

Created for Creativity

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Late last September, a week or so before the conference that gave rise to this essay, I was lying in bed, desperately wanting to sleep. Instead, I was wide awake with anxiety—thinking about the talk I was to give, how quickly it was coming up, and how very far it was from being written. As I lay there, I offered up a sleepy prayer that went something like: “Oh God, please give me words and ideas for this presentation!”

Those who heard the talk I ended up giving can judge whether or not God answered that prayer in particular! A much more interesting question, however, is how we should think about such prayers in general: whether God indeed answers them, and, if so, how. The theme of the conference at which I was speaking was: “Created for Creativity.” This implies two creative agents and two sets of creative acts. It gestures toward God, who created us and the world in which we live, and it points toward us as well. Moreover, the statement suggests that we are not only the outcome of God’s creative act: we are also intended as agents of further creative acts. How then should we think about the relationship between God’s creative activity and our own?

One possibility might be that God answers such prayers in a very straightforward and direct way, by simply pouring creative products through us, fully formed. On this model we would become simple conduits, nothing but copper wires along which divine current could pass. The creative product would simply materialize before us complete, without any input or any effort on our part.

I. The Possessed Poet

Perhaps surprisingly, this is a description of creativity that one often hears from artists. Many creative artists speak about having just this sort of experience, in which the art work streams through them from another source and by another agency. Here are just a few examples that could easily be multiplied:

I believe that all we create is sent from somewhere. It is as if our ideas already exist, and pass through us in order to be seen. What is up in the air comes down and comes through you.

- Ang Lee, film director
(Laufer and Lewis 1998, 108)

Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I can just hear melodies and little themes, and I know that it is directly from God because it is pure, it is good, it just came through me.

- Wynton Marsalis, trumpeter and composer
(Laufer and Lewis 1998, 117)

It still seems at times as if the creation of the work just happens. Sometimes my hand is moving with the spirit of the project, and hopefully, God is moving my hand.

- Faith Ringgold, painter, sculptor, and writer
(Laufer and Lewis 1998, 120)

I am just a medium, man. The shit is coming from somewhere. I don’t sit down and really think! I just get in this mode and I do what I do. That’s why I hate doing interviews, because people ask me, “How do you do what you do?” I don’t know!

- Eddie Van Halen, guitarist
(Resnikoff 1991)

Of course, this isn't the only sort of thing that artists say about the creative process. But it is striking how closely these comments mirror a very ancient conception of artistry. On this account, the artist is literally possessed by a divine spirit, and what we encounter in human creativity is not human creativity at all, but rather the voice of the divine.

One of the clearest descriptions of this idea is found in Plato's dialogue *Ion*. As the dialogue begins, Socrates meets up with Ion, who is returning from the festival of Asclepius. Ion is a rhapsode, something halfway between an actor and a singer, whose business is giving public recitations of poetry. Ion is in good spirits because he has just won first prize for his performance. So Socrates congratulates him and, in typical Socratic fashion, begins to question Ion about his art. When a rhapsode does his job well and moves his audience, Socrates wonders, just what sort of skill and what kind of power is he displaying?

Plato's dialogue offers some surprising answers to these questions. Put in the most basic terms, Ion claims that creativity arises from receptivity. At the beginning of the creative act, there is an encounter with, and a surrender to, something outside oneself. Ion is the vehicle, but not the source of the poetry. The poem does not come from, but rather comes through him. Socrates arrives at the ironic conclusion that Ion—the professional speaker—never really speaks with his own voice.

In fact, the dialogue suggests that Homer (the poet whose works Ion has been performing) does not speak with his own voice either. The *Odyssey* begins, "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story." If Homer's prayer is answered, then neither Homer nor Ion can claim ownership of their words. When Homer opens his mouth, the voice singing in him is that of the Muse. And in the same way, when Ion's listeners respond to his recitation, it is not his skill, but the power of the Muse that moves them. The whole process is like a magnetic current that runs through one bit of metal and then another and then another, says Socrates. The power passing through the pieces of metal is not their own, but that of the magnet.

Socrates tells Ion: "That's not a subject you've mastered—speaking well about Homer. It is a divine power that moves you, as a 'Magnetic' stone moves iron rings... and the power in all of them depends on this stone. In the same way, the Muse makes some people inspired herself, and then through those who are inspired a chain of other enthusiasts is suspended. You know, none of the epic poets, if they're good, are masters of their subject; they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all of those beautiful poems" (533d–534a).

If this is how artistry works, the dialogue contends, then a "creative contribution" from the human author or the human performer is not only unnecessary, it actually may place the work of art in jeopardy. The power of an artistic work arises from the divine voice speaking through it. The most effective artist then will be one through whom this voice travels most directly and with the least interference. To be effective, in other words, the Muse's activity must be matched by the artist's passivity.

"That's why the god takes [the poets'] intellect away from them when he uses them as his servants, as he does prophets and godly diviners," Socrates explains. Why? "So that we who hear should know that they are not the ones who speak those verses that are of such high value, for their intellect is not in them" (534d). The rhapsode speaks, but he does not speak. Homer's words are heard, but it is not Homer that we hear.

What we should notice as we reflect on Plato's dialogue is that in addition to advancing a description of artistic creativity, Ion also proposes a particular theology. Socrates' exchange with the poet suggests that this is what it looks like when a divine spirit acts on human beings; this is the relationship between divine and human activity. In particular, according to Ion, if the divine spirit is active, then we must be passive; if the divine voice is to be heard, then we must be silent; where there is divine wisdom, we remain ignorant. The Muse "takes possession" of the poet, Socrates says, and "robs him of his intellect." In this theological vision of creativity, there is indeed divine involvement in the creative arts, but not human creativity. The most we can attribute to the human creator is a kind of beautiful passivity.

We can imagine, no doubt, all sorts of reasons why this conception of creativity would be unattractive in a modern and secular age, but I would like to consider one particular line of objection that has developed.

II. The Passive Poet

One of the profound flaws identified in this way of thinking is that it overlooks the social and cultural dimension of creativity. Ion suggests that works of art do not arise from a culture, but instead descend upon it from the heavens. And this way of thinking is not only misleading; some critics have argued it is also dangerous. It encourages us to regard particular and contingent artistic norms as universal and absolute. The idea of "inspiration" in particular, takes one, very human way of looking at the world and in

effect places a stamp of divine approval upon it.

The musicologist Susan McClary writes that “from very early times up to and including the present, there has been a strain of Western culture that accounts for music in non-social, implicitly metaphysical terms. But parallel with that strain... is another which regards music as essentially a human, socially grounded, socially alterable construct. Most polemical battles in the history of music theory and criticism involve the irreconcilable confrontation of these two positions” (McClary 1987, 15).

McClary is often grouped with a movement called “The New Musicology,” which wants to argue strongly in favor of this later conception of music. Music is full of meaning, she argues, but “not, to be sure... transcendental meaning” (8). Rather, in music we encounter “human meanings, grounded in the historical contexts in which they performed—and in many cases, still perform—crucial social functions” (8–9). McClary draws particular attention to the music of Bach, since his music has often been praised, either for embodying some sort of transcendent mathematical order, or for giving voice to some transcendent theological truth. According to McClary, such suggestions are dangerous, because they disguise what the works of Bach (and all other musical works) are: “human constructs, created in particular social contexts and for particular ideological interests” (60).

The mention of ideological agendas helps explain why theorists like McClary so vehemently oppose even the casual mention of “divinely inspired” or “transcendent” art. McClary contends that the music of Bach and of other composers advances the values and mores of the composers’ particular social location, subtly but powerfully reinforcing the power relationships, prejudices, and vested interests of the culture. Any intimation of “inspiration” serves to attach a divine or cosmic authorization to the assumptions about race, class, gender, and sexuality that are concealed in works of art. And indeed, the idea that such agendas are concealed is likewise an important part of McClary’s critique. McClary argues that the ideological elements of artworks are not immediately recognized by listener, or even by composer. In fact, they “succeed best when least apparent, least deliberate, [and] most automatic” (2000, 5). The artist, McClary believes, is not the creator, but the carrier of the political and ideological subtext of the work. In a very real sense, the artist is not the originator of the artwork.

This same idea appears in Roland Barthes’s discussion of Balzac. Barthes considers a sentence composed by Balzac and concludes that “no one, no ‘person’, says it: its source, its voice is not the true place of the writing” (Barthes 1977, 147). Rather than originating from a single authorial voice, a text is a “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146). The author can do no more than “mix writings” (146). Indeed, however much the writer may wish to “express himself,” his sense of “self” is an illusion. The meaning the artist wishes to convey, Barthes says, is drawn from “a ready-formed dictionary” (146). He may choose to shift words around this way or that, but he is powerless to speak in his own voice.

Finally, one other example of this line of thinking appears in theorist Catherine Belsey’s analysis of the George Eliot novel, *Adam Bede*. Belsey exposes the offensive and oppressive ideologies contained in the novel and then asks: “Does this mean that George Eliot should be roundly condemned for colluding with exploitation?” Belsey’s answer is surprising. “Of course not,” she writes. Eliot should not be condemned because “George Eliot is not the origin or the explanation of the cultural convictions her novel reproduces.... The text is an effect of the meanings and values in circulation at its own historical moment. *Adam Bede* (who does not exist), George Eliot (who is not *Adam Bede*’s origin) and the unsuspecting reader... participate in a shared practice which reproduces the ruling ideology” (Belsey 2002, 37).

So—let’s pause for a second and take stock. We have looked very briefly at two accounts of creativity; one ancient and one modern; one emphasizing the transcendent and supernatural, and the other the contingent and social. And yet, at a number of points they mirror one another in striking ways.

First, each in some way helps us account for the experience of Eddie Van Halen. That is to say, each offers us an account of creativity that includes Van Halen’s reported experience of receptivity—in which he experiences himself as the vehicle of a creative agency outside himself.

But these two accounts are likewise similar in the fact that in each instance the artist, the creative individual, ends up losing her voice. Plato robs the artist of his voice by placing the artwork completely outside his social location. The critical theorists we have looked at briefly rob the artist of her voice by completely identifying the artwork with her social location.

Despite all the considerable differences between the two, in both instances what we encounter is an essentially competitive vision of creativity. In both instances, it is as if acknowledging the artist as a creative source means denying the involvement of any other agent or influence. And conversely in both instances, it is as if acknowledging the involvement of any other agency, whether divine or human, excludes the possibility that the artist’s own voice sounds. Ion insists on the involvement of the divine in

human creativity, and the contemporary thinkers we have considered deny it altogether. Both however would seem to be dubious about the possibility held out in this essay's title—that creativity is the proper inheritance of the human person.

Before addressing this problem, it is worth asking whether this competitive account of creativity actually merits a rebuttal. Perhaps the idea of the passive artist is only a harmless relic of ancient philosophical texts, or something that is tucked away in dense passages of esoteric academic journals.

But in fact, I think we bump into elements of this competitive vision of creativity in a number of more mundane and everyday settings. When I was in high school and college I played in a contemporary worship band. Before a worship service, it was not uncommon for one or more of the musicians to say a prayer that went something like this: "Lord Jesus, I pray that we would just be empty vessels for you, Lord; Lord, just move us out of the way so that it's just you playing through us; I pray that it wouldn't be us up there, but that it would be you that people would see." Now, there is something right about those sorts of prayers. And yet.... They seem to me like prayers that carry some residue of Ion's theology. They are prayers that suggest that the relationship between God's activity and ours is a zero-sum game. If God is to speak, we must be silent; if God is to be visible, we must be invisible.

We likewise hear echoes of this competitive vision of creativity when creativity is understood as wholly synonymous with novelty or originality, as if the fundamental criterion of creativity is that it has been untouched by tradition. It is not unusual for great artists and works of art to be praised with terms like "groundbreaking," "revolutionary," "innovative," or "unprecedented." What do such terms suggest? They suggest an inverse relationship between the greatness of a work and its dependence on the voices and traditions preceding it, as if the truly creative artist is the one whose voice is untouched by the voices of others.

A quotation from the great twentieth century composer Arnold Schoenberg offers a striking example of this:

To understand the very nature of creation one must acknowledge that there was no light before the Lord said: "Let there be Light." And since there was not yet light, the Lords' omniscience embraced a vision of it which only His omnipotence could call forth. We poor human beings, when we refer to one of the better minds among us as a creator, should never forget what a creator is in reality. A creator has a vision of something which has not existed before this vision. (Schoenberg 1975, 214–215)

Perhaps more speculatively, I wonder if I hear an analog to this competitive conception of creativity in my students, who believe that to find their own voice as adult people, they must throw off the influence of all the voices that have shaped them to this point, the voices of parents and family and church and childhood community. I think I may even hear faint echoes of this in the students who struggle with footnoting and acknowledging sources. "If my paper is filled with stuff I got from other people," they worry, "then is it really my paper?" However faint, here are reverberations of the idea that if one voice is sounding, then another is silenced. If one party is active, then the other must be passive.

III. De-Ionized Inspiration

The Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit is not only other than this competitive vision of creativity, it is its remedy. The divine spirit in Ion takes possession of its human subjects, whereas the Holy Spirit of Christian belief is called the Giver. *Ion's* competitive theology of possession is healed by a biblical theology of gift.

In Christian theology, the Holy Spirit is described as the giver of gifts. The Nicene Creed refers to the Spirit as "the Lord, the giver of life," and of course, many passages in both Old and New Testament speak of the gifts of the Spirit. One famous example is 1 Corinthians 12:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit... To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit. (1 Cor. 12:4, 8–9)

Or we might point to the passage in Exodus 31, where God pours out the Spirit on two craftsmen named Bezalel and Oholiab:

The Lord spoke to Moses: See, I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: and I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, to

help him. (Exodus 31:1–6)

These biblical texts imagine the divine-human relation in a very different way from Ion. Here a human being comes to enjoy something that belongs to God (wisdom, knowledge, intelligence). In Ion, on the other hand, the Muse lays hold of something that belonged to the human being (mind, use of one's own voice, command of one's own responses). And where the activity of the Muse is that of emptying out, the work of the Holy Spirit is described in terms of "filling."

Not only is the Holy Spirit the giver of gifts. Crucially, the Holy Spirit is gift. St. Augustine, in a famous passage, contends that "Gift" is a fitting name for the Holy Spirit.

So the love which is from God and is God is distinctively the Holy Spirit; through him the charity of God is poured out in our hearts, and through it the whole triad dwells in us. This is the reason why it is most apposite that the Holy Spirit, while being God, should also be called the gift of God. (*The Trinity*, 421)

By the Holy Spirit, the life of God is made to dwell in us. And what does that mean? What is the character of this God who indwells us? When we look at the life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we discover that God's own life is one of gift and surrender. In a remarkably lyrical passage, the twentieth-century Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar writes:

Do you believe in God the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit?... These three phrases too, are an expression—and Jesus Christ provides the proof of this—of the fact that the one God is, in his essence, love and surrender... Herein lies the most unfathomable aspect of the mystery of God: that what is absolutely primal is no statically self-contained and comprehensible reality, but one that exists solely in dispensing itself: a flowing wellspring with no holding trough beneath it.... In the pure act of self-pouring-forth, God the Father is his self. (Balthasar 1990, 29, 30–31)

The work of the Holy Spirit is to reproduce God's own life in us; part of what that means is that the Holy Spirit is given to make us givers.¹ By the gift of the Holy Spirit, God invites us into the ecology of gift that is at the center of God's own life. "We were created to be and to act like God," says Miroslav Volf, "and so the flow of God's gifts shouldn't stop as soon as it reaches us. The outbound movement must continue" (2005, 49). God gives to make us givers. If we translate this into the language of artistry and creation, we are not far at all from the assertion in our title: we are created for creativity. God gives not to make us passive, but to make us active givers. We are created for creativity in this strong sense, that the telos of God's engagement with us by the Spirit, is not that we would lose our voices, but precisely that we would be given them. God's intention is that we would, like God, be agents capable of giving to others.

The Romanian theologian Dumitru Staniloae, writes:

...no one returns to God things he has received from him without his own work having been added to them. The grapes, the bread, the wine, the oil offered to God are more than just God's gift; human work has also left its stamp upon them. (Staniloae 2005, 25)

Moreover, he adds,

it is God's wish that the human person spends himself in the effort to place his own valuable stamp upon the gifts received and thereby makes of them human gifts as well. (Staniloae 2005, 25)

In fact, we might expand on Staniloae here. The wine that is offered to others as a human gift, emerges not only from the skill and labor of the winemaker, but also from the fruit of the vine, the character of the soil, the waters that flow from the chambers of the heavens, the wood of the cask, and the daily fluctuations of the weather. Each has added its note to the bouquet. God gives, not to preclude the giving of the created world, but gives in such a way that all of the created world might be drawn into the movement of gift. The material world is in one sense the gift of God, given to humanity—so in Genesis 1, "God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.'" (Gen. 1:29 NRSV). But the world that has been given is also enabled to be Giver, offering gifts of its own. The picture we are left with is that of a cosmos caught up in the movement of gift, in which all things are blessed and set in motion to bless others. It is a world in which all creatures receive from others and then extend themselves out toward others.

IV. How All of This Applies to the Experience of Eddie Van Halen

We can think of the artist, then, as one who first of all receives the gifts of a world gifted by God: gifts of

sound, color, light, shape, and scent. The world offers itself to the artist. Because the world has been given by a Giver, because the world offers itself, for just this reason, the artist is right to associate creativity with receptivity, with encountering something outside of herself. Creativity involves receiving the gifts that are offered by stone and color, by resonating string and wood, and indeed by our own physical bodies. God's Spirit stands at the head of this cascade of giving that flows through the material and nourishes the creativity of the artist. In this way, it is right to say that the artwork is given by God and given by the world. At the same time, because God gives to make us givers, it is right to expect that the artwork is given by the artist's own labor and creativity. God does not give in order to preclude further giving, but to enable it. The world God has created is one in which each participant in the cascade of giving contributes its own voice and its own gifts to the onward movement.

In addition to the voice of God and the voice of the material world, the artist encounters another distinctive voice outside of herself: the voice of culture. Human artworks do not emerge fully formed from the earth, untouched by human hands or the marks of culture. This way of thinking about artistry would be markedly out of step with the theological vision we have been developing. God gives gifts, intending that the recipients will become givers as well and not just conduits or errand runners. Those who receive gifts shape and add to them (just as the soil and water contribute their distinctive flavoring to the wine). If this is how God has made humanity—not only to receive, but to give—then we should expect the emergence of culture, and the emergence of culture that does not merely reproduce nature but creatively extends and develops it. Humanity not only receives gifts but cultivates and “re-presents” these gifts to others. Culture itself and its products are made into a gift that is offered—offered to humanity generally, but also offered to the artist. For this reason as well, the artist is not mistaken when he experiences creativity as receptivity. Culture, society, its products, and its practices are among the gifts he receives. They are among the voices he hears as he sets out to create. In the case of culture, of course, not all gifts are benign. Some of what is offered up from the community may indeed be oppressive ideology. If the framework of creation is gift, however, this fact does not in itself rob the artist of his voice. A gift is offered rather than imposed. To claim that the artist is merely a passive receptacle of culture is to stop the chain of gift. It is to deny that the artist can be a giver as well as a receiver.

If the artist receives gifts—from others, from God, from the created world—it makes sense that part of her artistic experience would be that of receptivity. At the same time, if God's intention is that we not only receive gifts but become givers ourselves, then it makes sense that not all of the artist's experience would be that of receptivity.

V. Without Confusion, Without Separation

The Spirit is the Gift who gives gifts, in order to make us givers. If this is so, then it makes sense that we would see this kind of non-competitive ecology of giving embodied in Jesus; the one who was “conceived... from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20) and who is called “Christ” (meaning “anointed one”—that is, the one anointed by the Spirit). In my Introduction to Christian Doctrine class, we spend a good bit of time talking about the early church's debates about the two natures of Christ. The church asserted that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, and inevitably, various teachers took it upon themselves to try to explain how such a puzzling thing could be. A fellow named Apollinaris, for instance, suggested a very simple solution: Jesus is a divine Spirit inside a human body. This is kind of like an “M&M Jesus”—a sweet chocolaty divine center wrapped in a crunchy human shell. But the church responded: No. Jesus isn't human on the outside and divine on the inside. He is fully God and fully human. And other rationalizing explanations arose: Perhaps Jesus' divinity and humanity sit alongside each other inside him, not really touching, but sort of in two hermetically sealed compartments. Or: Perhaps Jesus is a mixture of the human and divine, his humanity absorbed into his deity like a drop of wine mixed into the ocean.

But one after another the church resisted these explanations and instead steadfastly insisted that in Jesus the divine and the human come together:

in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation;
the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union,

but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to
form one person and subsistence,

not as parted or separated into two persons. (“The Definition of Chalcedon,” quoted in Bettenson and Maunder 1999, 56)

More than a few scholars have dismissed this early creedal language as metaphysically incoherent,

philosophically pretentious nonsense. But in fact, the truth expressed in these creeds is what grounds the claim that we are created for creativity—that God’s agency and human agency can co-exist.

What we see in Jesus is precisely the kind of non-competitive ontology we have been describing. What the creeds say is that the reality of Jesus’ deity is not compromised by the full presence of his humanity. Neither is the integrity of Jesus’ humanity swallowed up by the fullness of his divinity. The two-natures doctrine tells us not only who Jesus is, but also, crucially, what it looks like when God and humanity are joined together. Ultimately it tells us that when God and humanity are united as they are perfectly in Jesus, this does not mean the silencing or the obliteration of the human.

If this is the kind of reality God is, and if this is the kind of world God has created, then we can suggest the following theses about the character of creativity.

First, in a world that has been given, we should expect to receive. Creativity begins with receptivity. In fact, this is one of the crucial insights from Ion and from critical theory, and of course, from Eddie Van Halen: creativity begins with receptivity. Artists (and creators generally) often sense that in creating they are met by a voice or by voices from outside of themselves. If we live in an ecology of gift, this is what we should expect. We should expect to receive. An article about Svetlana Alexievich, the 2015 winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, provides a powerful example of the receptivity of the artist.

In the modern world, [Alexievich said], it was impossible to write “the book” that encompassed everything in the manner of nineteenth century novelists.

“We need to have a book where lots of people can make a contribution—one person may speak half a page, someone else may have a paragraph or five pages that they can contribute and that this is a way of conveying what’s going on today. And my genre, I refer to it as ‘the novel of voices’ and you might say that my work is just simply lying on the ground and I go and I gather it and I pick it up and I put it together. If Flaubert said ‘I am a man of the pen—or the plume,’ I could say of myself that I am a person of the ear.” (Melvin and Cullinane 2015)

Creativity begins with being “persons of the ear.” It begins with receptivity and hearing other voices. In a culture that places a premium on individuality and self-expression this is a particularly valuable insight. Jesus’ admonition: “the one who would save his life must lose it” applies to the creative life as well.

But then, secondly, God gives in such a way to make the recipients not receivers only, but givers as well. I have argued that we inhabit an ecology of gift. If we imagine the artist/creator as a mere receptacle of other voices—whether human or divine—then this stops the chain of gift. Because our world mirrors the non-competitive being of a Trinitarian God, we can welcome other voices, without fearing the loss of our own. The activity of one party—again whether human or divine—does not necessitate the passivity of other parties.

Finally, God invites us to become not only givers, but contributors to an ecology of giving. If our creativity truly mirrors God’s, then our giving will likewise move toward the goal of ongoing giving. For those of us who are scholars and educators this is a point worth reflecting on. Do I give to my students in a way that nurtures further giving? Do I speak to my students in a way that enables them not only to hear my voice, but to find their own? Likewise, is the goal of my research and writing simply to disseminate my own voice as widely as possible? Or do I look for ways of exciting and inviting the voices and contributions of others?

The experience of the creative artist seems to include two seemingly paradoxical dimensions. On the one hand, the artist often experiences her art as the zenith of self-expression, as an embodiment, distillation, and fulfillment of her own distinctive vision and voice. On the other hand, the artist (at least on some occasions) feels as if the creative act originated from some source outside of himself. “The poem,” poet Mark Doty says, “is more something we find than something we make” (Laufer and Lewis 1998, 105). As I mentioned earlier, Ion advances not only a theory of artistic creation, but a theology. Likewise, the artist’s experience we are describing here gestures toward a particular theological vision. It is one, I believe, that is deeply consonant with what Christians want to say about God and the world God has made. We are not the creators of the world. Rather, we live in a world created by a God who speaks; a world, moreover, that has its own voice. Humanity, however, is not commanded to listen silently, passively, to these sounding voices. Instead, the human in the Garden is invited to speak and name the beasts. Human beings are called, in other words, to contribute their own voices to the great chorus sounding around them. Such a harmony of voices is possible precisely because God’s own person is a kind of harmony, a unity which does not exclude plurality. It is this God—one whose voice animates rather than silences other voices—in whose image we are made. And it is because we have been made by and in the image of this God that we can say we have been created for creativity.

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Endnotes

1. Throughout this discussion of gift I am indebted to Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2, *Creation and Deification* (2005), esp. chapter 2, "The World as Gift and Word." I am also following Miroslav Volf's rich and thoughtful reflection in *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (2005), esp. 63–70.