

The Future of Creativity: imagining the ultimate things
Address for Wesley Institute Chapel 17th March 2010

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Recently, I have been involved in a great many discussions and debates with atheists in Australia and overseas. There is a lot of noise in society at present about whether it makes sense to believe in God, and whether the world is better or worse off for having people who believe in God – actually around 85% of the world – in it.

One of the key points of the discussion is whether or not it makes sense to believe there is a Creator. It was perhaps the central point of conflict when Richard Dawkins appeared on the ABC TV programme ‘Q and A’ last week.

By Creator, Atheists seem to imagine Christians are suggesting a kind of grandfatherly model train enthusiast, who fashions a model world, adding a bit here, a bit there until it looks the way he wants it.

But that’s not what we think at all.

By Creator, Christians (and some other religions, too) mean a Mind or Being so potent that this Mind or Being could bring something out of nothing, Christians mean an eternal, necessary, personal reality so generous that, for no need of his own, but simply out of love and delight, he brings matter and energy into existence.

Genesis 1 portrays the act of creation as speaking words. A being, unlike the pagan gods of other creation myths, so elegant and potent that he can simply say a word and it becomes real.

Genesis 2, the second account of creation (and Bible-believing people have no problem with getting more than one perspective on things!) doesn’t put the creation together in the same day-by-day, element by element,

manner as the first account. Rather, it gives us a literary portrait of what it was like for humanity to enter the world. And God the Creator is here described more like an artist, perhaps a performance artist, sculpting humanity from the dust of the earth, forming, shaping, and then breathing the spirit of life into the clay.

The first account is like a hymn, a structured poem of creation; the second account is like a drama, an unfolding play of God's creative desires.

So it is no surprise that when believers in God think about creativity, they often think about God's own creativity. God the Creator; we want to be creative like God.

So, one Christian literary critic writing about novels says,

"[P]eople are most like God the Maker when they create a world and people it with significant characters out of their imagination."

I understand this way of thinking.

But it is not enough.

The belief in God as Creator is just the beginning (as you'd expect!).

But there's more. God is in fact in the business of *re-creating* the world.

The Christian faith teaches that this world, created good by God, did not follow the path of its goodness and instead fell into decay and confusion, and human beings moved away from their Sculptor and Breath-giver, to terrible results.

But God's love for the world he created meant that he would not abandon it, but instead put into action a plan to restore it, to rescue it from its own failings, to right its wrongs — to *recreate it*.

The death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ is described in the Bible as the initiating of this process of new creation. Read with me from the New Testament Letter to the Colossians:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

(Colossians 1:19-23, NRSV).

God's reversal of the fortunes of the world pivots on Jesus' death, and his rising to new life. His rising is the first signs, the "firstfruits of the harvest to come", the beginnings of the new age.

He has (v.20) "reconciled all things" to himself in heaven and earth, so that heaven and earth can move towards each other.

What an incredible inspiration that is!

What a great motivation for human expressions of praise, and wonder, and hope.

Because of this, creativity for a Christian is really *re-creativity*.

'Recreation' (re-creation) is an activity of those who serve the living God, the God who will bring all things together under Christ and will finally dwell in blissful peace with his creation.

In more theological terms, it is not creation, but eschatology, that provides the structures for thinking about human expression in the world.

I think we can already see the importance of eschatology in the arts—we don't have to look too hard.

From the incredible influence of visions of heaven and hell in painting and architecture (some of it stretching way beyond the teaching of the Bible itself, I hasten to add).

To the musical structures that express ideas such as 'nearness' and 'delay', or promise and fulfillment, or patterns that add meaning and impact as they are repeated, varied and resolved into unity. The theologian and musician, Jeremy Begbie, talks about the ways in which music (classical music in his discussion) manifests these ideas, and gives us a way of

imagining and experiencing what it is like to make our way through time and reach somewhere of satisfaction and delight.¹

Even an artform such as landscape painting is often influenced by eschatology, as in pastoral scenes of tranquility and beauty that evoke a timelessness or eternity, in which “all is right with the world”.

In our own city of Sydney this month, the Opera version of Peter Carey’s novel, *Bliss* has opened. You may have read the novel, or seen the film that was made of it twenty years ago. It’s about an advertising man called Harry Joy who has a near-death experience and realizes that his own life is a living hell — his son’s a drug-pusher, his wife’s unfaithful, and his daughter sells herself. He believes in Hell, because that’s what his life is, when looked at through realistic eyes. He goes on a quest for paradise, and finds it—amusingly—in the arms of the dreamily vacant prostitute called Honey Barbara.

This novel is about eschatology. Thoughts of heaven and hell, the hope of redemption, the quest for paradise — these things fill the authors mind and drive his creativity. Peter Carey is no Christian, as far as I can determine, but he does clearly grasp that it is the *ultimate things*, the things of the End and the Future, that guide so much of creativity.

So, how does it affect Christians to shape their creativity around *re-creativity* instead?

I have three suggestions:

1. Your creative work should be shaped not only by love of creation, but by love of the future reality of the creation in Jesus Christ. The death, resurrection and return of Jesus should be at the core of what it means to be a Christian in the arts.

¹ See Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

2. Your heart should belong not to this world, but to the world to come. If your heart belongs to the world to come, you will be a better servant of this world. As Paul says, again in Colossians, but this time in chapter 3:

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory” (Colossians, 3:1-2).

This doesn't mean you are too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. Not at all; in fact, the opposite. Because you know that God loves this world so much that he not only chose to create it, but also chose to recreate it, to restore it, to redeem it—well, you are even more motivated to be a great blessing to the world and everyone and everything in it.

3. And finally, because your life is in Christ, being creative is not your highest calling. It is what you do, it's part of who you are, but it's not your identity. Your identity is secure in Jesus, and your life is “hidden with him”, to be revealed in all its glory when the work of recreating is done.

If your life is not in Christ, but in your art—or in any kind of work or play—then your creativity is in fact a kind of idolatry. But if your life is in Christ, then you are free to worship him through all that you do, through your music, your teaching, your relationships, your play, all the wonderful creative, and recreational, activities that you enjoy.

These are the things that occupy you while you await the coming of God in Jesus. “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory”.

ⁱ D. Williams, “Christian poetics, past and present” in ed. L. Ryken, *The Discerning Reader: Christian perspectives on literature and theory* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995), p. 59.