation and do not treat it with disdain. Earthiness is good.

b) Via Negativa:

"Befriending loss and letting go." Be empty, be emptied and be content to be nothing. (But don't annihilate ourselves.) Welcome silence, let pain strip us of our cover-ups.

c) Via Creativa:

"Celebrating the artist and artisan in each of us." See ourselves as 'divine' and creative.

d) Via Transformativa:

"Compassion that transforms and brings about justice." We and all creation shall be transformed, and we are in the process of being transformed.

Fox proposes that the traditional 'threefold path' be replaced by four paths to the true Christian life of his Creation Spirituality. In Fox's writings the theological applications of these 'paths' falls into doctrinal error. However, they are in themselves mostly biblical, and remind us of the essential goodness of God's creation, the 'original blessing' of Genesis 1.

a) Via Positiva.

Biblical texts like Genesis 1, Job 38,39, Romans 8, Hebrews 1:1-3, as well as details in the Mosaic Law, and above all the Incarnation of God, make clear that God's creation has real value and that we should love and look after it for him.

b) Via Negativa.

Luke 9:23, Habakkuk 3:17-18, Galations 2:20 and much of Job point to an 'emptying' of ourselves before God, and a 'resting in God'.

c) Via Creativa.

This can be seen in the fruit and gifts of the Holy Spirit and in God's affirming of human activity, such as in Genesis 2:20, Exodus 31:3, Hebrews 6:10 and the parable of the Talents.

d) Via Transformativa.

Transformation of humans (Rom.12:2, 1 Peter 1) and also of the wider creation (Rom.8:21, Col.1:20, Eph. 1:10) is an important biblical theme.

Fox's Problem and Response

In his formulation of the Four Paths, Fox is reacting against what he calls a 'Fall-Redemption' view, and in his distaste for that over-compensates and presents the four paths as the antithesis of that view.

But, the 'Fall-Redemption' which Fox encountered and describes is not the Bible's Fall-Redemption but is a rigid, rule-bound, joyless idea. It might be called a Fall-Only view: Fall without Redemption. Fox is right to reject it, but his own understanding of both Fall and Redemption is also flawed. His version of Creation Spirituality is counter-productive, and his 'original blessing' becomes, in the end, a curse.

Current and Undercurrent

The main current in Fox's theology is his affirmation of God's physical creation. The current is positive, helpful and propels us forward. The undercurrent is his misunderstanding of Fall and Redemption, and this is negative, distracting, and deflects his followers into futile uncertainties.

The current is clear and easily seen, the undercurrent can only be felt. Christians reading Fox's book on 'Original Blessing' feel the undercurrent and rightly react against it. What I want to do here is to lay bare the undercurrent, so that we might understand it and respond in more constructive ways to what Fox is saying. I will explain what I think is the root of Fox's misunderstanding and propose that, in fact, the doctrine of original sin, when understood in context, is good and even beautiful.

Creation-Fall-Redemption

Christians who believe in 'Fall and Redemption' are often participants in, or even at the forefront of, movements which – in practice, though they would not think of themselves in those terms – follow the four paths of Creation Spirituality, even if not in precisely the way Matthew Fox might hope.

Some examples might be:

(Via Positiva) 'Conservation Sunday', supported by the Evangelical Alliance, A Rocha and others.

(Via Negativa) Holiness movements, the aim for 'Not I but Christ' in Roy Hession's *Calvary Road*.

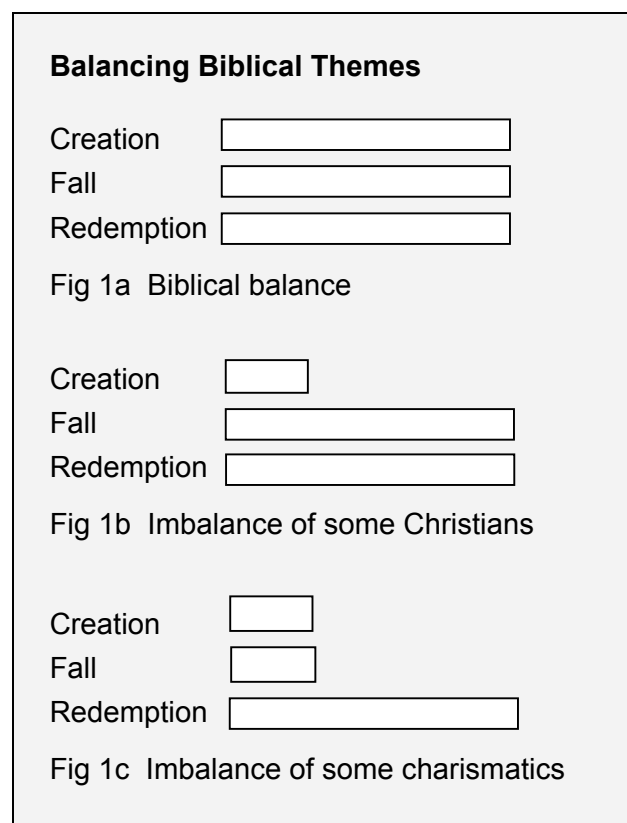
(Via Creativa) Arts Centre Group, celebrating the arts as God-given, and UCCF professional groups.

(Via Transformativa) Healing ministries, such as in the charismatic movements. Justice for the poor such as in Tear Fund, Christian Aid and CAFOD.

Two good books setting out a mainstream Christian view are Paul Marshall's *Heaven is Not My Home* (1999) and Tony Campolo's *How to Rescue the Earth Without Worshipping Nature* (1992).

Here is a paradox. If Fox's 'Creation Spirituality' is the antithesis of the Fall-Redemption view, how can such Christians be at the forefront of the Four Paths? The answer must be that true 'Fall-Redemption' and 'Creation Spirituality' are NOT opposites.

Creation, Fall and Redemption are three key themes in the Bible, with a balance between them depicted in Fig.1a. But much Christian thought has tended to suppress one or another. For example, Fig.1b depicts a 'pietist' view, which neglects Creation, and Fig.1c represents an emphasis on premature Redemption, on being completely freed from suffering, which can be found in some, but not all, charismatic groups.



This is not just a matter for theologians. FitzSimons Allison's excellent book on *The Cruelty of Heresy* shows that doctrinal error or imbalance can have disastrous practical effects.

For example, in the full humanity and divinity of Christ, the themes of Creation and Redemption are combined in the Incarnation. On the one hand, if the humanity of Christ is rejected, or downplayed, we end up with an 'escapist' religion that cares nothing for a groaning Creation or for the poor, and refuses that suffering with Christ which in Fox's language is called the 'Via Negativa'.

On the other hand, rejecting the divinity of Christ turns our religion into a ‘teeth-gritting’ attempt to follow Jesus’ ‘good example’ that ends up either in arrogance (if we believe we can do so) or despair (if we realise that we cannot). Rejecting any aspect of a balanced biblical truth is cruel, robbing us of the abundant life promised by Jesus. Such imbalances are the basis of all heresies.

We can take Allison’s approach further, considering the consequences of rejecting the third component, the Fall. That leads to complacency. Believing we are basically OK, we would reduce Redemption to growth or education. No repentance, no turning back to God, would be needed – God a mere doting aunt who pats us on the head. Perhaps most serious, we would fail to diagnose the problem we faced, and therefore find no real, lasting solution.

Fall-Only

‘Fall-only’ ideas affect various parts of Christianity. Fox seems to have encountered such an imbalance, which is depicted in Fig.1d, in a Roman Catholic setting, but it also occurs in Protestant contexts. Often, such errors arise from popular folk religion (of the type Graham Greene wrote novels about) rather than official theology, and much of contemporary Roman Catholic thought is innocent of this error.

Roland Bainton argued in *Here I Stand* that some forms of “mediaeval religion deliberately induced [tensions] playing alternately on fear and hope. Hell was stoked, not because men lived in perpetual dread, but precisely because they did not.” Christ was distant, salvation was a tenuous wish to attain to an escape to heaven, no longer something to be experienced here and now by ordinary folk. The occupations of laymen and their everyday life were disdained. The Creation order (the natural world, work, art and sexuality) served only as a backdrop for the drama of human salvation. But it did not work, it led to cruelty in the name of righteousness, and injustice being excused for the sake of a heavenly reward.

For a helpful discussion of this, its roots in Greek body-soul dualism and its secularised modern forms, please see Dooyeweerd’s *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Options* .

Fox seems to have suffered at the hands of a modern ‘Fall-Only’ imbalance, and he blames this theology for most of what he perceives as today’s ills, such as environmental damage and the oppression of tribal peoples. Fox’s response was to reject it and seek a theology in which the Fall is diminished (though he acknowledges the presence of evil) and Creation is emphasised at its expense, as depicted in Fig. 1e.

Understanding Fox

Our understand of Fox’s stance is that he is reacting against a seriously deficient form of Christianity, in which both Creation and Redemption are suppressed, and has responded by playing down the Fall and stressing Creation and a weak kind of Redemption. So, the following can be stated:

1. Fox is right in his identification and rejection of a distorted Fall-Only religion.
2. Fox is right in the positive things he proposes, namely the Four Paths.
3. Fox is wrong to react against and suppress the biblical doctrine of the Fall.
4. We should welcome what is helpful in Fox’s work but strenuously develop his ideas in relation to the reality of the Fall. This is what I shall try to do now.

Original Blessing? Original Curse!

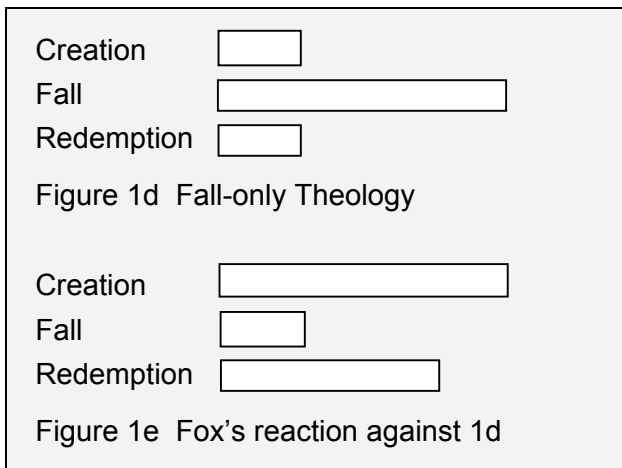
The current of ‘original blessing’ is jeopardised by the undercurrent of Fox’s rejection of ‘original sin’. He sets up Four Paths, but gives us no ability to follow them; all we are left to do is ‘try harder’.

But, as Paul knew (Rom.7) and as Terry Waite had discovered when he wrote “there is no such thing in me as a purely altruistic motive”, we can never live up to their demands. So, Fox’s ‘original blessing’ becomes a dead-weight, a curse.

Original Blessing Via Original Sin

The only way to follow the Four Paths and reach the ‘original blessing’ is via the truths of original sin (Fall) and God’s atonement in Christ (Redemption).

1. Creation (‘Original Blessing’). God made plants, animals and humans and also our potential in art and technology. In the beginning, all was good and humans had a special role of stewarding the creation for God, to bless the creation by discovering, developing and enriching it (Gen.1:28, Gen 2). To enable us to do this, we were given special characteristics, and a special relationship with God. We are called to walk the Four Paths. God enters his creation and shows us how.



2. Fall (Original Sin). But we turn away from God. We become self-centred, a source of harm to others, a curse not a blessing. This manifests itself in pride, arrogance, unconcern (e.g. for the poor, Ezekiel 16:49), rebellion, and these all lead to injustice and suffering. Unconcern for creation prevents us from taking the Via Positiva. Pride prevents us taking the Via Negativa. Rebellion distorts the Via Creativa. And arrogance prevents us taking the Via Transformativa. We cannot escape the curse. Nothing in creation (education, law, healing, or human will) can overcome it. It goes deeper than inability; our presuppositions about reality prevent us realising, and pride prevents us admitting, how helpless we are.

3. Redemption. "But God so loved the world," (note: the world, not just human beings), "that he gave his only Son ..." to redeem us (John 3:16). Romans 8 gives a broad picture: those who accept God's redeeming work are no longer condemned (v.1), rightly call God "Father" (v.15) and are transformed (v.12-14) and set free (v.21), and nothing can separate us from God's love (v.35).

4. Real 'Creation Spirituality'. Notice Romans 8 v.19-22: the Creation itself will share this joy. It is the truly-redeemed who bring joy to Creation, not because there is no Fall, but because God lives in them, and empowers them to treat Creation aright (Gal.5:22-23). They walk the Four Paths so that the Creation, which includes ourselves, will come to completion in Christ (Col.1:20).

So Fall-Redemption and true Creation Spirituality can be integrated. Indeed, I believe they cannot really be separated because we cannot have Hope without Redemption, nor can we have Original Blessing without the idea of Original Sin.

Further reading

Bainton, Roland *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950).

Basden, Andrew *The Beauty of Original Sin*. An open letter to Matthew Fox, 1994, available from the Christian Studies Unit, 65 Prior Park Road, Bath, BA2 4NL.

Campolo, Tony *How to Rescue the Earth Without Worshipping Nature* (Milton Keynes: Word Books, 1992).

Dooyeweerd, Herman *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Options* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1975).

FitzSimons Allison, C. *The Cruelty of Heresy* (London: SPCK, 1994).

Fox, Matthew *Original Blessing* (San Francisco: Bear & Co, 1983).

Marshall, Paul *Heaven is Not My Home* (Leicester: IVP, 1999).

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