

## Grit and Grace: Towards A Progressive Christian Theology of Creativity

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If creativity is about various kinds of relationships, we might ponder the following relational trinity of creativity: the Creative Mystery at the heart of all things, Jesus as an incarnation of creativity, and the creative spirit that moves and breathes within and among us. Books could be written about each of these topics (and have been); here, I'm only trying to suggest some preliminary ways we might engage with these ideas.

### Creative Mystery

Thomas Aquinas referred to God as “the artist of artists.” More recently, songwriter Greg Tamblyn wrote a lovely song called “I Think of God as a Poet” ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_rbAJVhREZU&ab\\_channel=GregTamblyn-Topic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rbAJVhREZU&ab_channel=GregTamblyn-Topic)).

Whatever else we think about the sacred, whether we encounter the holy as a person or the ground of our being or something else entirely, there's no denying the centrality, power, and importance of creativity as a sacred force (and of the sacred as a creative force or being). When we image God as a person or being, one of our names for that person or being is “Creator.” (I use the term “Creative Mystery” here to avoid foreclosing on any of the possible other names we might want to use.)

This deep connection between the sacred and creativity is found in most creation stories across different communities and religions around the world and throughout history. Progressive Christians have inherited the Jewish creation stories found at the beginning of Genesis, which feature a profoundly creative divine entity, one who makes something from nothing. Perhaps the first creation story to appear in the Bible (written later than the second one) is tied to a particular religious ritual, and perhaps the second one is a way to make sense of human travail and limitations; that said, we don't have to take either story literally to find them powerful.

One of my favorite interpretations of these stories is found in the musical *Children of Eden*, with songs by Stephen Schwartz (of *Godspell* fame). The musical begins with the song “Let There Be” ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fumuFUE04IU&ab\\_channel=ParkerPayne](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fumuFUE04IU&ab_channel=ParkerPayne)); later, when Eve gets curious about the world around her, she sings “The Spark of Creation,” which names and celebrates the creative spark that she carries and ties that spark directly to the original creation and its creator (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lru04HjvD-Y>).

The idea that our creativity is a divine spark within us, the Creative Mystery at work in our lives, is in keeping with Matthew Fox's work on creation spirituality (<https://www.matthewfox.org/what-is-creation-spirituality>) and also in keeping with some insights of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker in their book *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*.

Certainly, multiple religious traditions tell stories of the sacred (as a single entity, as multiple entities) in which the sacred is destructive as well as creative. Judaism describes God's

destructiveness in the Noah story (Genesis 9) and implies it in some of the prophetic texts. Two of the three divinities in the Hindu Trimurti (the triple deity of supreme divinity) are Brahma (“the Creator”) and Shiva (“the Destroyer”). For me, progressive Christianity’s power and beauty includes its focus on the creative aspect of the sacred and our invitation to make that creativity manifest in our own lives. Humanity is destructive enough as it is; we do not need to image the sacred as violent or destructive especially when doing so legitimates or justifies our own destructive capacities. We can welcome the Creative Mystery into our hearts and lives, celebrate the creativity in the natural world (without denying its violence and destruction), and seek to honor the Creative Mystery in our own creating.

### Jesus as an Incarnation of Creativity

“In the beginning was the Creative Energy: The Creative Energy was with God and the Creative Energy was God. It was with God in the beginning. Through it all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through it. All that came to be had life in it...The Creative Energy was the true light that enlightens all people and it was coming into the world...to all who did accept it, it gave power to become children of God...The Creative Energy was made flesh, it pitched its tent among us, and we saw its glory...full of grace and full of truth.” (Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 40; paraphrase of John 1:1-4, 9, 12, 14)

We often understand Jesus to be an incarnation (or the incarnation) of God or of love (perhaps the same thing). For our purposes here, we can also understand Jesus as an incarnation of creativity, however else we may understand him. Theologian Jon Paul Sydnor has argued that Jesus interpreted the scriptures of his day in an open, situational, and pastoral way, involving experimentation and rejecting totalization (Jon Paul Sydnor, “Christ Was Not an Inerrantist, So Christians Should Not Be Either: How Jesus Read His Bible,” *Open Theology* 2016, 744-758). Both this openness and this situationalism are hallmarks of creativity.

Jesus’s creativity is particularly manifest in his parables and his sayings. Jesus was a genius at coming up with parables and sayings that reached people where they were but then took them someplace else, someplace new, by juxtaposing the familiar and mundane with the ridiculous and unthinkable, the ho-hum and ordinary with the uncomfortable and barrier-breaking. Unlike the deity described in the Biblical creation stories, Jesus is not making something out of nothing; as a creative human being, he is taking ideas and images that already exist and troubling them in the service of his vision of Beloved Community (or Love’s Domain or the Kin-dom of God). For example, the phrase “good Samaritan” in the context of Jesus’s time and among his Jewish audience would have been an oxymoron, something like “beloved enemy.” Which was, of course, exactly the point. It’s one thing to tell your followers to love their enemies; it’s quite another to tell a story in which your enemy treats you lovingly and tends to your wounds while your own people pass by along the side of the road.

I use the phrase “*an* incarnation of creativity” rather than “*the* incarnation of creativity” to describe Jesus. For me, focusing on the humanity of Jesus makes demands of me and gives me hope that I might rise to those demands in a way that focusing on the divinity of Jesus simply does not. Jesus as a human incarnation of creativity calls me to use my own creativity in service of Jesus’s vision, just as he used his creativity; I am invited to become my own incarnation of

creativity, to join those who work to co-create Love's Domain of peace, justice, joy, gratitude, and – of course – creativity.

### The Creative Spirit

Once we commit to living as co-creators of love and joy with the Creative Mystery and to incarnating creativity as Jesus did, we will find ourselves inspired, nourished, sustained, and indeed breathed by the Creative Spirit. Referring to the Holy Spirit as the Creative Spirit reminds us that this spirit, whatever else is true of it, goes where it goes and inspires who it will. If we put in the effort, do the labor, build the resilience, and otherwise prepare our minds (and bodies and spirits), chance – or the Creative Spirit – will favor us. It will blow through our lives, shake us up, help us learn new truths and open our hearts further. It will be our creative advocate, playfully calling us forward into ventures we cannot yet imagine.

Or perhaps I should call the Creative Spirit “she” rather than “it,” for she is our muse, our source of inspiration. In Greek and Roman mythology, the Muses are nine goddesses who preside over the arts and sciences (two important venues of creativity). We could get even more creative and identify the Creative Spirit with the feminine face of God as suggested in the Talmud, the Shekhinah. This term comes not from the Bible but from rabbinic literature; it refers to the dwelling place of the holy. (Identifying the dwelling place of the holy with our lives, where the Creative Spirit lives and breathes and gifts us with inspiration, might be itself a bit of a creative invention. But it is another way to lift up the sacred feminine, still far too often underrepresented in our language and liturgies, and to remind ourselves how many profoundly creative people have been female or feminine or, as I sometimes put it, gender-creative.)

We cannot control or contain the Creative Spirit. She is not ours to control or contain. But we can make ourselves ready for her. We can labor. We can learn. We can gather in rooms, to celebrate and mourn and be afraid and be hopeful together. We can cultivate our best selves and grow our heart and minds and spirits. We can practice and train and sweat and struggle in our creative work. And if the paradoxes of creativity hold true, sooner or later, perhaps when we least expect her, the Creative Spirit will arrive and inspire us.