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MATTHEW FOX on  
**SEEING CHALLENGE**  
as ADVENTURE

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# Listening in With . . . Matthew Fox



Theologian and activist **Matthew Fox, Ph.D.**, was a Dominican friar for 34 years before Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) expelled him in 1993. Fox's *faux pas?* Reviving Creation Spirituality, which decries original sin (the doctrine that we're all born sinners) in favor of Original Blessing (seeing all creation as divine). Creation Spirituality blends teachings from the Christian mystics with science, the arts, social justice, environmentalism, and ideas from other spiritual traditions worldwide (including those of indigenous cultures). Wasting no time, Fox became an Episcopal priest the year following his ouster. Here, he talks with *Unity Magazine* editor **Katy Koontz** about seeing challenge as an adventure—and what it's like to get a pink slip from the Vatican.

# Champion of Challenge

**Katy Koontz:** In your new book, *Stations of the Cosmic Christ*, you share some simple and useful spiritual practices that people can use to affect change. Can you give some examples?

**Matthew Fox:** The book contains photos of 16 works of art, one for each of the 16 stations, now on display at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. They include seven clay tablets created by the late M.C. Richards that depict “I Ams” (including “I Am the Good Shepherd,” “I Am the Living Bread,” “I Am the Light,” and so forth), plus nine icons created by Javier Lemus, an artist from El Salvador, that depict the Cosmic Christ events in the story of Jesus (such as his baptism, the resurrection, the transfiguration, Pentecost, and so on).

Together they create a practice. Like the Stations of the Cross in the Catholic and Anglican churches, they represent a sort of minipilgrimage you make by walking from station to station. We also have a set of meditation cards showing each station, so you can do the practice at home or while traveling, making it very portable. You don’t have to go to a church to do it. Not everyone is hanging around churches these days.

**KK:** I love the idea of a portable practice.

**MF:** The idea is to enter more fully into the Cosmic Christ—the archetype of the divinity present in all beings. Thomas Merton, the late Catholic monk, said that all beings are holy and that’s exactly what the tradition of the Cosmic Christ is about. Praying that, getting it more fully into our hearts and minds, is the purpose of this practice.

Each one of these stations reminds us of our own holiness. After all, it’s not Jesus talking in the Gospels saying, “I am divine.” Jesus never talked like this. It’s the Christ talking, which is to say that each one of us is divine. How

are we divine to one another? How are we a light to one another? How are we living bread to one another? How are we good shepherds? Are we living up to our potential?

**KK:** Those are some pretty potent questions.

**MF:** They are indeed. If we’re going to evolve, we have to begin to take on the mantle of our Christhood and of what the Buddhists would call our Buddha nature—that’s the Cosmic Christ in the East. I think there’s a parallel teaching about the Buddha nature being present in all beings. So, too, the Christ nature is present in all beings.



*I Am the Good Shepherd*

Photo Credit: Mark Serr

**KK:** What do you think spirituality on a global scale—and the Christian Church in particular—will look like in 20 years?

**MF:** The church may well divide, thanks to those intent on building thick walls and moats of orthodoxy, and I sense the younger generation will be increasingly more ecumenical—more interfaith. They’ll have more of a Creation Spirituality consciousness because the eco-consciousness is becoming clearer and clearer to young people.

Look at what’s happened in Flint, Michigan, with water. We can no longer take the basics of life for granted. There’s the whole reality of air pollution, water pollution, rain forests dying, and many species going extinct. I think young people recognize that this is the challenge of our time, and it is a spiritual challenge as well as a technological and a moral challenge.

We need to see the earth as sacred again, to recognize that it’s a unique and precious gift. People imagine that we’re going to get in spaceships and go someplace else. That’s ridiculous. This is our home and either we take care of it or it’s going to swallow us up. Even Pope Francis is very explicit about this. It’s good to have a pope who is on board.

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**KK:** What's your take on Pope Francis? He's certainly unlike any other pope in history.

**MF:** He has elements of John XXIII, the pope who called the Second Vatican Council, who was also serious about trying to reform the Catholic Church. I think he's learned a lot about interfaith—he wrote a book with a Jewish rabbi in Argentina, and his friendship with this rabbi is very real. He's been less protected, less in a hothouse of ecclesial makings than many of the previous popes. He's seen third-world poverty up close and personal in his home country and in the barrio working with the poorest of the poor for many years. Also, in Argentina only 10 percent of the Catholics are practicing, so I think he learned a certain humility in that the Catholic Church is not exactly running things there.

**KK:** Only 10 percent? That's surprising.

**MF:** Yes, it's not as if Argentina is a hotbed of Catholic vitality. So there's been a very big shift from the previous two papacies to this one. The Catholic Church has been split through much of my lifetime between the spirit of Vatican II and the extreme right wing, which had two popes running things for 34 years. This pope is trying to resurrect the Vatican II spirit, and he represents more of the people.

There's a big battle going on, and I wouldn't want to predict how it's going to end. I think it's going to be pretty interesting, though, so one has to keep one's integrity and just stay grounded and not worry too much about popes.

By the way, the encyclical Francis issued about the earth is a really good piece of work. I might add that 80 percent of it was written by a student of mine, Sean McDonagh, a priest who went through my master's program.

**KK:** I had no idea—that must have been somewhat confirming for you.

**MF:** It's interesting because the previous two popes called my work, and this is a quote, "dangerous and deviant." But this pope, one might say, is plagiarizing it. So I've lived long enough to see a 180-degree turn in the Catholic Church. It's kind of fun.

**KK:** What did you think when Benedict stepped aside?

**MF:** That maybe the Holy Spirit is alive and well after all. I think it was one of the smartest things he ever did, and one of his better accomplishments.

**KK:** When did you first start having challenges with the teachings of the Catholic Church?

**MF:** In high school, my friends were Protestant or agnostic or something, and we'd have these discussions and debates. I wanted answers, so I would go to the parish priest who was a Dominican, and he would give me books to read. That's why I was drawn to the Dominican Order, because it has an intellectual tradition and I was interested in ideas.

To be alive is to keep your mind alert. You can't just swallow everything, hook, line, and sinker. No institution has all the answers, and corruption can take over any human organization. Obviously the stories about priestly pedophilia that have come out in the open in the past 20 years are part of the shadow of the Catholic Church. So part of being grounded is that you need to keep asking questions.

I was blessed because when I went to study in Paris in the late '60s, I met my mentor, Père Chenu, who taught me the tradition of Creation Spirituality, which combines the mystical side of religion with the prophetic side of justice, social justice, eco-justice, and the rest. That's why I devoted my work to trying to make that tradition come alive. It keeps you on your toes.

**KK:** When, as you've put it, the Catholic Church "fired" you ...

**MF:** I got a pink slip from the Vatican.

**KK:** What was your initial reaction? Given what you have done with your life, you must see that as a blessing now, but did you see it that way at the time?

**MF:** I was in the middle of writing my book, *The Reinvention of Work*. The doorbell rang and it was a FedEx from my provincial in Chicago, informing me that I was out of the Dominican Order. I remember sitting on the steps opposite the front door with this FedEx in my hand. A message came to me, which said, "You are a post-denominational priest." I had never heard that phrase, *post-denominational*. But it was quite synchronistic to be writing a book on reinventing work and then to be thrown out of my work—my brotherhood with the Dominicans—after 34 years. A few years later, that phrase became the subtitle of my autobiography, *Confessions: The Making of a Post-Denominational Priest*.

So I was a little surprised, yes. My book on Thomas Aquinas [*Sheer Joy: Conversations With Thomas Aquinas on Creation Spirituality*] had just come out. Thomas Aquinas is a great Dominican, and I remember thinking naively, *Now they'll never kick me out*. There's something to be said for naivete.

**KK:** What happened next?

**MF:** I wanted to stay in the Christian tradition and work with young people to reinvent forms of worship and liturgy and ritual. These young Anglicans in southern England were doing that—bringing raves into worship. I asked how I could help and they said, “If you were an Episcopal priest you could assist us with this.” I thought about it, prayed about it, and it was clear. The pope had fired me; he didn’t need me anymore. So I went to the Episcopal bishop in San Francisco, Bishop Swing, and told him I was thinking of becoming Episcopalian. He gave me the green light.

**KK:** Do you think all challenges are blessings in disguise?

**MF:** Surely—and for a lot of reasons. Challenges bring out the best in us. Our adrenaline kicks in and we get energized. Challenge keeps us alert. It keeps us alive. It keeps us young. Meister Eckhart said, “I am younger today than I was yesterday, and if I am not younger tomorrow than I am today, I would be ashamed of myself.” Spiritual life is about growing younger, not older, and challenge helps us with that. So challenge is not a bad thing—we *need* challenges. It means our species will evolve to another level. That’s how we have to look at it, and that’s a wonderful thing.

**KK:** The way you put it is actually pretty exciting.

**MF:** Exactly! It’s an adventure. And it’s important that elders and young people work together on this adventure.

**KK:** You’ve often said that we need an intergenerational wisdom—how does that work?

**MF:** First, both ends of the spectrum have to look inside and see who they are and what they have to offer. I think we should have rights of passage for elders as well as for young people so the elders realize that getting old is not just about your body slowing down. In fact, I make a big point of replacing the word *retirement* with *refirement*—rediscovering the fire in your belly after you’ve left the formal, institutional workplace, and asking how you can give back. The elders have to become more conscious of their calling because young people need as much help as they can get. They face huge challenges today regarding the earth crisis and more.

Then, of course, the young have to realize they’re not just here to fall in love, get married, and grow a family. That’s too simple today. They have to realize that being citizens of the world and stewards of the earth for future generations is part of their vocation.

When I wrote *Occupy Spirituality* with Adam Bucko in 2013, we surveyed young adults and found 98 percent want elders but can’t find them. So the elders should be going out of their way to try to connect with young people.

Then, of course, we can do rituals together. I’ve been working on this ritual we call the Cosmic Mass for about 20 years. It’s wonderful to see young people DJing and VJing and rapping, and to have elders there, too, participating through dance and so forth. Rituals should be a place where the young and the old get refreshed and regenerated together. That’s how it is in any Native American ceremony—many generations are represented. That’s part of building the courage for the challenge and for the adventure.

**KK:** The late Catholic Priest Thomas Berry once said you were surely the most challenging theologian in America. Do you agree?

**MF:** I’m honored that he said that, but I don’t sit around comparing myself to others. “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the most challenging of all?” I just try to speak my mind and do my homework and think about things. Interpreting Jesus and applying him to different cultures and historical moments is my job as a theologian, but to live it is *all* of our jobs. I think being able to challenge one’s self and others is a wonderful vocation. I don’t really set out to challenge—I just set out to tell the truth as I see it—and I guess some people find that a challenge. 

## The Principles of Creation Spirituality

All creation is fundamentally a blessing, with the Divine dwelling in all things. Therefore, God need not be seen as having only one form (for example, male or female) or one literal name. Diversity—including that expressed by multiple cultures, religions, and ancestral traditions—is honored, and wisdom is seen in all the world’s sacred traditions. Creation Spirituality recognizes all people as mystics (entering the mystical as much through beauty as through suffering), artists (whose creativity is their prayer), and prophets (whose work is to interfere with all forms of injustice). Through spiritual practice, including meditation and entering the Silence, we are able to find our true selves, moving beyond fear into compassion and community. In fact, the basic work of God is compassion, and as children of the Divine, this is our calling. Such compassion also extends to the earth, recognizing that ecological justice is essential for the sustainability of life on this planet.