

Creation Spirituality and Lutheranism
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And Notes from a Presentation by Larry Rasmussen
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Part I: Presentation by Marilyn Jackson, PhD, Western Institute for Social Research, Berkeley, CA; Augustana BA, religion major graduate and MA graduate of Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality, Holy Names College, Oakland, CA

Introduction to Creation Spirituality as defined by Matthew Fox:

As a young Catholic priest, in the 1960s, Matthew Fox was concerned about the flocking of his peers to Eastern Spirituality. He set out to discover what "Western Spirituality" had to offer. He developed Creation Spirituality, which includes any religion that holds earthly creation to be a dynamic, creative subject of our spiritual belief. Fox studied at graduate school in Paris, France, where Pere (Father) Chenu, named the "creation centered" vs. "fall/redemption" spiritual traditions for him. He then developed an institute for the study of Western Spiritual traditions that took a few different forms in recent decades.

Spirituality is a newer term for Lutherans than for Catholics. For many it means an inner experience but this inner work leads to a difference in one's outer life as well. Mysticism is a similar word, often thought of as unrelated to every day life, though that is a narrow view, because as we change inside, it naturally changes what occurs in our outward lives. Matthew Fox expanded the definition for the terms of spirituality, mysticism and religious experience, to include art as meditation, seeing the activity of creation happening in creativity and artistic endeavor. He linked the concept of transformation and social justice.

Fox points out two traditions, one that is a fall/redemption model and another that is based in what he calls Original Blessing, responding to centuries of emphasis on the predominant Christian theme of Original Sin. Original Blessing is one of many themes based in Biblical tradition in passages about the goodness of God's Creation and God's positive outlook on Creation, including humans' role in the world. Fox' writings teach that spirituality starts with Original Blessing or what he calls with Latin terminology, the Via Positiva (the positive way) which is followed by the Via Negativa (negative way).

Fox brought to the attention of modern day mystics, the teachings of Christian mystics from the middle ages in Europe. The women's lay movement, the Beguines was one. Hildegard of Bingen, a German Benedictine abbess of the 12th century was another. Meister Eckhart was a priest who lived a century later. Fox found, to his surprise, that Eckhart's writings echoed ideas he had been developing ideas in his own research in spirituality.

Fox points out the healthiness for our psyches to have a balance of four spiritual paths rather than to have a prime emphasis on just one negative aspect of spirituality, or even two, as in the Yin and the Yang of Eastern tradition. It is much easier to examine difficulty if one has started with a positive outlook. The Via Negativa, the second path, can be different than original sin. The letting go aspect of the Via Negativa can also mean to let go of judgment. In balance with other spiritual paths, the Via Negativa becomes a valued experience and can be defined as a sinking or letting go and being quiet; not just a time to feel badly and remorseful. This can be more like what many think of as mysticism, the retreat from the business of life.

So after the embracing and letting go of the first two paths, one is buoyed up and onto the third and fourth paths: Via Creativa and Via Transformativa. The Via Creativa often

begins with a **breakthrough** to creativity, when something new and positive arises out of nothing. One story Matthew Fox told that I like is about when he was at a gathering and sat at a large table of indigenous people. Each of them talked about how they had made something they were wearing or had with them. The process and art of making something is one of Fox' themes of creativity. Creativity can be used for good or ill. In the fourth path, the Via Transformativa or the way of transformation or change, he balances the idea of creativity by defining where creativity is taking us. This *transformativa* is not just any change. It is characterized by compassion and justice, expressing the will of our Creator.

Creation Spirituality finds common ground for dialogue among spiritual traditions around the world, both with indigenous as well as universal religions. Everyone can relate to these four paths: to good and bad, to the ongoing creativity of the universe and the effort to make the world a better place. It is like Deep Ecology in that it relates to many other cultures in a deep way. Matthew Fox is quoted as saying, *There's no such thing as a Jewish ocean and a Lutheran sun and a Buddhist river and a Taoist forest and a Roman Catholic cornfield.* <http://www.intuition.org/txt/fox.htm>

Matthew Fox on Relating Creation Spirituality to Lutheranism. Here is an excerpt from Part V of my dissertation, written for the Western Institute for Social Research in Berkeley, CA (without references).

Matthew Fox wrote that the **“Great Scandal of Protestantism”** is that they are “out of touch with 33 percent of what inspired Martin Luther’s prophetic criticism of the Western church,” or the mystical tradition. He said that as a body, mainline Protestantism has repressed the mystical... the fire, passion, eros and power of the Spirit. As a result, “Preachers of fire and brimstone,” fundamentalists, are walking away with the “hearts and truncated minds of Western religion.” There is “no longer a fire in the belly of Protestant religion” and mystics are not understood. “When mystics are forgotten, so too is creativity.” Martin Luther was influenced by the Theologica Germanica, a fourteenth-century spiritual work, straight out of the Rhineland mystics, Eckhart, Hildegard and Mechtild. The author was anonymous which is understandable since after Eckhart was condemned, a holistic mysticism was suspect. Fox writes that Luther thought that John Tauler, a Dominican who studied with Meister Eckhart, was the author. “As Lutheran scholar Bengt Hoffman points out, it was from Tauler that Luther learned realized eschatology. He ‘had convinced Luther that eternal life begins on this earth and that eternal life should not be connected with reward.’ What is at issue in terms of reward and earning of heaven is Eckhart’s theology of ‘living without a why.’” Fox continues to say that if Catholics had been studying Eckhart in the past 300 years, the wars between Protestants and Catholics over works and justification would have been eliminated. “Eckhart wrote, ‘all works are surely dead if anything from the outside compels you to work.’”

Fox goes on to say that in addition to “confessing that one-third of the influence on his theology and decision-making was that of the Rhineland mystics,” in his Small Catechism, he includes the three articles of Christian faith, “1) Creation, 2) Redemption, 3) Sanctification”. Fox writes that 99 percent of Western Christianity since Luther has leaped over the first article, Creation. “Anthropocentrism reigns in Protestant and Catholic circles alike...” He calls the “movement in seminaries to develop the Western spiritual tradition,”... “a right-brain awakening, which many are fearful of. He proposes a four-point plan to recover a healthy spirituality for “protesting Christianity.”

1) Return to the Sources of the Christian mystics of the middle ages.

2) Cease confusing human words with the Word of God: Protestant's greatest strength, preaching, is also a weakness. Ever since the printing press, they have over-identified the "Word of God" with the "words of the preacher or words of the Holy Bible." When we reduce God and Creation to humanity's words, we are anthropocentric. He suggests that Protestant theologians repeat the sentence from Meister Eckhart, "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God." Creation started at least nineteen billion years before human words. Wisdom and God existed before any words were spoken. Proverbs 8 says that the Lord created Wisdom at the "beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old, before the beginning of the earth." Wisdom was at God's side, a "master workman...daily his delight, rejoicing before him always" (Proverbs 8, vv. 22-23, 30-31)

3) Resist the imperialism of left-brainitis by recovering eros, play, art as meditation and silence: Fox criticizes liberal Protestantism of being too rational and the Fundamentalists of being too sentimental. He refers to Carl Jung who talks about "chronic iconoclasm", resulting in an "alarming poverty of symbols." Fox says that by returning to the basics, like clay, paint, dance and massage, we enliven imagination and allow mystery to flow. One student of his had a dream where she had a huge brain and the right side was a dried up prune. Fox writes that art as meditation can moisten a shriveled up brain. A healthy Via Negativa is letting go of human wordiness and allowing silence, without and within, which, as the poet Rilke wrote, "touches the roots of speech" (Ibid.).

4) Recover the Via Positiva: Fox feels that too much "moroseness and ethical righteousness" hands over the best and most critical prophets of the West. This "moral sadness and depression resembles the guilt-ridden sermons of fundamentalists. What's missing is Via Positiva: joy, delight, wonder at being alive and the cosmic unfolding of divine revelation in the ongoing creation.

Fox quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer as writing from his prison cell shortly before being executed, "I wonder whether it is possible...to regain the idea of the Church as providing an understanding of the area of freedom (art, education, friendship, play)...? I really think that it is so and it would mean that we should recover a link with the Middle Ages. Who is there, for instance, in our times, who can devote himself with an easy mind to music, friendship, games or happiness?"

You can read Matthew Fox' book, ***Original Blessing, a Primer of Creation Spirituality***, for his 26 paths, divided in four parts, or contact me for the summary in my dissertation. In the sessions at Rock Island , one of the themes that interested some participants was the concept emphasized by Fox of *panentheism*, where we experience God through nature, but do not worship nature as God, as in *pantheism*.

More Lutheran Sources and Connections

Below is an outline for how I have related Creation Spirituality to Lutheranism in my dissertation, slightly edited for this publication. This is interwoven in response to Matthew Fox's 4 paths. I drew extensively from the book ***Earth Community, Earth Ethics***, by Larry Rasmussen who spoke with me at this event. I also drew from the 19th century minister, author, politician and hymn writer, N.F. S. Grundtvig, among other Lutheran leaders, both clergy and lay people.

LUTHERANISM APPLIED TO THE FOUR PATHS FROM ORIGINAL BLESSING

1) Via Positiva of Lutheranism:

Love of Nature by prominent Lutherans and Lutheran camps

Salvation by Grace

Pietism as spiritual source encouraging inner life of prayer (also in path 2)

Dreams as guidance (taught by my father, Rev. Leland Jackson) (also in path 2)

God's Holiness and Praise (Augustana liturgy)

Gospel emphasis,

Heritage of Theologica Germanica through Luther, Spirituality background through pietism;

N.F.S. Grundtvig's Perspective on Being Human as Well as Christian

Protestant Creation Theology (ecological design in colleges and institutions)

God and Creation in Hymns

2) Via Negativa of Lutheranism (or the Yin and Yang of Lutheranism)

Letting go to Sin & Grace

Pietism as spiritual source encouraging inner life of prayer

Dreams as guidance

Feminine Presence and Absence (Grace as a feminine concept but lack of female imagery)

Larry Rasmussen on Environmental Apartheid (Sin toward the rest of nature)

Martin Luther's vs. Satan and "Sin boldly"

Theology of the Cross as Earth Ethic

3) Via Creativa of Lutheranism

Earth Faith Symbolism, a discussion of symbols to reclaim that are life giving

Reclaiming Science

Earth Ecumenical Habitat

Earth Economics

Ecumenical Dialogue Between Lutherans and Eastern Orthodox Christians

Deep Ecumenism

Cultural heritage of Lutheran Churches that Merged into the ELCA

Magaly Rodriguez: Multichannelled media and the arts, a way for communication to bring people together

Lutheran Learning Communities: St. Martin's Table, Mpls, MN , Holden Village , WA and church camps

Hymns about Creation

4) Via Transformativa of Lutheranism

The Call to vocation as Spiritual path

Lutheran Peace Fellowship, Bread for the World and other Lutheran advocacy organizations

Education and Social Change and the Legacy of N.F.S. Grundtvig

Bonhoeffer: The Christian's Song of Songs

Swedes, Socialists and Secularists

Historical Perspective on the Swedish Lutheran American Church's Social Stance

The Kingdom of God theology

Rasmussen on justice, for humans and earth alike...

Earth Action

Hymns of Transformation

If you are interested in what I have done so far, I would be glad to know. I need encouragement as this is a new area. On my way to the AHA gathering 2010, I was able to

visit with Rev. Jim Roberts, of Rockford , IL, who has drummed with Matthew Fox and has developed an “indigenous” understanding of Creation Spirituality. I was reminded by him to look for guidance through prayer, which he does in a deep ecological way, drawing from many traditions, though with a Lutheran understanding. I would be interested in attending and/or helping to organize a workshop with Roberts in the Rockford area if it can be worked out sometime. I have had this posted online but am thinking of publishing in a different format. Contact me for the fuller text of the dissertation: marilyn@wisr.edu or estraloe@sbcglobal.net.

Part II: Below are notes by M. Jackson with commentary and website links from t Larry Rasmussen’s talk. His new book will be out November 2012: **Earth-honoring Faith** <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Philosophy/EthicsMoralPhilosophy/EnvironmentalEthics/?view=usa&ci=9780199917006> . As Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics, Union Theological Seminary, New York, Dr. Rasmussen authored and edited several books including *Earth Community*, *Earth Ethics* (Orbis, 1998), *Ethics for a Small Planet* (SUNY Press, 1998), and *Earth Habitat: Ecoinjustice and the Church’s Response* (Fortress, 2001)

Lutheranism as a Resource for Eco-Theology and Ethics

Dr. Rasmussen stated that we are in a time of Christianity’s Religious Ecological Phase. (*I recognize this term, Ecological Phase, which the late Thomas Berry 1914-2009, of the Riverdale Center of Religious Research who often came to speak to Matthew Fox’ students used*http://www.thomasberry.org/Biography/short_bio.html.)

He talked about the Medieval mystics who used the Sacramentalist tradition of revering the cosmos. This tradition of using ritual to celebrate our connection to nature lives on today through various Lutheran and Christian organizations.

One Lutheran tradition is Rogation Sunday,http://www.synodresourcecenter.org/wma/worship/occasional/other/0015/rogation_sunday.html which came from the Hauge tradition (*and also has roots in Roman society*)http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rogation_days.

He referred to some Lutheran organizations: Lutheran Earthkeeping Network of the Synod <http://www.webofcreation.org/LENS/synods.html> and Lutherans for Restoring Creation <http://www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org/>

Luther was a panentheist (God is in with and under the wine). Some other Lutherans he mentioned were Joe Sitler, author of *Gravity and Grace* and the well known Dietrich Bonhoeffer, resister of Hitler and the Nazis in Germany.

Another connection to Eco-Theology and Ethics is the Simple Living Movement http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simple_living.

Scientists are asking for help to get people to rally but have not gotten the support they needed to deal with climate change and other catastrophic things that humans are doing to the ecological network. When science discovers a problem, human society has not necessarily been persuaded or done anything to avert ecological problems.

The value of Sufficiency begs the question, "How much is enough?"

Several religious institutions have adopted “green” policies:

The Holy Wisdom Monastery, north of Madison, emphasizes care for the earth: <http://benedictinewomen.org/care-for-the-earth/> and I find at their website that in late March 2010 the U.S. Green Building Council awarded Holy Wisdom Monastery a Platinum rating – the highest level of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) certification available.

St. Olaf’s science center has also received the highest LEED rating. <http://www.stolaf.edu/news/index.cfm?fuseaction=NewsDetails&id=4767>

The Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary in the Philippines <http://www.thomasberry.org/Essays/TheGreatWorkUnderway.html> has a Center for the Integrity of Creation, 14 stations of the Cosmic Journey, and a Bio-Shelter.

Christ in the desert monastery maintains one of the largest private solar power systems in the US, which provides its only source of electricity. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monastery_of_Christ_in_the_Desert

In Zimbabwe they plant trees as Eucharist in the tradition of the African Association of Earthkeeping Churches. <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/bron/PDF--Christianity/Daneel--African%20Earthkeeping%20Churches.pdf>

Three (3) Strategies and Conclusion:

The word “Environment” separates us from nature and implies that we Humans are apart from the rest of nature. He said there are three strategies being taken by Lutherans and other Christians in response to the call to change our human abuse of the earth:

- 1) Eco Justice, liberation theology, grass roots organizing
- 2) Stewardship
- 3) Creation Spirituality: Christian communities, Eastern Orthodox traditions which aims to change the relationship of humans and the rest of nature, to get past the deep western dualism using Sacraments of creation: water, food & Eucharist. All matter is sacred and a medium of the presence & power of God Earth is the icon that hangs around God’s neck. Conversion can be an inner journey and creation rich Luther stated that we should trust creation through the lens of Christ. Think of human economy as not subject and object but with (and part of—my words) the economy of nature.

Lutherans have traditionally done mercy better than justice though the Augustana tradition has been noisy with justice and advocacy.

I’ve listed above some websites that tell more about topics Rasmussen referred to. You can find more articles by him online. In one called *Drilling in the Cathedral* he quotes Simone Weil, “How can Christianity call itself catholic, if the universe itself is left out?”

<http://www.earthandspiritcenter.org/Cosmology/Cosmology2/4-8%20-%20Drilling%20in%20the%20Cathedral%20-%20Larry%20Rasmussen.pdf>