

## Theme 2

### Creation as Blessing and the Recovery of the Art of Savoring Pleasure

#### *Original Blessing, Theme 2...*

Blessing is the word behind the word, the desire behind the creation.

We can say blessing preceded creation, too, for blessing was its purpose.

As Rabbi Heschel puts it, “Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy.”

Elie Wiesel points out, “The concept of original sin is alien to Jewish tradition.”

We enter a broken and torn and sinful world—that is for sure.  
But we do not enter as blotches on existence, as sinful creatures,  
we burst into the world as “original blessings.”

If creation is a blessing and a constantly original one, then our proper response would be to enjoy it. Pleasure is one of the deepest spiritual experiences of our lives. Ecstasy is the experience of God.

Blessing is politically dangerous; the art of savoring is politically suspect; pleasure is too often a route to sharing the pleasure—which is justice-making.

The God of Dabhar and of blessing does not tolerate being dammed up for too long. She has too much Eros, too much love of life, too much desire to share the blessing and delight in our response to it.

God’s ecstasy will not forever be forgotten.  
Is that what Jesus the Christ came to remind us about?

-Matthew Fox

=====End of Section=====

## Sacred Pleasure

An interview with Riane Eisler

**Matt Henry:** Matthew Fox and you are both very skilful and deliberate with words, including the titles of books. Matthew's *Original Blessing* and your book, *Sacred Pleasure* are cases in point. They're reasonably synonymous phrases.

**Riane Eisler:** And they're both heresies.

**M.H.:** Could you say a little about your choice of the title *Sacred Pleasure*, and the power inherent in such titles?

**R.E.:** My hope is that the power inherent in these titles makes people question. To ask: "Oh, is this possible—that pleasure could be sacred, that it's not original sin, but original blessing?" If we are to move to a more caring society, we have to ask not only what's wrong, but what is possible.

**M.H.:** And *Sacred Pleasure* approaches both the past and the present/future to ask what is possible.

**R.E.:** As you know, I start *Sacred Pleasure* with observing the link between candles, music, flowers and wine, as they are both the stuff of romance, sex, and love. They are also the stuff of religious ritual. Although that is very striking, it is very seldom noted. The book is an exploration of pleasure, and yes, ecstasy, which is characteristic of sexual ecstasy—that carnal union, as well as being what mystics have written about over the ages, that feeling of oneness. And oneness also is what we call the Divine. I was very struck by that.

I was struck also by how odd it seemed to me as I looked at earlier archaeological finds, earlier imagery, that so much of the sacred imagery we've inherited—and not only Western, but also Eastern, really doesn't celebrate pleasure—it celebrates pain; it celebrates suffering; it celebrates violence. Whether it's the Mahabharata with these deities slaughtering each other, or the Christian crucifixion. I remember there was a little figure of a woman giving birth at Çatal Hüyük. It also struck me that the act of giving birth, of giving life rather than taking life, is absent from our sacred imagery. These are some of the things that I wanted to explore and invite readers to join me in exploring.

**M.H.:** In several of your books, beginning with *The Chalice and the Blade*, you name two historical social realities as the dominator model and the partnership model. These have remarkable symmetry with *Original Blessing's* Fall/Redemption spirituality and creation-centered spirituality, respectively. Writing within the Creation Spirituality tradition, Fox says that "pleasure is one of the deepest spiritual experiences of our lives. Ecstasy is the experience of God."<sup>1</sup> What do you see as gained and lost by these various models in the way in which they denigrate or embrace pleasure?

**R.E.:** What is gained in the denigration of pleasure is the maintenance of the domination system, because that's a system held together primarily by pain or the fear of pain. Pleasure gets very distorted in that system; it becomes what we call fun, which is really very escapist. It's almost deadening ourselves to what we're really feeling. It also becomes that surge of power that one has when one believes one is subjugating someone else. There are only two alternatives in the domination system—you're either

the dominator or the oppressed—so naturally you define pleasure as what passes for pleasure when you're the dominator, not the dominated. Basically, the sacralization of pain serves a system maintenance function. Yet it's never a complete dominator system. There are always partnership elements in order for us to survive.

In the partnership model, there is also pain. There's pain when we're born; there's pain when we die; there's pain when we're sick; there's pain when we're rejected in love. Yet these pains are not necessary to maintain the system, so the system is held together more by bonds of the sharing of pleasure, whether it's the sharing of food, or sexual pleasure, or the pleasure of the sense of service to others. There's a difference between sacrificing oneself for others, and serving others. That's something very important about the distinction between the two models. It is not that in a domination system there aren't people who serve—but in the religious domination model, they have to renounce everything. I mean, at an extreme, there is the mortification of the flesh, which is pathological. The link between sacred pleasure and original blessing is very strong. They each require different religious myths, stories, rituals, beliefs. In the dominator system, spirituality to a large extent becomes a distancing—the great spiritual figures are the ones who live in a cave. I don't consider that very spiritual. I consider that a perverted form of hedonism, because you're getting pleasure by escaping from the painful reality.

**M.H.:** Meister Eckhart agrees with you. He writes that “asceticism is of no great importance, for it creates more, instead of less self-consciousness.”<sup>2</sup>

**R.E.:** Absolutely; there's also misogyny inherent in that spirituality. There is, in the domination system, a disdainful contempt for women and for the stereotypically feminine. It is of course, women, as mothers, who are socialized to take care of others, but they are supposed to sacrifice themselves for others. It's the same thing, but a different manifestation of the domination system. What I did in *Sacred Pleasure* was to show how it runs through the different constructions of both sexuality and spirituality.

**M.H.:** The words *thanatos* (death-drive, or -focus) and *eros* (life-loving, sacred pleasure-focus) fascinate me. I think on the one hand, our culture has such a preoccupation with *thanatos*, yet does not really know the word. On the other hand, *eros* is often heard, but has been co-opted by pornographers.

**R.E.:** In regard to death, of course, we are born and we die, and we live on borrowed time. These earlier cultures were not ideal. It's not they weren't afraid of dying, and it's not that they did not recognize death. But for the ancients, death was part of the cycle, and the cycle involved sex. And pleasure played a part. We see it in some of the burials, the belief that there is birth, death and rebirth in which the great Mother reclaims what was hers to give. But sex plays a part.

We actually do celebrate death, *thanatos*, and we have confused the other with pornography. Pornography is not about pleasure, that's erotica. Pornography is about the subordinating, tormenting and humiliating, and even the killing of another human being. That sado-masochistic view, which some defend as so radical and fashionable, is really one of the most conservative ways to look at sexuality, because it reinforces that dominator system on the most basic bodily level.

It's not a question of judging people who are engaged in that, because we've all been exposed to that. There is so much that associates sexual pleasure with all of those things that are *not eros*—whether its advertising, pornography, fashion magazines . . . it's the

erotization of violence. Once we become aware of it, then we can ask the question “what purpose does this strange way of looking at sexuality serve?” It is, of course, another way of maintaining the dominator system.

**M.H.:** One of the many compelling points you make is that even when it comes to human reproductive processes, the dominator language has taken hold. The common descriptions of the way the egg and sperm supposedly behave “is practically a carbon copy of the way women and men are expected to behave in dominator cultures, (even though) the real story of what happens between the egg and sperm is radically different.”<sup>3</sup>

**R.E.:** Well, it’s funny.

**M.H.:** Yes, even at that literally microscopic level, we’ve managed to wrap our language around that process and thereby project and perpetuate meanings.

**R.E.:** And it shows how these supposedly “objective” scientists, like everybody else, are so trapped in the dominator mythos.

**M.H.:** You engage the work of geographer James DeMeo, who demonstrates a connection between environments becoming inhospitable, and the arrival and rise of dominator mentalities.<sup>4</sup>

**R.E.:** I’m not an environmental determinist,<sup>5</sup> but there’s no question that where Earth is, if you will, not a good mother, there is a tendency for dominator systems to spring up.

**M.H.:** Certainly that is globally relevant now.

**R.E.:** It’s scary now, we need to move—in an age of nuclear and biological weaponry—we must move to a partnership model to survive. The overpopulation—the environmental despoliation that causes—is inextricably connected with the subordination of women, for where women have higher status, they do not have to define themselves as breeders. Again, we’re back to gender issues.

**M.H.:** Have you encountered much personal or institutional resistance in response to your work?

**R.E.:** Yes, but those people don’t really approach me. I’m lucky; it’s people who appreciate my work who contact me. But I’m sure there are those that think I’m, you know, spawn of the devil. The most resistance comes because of the gender issues I point to. The domination system is so bound up with gender stereotypes, so it’s understandable that people feel uncomfortable when it’s pointed out that some of these gender stereotypes are pathological. I understand that, yet I feel so strongly about it. The great sociologist Louis Wirth said the most important things about a society are those that people don’t like to talk about. We saw that about race, and we certainly see that about gender.

**M.H.:** To quote *Original Blessing* again, “Blessing is politically dangerous; the art of savoring is politically suspect; pleasure is too often a route to sharing the pleasure—which is justice-making. And justice-making conjures up passionate criticism of what is. As W.H. Auden put it, ‘As a rule it was the pleasure-haters who became unjust.’”<sup>6</sup>

**R.E.:** Of course. So many of the pleasure-haters, whether it was the Inquisition . . . Torquemada . . . where anything that gave you pleasure was branded “sinful.” These

people were very sick; so “unjust,” to me, is too mild a world. For so often the pleasure-haters were not simply unjust, but cruel.

**M.H.:** Fox, of course, wound up on the receiving end of the Inquisition’s present incarnation—the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith silenced him for a year; he was subsequently expelled by the Dominicans. How surprising, how refreshing, and how hopeful is it that, even before he outgrew the clerical garments of the Vatican, that this North American, English-speaking, educated, white, middle-class, male, Catholic priest could so emphatically assert the importance of sacred pleasure, original blessing?

**R.E.:** I think it’s wonderful. Every once in a while, we come across a man like that.

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<sup>1</sup> ~~*Original Blessing* p.52~~ End of Section

<sup>2</sup> *Original Blessing* p.201

<sup>3</sup> Riane Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth and the Politics of the body*. HarperCollins, San Francisco, 1995. p.289

<sup>4</sup> Op. Cit. pp.92-94

<sup>5</sup> Environmental determinism, also known as *climatic determinism* or *geographical determinism*, is the view that the physical environment, rather than social conditions, determines culture.

<sup>6</sup> *Original Blessing* pp.54-55

## When Original Blessing Outwits Original Sin

by Diarmuid O'Murchu

The spiritual ferment of the 1960s matured significantly in the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It evolved into some well known movements including: an intense interest in meditation and contemplative prayer, a re-awakening of mystical devotion, several new rituals, fresh ecumenical endeavours, multi-faith dialogue, creation-based spiritualities, eco-feminist theology, and a diverse range of liberation movements. The old certainties had lost both credibility and appeal. A fresh spiritual hunger irrupted. And visionary prophetic people were ready to meet the challenge.

Matthew Fox is one of the controversial, visionary figures of that era, and his book, *Original Blessing*, one of the seminal works articulating the newly emerging spiritual consciousness. The engaging mystical insights of Meister Eckhart, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Francis, and Thomas Aquinas became accessible to the rank and file of human society. Creation spirituality began to break down the old dualistic split between the sacred and the secular. Female insight regained fresh status. And something much bigger than church allegiance was let loose.

### Beyond Original Sin

The book, *Original Blessing*, meant different things to different people—and continues to be a significant primer on *Creation Spirituality*. For myself, it was the title of the book that grabbed my attention, and as I perused through pages 46ff. (on original sin), the provocative originality of the title activated flash-lights in my soul. At last, here was a clear-headed articulation of something I had suspected for much of my adolescent and young adult years: *We are first and foremost the beneficiaries of an original blessing and not the victims of an original sin.*

Nobody doubts or questions the fact that we live in a world of inexplicable pain and suffering, but attempts to explain it in terms of a fundamental (original) flaw have defied credibility for quite a long time. As Matthew Fox himself indicates, the concept of original sin is not even well grounded in either Scripture or the Christian tradition. It is one of those rational, but short-sighted, explanations offered by those who seek to make sense of what is often described as the tragic nature of the human condition. On closer examination, it is a moralistic strategy to dominate and control what is going on in our world, with the added hope that by making people feel a permanent sense of guilt and unworthiness, it will be much easier to control our wayward lives.

Lest the reader is not aware, let me recap the popular myth from which the doctrine of original sin initially evolved. All was peaceful and harmonious in the heavenly realm until open conflict irrupted between two sets of angels (each seeking a monopoly of power and privilege). In a classical dualistic contest, the good angels were victorious and kicked the bad ones out of paradise. They landed on Earth and began to propagate—through sexual intercourse—and through the act of propagation have passed on from one generation to the next the rebellious spirit of disobedience and sin.

Incredulous though the myth is, it caught on, and obviously made sense—and to a degree still does—in situations of great turmoil, violence and oppression. Strange, however, how we missed the anthropocentric foundations for so long: humans are the first to be corrupted, and after that everything becomes prone to sin, death and

corruption. The myth assumes that humans are the first and superior life force, and everything else in creation is merely an object for human use and disposal.

The worldview underpinning the doctrine of original sin is incredibly reductionistic and of course totally idolatrous. The fact that God is the creator of all that is—and was at work in creation for billions of years before humans ever evolved—seems to be either forgotten or consciously ignored by those who initially conceived, and later supported, the doctrine of a fundamental flaw.

### **Re-visiting Worldviews**

Volumes have been written on the topic of original sin. By comparison Matthew Fox's treatment is minimal, a mere six pages, but within that space Matthew provides a concentrated overview, clear and incisive. Most revolutionary, as already indicated, is the invitation to begin where God begins in time, namely with the grace-filled endowment that characterises the entire created order, including humans.

Immediately, several key issues require radical rethinking: our understanding of God, what it means to be human, the nature of sin and grace, and perhaps most formidable of all, the world-view within which people operate in different historical times and contexts. Not surprising, Matthew's vision of a creation-based spirituality quickly led to a plethora of ground-breaking ideas on the meaning of creation in both its planetary and cosmic aspects. This revived field of study came to be known as the New Cosmology.

A great deal has been written on this subject (eg., Swimme and Berry, 1992; Ruether, 1992; O'Murchu, 2004; Primack & Abrams, 2006). For the purpose of this essay I wish to highlight some key insights:

- The epic of evolution, over some 13.7 billion years, cannot be accessed merely through rational logic and scientific investigation. Rather the deeper meaning becomes much more transparent and compelling through story and narrative. There is a great deal more to the story than what rational science can access or verify. Giving the human exclusive priority—anthropocentrism—undermines the deeper meaning of creation's story.
- Creation is a blessing to be savoured, not a torture to be endured. The richly-adorned tapestry engages the imagination and awakens awe and wonder when we truly appreciate the rich diversity and complexity through which everything comes to birth, grows and flourishes. Neither science nor religion highlights this *Via Positiva*.
- This positive acknowledgement in no way denies the paradox of creation-and-destruction (the cycle of birth-death-rebirth) that also characterises every life-form in creation including the cosmic and planetary spheres. This subject is extensively developed not so much by Matthew Fox himself as by those taking his vision to greater depths, notably Swimme & Berry (1992).
- The human is situated within the fabric of creation and not apart from it, or superior to it, which is what both science and religion tend to do. This is also one of Matthew's most original re-constructions: re-calling humanity to a more integrated, interactive and dynamic participation in the unfolding story of everything to which we belong, and without which our lives would be quite meaningless.
- Finally, Matthew attempts to reclaim spirituality (rather than religion): not the ascetic, anti-creation, anti-body, anti-pleasure type that features to

varying degrees in all the great religions, but a spiritual vision that affirms and embraces the foundational goodness with which God has endowed all life forms, including our human existence.

### **Reclaiming an Ethic of Pleasure**

In the vocabulary of spirituality, *pleasure* is a tainted and suspicious word. It tends to be identified with instinct, sex drive, gluttony and hedonism. Interestingly and ironically, it is rarely if ever applied to *power-seeking*, probably the most pleasurable addiction of all. Why pleasure became so demonised is a complex story, one Matthew Fox chooses not to pursue, other than noting that the extreme moralism in mainstream religion arises from the deprivation of a meaningful mysticism.

In striving to reclaim an ethic of pleasure for our time, this seems to be one of Matthew's most innovative insights, also articulated by the American psychotherapist, Bruce Wilshire (1998), who claims that the substantial increase of addictions in our time serves as a cultural compensation for the serious lack of a meaningful mysticism. For Matthew, however, the retrieval of mysticism does not begin with religion or with the individual spiritual seeker. Rather it begins with the cosmic creation in all its divine grandeur, as the first revelation of God's blessed endowment for all that exists.

This cosmic vision, imbued with awe, wonder, and a sense of pleasure that defies all our moralistic categories, is the foundational material of *Original Blessing*, and also of his ground-breaking work, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (Fox 1988). Moving from the Cosmos and the Earth-planet, Matthew then re-visions how we can reclaim the meaning of pleasure in our human embodied existence. This he does most effectively in *Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh* (Fox 1999). Acknowledging human sexuality as a particular God-given focus for embodied pleasure, however, he highlights that the potential for such pleasuring is not reserved to the sexual sphere, but rather is located in every dimension of our embodied existence at both the personal and inter-personal levels.

He also reviews how we can re-appropriate pleasure in ordinary daily life. He has devoted a whole book, *The Reinvention of Work* (Fox 1994) to this challenge. Instead of the drudgery which work has come to be for so many rich people, and the awful boredom due to lack of work for so many poor people, he invites us to see our work as a form of art, an engaged ritual with cosmos and home-planet, far more basic and empowering than any salaried job. This is really prophetic stuff!

### **Is He Taken Seriously?**

How far has Matthew's message reached—into the culture, into the religions, into the Churches? It seems to me that Matthew belongs to what I would call *the league of morphic resonance* (based on the seminal insights of Rupert Sheldrake with whom Matthew co-authored *Natural Grace* in 1997). Matthew has sown seeds that will flower and blossom when the time is ripe. It does not really matter whether major institutions—state or church—pay any heed. For those who are ready to hear, the ideas create a deep resonance, and in a strange way address a crisis the mainstream institutions either ignore or try to subvert.

Three groups of people can be challenged and enlightened by his insights into the meaning of pleasure:

- Firstly, those who still carry the burden of shame, or persistent guilt, especially in the sexual realm. There are many sexually wounded people in our world, especially women and children. Despite all the public display of

sexual symbol and innuendo, millions struggle to integrate a joyful and fulfilling sexual relationship in their lives. What Matthew helps us to reclaim is that sexuality was created by God, not by some evil force; that the frolicsome, erotic, wild dimensions of sexual pleasure and playfulness are not the consequences of Original Sin but are themselves dimensions of the God-given reality of human sexuality.

- Secondly, Matthew offers a pastoral challenge to those who have thrown caution overboard and, as a reaction or compensation, indulge themselves hedonistically whether in alcohol, drugs, excessive sex, or shopping (emerging as the biggest addiction in the USA). In a climate less harshly judgmental, one that provides a larger frame for understanding where we have come from, people stand a better chance of acknowledging their insatiable drives and addictive tendencies, and are much more likely to seek the needed help to move in a different direction.
- Thirdly, for those seeking to re-vision a more integrated spirituality, Matthew offers several valuable insights. Foremost is that of re-appropriating the wisdom of the mystics, which, as John Jeffrey Kripal illustrates so vividly, incorporates a strong sensuous and sexual dimension (cf. Kripal, 2001). Breaking down the dualisms which so falsely carve up God's creation is another significant challenge. Instead of the extremes of pain and pleasure, or dualisms like that of body vs. spirit, for God, *both are necessary*, and one is meaningless without the other. Holistic integration, not dualistic fragmentation, is what constitutes the soul of every vibrant spirituality.

## Conclusion

*Original Blessing* is a work in progress. It recaptures and articulates afresh enduring truths, particularly those that empower the masses. Every new generation needs prophetic voices to enable us to reclaim that which the dominant culture is forever trying to subvert. The prophet and the poet render us an invaluable service: speaking the unspeakable, redeeming what the dominant culture tends to subvert, bringing into word what many intuitively know, but dare not speak aloud.

Matthew often quotes the prophetic insights of Scripture scholar, Walter Brueggemann, a kindred spirit who also knows how to speak truth to power, especially in a time when the dominant culture is wearied, resistant, violent and compulsively committed to management—lest the world fall apart! I end with some of his inspiring and challenging words (Brueggemann 1989, 6):

The poet does not come to have any say until the human community has engaged in its best management. Then perchance comes the power of poetry—shattering, evocative speech that breaks fixed conclusions and presses us always toward new, dangerous, imaginative possibilities.

In a sense *Original Blessing* is a work of poetry. Perhaps, that more than anything else, is what gives it an enduring value!

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## The Dance of Creation

Watercolor

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Barbara Getrost

### Artist's Statement

My work arises from a union with Divine Mystery and much as such a thing can be spoken to, this work sings of it and to it.

To me, a pregnant woman's body is where The Mysteries of Life and of Union incarnate. She is The Temple. She is where man and woman unite. She is the sacred altar upon which Spirit gracefully alights. She is the wardrobe from which all matter is created. Her Body harbors

sensuous eternity, Divine power and the spiraling dance of Life. Surely, this must be the highest quintessence of Beauty? Such quality and power is beholden to every woman, regardless of whether she bears children. I work with pregnancy because that is when Her nature is most evidently manifest and noticeably expressed.

This art is a tribute to the Love that powers our Humanity. It calls for the full embodiment of spiritual love. It leaves nobody out, as it calls to every single one of us, because this is how we all arrived - via the embodiment of Love! The art also contains the songs of remembrance, of honor and gratitude forgotten.

It is significant that this important subject matter has not been given an appropriately respectful place by the arts, religion, nor society at large, worldwide, for at least 5,000 years. It is my greatest hope and intent that these works contribute to awakening an awareness of our true spiritual and physical natures. And that the war which has been waged against Earth, women's bodies and souls replete with her unique spiritual powers, will find abundant peace at last, alongside, in synergy and true partnership with men.

So be it! Enjoy the revelry of Her and His creating!

