

MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS SERIES

MATTHEW FOX



Essential Writings on Creation Spirituality

Selected with an Introduction by

CHARLES BURACK



ORBIS BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

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The Creation Spirituality Tradition



WHAT IS CREATION SPIRITUALITY?

Like Falling Off My Horse: Père Chenu Names the Creation Spiritual Tradition

In the fall of 1967, Fox began his studies at the Institut Catholique de Paris, where Père M. D. Chenu, O.P., named the crucial distinction between creation spirituality (CS) and fall/redemption religion. That distinction and the emphasis on culture in spirituality formed the foundation of Fox's future work. (CB)

The CS tradition, as the name indicates, considers creation—nature, the cosmos, Earth, all of existence—to be sacred. CS mystics affirm that our first experience of the Divine is our wondrous experience of the universe. The tradition does not put humans first; rather, the prime reality is the totality of creation, just as in the first chapter of Genesis, and just as in contemporary science with its new creation story of the 13.8-billion-year unfolding of the universe, and just as in the works of the pre-modern mystics who offered a psychology of microcosm/macrocsm, and just as we need to do to save Mother Earth as we know her. CS is the oldest tradition in the Bible (the J source) and constitutes the very tradition from which the historical Jesus derives—namely, the wisdom tradition. Therefore, it is feminist and welcoming of science since wisdom is feminine and the job of scientists is to teach us about nature. It is also prophetic since “wisdom is a friend of the prophets,” and justice is needed

to save Earth and its many species, including our own human communities. (MF)

I loved Paris. I could walk forever the streets of the Latin Quarter. There were Saint-Severin; Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre; Notre Dame (even if Thomas Aquinas once said, during the construction of it, that he would give the entire cathedral for just one lost book of the theologian Gregory of Nyssa); the monument at the end of the Île de la Cité to the deported ones of the Holocaust; Shakespeare & Company, where T. S. Eliot, Hemingway, Joyce, and so many other great writers had hung out . . . I used to walk the Latin Quarter imagining what it must have been like in Aquinas's day or Abelard and Heloise's day, when the university was just coming into existence and ferment was everywhere. The museums drew me regularly, especially the Rodin museum, which was within walking distance of where I lived my first year in Paris, and the Jeu de Paume, where the impressionists were displayed . . .

In addition to a sense of history, Paris gave me a sense of the artist. Little children accompanied their parents to art museums and appeared just as curious and enthralled with the paintings as the adults were—this was new to me. When my mentor Père M. D. Chenu would one day say to me, “Remember, the greatest tragedy in theology in the last three hundred years has been the separation of the theologian from the poet, the dancer, the painter, the dramatist, the potter, the filmmaker,” I knew what he was talking about. I too had ceased writing poetry the moment I entered higher education. Now, in Paris, the poet began to return to my soul. There was permission in the air to be an artist. Here I learned that art is not about getting a degree or even being a genius. Art is about the way we see our world, and let it see us. I had to leave my own country to learn this lesson, but it was a lesson I have never forgotten . . .

Being immersed in an ancient, fascinating, rich culture and seeing things in a whole new way with a new language and new customs and new food and new values were all part of my

awakening in Paris. They were all part of learning about culture and religion, culture and spirituality—an awareness that was deepened considerably by my Master’s thesis in theology on Jesus’s prayer in the New Testament. As an American in Paris, I was learning about the relativity of my own culture: its language, its history, its interpretation of history (someone in America had taught me that we had invented cars and cinema and all kinds of things that Europeans would have other opinions about), its global politics, its war in Vietnam, its racism, its mythologies. . . .

I made my way to the school of my choice, the Institut Catholique de Paris, or the “Catho” for short. The Institut was begun in the nineteenth century, but the theology faculty, where I enrolled, traces its history back to the original University of Paris in the twelfth century. I love the French system of education at the doctoral level, since it emphasizes *thinking* and is only minimally concerned with exams, pleasing the faculty, and memorizing. . . . I thank Thomas Merton many times over for his advice to come here.

I came to Paris with one pressing, urgent question that superseded all other concerns for me: what is the relationship—if any—between mysticism and social justice? I felt that was the most foundational issue for me and possibly for my generation. In the midst of social revolutions such as the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War protests, this question kept haunting me. It seemed to be the nexus where culture and spirituality or culture and healthy religion meet. But there was very little that I could find in the traditional literature that answered the question for me. I remember how excited I was to see a book by Père Jean Danielou with the wonderful title *Prayer as a Political Problem*. My heart sank as I read it, however. Unfortunately, the title was the only worthwhile part of the book. His politics were rightest, and his grasp of prayer was anything but magnificent. I began reading Louis Cognet’s four-volume series on the history of Christian spirituality from the Bible to the twelfth century, taking copious notes and following the leads in his footnotes to

other books. I realized that it would be a process, wrestling with my fundamental question about prayer and justice, spirituality and culture. . . .

My classes at the Catho were a large part of that process, though sometimes I felt like we were taking two steps forward and one back; or two back and one forward. From Père Michel de Certeau—a young and vibrant though slightly nervous Jesuit who came to class in dark glasses, having recently been in a serious automobile accident—I took a seminar on the seventeenth-century Jesuit Père Jean-Joseph Surin . . . I was keen on relating spirituality to politics, and seventeenth-century France would be the last place to look for such a connection. On the other hand, by becoming so steeped in the spiritual pathology of that period (Madame Guyon, one of the Parisian gurus of the period, had the name “Jesus Christ” carved on her breasts—for whom to see, I was never sure!), I was seeing the *Via Negativa* of modern spirituality: how *not* to do spirituality.

In my first year, Louis Cognet offered a course on “Bach’s spirituality,” and though my French was too lean to understand much of the technical language, I would sit in the back of the room taking in by osmosis what I felt was an important subject. I remember saying to myself that there was no theology school in all of North America where one can listen to someone lecturing on the spirituality of Bach. Even though I wasn’t getting the details, I was truly in a good place just being there.

Cognet himself offered a three-year lecture course on the entire history of Western spirituality. These classes were especially valuable to me. His knowledge plus his sense of humor made the time pass swiftly, even when it was deep winter, and he had to compete with the one radiator that kept singing out of tune and releasing enough heat to overheat the entire school. In his final year of lectures, he covered the pressing theological issues of the sixties: the role of Karl Marx, who was “far more influential on religion than Père Henri Lacordaire” in the nineteenth century; the role of Freud in psychology—the analyst is often the priest in our society; subjectivism

of seventeenth-century Protestant and Catholic spirituality as passé today; secularization; atheism. He felt the “death of God” theologians were asking the basic spiritual questions of our time, including those of language itself. He urged us to go beyond the pessimistic theology of Augustine and its Neoplatonic suppositions. Cognet cited Dietrich Bonhoeffer for his emphasis on the essential role of justice in our spirituality, thus putting an end to pietistic religion. God becomes engaged by *creation*—not just by the incarnation. This would prove a dominant theme in my development of a creation spirituality.

Cognet, who published ten books on Christian spirituality and was an accomplished organist and photographer, as well as a scholar and priest, died suddenly of a heart attack in his early fifties, a year after I graduated. I will never forget his final lecture, in which he laid out the principles that must guide a new spirituality for our times. He said that we need a spirituality that includes the body, justice making, a sense of history and evolution, therefore a spirituality of matter that is cognizant of science. In his final lecture Cognet challenged me deeply when he said that:

all we need to know is that there is a real drama going on, and we’re in it and so is God—we don’t know how it will turn out. The reign of God is already here since salvation is not somewhere else. Terrestrial values are real values—justice, generosity, kindness are already salvation. The Beatitudes are right now: justice has to be reached on this earth. To work for it is the church’s duty. There must be a vertical as well as a horizontal relationship to God for these things to happen, say what you will. The task can fail— evolution can contradict itself. The risk is real.

In retrospect, I see that much of my work has indeed been in response to Cognet’s challenge in that lecture . . .

The two most influential doctoral seminars I took were from Abbé Marchasson and Père M. D. Chenu. Marchasson was an

older priest, an historian whose expertise was nineteenth-century French history. He had devised a method (the French were very big on *methods*) for examining nineteenth-century French newspapers to derive from them the philosophy behind the culture . . . After several weeks in his class, I began to ask myself: What am I doing here? Why did I take this class? Then the great French word hit me: *la méthode!* Method. Yes, the methodology was interesting, and it held promise if I was serious about studying culture and spirituality. Why not take the method used here and apply it to contemporary America?

With this in mind, I sat down with Marchasson and made my proposal to him: I would do my doctoral study on some influential American publication, employing his methodology to discern the ongoing suppositions in that culture toward religion/spirituality. “Ah, yes,” he said, “you can take this method to the New World.” *The New World*, I thought. I had never looked at America that way before. For me it had been my *only* world, and currently, with the riots and rebellions and the bloody mess in Vietnam, it appeared anything but new.

Then there was my encounter with Père Chenu. Seventy-six years old, big, bushy eyebrows, excited, dynamic, funny, political, warm, affectionate—he became my mentor. He was the reason I remained a Dominican. He had what I hoped to see in all Dominicans: life, passion, political consciousness, wisdom. And above all, the French *passion for ideas*, an intellectual life, an intellectual history, that served a greater cause. It was Père Chenu who kept me in the order—not because we ever talked about it but because of his example. From the French, and from Père Chenu in particular, I learned respect for the power of ideas and for those who carry them.

While I owed to Abbé Marchasson a methodology that gave me access to a critical appraisal of religion in my culture, I owed to Père Chenu the answer to my question of questions: how do I relate spirituality to culture, prayer to social justice, politics to mysticism? He named the creation spirituality tradition for me. In encountering this tradition, my entire life would gain a

focus and a direction that it never had before. It would also gain a notoriety that I never, in my ecclesial naiveté, could have predicted.

I remember as if it were today that moment in our seminar, in the dimly lit upper room at the Catho with the green velvet cloth on the table, when Chenu named the two spiritual traditions: that of “fall/redemption” and that of “creation-centered spirituality.” Scales fell from my eyes; I was bumped from my horse! The most pressing question I had brought with me to Paris—how do mysticism and social justice relate (if at all)—now had a context! So did the issues of dualism and the demeaning of body and matter. Creation spirituality would bring it all together for me: the scriptural and Jewish spirituality (for it was the oldest tradition in the Bible, that of the Yahwist author of the ninth or tenth century before Christ); science and spirituality; politics and prayer; body and spirit; Christianity and other world religions; and soon, the ecological movement. It would be my task to study creation spirituality more deeply and to begin a cultural translation of it. This task would prove to be a process in its own right with unforeseen consequences.

In Chenu’s seminar, three-quarters of the students were from Latin America. It was in his work in the worker-priest movement in the forties and fifties that Chenu developed the methodology of praxis preceding theory. He used to say, “I did not do theology in an armchair. I tested it in the field.” He would attend meetings of the worker-priests and workers just to listen to their dialogues. He was not there to give speeches, but to listen and offer feedback if asked. It is little wonder that liberation theology’s base-community movement found such support in his person and in his methodology. That is one reason why Gustavo Gutiérrez cited Chenu in his classic work *A Theology of Liberation* and why students from Latin America were so drawn to him . . .

Time and again Chenu reminded us that movements of the laity had sparked the church renewal in the twelfth century, “the only renaissance that succeeded in the West,” because it

came from below and not from above. Laity would lead today's renewal of church life too, he was convinced.

In his seminar on twelfth-century spirituality, he would bring large picture books to class, volumes of the twelfth-century cathedrals. "You can't do theology without art," he would say, and "you can't understand twelfth-century spirituality without appreciating the architecture and the artisans and engineers behind it." In addition to appreciating the artist, Chenu also welcomed *youth*. He never talked down to students when he taught. I never heard him do anything but encourage us young thinkers, exuding enthusiasm and excitement about our questions and ideas. His approach to thinking was one of "Yes, and," not "Yes, but." He had a deeply youthful soul himself; no trace of complacency or cynicism was visible in him. He was a deeply joyful and humorous man. Once, when he was discussing Nicholas of Cusa in class, he gave the basic information about him: a theologian, scientist, mathematician, diplomatic, and "a cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church." Immediately his eyes began to twinkle, and he looked up swiftly to say, "Not necessarily a good reference, you understand." Though Chenu was silenced and forbidden to publish for years under Pope Pius XII, there was no bitterness in the man . . .

Sometimes when I wonder what my role is as theologian, I think of an interview Chenu gave when he was eighty-six years old. Asked "What do you think of the crisis in the church today?" Chenu replied:

It's a godsend. A theologian has to be immersed in the movement of history. You might say that when something new is beginning, when things start to fall asunder, that's when he's most deeply happy, because then he's given a unique opportunity to observe the Word of God at work in history. The *nowness* of the Word of God, shaking up the world—that's where true theology springs from! . . .

Christians fear change, and so does the Church, insofar as it is a society of Christians. Afraid of being blamed by the future, it prefers security to freedom. I prefer freedom.

During our seminar with Chenu in the spring of 1968, all of Paris was paralyzed by student riots and strikes of civil workers. The Sorbonne was closed, as were most schools and businesses, though the Catho was still in session. At the end of one class, Chenu shut his notebook and said, “We have been talking about twelfth-century history—here is your chance to make some history. Go out and join the revolution! Don’t come back next week; come back in two weeks and tell me what you have contributed!” He was seventy-six at the time. —CNF 72–82

Contrasting Creation Spirituality to Fall/Redemption Religion

All spirituality is about roots. For all spirituality is about living a non-superficial and therefore a deep, rooted, or radical (from *radix*, root) life. Roots are collective and not merely personal—much less are they private or individualized. To get in touch with roots is to leave the private quest for *my* roots to get in touch with *our* roots. Where roots grow and nourish in the bowels of the earth, things come together, and there a collectivity of energies is shared. No root that was ruggedly individualistic would long survive. In the earth’s bowels roots feed on the same organisms as they twist and turn interdependently among one another. The name that religion gives this collectivity of roots is “tradition.”

Tradition is the common nourishing and searching and growing of our roots. We need tradition as much as we need one another. It has been said of the late Rabbi Heschel that he believed in the transmigration of souls because this doctrine “contains a profound religious truth. For one to know oneself, one must seek to understand one’s past, one’s heritage, the religious tradition from which one emerges . . . The human soul is born with a past.” Westerners have been born with a past, and

it is important to get us in touch with those roots once again. For the question arises: How much in touch with our roots are we of the West? Roots, being underground energies, can easily be covered over and covered up. They can become forgotten and even be violently repressed. They can be put on a shelf or exalted on a pedestal where they never truly intersect our own lives and where they dry up and then die. They can become lost and unknown for centuries, and only explorers into the bowels of the earth who journey from the light of day and the ego-separations of daytime to the dark caves of our collectively hidden unconscious can reclaim them.

Christianity is in great danger of forgetting its roots. Much of this is due to the overly weighty influence of nonbiblical philosophies in the history of Christian spirituality—ways of thought like Stoicism, gnosticism, Platonism and Neoplatonism. Much also is due to the political, sexual, and economic dominance of Christianity and Empire, so that much that was authentic in biblical spirituality was twisted or repressed in order to put Christianity at the service of Empire building and Empire maintaining. Thus the passage from Christianity as a way of life (spirituality), which is how the early Christians saw themselves in the *Book of Acts*, to Christianity as a religion. Thus too the passage from creation spirituality, which sees life as a blessing, to the dominance of redemption motifs, motifs that instead of reminding people that they are of divine stock (“images of God”) instruct even the young—especially the young!—in how corrupt they are or ought to consider themselves. Thus the unhealthy and unbalanced sexual dominance of the male and masculine images (for example, that of climbing Jacob’s ladder) in Western mystical history.

Western spirituality has two basic traditions—that which starts with the experience of sin and develops a fall/redemption spiritual motif; and that which starts with the experience of life as a blessing and develops a creation-centered spirituality. This book’s purpose (*Western Spirituality: Historical Roots, Ecumenical Routes*) is to put Westerners in touch once again with

the more neglected of these traditions, namely that of blessing/creation. This tradition will emphasize humanity's divinization rather than humanity's fallenness.

A Christian professor who is a fine and distinguished scholar of the Hebrew Bible said in a lecture recently that creation spirituality must never ignore the redemption tradition. As an abstract statement this declaration is true enough, but as a critical comment on the history of Christian spirituality it utterly misses the point and in fact continues the ongoing repression of the creation tradition. For the evidence is overwhelming that in Christian history the fall/redemption motif, so often championed by dualists like Augustine and Bossuet, has held overpowering sway—it condemned Pelagius and Scotus Eriugena, Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart, and it platonized and thus neutralized Francis Assisi. It practically wrote women off the face of the spiritual map, locking them up whenever possible, virtually ignoring their experience and their writings, with only a few breakthroughs visible such as Catherine of Siena or Teresa of Avila. In the over-emphasis on salvation history and the silence vis-à-vis the history of nature, society, and creativity, it has ignored rich and badly needed roots in scriptural and historical spiritual development—to say nothing of ecumenical spirituality. It has put the body down and called this repression holy; it has encouraged private conversions and sentimental pieties that have nothing to say to what Nicolai Berdyaev calls *theosis* or a “cosmic and social religion”—thus it renders sacraments and ritual trivial. It has substituted a private “righteousness” for biblical justice; it has taught sin consciousness rather than peoples’ capacity for the divine; it has more often fostered curses than blessings. It isolates: it isolates individuals from themselves, for example as regards their own passions, and it isolates individuals from one another. It thus very readily becomes a tool for dividing and conquering that sacralizes and legitimizes those who would lord it over others, whether in state or church. It has remained silent about that ultimate way of life that Jesus taught and died for—namely, compassion, and when has it consented to include compassion as a part of spirituality

at all, it has sentimentalized this biblical name for the divine which in fact is about setting captives free. It has failed to resist docetism and the dehumanizing of Jesus and the incarnation event. In its dualistic view of the world, it puts salvation history against history, supernature against nature, soul against body, redemption against creation, artist against intellectual, heaven (and hell) against earth, the sensual against the spiritual, man against woman, individual against society and condemns all those with a cosmic vision (creation after all *is* cosmic) as pantheists. Its one-sided spiritual theology does not even have the term *panentheist* in its vocabulary.

In short, I suggest that it is not creation spirituality that needs to bend over backwards to include the redemption tradition, since the latter is just about the only tradition most Christians have been exposed to; rather, it is the redemption spirituality that should quit its hegemony for a while, practice something of the detachment it preaches to others, and listen and learn from those who represent the creation-centered tradition and are trying to live it. Creation spirituality, far from ignoring redemption, actually involves itself in reunderstanding the meaning of redemption in different cultural and historical periods. This is clearly the case in Latin American Liberation Theology, which is clearly a species of creation spirituality. Creation spirituality is dedicated to what biblical scholar Dr. Helen Kenik, in her essay "Toward a Biblical Basis for Creation Theology," demonstrates to be justice as the act of preserving creation and passing it on as a blessing to others. The nature/grace dualism that haunts the Western psyche is reinforced by the hegemony of redemption spirituality *over* creation spirituality, of grace *over* nature, as if nature itself is not graced. Moreover, the fall/redemption tradition has become distorted itself to the extent that it ignores the gracefulness of creativity and creation. Just as creation-centered thinkers do not ignore redemption motifs, so too must the redemption-thinkers begin to include creation in their consciousness in a deep way in order to redefine what is meant by redemption in the West.

Nor are cries for “reconciliation” between the two traditions to be heeded at this time in Christian history. For, as Krister Stendahl has pointed out, a reconciliation that comes too soon is nothing but a surrender by the powerless to the powers that be. When unequals reconcile, what obtains is capitulation, not reconciliation. Reconciliation is for equals, not for those still bound in a powerful/powerless situation. The fact is that creation spirituality remains an unwanted step-child in Western Christianity whose mainstream has invested so heavily and so long in an Augustinian original sin and redemption motif and a patriarchal consciousness of empire-building. Instead of reconciliation at this date, what is needed is more and more scholarship that uncovers the wonders and beauties of creation spirituality on the one hand and more and more persons willing to throw themselves into living it on the other. For only out of this living will a lost tradition be refound and reborn. —WS 1–5

A Spiritual Paradigm for Our Times

I believe that the creation-centered spiritual tradition represents the appropriate spiritual paradigm for our time. I also believe that this tradition and the living of it represents a Copernican revolution in religion. Copernicus moved people from believing that Earth was the center around which the universe revolved to believing that Earth moved about the sun. In religion we have been operating under the model that humanity, and especially sinful humanity, was the center of the spiritual universe. This is not so. The universe itself, blessed and graced, is the proper starting point for spirituality. Original blessing is prior to any sin, original or less than original . . . Chapter one of Genesis begins with a cosmology—a celebration of the goodness of the universe and earth with all its creatures. Chapter two gets into human fallenness. The time has come to let anthropocentrism go, and with it to let the preoccupation with human sinfulness give way to attention to divine grace. In the process sin itself will be more fully understood and more successfully dealt with. The eco-crises of our time are witness to the failures of religion and