



# The Living Christ & Creation Spirituality

A CONVERSATION WITH MATTHEW FOX

Interviewed By JOE DAOUD MARTIN

In his many decades of engagement with interfaith work Matthew Fox has been at the intersection of all the mystic spiritual paths: particularly those paths that involve both inner work and outer engagement with all of creation. Early in life he was drawn to the Dominican Order, and inspired in part by Thomas Merton, entered for a while into the life of the hermitage.

The Dominican Order served as a brother/sisterhood for many historical figures whose writings and work he admired—most notably the extraordinary thirteenth-century German mystic Meister Eckhart who was tried twice and finally silenced by the Papal authorities in Avignon. In 2014 Fox published *Meister Eckhart: A Mystic-Warrior for Our Times*. Inspired by the mystic practice and writings of Eckhart, Fox has been moved to explore medieval women mystics such as the influential lay Order of women known as the Beguines, as well as Mechtild of Magdeburg, Julian of Norwich, and other mystics, most particularly Hildegard von Bingen. At the same time he has focused his lights on modern mystics whose practices have helped transform religious practice in the West, bringing contemplative practice back into currency. These figures include Thomas Merton, Father Bede Griffiths and Ananda Coomaraswamy. In Buddhism, he has found a spiritual kinship with the renowned Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher and author Thich Nhat Hanh, whose interspiritual works like *Living Buddha, Living Christ* opened up new

possibilities for mindfulness practice in Christianity. Fox has immersed himself in Native American approaches to spirituality as well.

After a lengthy dispute with the Vatican over Fox's works on Creation Spirituality, Fox was eventually dismissed from the Dominican Order in 1993, and left the Catholic Church altogether—so he took “refuge” in the Episcopalian Church. Be that as it may, the arrival of Pope Francis, he feels, has brought the church closer to inter-spirituality and Creation Spirituality. One of Fox's long-time associates helped to draft Pope Francis' groundbreaking encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si*. Fox had previously established the University of Creation Spirituality (now Wisdom University), and the new movement of the Cosmic Mass.

In his books, Fox works with the key idea of the “Cosmic Christ,” that points to the potential for everyone to realize the spirit within. “Creation Spirituality” focuses upon four related paths drawn from the traditions of Christian mysticism: The *Via Positiva*, *Via Negativa*, *Via Creativa* and the *Via Transformativa*, which are discussed in the interview.

The following interview took place in Oakland, California, on the occasion of the release of Fox's revised autobiography *Confessions: The Making of a Post-Denominational Priest*.



**It has been said that all religions have a common core, but maybe different forms, and you have been around to ignite an interfaith movement, and you've been promoting, also, the restoration of mysticism in the Western religious traditions. In your new edition of *Confessions*, your mem-**

oirs, you write that when you were quite young, somehow you tried the path of the hermitage. So, did it start there? I was already in the Dominican Order when I made that foray into solitude in the hermitage. So the Dominican experience preceded that and in many ways seeded it, watered it, because training with the Dominicans was a lineage, a 700 year lineage, and there is a lot of depth there and a lot of beauty and I was moved by it and I wanted to spend more time in solitude. So I went to this hermitage for a summer, but I was told that this is a crazy thing to do, and if you do it you may never get ordained a priest, and I said that's fine. So, in a way I left the priesthood before I became a priest and that was a circumstance I have never regretted because I chose it. But I know I carried that experience with me, for my whole life, I guess. I told a friend that I ran on the energy that I derived from the hermitage for twenty years. It was a very freeing and powerful experience. So when I found Meister Eckhart talking about how important solitude is, and Merton, I knew what they were talking about. But I also believe, and Eckhart is this way too—and this is my tradition as a Dominican—that solitude is something you can carry with you wherever you are. Eckhart says that. Once you learn to let go and let be, he says, you are always in the right place at the right time whether you're in a monastic cell or in the marketplace, etcetera. So, for me those are deep lessons. We have to move beyond structure, external structure, and find the rhythm of solitude and interaction—contemplation and mysticism *and* warriorhood or prophecy. We have to find that dialectic... to dance!

I know many people in recent times gravitated to Eastern traditions because they didn't find in Western religion the ability to achieve realization. So we picked up books like *The Perennial Philosophy* by Aldous Huxley thinking we'd get the Eastern traditions, and there were names like Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart, who figures prominently there. That's where I was first exposed to any of his ideas. So the question is, did the church somehow drop support of the contemplative part of religion, meditation and so on? Or was it there, and was just a well-kept secret? [both laugh] Well, I think several strands are involved here. One is, of course, that you had the distinction between the monastic and the lay world. So, Teresa of Avila was a nun, a Carmelite nun, so the Carmelite nuns were reading Teresa

of Avila, and also John of the Cross, who was a Carmelite monk, or friar really. But did they trickle out that much into the lay world? No they didn't. But another dimension to the problem was—is—the Enlightenment. The culture itself was turned off by mysticism and then it completely distorted it. So that Theodore Roszak, whose work I certainly respect a lot, says that the Enlightenment held mysticism up to ridicule as the worst offense against science and reason. So you had, of course, distorted versions of mysticism, especially in the seventeenth century when science was coming into its own. And of course, following the debacle of the religious wars of the sixteenth century, and the burning at the stake of Giordano Bruno in 1600, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, all of this hullabaloo was going on, and science... in fact I think it made this truce in the seventeenth century with religion. They said, "You guys take the soul, we'll take the cosmos..."

**So Descartes puts a God in the machine—a soul in a machine.** And took it out of the rest of nature, so that animals don't have souls, trees don't have souls and all the rest. This is totally contrary to anything the medievals taught. Not just Francis, but Aquinas, the whole medieval tradition was very indigenous, very animistic, it was aware of the soul in all living things and beyond even, in land, too. So what I would say is that mysticism was distorted, both by the culture which kind of ran with the left brain and then left the right brain behind with the Enlightenment. We're still suffering from that. It's the way academia defines education. This whole thing about the amount of exams, memorizing answers and all that, this is a flight from intuition—which is really the right brain—from all mysticism. And great souls have seen this. Like Einstein. I abhor American education because we have two gifts, he said—the gift of the rational brain and the sacred gift of the intuitive brain, and the rational brain should serve the intuitive because that is where values are found. He said we live in a culture that honors the rational and has forgotten the sacred brain. So to me it's a cultural issue as well as an ecclesial issue.

You've just brought up Einstein and there's one passage you used in *Confessions* that, I think, underscores what you were just saying about him. "People should not," he says, "make the intellect their God. If one doesn't play a part in the creative whole he is not worthy of being called human." Which reminds me of a couple of things in the Sufi mystic tradition, especially in Ibn Arabi's "unity-of-being." Everything is interconnected, you were just saying, and all of engendered existence is continuing as a process. Those are marvelous quotes you brought into the book from another source—I think from someone you knew that had an encounter with Einstein. Right, and there's another line of Einstein's from the same source where he echoes what you just said. He says, for me God is unity between things. The unity within things. The unity of the whole. That's my understanding of that. The Jews





you have these other dimensions, I think, that are brought into the equation when you're dealing with concepts like synchronicity, or morphic fields, or the soul itself. And experiences people have, precognitive experiences or experiences of people who died and appear to other people. I have a good friend who is very blue collar, not at all religious. He's Asian, and after his mother died a few months later she appeared in her bedroom and they had a conversation. And every time he tells me about it his eyes water. It was absolutely an authentic, real experience for him. He's a very down-to-earth guy; he works with his hands. He builds houses and so forth. But when I hear him tell me that experience, then I look at the gospel stories and I see Jesus popping up with several people whom he loved after he died, I think, this isn't so unusual. All kinds of people have experiences of resurrected beings, and it's invariably someone they loved. It's about that love relationship again that continues on after this particular form of our existence fades away, when our bodies die. There are so many more levels

and the Muslims say that God is one. So does Christianity. That's what it means, not as one thing up there in the sky watching us, but God is the oneness of the unity of all creation.

I think that may be one of the most complex elements in your work. Let's talk about some of the material you've published with Rupert Sheldrake, especially in the book *Natural Grace*. In your work with him, you found useful his concept of morphic fields—where things don't necessarily have an empirical causal connection: that things arise when their time has come. Certain animal behaviors around the planet he finds, will develop in one part of the world and very quickly (the same species) will have it in another part of the world without meeting one another. And somehow this notion of morphic fields gave you insight into other things like Carl Jung's synchronicity, the nature of the soul. Can you say a bit about that? I think that both synchronicity and morphic resonance, they're all about moving beyond Newtonian time and space. Obviously there's a place for Newtonian time and space. It's a perspective that works with a lot of practical things. But it's obviously not the whole picture, and so

of existence than our culture teaches us. Here's one great example: David Paladin was this Native American artist who as a young man lied about his age, went into the Army, got captured in Europe, was put in a concentration camp for four years. When they found him in the camp he weighed sixty pounds. He was comatose...

**A concentration camp?** Yeah. They put him in a concentration camp and they tortured him. He was unconscious. They brought him back, he came out of his stupor after two years and his elders said well, you have a choice. You're a paraplegic so you can be in a VA hospital in a wheelchair for the rest of your life, or we can try and heal you in the ancient ways. And he said let's try those ways. They threw him into an ice cold river, this paraplegic, and he said that when he hit the river he was madder at his elders than he was at the Nazis who had done this to him. But, it worked. He walked. He made two pilgrimages by foot to Mexico and back. He was an artist and he met—as a young man—Marc Chagall and Picasso. Chagall said to him, "Don't paint the pictures of your people, the stories of your people. Paint your *dreams* of the stories of your people." He said that made all the difference.

I visited his home after he had died because his wife invited me to write commentaries on his paintings because he knew my writing, *Original Blessing*, and had made a connection between his Native American roots and his Christian roots. So I visited her and she said to me, “You know, that artist used to come to my husband at night and would dictate paintings to him.” And I said, “Really?” And she said, “Yes, I’ll get one.” She walks out of the room and comes back, and immediately I said, “That’s Paul Klee.” And she said, “Of course it is. It’s signed Paul Klee.”

**It was signed Paul Klee?** Yes, it was signed Paul Klee, but her husband signed it.

**So that’s presence. He was really very present.** It just shows you that life is so much more interesting than television would tell us. You know, there are just so many more dimensions to life. Obviously this guy was shamanistic and his elders told him the reason you were tortured and suffered so much as a young man is that was your initiation into shamanism. So this man was living in two worlds at once, and therefore he was a great conduit for these dead artists who weren’t done with their work yet, I guess. So I just think that is a powerful story about the vastness of our souls and the vastness of the diversity of spirit and intelligence in the universe.

**So returning to the idea of the morphic field, coming from Sheldrake’s work: it’s something you enter into but, as in the case of Jung’s synchronicity—it’s non-causal. It’s not cause-and-effect. It’s just things that happen simultaneously because they’re in relationship.** Yeah. The image I get is Einstein’s image of gravity. It’s like a big net we’re following around.

**We’re in it.** We’re in it and we run into each other, or other interesting beings. And the “we” is not just those of us with physical bodies but our ancestors too. And this is the teaching of indigenous people everywhere; that the ancestors are here. In the West we call this the communion of saints. So, we’re in this thing together and there’s a lot of rolling around. [laughs]

**This brings you to the conclusion that we shouldn’t say “the soul is in us”—I think this may come from Meister Eckhart—but that, “We are in the soul.”** The soul is not in the body but the body is in the soul.

**Like a field.** Like a field. Exactly, and to me that just opens things up, because then that means if you say your soul’s in your body that’s constricting. But if the body’s in the soul it means when you’re thinking about the Rover on Mars, your soul is there. And that’s Aquinas, saying that our psyches are made for the cosmos. Every human being, he says, is capable of the universe. So, our souls are yearning to be stretched, and to learn. And of course our radical curiosity as a species—we’re so eager to learn—how did the universe begin and how big is it and where does it end and all those questions—and that’s all part of the same thing, I think. It’s what

Einstein called our “holy curiosity.”

**And also you bring up shamanism in your recent book on Meister Eckhart. Here we’re talking about the thirteenth century mystic who had his own problems with the Church in his time, as you and others have had in your time. In various chapters you look upon Eckhart as a potential feminist, or as a potential Sufi, or as a potential shaman based on various statements and writings. So let’s go to the question: what do you see as the shamanistic element in Meister Eckhart?** Even his favorite name for God is “the ground of being” and Thich Nhat Hanh loves that phrase. The ground is something earthy, it’s something in the lower chakras and this is all shamanistic, that’s all indigenous, the sacredness of being and the ground of being. But he also talks about “circles” a lot like Black Elk. Black Elk goes on and on about how everything in nature is in circles like a bird’s nest, and he says our religion is like a bird’s nest, because it’s circular. But he says even the seasons are circular and the twenty-four hour day is circular and life is a circle from birth to death. He says everything is a circle. Well, Eckhart says being is a circle and God is a circle. So you have that archetype of the circular, and curved—which is part of the maternal, too, as part of the feminine divinity.

So that’s all shamanistic, in Eckhart as well as in Black Elk. And the shamanistic is also very in touch with the spirit world, and Eckhart talks a lot about angels, a lot about the spirit world, and as a Native American teacher once taught me, he said what you Christians call angels, we call spirits. Eckhart, while he was a great intellectual, his seventh chakra was very in touch with the angelic world, as well, and he brings them in in lots of circumstances in his teaching. So there’s so much there that is shamanistic. In many ways I think he’s from the lineage of Hildegard of Bingen who was a century earlier. By the way, Eckhart was thirteen when Rumi died. And he was a contemporary of Hafiz. So you know there was something in the air.

**Like the Axial Age fifteen hundred years before that, when the great sages emerged in Greece and India and elsewhere.** And I think today we’re living in a somewhat analogous time, I really do. I think there is a lot of spiritual action that is happening. But Hildegard, she was very shamanistic. For example, her healings using stones, quartz, and so forth, she writes about this, and about the animals, too, as healing powers. And she always talks about the “maternity” of God. She says we are surrounded by the arms of God. So again, it’s roundedness. She also talks about God as a circle. So there is a lineage here that Eckhart is part of, what I call the Creation spiritual traditions of the Rhineland mystics. The Rhineland mystics derive from the Celtic tradition. Hildegard was in a Celtic monastery that was on the Rhine in Germany. By the way, one thing I learned when I wrote my chapter on Sufism in *Eckhart*, is that there are teaching stories that in the ninth century in Ireland there were Sufis. There was a strong Sufi community, and that’s very interesting because that would

There was a strong Sufi community, and that's very interesting because that would mean that the Sufis, then, truly interacted with the Celtic Christian tradition. That would help to explain, I think, some of the deep wisdom that we find in the Celtic tradition, and it certainly comes out in Hildegard and Eckhart and Francis and Aquinas—in all these Rhineland mystics.

mean that the Sufis, then, truly interacted with the Celtic Christian tradition. That would help to explain, I think, some of the deep wisdom that we find in the Celtic tradition, and it certainly comes out in Hildegard and Eckhart and Francis and Aquinas—in all these Rhineland mystics. They were so nature based. They were not psychologically based like Augustine, all wrapped up about whether he was saved or not.

**At that time Meister Eckhart was not exposed to most Eastern traditions but knew of Ibn Sina, or Avicenna, who was a philosopher, scientist and a mystic. It's interesting that Eckhart did have access to him, somehow.** Eckhart and Aquinas. Aquinas before Eckhart was reading Avicenna and Averroes, Ibn Rushd, but when it comes to Avicenna, it blew my mind when I was writing my most recent Eckhart book, that Eckhart on thirteen different occasions, thirteen different sermons, gives Avicenna credit for the “spark of the soul” concept, and that concept is absolutely essential to Eckhart's thinking, and every time he doesn't take credit for it. He says “this great master” and he's talking about Avicenna.

**He refers to him as a master.** Absolutely. A great master. And he names him sometimes, but even when he doesn't, we know who he's talking about. He's talking about Avicenna. So, you're right. Eckhart did not know Buddhism, and he did not know Hinduism, but he knew quite a lot about the Muslim tradition. As you know, Francis, (who died thirty-four years before Eckhart), tried three times to get to the Middle East to experience the Sufi reality, and he did come back dancing whirling dervish dances. He was converted by the Sufis. He did not convert the Sufis.

**Openness is a more interesting approach than conversion, right?** Exactly. And learning. Learning is much more important, and he learned. I think that's really exciting in Eckhart. But also in Eckhart, since we brought up Hinduism and Buddhism, nevertheless even though he never read any Buddhism or Hinduism or knew anyone, he's Hindu and he's Buddhist. There are whole passages in Eckhart that are pure Buddhism. And there are in Aquinas too I have found. And they never knew Buddhism, and what that proves to me is the universal truths Buddhism has arrived at—a Christian meditating in the thirteenth century and the fourteenth century can arrive at the same truths, and that's really important to know. You don't have to read Buddhism to find the truths that the Buddhist traditions finds. That's just so exciting. And

that's why something like even the archetype of the Cosmic Christ or the Buddha nature... I get excited to hear this Jewish Rabbi has just discovered the same concept in his tradition, by a different name, of course. That's what's exciting to me, when the universality of human spiritual experience can be discovered jointly you might say. Then we have a springboard for growing up as a species.

**Let's talk about the four paths of Creation Spirituality, Via Negativa, Via Creativa, Via Positiva and Via Transformativa. How does Via Negativa lead to Via Creativa?** Well, it gets you into a state of creativity because it empties you, and when we can be emptied, from time to time—and this is only one of four paths—you can go deep in it so it is also nothingness. But when you are emptied, then you're ready to give birth. There is a great dream that Eckhart said he once dreamt... That a man was pregnant, pregnant with nothingness, and out of the nothingness Christ was born. So, I think that says it all. That creativity, as opposed to just reshuffling things, creativity does come out of emptiness. Sometimes it's gentle, but sometimes it can be very severe. It can be a breakdown, it can be Alcoholics Anonymous. It can be hitting the bottom. So then, who are we when we come out of it? How are we transformed by it?

**We were just talking about the element of the Via Negativa, a subtraction and emptying out, which you said could lead to the Via Creativa which emerges from that clarity, that emptying out. You have also the Via Positiva and Via Transformativa, the four paths, here. Positiva seems to be pointing to the grandeur, the openness, the experience of bliss, and the Negativa, emptying out, and you have a final one, the Via Transformativa—which I'd like to hear more about in conjunction with those other three. How do those three take us to the Via Transformativa?** Well, the Via Transformativa is about transformation, about social transformation, about justice, it's about compassion, it's about service. To get there, to build that warrior energy that it takes to be an effective, compassionate agent, you have to first of all be in love, and that's the Via Positiva. Secondly, you have to learn about letting go and letting be, and thirdly you have to gather your resources and creativity and learn the mystical experience of co-creation of the spirit. Creativity is a mystical experience, too. The image I always have of creativity is being on a raft down a rushing river without an oar. You're there for the ride. But it's fun. [chuckles] And wild things happen. You're not

in charge. Spirit is in charge and Eckhart has this brilliant sermon on the spirit as a rushing river and he gets it from the sounds. The energy in the sermon, how it carries on, you know he's talking about creative experience.

So you have to bring all that to the Via Transformativa—you don't just show up and say I'm mad so let's go do something. And that's a problem. A lot of our efforts at justice come out of an action/reaction response. Out of anger alone. And anger has its place, but you have to feed it with healthy Via Positiva. That's a skill, a discipline, and then creativity itself, you bring this to the table and then you have something to draw from. But it doesn't even end with the Via Transformativa. The Via Transformativa is not an end in itself. It returns you to the Via Positiva. What's the point of justice? It's to make the table larger so that people can fall in love with the beauty of life, so you're back to the Via Positiva. That's why I imagine it as an ever expanding spiral so that you go through these paths time and time again, even in one day. But certainly in a lifetime. For me it makes so much more sense than the traditional language of purgation, illumination and union. First of all, that language is not Biblical, not Jewish, it's not prophetic. It leaves out justice, it leaves out enjoying the light, it leaves out creativity. It leaves out a lot...

**I wanted to get to the "Cosmic Mass." I think with that we have to, in a sense, start with maybe the Cosmic Christ and just establish what this is, because this event, the Cosmic Mass, one of its influences, one of the elements that feeds into it is the Eucharist. Where does the historical Jesus leave off and the Cosmic Christ begin? Is it the moment of the transfiguration in the gospels? Is there a change that happens there and we look at things differently? It's a really good question, but there's no simple answer because the Cosmic Christ is in Jesus but the Cosmic Christ is in all of us. The Cosmic Christ is in all beings. John 1 says that Christ is a light in all beings. And science today says yes, there are photons in every atom in the universe. So that's the light in all things, the Cosmic Christ. It also relates to the "spark of the soul" of Avicenna and Eckhart. And the Kabbalah is real big on sparks, too. That's the thing about the Cosmic Christ, it's not just about Jesus it's about all of us, we are all other Christs ... Hildegard has a great line, she says, "Every ray of the sun is the sun, so every ray of God is God." We're not all that God is, but we're God.**

Now, when it comes to the Eucharist I have been really struck by a passage I saw in Thich Nhat Hahn just a year or so ago, and I love that it's coming from a Buddhist monk, where he says what greater thing could Jesus have done to leave himself behind than to have taken bread and said "This is my body;" to have taken wine and have said "This is my blood." Because he said, and this is Thich Nhat Hahn, he says when you see bread you see the sun, you see the clouds, you see the rain, you see the soil, so the whole universe is there in the bread. It's the Cosmic Christ. So it's a banquet of the Cosmic Christ. That's what the Eucharist is about.

**The blood is the more difficult side—something that we have to confront...** Teilhard de Chardin talked about that, that the bread stands for all the beauty of the world and the wine stands for suffering of the world. The Cosmic Christ is not just the light in all things, it's also the wounds in all things. And that's very important, that's part of the archetypal message here—of the crucifixion, of the Christ. That the Christ has wounds, as we all do. And how to deal with suffering. I think that's the heart of the theology of the Cosmic Mass, or really of any mass. Except that I think that a lot of theologians, liturgical experts have wandered a bit from those realities. Because they don't have an understanding of the Cosmic Christ. They think it's only about Jesus.

**So, these perceptions of Teilhard de Chardin and Thich Nhat Hahn and yourself on the Eucharist get brought into this idea of the Cosmic Mass—the Cosmic Christ being part of that—and you have then also somehow brought in the shamanistic traditions, particularly of Native Americans, right? And Raves? Raves have been called the urban shamanism.**

**Yes. For good reason.** Yes, because it's about a beat. And that's what a drum is, isn't it? And that's how shamans pray—with a drum, and a drum is a first chakra instrument. It gets you down, it gets you connected to the earth, it gets you connected to your heartbeat and it stands for Mother Earth and the universe. We need to get our eyes out of our books to pray, we need to connect to the earth again. We need these shamanistic practices of praying by dancing, and it shouldn't be underestimated and especially at a time of an ecological crisis because the reason we're out of touch with the earth is we are not recognizing through our feet the sacredness of the earth. And we can do that again simply through dancing.

**It also establishes community, and interconnectedness. Absolutely. And it's multigenerational.**

**It seems to me the Cosmic Mass brings together the ancient and the modern. It also brings the Eucharist into the shamanistic.** The hunger for ritual is real. So we have to take what forms we have and shake them up. And I believe that the Eucharistic lineage has a lot going for it in this postmodern time. And we should be dealing with the new languages of art such as rap, DJs and VJs and all these art forms. I compare it to the revolution in the twelfth century with stained glass. Stained glass in the twelfth century was a complete revolution.

**You have this phrase, actually it's the title of one of your books, *One River Many Wells*, so all these different traditions feeding into one water, but underground there's this coursing surge of spirit. Exactly. "One wisdom" as Nicholas of Cusa, in the fifteenth century, said. We call ourselves by many religions but in fact there is only one wisdom that is a "terrible beauty" he said, "a terrible beauty that is wisdom."**