

ENVIRONMENT AS RELIGION:
MATTHEW FOX'S CREATION SPIRITUALITY
AS A PARADIGM FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS¹

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Matthew Fox is a Catholic priest and former member of the Dominican order, the founder and director of the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality, located on the campus of Holy Names College in Oakland, California. Among the books in which he articulates what is described as "creation-centered spirituality," the following are most important: *A Spirituality Named Compassion* (1979; new introduction 1990); *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (1983); *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance* (1988); and *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth* (1991).

My interest in Fox's brand of creation spirituality arose at the point where my explorations regarding the relationship of ethics to spirituality converged with my reflection on the relationship of environmental ethics to worldview.² What arrested me at this point was Fox's claim that "creation spirituality makes a primary contribution to the struggle for world peace and justice by offering a paradigm shift."³ He introduces the matter in *Original Blessing* by insisting that we need a new religious paradigm to guide us in our quest for survival, and that

¹ A paper presented at *The Willard Environmental Ethics Symposium*, 15 April 1993 at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

² See Nelson D. Kloosterman, "Christian Ascetics in the Theological Curriculum: An Apologia," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 1 (Fall 1985): 133-141; and Nelson D. Kloosterman, "Studying Spirituality in a Reformed Seminary: A Calvinist Model," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 6 (Fall 1990): 125-137.

³ Matthew Fox, "Creation Spirituality: A Personal Retrospective," *Listening* 24 (Spring 1989): 134. Elsewhere Fox states:

Re-visioning our religious heritage so that it truly honors the soil as a divine locus and teaches humans the importance of recovering a mystical relationship to it strikes me as something well worth doing. We can change our religious rituals so that they empower us to both appreciate the earth and defend it creatively against abuse. Such changes in our religious and spiritual paradigms are a significant step in the redemption of the earth (*Creation Spirituality* [San Francisco: Harper, 1991], 26).

the creation-centered tradition of spirituality offers the necessary paradigm. a very terrible evil that is doing untold harm, doctrinally and morally, to the souls of man." My purpose in this essay is (1) to identify what I consider to be the central elements in Matthew Fox's creation spirituality, namely, his views of God, of creation and of sin, in order (2) to clarify the character and content of his moral recommendations and (3) to evaluate his proposal in terms of the claims of Christian theism.

The need for Fox's Creation Spirituality

Why do we need a new religious paradigm as a resource for cosmic survival? Because, in Fox's view, the West has adopted an exclusively fall/redemption model of spirituality that has come to dominate theology, seminary education, psychology and Bible study for centuries. St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) is accused of fathering this illegitimate offspring:

It is a dualistic model and a patriarchal one; it begins its theology with sin and original sin, and it generally ends with redemption. Fall/redemption spirituality does not teach believers about the New Creation or creativity, about justice-making and social transformation, or about Eros, play, pleasure, and the God of delight. It fails to teach love of the earth or care for the cosmos, and it is so frightened of passion that it fails to listen to the impassioned pleas of the *anawim*, the little ones, of human history.⁴

The fatal flaw in Augustine's paradigm is its doctrine of original sin. If people enter this world as sinners, if their origin somehow bespeaks culpability, the necessary result will be pessimism, cynicism and sadism. Creation-centered spirituality recalls that sin is only as old as humanity — and that the cosmos is far older. Hence, by beginning with original blessing instead of original sin, creation spirituality brings us back beyond our own beginnings to that pre-human innocence.⁵

Moreover, because it considers all nature as "fallen" and seeks God in the individual soul rather than in nature, Augustine's kind of spirituality allegedly is hostile toward science, breeds human chauvinism

⁴*Original Blessing* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1983), 11.

⁵*Original Blessing*, 19.

toward nature (expressed in sins like geocide, ecocide and biocide), and divorces spirituality from justice. In the face of what Fox terms "the ecological crisis" facing the modern world, we must exchange the prevalent *egological* worldview for an *ecological* perspective.⁶

Common to all primitive societies and religions was a cosmology that formed the basis for worship, praying, economics, politics and morality. The Hebrew Bible preserved a strand of creation spirituality, especially through the Yahwist author (9th century B.C.) and through the book of Proverbs, which expresses "the cosmological, feminist vision of creation spirituality."⁷ Jesus (in his parables and kingdom teaching) and the New Testament writings carried on this tradition, particularly John's Gospel (with its logos prologue) and the Book of Revelation, along with various hymns in praise of the Cosmic Christ. The Greek church fathers (in distinction from the Latin or Western fathers) preserved the creation-centered spiritual tradition. Names associated with this epoch include Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130-200), Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus. But the high point was reached in the twelfth century "renaissance" led by mystic-prophets such as Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Nicolas of Cusa.

Western culture became anthropocentric in its spirituality (and hence, in its morality) at the end of the Middle Ages, when the intellectual breakup of cosmology left us with a mechanized and non-mystical world. The year 1329, when Eckhart was condemned by the church, marked the divorce between the mystical and the prophetic, leading to the demise of creation spirituality. In the following centuries, spurred by both Reformation and Enlightenment forces, science and religion parted ways. Theology, religion and spirituality came to be dominated by the psychological, the individual, inner orientation.⁸

Today, however, creation spirituality is being recovered to provide a bridge between spirituality and ethics, between science and religion.⁹ This tradition has been kept alive and nurtured among Native Americans, among the Celtic peoples of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and among the natives of Africa, Asia, New Zealand and Australia.

⁶*Original Blessing*, 15.

⁷*Creation Spirituality*, 14.

⁸*Creation Spirituality*, 13-14. An earlier version of this criticism of Western Christianity was issued by Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203-1207.

⁹*Creation Spirituality*, 15.

The content of Fox's creation spirituality

In his epoch-making study, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,¹⁰ Thomas Kuhn reminds us that a paradigm is a worldview whose values and premisses serve to integrate one's apprehension of reality. A paradigm shift involves seeing nature in a new way, a transformation of vision or worldview. In *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* Fox provides a summary comparison of the old and the new models, identifying them in terms of a shift

from anthropocentrism	to a living cosmology
from Newton	to Einstein
from parts-mentality	to wholeness
from rationalism	to mysticism
from obedience as a prime moral virtue	to creativity as a prime moral virtue
from personal salvation	to communal healing, i.e., compassion as salvation
from theism (God outside us)	to pantheism (God in us and us in God)
from fall/redemption religion	to creation-centered spirituality
from the ascetic	to the aesthetic ¹¹

Fundamental to Fox's spirituality is his understanding of creation borrowed from Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth century theologian whom Fox frequently calls his Dominican "brother."¹² At its core,

¹⁰Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970.

¹¹Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 134-135.

¹²For a critical analysis of Fox's use of Eckhart, see James A. Wiseman, O.S.B., "Matthew Fox's Interpretation of Meister Eckhart," *Listening* 24 (Spring 1989): 25-38. At this point we are interested to note Wiseman's conclusion that

It is not even clear that Eckhart would have advocated Fox's sharp dichotomy [between the fall/redemption and creation-centered traditions]. While Fox seeks "an alternative to the domination of Western Christian spirituality by Augustine," [Frank] Tobin makes the significant observation [in *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language*] that Eckhart "quotes no one as often [and, one might add, as favorably] as he does the great Christian Platonist of the West, Augustine," while Bernard McGinn . . . notes that Augustine's treatise *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* "was one of Eckhart's favorite works" (33).

creation is about *relation*. Creation is "a trace, a footprint, an offspring of the Godhead. Creation is the passing by of divinity in the form of isness."¹³ Creation is "the source of all worship and the goal of all morality," "the source, the matrix, and the goal of all things — the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega. . . . Creation is the mother of all beings and the father of all beings, the birther and the begetter."¹⁴ In describing creation as original blessing, Fox speaks of our sinful inclination to forget about "the grace of creation."¹⁵ Such grace belongs to creation understood as a redemption from chaos, and undergirds our own redemptive co-creativity.¹⁶

Fox explicitly outlines his view of how creation is related to God in *Original Blessing*, where he discusses the four paths of creation spirituality: the Via Positiva, the Via Negativa, the Via Creativa and the Via Transformativa. Within these four paths he considers twenty-six themes. Theme 6 is entitled "Panentheism: Experiencing the Diaphanous and Transparent God."¹⁷ Extending psychologist Carl Jung's notion that one of the ways to lose your soul is to worship a god outside of you, Fox insists that

the idea that God is "out there" is probably the ultimate dualism, divorcing as it does God and humanity and reducing religion to a childish state of pleasing or pleading with a God "out there." All theism sets up a model or paradigm of people here and God out there. All theisms are about subject/object relationships to God.¹⁸

The solution is to move from theism to panentheism, which means "God in everything and everything in God." Panentheism views the world sacramentally, a consciousness that regards beings and events as divine. Our environment channels divinity to us, because in some way we meet the creator in every creature. As a mature doctrine of the presence of God in creation, with its maternal images of God as enveloping, embracing, inclusive, cosmic and expansive, panentheistic spirituality "is

¹³*Creation Spirituality*, 9.

¹⁴*Creation Spirituality*, 10.

¹⁵*Creation Spirituality*, 11.

¹⁶*Original Blessing*, 236.

¹⁷*Original Blessing*, 88-92. For one Protestant analysis of this aspect of Fox's worldview, see Donna Runnalls, "Matthew Fox and Creation Spirituality," *Touchstone* 10 (May 1992): 27-36.

¹⁸*Original Blessing*, 89.

an explication, an unfolding, of a panentheistic God.¹⁹ Whereas theism reinforces anthropocentrism by elevating people to an exclusive relationship with God, panentheism is genuinely ecological.

Creation spirituality empowers us for an ecological era, a time when we cease looking *up* for divinity and start looking *around*. . . . A panentheistic spirituality — a spirituality in which we see "all things in God and God in all things," as Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote — tells us to look around for the divine who is found both in the glory and in the real pain of our times.²⁰

Theism is inherently hierarchical, teaching a "trickle down" theology of grace, while panentheism is truly democratic.²¹ Rather than teaching human mastery and ownership of nature, as theistic spirituality is inclined to do, creation-centered spirituality guides us in relating to the cosmos interdependently, with trust and reverence.

It is not the case that simply because it begins with original blessing, the creation-centered spiritual tradition ignores sin. In fact, Fox describes sin very explicitly in terms of each of the Four Paths of creation spirituality.

Path One, or the *Via Positiva*, emphasizes befriending creation, in terms of which sin consists in injuring creation's harmonious balance (Theme 10). Ecological damage is the most basic sin, for hereby the human race despises its mother. Giving rise to ecological sin is the ecological, dualistic mentality that manipulates and controls creatures as objects. Other sins include limiting pleasure or love of life (*Eros*), which leads to consumerism, and self-negation ("without healthy self-love there will be no other love"²²).

The *Via Negativa* emphasizes the need for letting go, for sinking into silence and nothingness, for receptivity and emptying. Clinging is the cardinal sin of the second path, evidenced in sins of addiction in our consumerist society (Theme 14). Another sin here is the sin of projection, of refusing to let people be different, to be themselves, an unwillingness that results from refusing to let go of dualisms. Moreover,

¹⁹*Original Blessing*, 91. Pan-en-theism should be distinguished from pan-theism, which identifies God and the cosmos as coextensive. For a recommendation that we turn to pantheism as a basis for environmental ethics, see Richard L. Means, "Why Worry about Nature?" *Saturday Review* (2 December 1967).

²⁰*Creation Spirituality*, 41.

²¹*Creation Spirituality*, 105.

²²*Original Blessing*, 120.

letting go and letting be requires us to let sin and pain be, to let them instruct us in their own mysteries and darkness.

Within the *Via Creativa* we humans reach our divinity from the interaction of the *Via Positiva* with the *Via Negativa*. Theme 15 speaks of "From Cosmos to Cosmogogenesis: Our Divinization as Images of God who are also Co-creators."²³ Sin against the *Via Creativa* comes to expression in patriarchy, with its neglect of creativity and mothering as fundamental spiritual and cultural values (Theme 20). Its forms include sadomasochism in every form: physical, social, political, religious, economic and cultural. "Sadomasochism prevails where humans exploit the earth, the animals, the fishes, or one another." Feminism's exposure of the cultural dichotomy between power and powerlessness is teaching us that, and how, "sadomasochism is dualism lived out as a way of life, i.e., a perverse spirituality."²⁴

Path Four, the *Via Transformativa*, is necessary for energizing and directing creativity in the service of compassion (also called erotic justice), lest it be perverted in service to racism, sexism, militarism and giant capitalism. Here we find Fox's corrective to "Augustine's dangerously dualistic distinction between action and contemplation."²⁵ As we enter a new age, an ecological phase marked by a new revelatory experience of cosmic origins, our spirituality must break forth into cosmic compassion which struggles for, among other things, the rights of whales and the soil, of forests and the air. In this post-Newtonian and post-Augustinian era, religion must join physics, biology and ecology to celebrate and exercise compassion.

The key to understanding compassion is to enter into a consciousness of interdependence which is a consciousness of equality of being. Creation-centered mystics, for whom compassion is the fullest expression of the spiritual journey, insist on interdependence being the basis of all relationships.²⁶

²³Fox does distinguish between humanity's *created* divinity and God's *uncreated* divinity; but the meaning and utility of this distinction evaporate when a few lines later he suggests that "perhaps the most gross of all dualisms is the dualism between the divine and us. As if we hold no divine blood in us, as if we are creatures only and not creators. Co-creators with God" (*Original Blessing*, 236).

²⁴*Original Blessing*, 232.

²⁵*Original Blessing*, 251.

²⁶*Original Blessing*, 279.

Elsewhere Fox defines compassion as "*the working out of our interconnectedness; it is the praxis of interconnectedness.*"²⁷ Citing his Wicca associate, Starhawk, Fox contrasts his panentheistic version of compassion-as-justice with the prevalent Western concept of justice, which arises from patriarchal religions that locate God outside the creation and hold his laws to be absolute and immutable. This feature of interdependence marks the fundamental difference between patriarchal religions and the emerging goddess religions of the twentieth century. Living in terms of the ego differentiation nurtured by patriarchalism is an illusion, since in reality we are already united, each of us part of the other. Compassion requires us to abandon ego's way of relating, to move from the private "I" to the cosmic "we." The basic sin against the fourth path is carelessness, apathy, indifference, absence of passion (Theme 26). Privatized religion is responsible for nurturing every form of accepted exploitation.

*The material ethics of Fox's
creation spirituality*

Our consideration of sin in the Four Paths of creation spirituality has already brought us deep within Fox's ethics. But it is perhaps chapter 3 of his *Creation Spirituality*, entitled "Gifts of Wisdom: Rules for Living in the Universe," that offers the nearest thing to his statement of ethics.

Common to all wisdom teachings is the notion that morality and ethics are derived from our knowledge of the universe itself.²⁸ Here are four examples of moral principles derived from the cosmos.

The first is that nature herself is *profligate*, giving away things all the time. The sun's energy is far more than we use, the earth's beauty far more than we appreciate. How this "law of nature" norms our ethics Fox illustrates with an appeal to Thomas Aquinas, who taught that

when people have the necessities for living and more than that, they have an obligation to give away the rest to those who lack the necessities and that if they do not, those in dire need have

²⁷ *Creation Spirituality*, 36; italics original.

²⁸ *Creation Spirituality*, 43.

the right to take what is necessary for their survival, an act that "is not, strictly speaking, theft."²⁹

Second, the shift in our scientific paradigm has discovered *interconnectivity* as the basic law of the universe. The same gravity keeping me on the ground is moving planets and galaxies. People together in a room for a short time begin to breathe one another's water vapor. In fact, breathe deeply and you will inhale at least one molecule of the air that Jesus breathed on earth.

Today's science tells many stories, and they are all about interconnectivity. But how does this translate into a moral law for humans? Thomas Merton provided the answer when he wrote that "the whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the inter-dependence of all these living things, which are all part of one another and all involved in one another." *Compassion is the moral law of interconnectivity*, the cosmic law of responding to another's pain and suffering as well as to another's joy and celebration.³⁰

Creation-centered spirituality emphasizes not only justice among humans, but especially *geo-justice*, justice between humans and the earth and all her creatures. In fact, the struggle for the rights of whales, of the soil, of forests and of the air holds the possibility for waking people to injustice among humans as well.³¹

Interconnectedness finds expression in justice and cooperation. *Justice* involves the quest for symmetry, for equilibrium and dialectic, for homeostasis, while *injustice* is a rupture in the universe, an affront to cosmic wholeness.³² Cooperation in community rather than competition is a moral law illustrated by nature herself, as Lewis Thomas observes in *The Lives of a Cell*:

There is a tendency for living things to join up, establish linkages, live inside each other, return to earlier arrangements, get along, whenever possible. This is the way of the world.³³

²⁹ *Creation Spirituality*, 44.

³⁰ *Creation Spirituality*, 45; italics added.

³¹ *Creation Spirituality*, 35.

³² *Creation Spirituality*, 48.

³³ Cited in *Creation Spirituality*, 50.

A third law of the universe, the law of *sacrifice*, dictates that things eat and get eaten, that things are born and die in service to following generations of evolutionary surprises. Religion contributes to our understanding of this law with its notion of "sacrifice." Even Christianity embraces a "Eucharistic Law of the Universe" which applies the principle of transformation and sacrifice, eating and being eaten, to divinity itself. All eating and being eaten in nature should be reverential and awesome acts, for to eat is to ingest nineteen billion years of history, along with divinity itself. Assured that we too will be food one day for future generations of living things, we might as well begin responding to this universal principle by letting go of hoarding and by entering the chain of beings as food for one another. This law of sacrifice requires of us a response of gratitude in eating and drinking, which Fox illustrates this way: "I say 'thank you' for the orange that dies for me this morning when I drink a glass of orange juice by promising to be as succulent and round and radiant as an orange throughout the day."³⁴

This brings us to a fourth law of the universe: the law of *laughter*. According to Fox, too much sobriety violates the laws of nature. Humor and paradox, with their openness to novelty, constitute a necessary dimension of our ethics. Such humor appears in his friend's practice of ice cube liberation: an ice cube is water imprisoned to serve human needs, so this fellow occasionally ransoms bags of ice cubes from gas stations, takes them to nearby ponds, and lets them go to rejoin their water brothers and sisters.³⁵

In terms of these four cosmic moral principles Fox preaches against a variety of evils afflicting Western culture, among them sins of adultism,³⁶ addiction,³⁷ and anthropocentric capitalism.³⁸

³⁴ *Creation Spirituality*, 51.

³⁵ *Creation Spirituality*, 53.

³⁶ See *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, 181-185, 187; sadly, in the context of condemning the sin of adultism which involves us in oppressing, wounding and killing our youth and human youthfulness, Fox is deadily silent and passionless about the most modern and suicidal expression of adultism: *abortion on demand*.

³⁷ See *Creation Spirituality*, 82-87.

³⁸ *Creation Spirituality*, 112.

An evaluation of Fox's ethics

Matthew Fox's struggle to combine spirituality with ethics in terms of a paradigm or worldview is a noble endeavor. His ideas have come under severe criticism within Roman Catholic circles.³⁹ Yet, his assessment of current environmental and social ills provides an opportunity for much needed public discussion of worldview commitments and their implications for environmental ethics. Because we will bequeath to the coming generations a *world* as well as a *worldview*, the health of both requires us to raise public awareness regarding the integration of religious commitment with environmental concern. Exactly here is where the discussion ought to occur.

Before setting forth an evaluation of Fox's recommendations, I'd like to indicate two potentially fruitful directions for further analysis of creation spirituality. Space limitations prevent us from offering our own diagnosis of the causes and character of the ecological predicament.⁴⁰ Just as a problem's remedy is implicit in the diagnosis, part of our quarrel with Fox's remedy roots in our dispute of his description of the problem. Similarly, Fox's pantheism needs to be analyzed within the context of what is probably pantheism's most comprehensive

³⁹ Although it appears that Fox's behavior has occasioned his expulsion from the Dominican order, his writings have been scrutinized by the Vatican and have been subjected to criticism alleging scholarly ineptitude, intellectual inconsistency and religious heterodoxy. See Kenneth C. Russell, "Matthew Fox's *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*," *Listening* 24 (Spring 1989): 39-53; Mitchell Pacwa, S.J., *Catholics and the New Age: How Good People Are Being Drawn into Jungian Psychology, the Enneagram, and the Age of Aquarius* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1992), 173-216; Mitchell Pacwa, S.J., "Catholicism for the New Age: Matthew Fox and Creation-Centered Spirituality," *Christian Research Journal* 15 (Fall 1992): 14-19, 29-31; Donna Steichen, "Matthew Fox: Lost in the Cosmos," *Fidelity*. (January 1989): 26-35; Michael O'Brien, "An Original Theology: Creation and Matthew Fox," *Canadian Catholic Review* (April 1988): 125-131; John Sheets, S.J., "On Being A Musical, Mystical Heretic," *Faith and Renewal* 16 (Sept-Oct 1991); and Ron Rhodes, *The Counterfeit Christ of the New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1990), 221-223. Sympathizers include Thomas Boogaart, "Galileo, Fox, and the Reformed Tradition," *Perspectives* 6 (January 1991): 18-20; and Charles Cummings, *Eco-Spirituality: Toward a Reverent Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991).

⁴⁰ For balanced, statistically-based challenges to many popular contemporary environmental, social, political and economic policies, see E. Calvin Beisner, *Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), and his *Prospects for Growth: A Biblical View of Population, Resources, and the Future* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1990).

exposition today, namely, process theology.⁴¹ His notions about God, creation, history and eschatology find close parallels with that intellectual movement.

As we turn now to an evaluation of Fox's creation spirituality, we wish to direct our attention to the moral basis within his position. We will argue that only the view of creation proposed by Christian theism offers a consistent basis for (1) the *possibility* of moral responsibility within and toward creation, and (2) the *meaningfulness* of moral action in creation and history.

Creation and human responsibility

Christian theism has traditionally and correctly insisted that our choice is not simply between an anthropocentric and a cosmocentric worldview. This false dilemma is exposed already by the opening words of the biblical creation account: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Contrary to pantheism, Christian theism argues that the universe is not God, and God is not the universe. Contrary to panentheism, Christian theism proceeds self-consciously, on the basis of supernatural revelation, from what Fox derides as "the ultimate dualism," namely, the idea that God is "out there."

At the foreground of the Genesis creation narrative stand two assertions. The first is that creation was an act resulting from a sovereign word spoken by a personal God. Creation was an act, a caused act, not of physical birth but of speech.⁴² The kind of word that brought the universe into existence was a powerful word, a free declaration of a personal God. The second assertion is that this sovereign word determined the status of differences within creation, those characteristics and qualities distinguishing creation's things from each other and from their Creator.⁴³ This second assertion leads

⁴¹Someone unfamiliar with the history and terrain of process theology will be helped by *Process Theology: Basic Writings*, edited by Ewert H. Cousins (New York: Newman Press, 1971). For useful evaluations of process theology, see David Basinger, *Divine Power in Process Theism: A Philosophical Critique* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1988); Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Inexhaustible God: Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Process Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983); and *Process Theology*, edited by Ronald Nash (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987).

⁴²Rudy Wiebe, *My Lovely Enemy* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1983), 140-141.

⁴³Henry Vander Goot, "Creation and Differentiation," *RES Theological Forum* 7 (December 1979): 1-16.

Christian theism to acknowledge that God fashioned all things according to "kinds." Here the Genesis account is describing the creation as it is accessible to human experience. Common sense confirms the complex diversity and marvelous intricacy described in Genesis; the narrative presents a coherent multiformity and pluriform unity that fit reality.

Because Christian theism rests with both the creation and the description of creation in Genesis, it does not seek the cause of being or conceive of being as having no beginning. In other words, because it refuses to raise the issue of God's beginning in the context of the phenomenal creation, biblical faith emphasizes the *difference* of God from his works. In creating by the fiat of his word, God neither responded nor reacted to anything he had already created.⁴⁴

This basic differentiation, whereby God places himself "over against" the creation, distinguishes Christian theism from its pagan alternatives. It also forms the pattern for the rest of creation: Genesis describes the divine act of creation in terms of successive differentiations establishing creatures according to "kinds." Creation was the act of making separate things: heaven separates water from water, heavenly bodies separate day from night, etc.

The first principle is not, therefore, uniformity and oneness so that the multiformity of our experience must be viewed as secondary and derivative, destined eventually to become again the One it essentially is. In the Bible there is no such exaltation of homogeneity and sameness as there is in those dialecticist philosophies of identity that presently inspire democratizing trends in all areas of life. . . . The transcendence of God is not a dream; furthermore, irreducible distinctions among things in the world (between A and non-A) are not merely appearance. That is, they are not absent from the primordial starting point, as evolutionism assumes. Nor are they destined to be transcended in a tensionless, eschatological future, as cultural idealism and dialectical materialism assume.⁴⁵

A Christian view of history and of ethics begins with this understanding of creation. The goal of history is not the elimination of a *metaphysical* alienation between opposites (where *universal* is synonymous with good

⁴⁴Vander Goot, "Creation and Differentiation," 6.

⁴⁵Vander Goot, "Creation and Differentiation," 12.

and *particular* with evil).⁴⁶ Rather, the goal of history is the glorification of the Creator through the resolution of *moral* and *religious* alienation.

This biblical idea of creation as differentiation provides the basis of human responsibility. Because God sovereignly (that is: freely) created beings who are distinct from him and from each other, these beings themselves exist in terms of laws and callings appropriate to their "kinds." Actions among created beings are independent and real, according to their natural powers and essential structures. Human beings are uniquely structured with freedom and intelligence to enable them to perform relatively independent and spontaneous actions within creation.⁴⁷ This provides the only possible basis for ethics, and implies that sin is really a moral rather than a metaphysical dilemma.

The first assignment given humanity at creation was the mandate to exercise dominion within creation. Clearly humans exist in a special relationship among all creatures to God, and in a special relationship to all other creatures. This is expressed in Gen. 1:26-28:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Space permits these brief observations. (1) The relationship between people and God precedes and determines their relationship to the rest of creation. *Theology determines anthropology, both of which guide ecology!* (2) The quality of bearing God's image entails the humanly reflective activity of dominion stewardship within creation. The "image

⁴⁶In his treatment of environmental ethics, Trappist-Cistercian monk Charles Cummings proposes an eco-spirituality which "integrates features of redemption-centered spirituality and creation-centered spirituality in a movement toward the final reconciliation of opposites in the new creation" (*Eco-Spirituality*, 109). His appeal in this connection to Galatians 3:28 is mistaken.

⁴⁷Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: University Press of America, 1986), 62.

of God" is primarily relational, involving our unique calling to be responsible toward both Creator and creation. (3) Adam and Eve receive two commands given to other creatures ("be fruitful" and "multiply"), and two commands given to no other creatures ("subdue" and "have dominion").⁴⁸ With these as the fundamental calling, the rest of Scripture provides instruction in the manner and goal of dominion stewardship.

At this point we encounter another of Fox's false dilemmas, this time a choice between human mastery over creation (theism) or interdependence between people and creation (creation spirituality). But the fact that *some* Christians may be guilty of exploiting nature is insufficient warrant for blaming this abuse on the theistic worldview. Dominion, biblically exercised, respects differentiations within creation. Created to be a partner in covenant with God, humanity is called to exercise lordship as *stewards* entrusted with the cultivation *and* protection of created things in terms of their natures.⁴⁹ This kind of covenant ecology avoids the extreme errors of viewing nature independently, alongside God and the human race, and of personalizing nature as "brother" or "sister." Between people and creation stands God the Maker, Owner and Lawgiver. Stewardship turned into despotism only when people attempted to break away from God by asserting their illusory autonomy. The remedy for environmental despotism lies, consequently, in restoring human beings to submission under divine sovereignty.

In summary, there is a third alternative to anthropocentrism and cosmocentrism. It is theocentrism, wherein humanity and cosmos are related to, yet distinguished from, the being of God. This triadic relationship views humanity *within* creation, so that people share fully the qualities of creation's creatureliness; but it also assigns them to live between the Creator and creation, so that people enjoy a uniquely responsible otherness toward both God and the creation.

⁴⁸*Earthkeeping in the '90s: Stewardship of Creation*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 285ff.

⁴⁹For a recent explanation of the notion of stewardship, see *Earthkeeping in the '90s*, 307-325.

*The character of moral action in
Fox's spirituality*

Among rules for living in the universe Fox identifies nature's laws of profligacy, interconnectivity, sacrifice and laughter. In our concern for environmental ethics, it seems appropriate to inquire about the source, character and applicability of principles like these.

The conclusion seems unavoidable that within panentheism, ethics merges into aesthetics. If creation is redemption from chaos,⁵⁰ then indeed we should heed Fox's call to turn from obedience to creativity as a prime moral virtue. Then beauty is the defining quality of goodness, and ugliness defines evil. In fact, Fox criticizes Descartes' dualistic philosophy precisely for excluding beauty and feeling: "Descartes' philosophy has no treatment of aesthetics. *Beauty is banished as a philosophical and moral category.*"⁵¹

Similarly, the conclusion seems inescapable that "evil" is a metaphysical term describing anything that obstructs cosmic harmony, homeostasis and interconnectedness. Sin and guilt reside in the individuality of *being* rather than in *action* that breaks covenant with a personal God. The full implication of this is that *being itself* is culpable to the extent that it exists individuatedly. Surely this is contrary to Fox's intentions, but if it is true that all monist systems that merge god, self and the universe leave no room for meaningful action,⁵² then it seems fair to conclude that worldviews which *tend* toward monism, as does panentheism, also tend to exclude meaningful moral action. Put another way: although Fox stresses ecological and economic responsibility throughout his writings, the worldview he is propagating empties the notions of "freedom" and responsibility" of any objective, transcendent content. Panentheism leads simply to introspection, self-isolation and indifference.

For example, within the worldview of panentheism, how must I determine whether on a given morning I or the orange ought to be "sacrificed," or in a given situation whether human rights are more important than whales' rights? Fox isn't clear on this question. Does the principle that every living thing is accountable to every other living

⁵⁰ *Original Blessing*, 236.

⁵¹ *Creation Spirituality*, 103; italics original.

⁵² *Earthkeeping in the '90s*, 192.

thing for its existence require vegetarianism as well as pacifism?⁵³ Within pantheism, what is the basis for distinguishing "lower" from "higher" life forms? Why should the widely held claim that "a human person transcends all non-human creation by reason of his or her capacity for self-reflection, creative thinking, free choice, language, and altruistic love" have any moral authority?⁵⁴ Again, we may agree that "where there is unnecessary violence or cruelty, eco-spirituality strives to put reverence."⁵⁵ But the question then becomes: By what criteria and by whose determination do we know whether and when violence becomes unnecessary? How can we know whether we should reverence the egg or crack it to fix an omelette?

Pantheistic morality is intracosmic, as are all non-theistic moralities which necessarily derive moral norms from the cosmos and from history—which is to say: from humanity itself. Attitudinal words like *reverence*, *wonder*, *amazement*, *awe* and *awareness* slip into our vocabulary as synonyms for justice, righteousness and goodness. But without an external, transcendent referent, they are inherently subjective and relative. The irony we face is that a worldview formulated by rational process cultivates the irrational by discrediting reason as a reliable interpreter of reality. This is the murder of reason, and the resurrection of superstition.

Because of its consistent ontology based on creation as differentiation among beings, only Christian theism provides distinct moral categories which enable us to treat both humans and whales rightly. In this connection, accepting a hierarchy of being within reality (God, human beings, animals, plants, etc.) is a prerequisite for recognizing a hierarchy of values, with which ethics deals. Such a "hierarchical ordering of earthly life" need not mean the "elevation of one species *at the expense* of others."⁵⁶ Christian theism emphasizes principles of dominion stewardship, private property, justice, liberty and love in managing earth's resources.⁵⁷ One implication of these principles is that the human race, not the environment, is primary. Of course the

⁵³Thus Jeremy Rifkin, *Confessions of a Heretic* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 98.

⁵⁴Charles Cummings, *Eco-Spirituality*, 88.

⁵⁵Charles Cummings, *Eco-Spirituality*, 97.

⁵⁶Contra Douglas J. Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 112; italics added.

⁵⁷For a full discussion of these, see E. Calvin Beisner, *Prospects for Growth*, 155-168.

environment must be protected, but for the sake of people, not for its own sake. Any other position leads to the idolatry of nature.⁵⁸

What we are saying is this: traveling in search of a new paradigm for environmental ethics, Matthew Fox has discovered the land of panentheism and named it "creation spirituality." Before leaving home, however, he packed his suitcase with clothes unsuited to the climate of his new homeland. Although in his new land he clothes his argument with fashionable moral terms like justice, freedom, sin, good, evil, hope and love, one fears that, quite apart from his intention, they no longer cover the same content they once did. Fox has redesigned them, refit them for service within an alien paradigm. These terms enjoy coherence and utility best of all within the paradigm of biblical theism, with its provision for both genuine divine sovereignty and genuine human responsibility. As Western culture considers leaving home to join Matthew Fox in the land of panentheism, the caution needs sounding that his moral clothes will never last, and as a result, neither will the environment.⁵⁹

⁵⁸See Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and Its Confrontation with American Society* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1990), 140-176.

⁵⁹The enigmatic title "Environment as Religion" has this meaning, then: Within Matthew Fox's paradigm, creation's redemption requires a process of growing interconnectedness; if religion may be loosely defined as living out ones understanding of redemption, then yielding to this process of interconnectedness is the highest form of religion possible. Environment is not, after all, a *thing*, but a *way of life*.