

Preface

Contributors to contemporary discussions about human creativity tend to verge toward one of two extremes. On the one side are those who suppose that it is something that any of us can do quite easily at a single stroke, as it were, by simply picking up a paintbrush or strumming the strings of a guitar. On the other are those who refuse the term except where it seems appropriate to speak of striking originality or even of genius. Jim Watkins's new book is a welcome corrective to both accounts that is likely to challenge readers whatever side of the divide it is to which they might naturally incline.

Take first the latter kind of usage that has become so prevalent in describing major figures in the arts since at least the Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century. The creative figure is then seen as someone like Lord Byron in poetry, Richard Wagner in music, or Albert Einstein in science: an eccentric who stands apart from the rest of us, with new ideas that seem to come from nowhere. An inevitable result in contemporary art has been the constant search for novelty: true genius must be seen to be self-generating without any obvious cause. But a moment's thought is surely sufficient to realize that it is in fact quite impossible for human beings to step wholly outside the culture of which they are part. Parents, friends, teachers have all helped to make us who we are. So new ideas come

through developing an existing tradition of ideas: and not, as with the divine *creatio ex nihilo* (“creation out of nothing”), out of no resources but God’s own. Indeed, pursue the “genius” who denies all debts, and, whatever they may say to the contrary, the reverse quickly becomes obvious.

But no less nonsensical is the idea of an effortless creativity available to us all. It is only by immersing oneself in the practice of art, music, or any other craft that one can achieve more than scribbles or a simple tune. While the instruction of teachers may in the end be found deficient, as also the kind of art studied from previous generations, nonetheless both will have shaped what is in the end produced, as the possible range of relations between technique and expression are mastered. But it is not only predecessors who contribute, it is also the materials themselves as the artist becomes more aware of their potentiality and malleability or otherwise. So, for instance, the concert pianist does not spend hours practicing simply in order to learn a particular piece, it is also a question of exploring what kind of potential exists in the instrument for conveying one kind of meaning through the music rather than another. Thus, so far from being the triumph of the ego as the Romantic model of genius might suggest, creativity is more a matter of sustained effort and openness, a giving and surrender of self. And that is why I presume Jim has joined sacrifice with creativity in his chosen title for the work: not as a new way to glorify the artist as someone who gives up everything for his/her craft but rather as someone who so immerses him/herself in the craft that self seems altogether the wrong focus.

Were detailed arguments to this effect all that readers were to find in what follows, this would be rewarding enough in itself. But in fact *Creativity as Sacrifice* is immeasurably richer than this. Part One considers what criteria should be applied in determining the appropriateness or otherwise of any proposed theological model, and

opts for one that can be successfully tested both against the way human beings are and what implications this might have for our understanding of God. Part Two then explores the major models that have been canvassed in the twentieth century, depending on whether their main stress has been on creation, revelation, or redemption. If the inclusion of *sacrifice* in the book's title might seem to have made the choice of redemption inevitable, Part Three still has its surprises, as the model feeds back into the author's understanding of divine creation as a kenotic process and his willingness to test his theories not against a committed Christian artist (where endorsement might have been more easily expected) but against an outstanding environmental artist of our own day, Andy Goldsworthy, well known for projects both in Britain and in the United States but, while spiritually minded, of no settled faith.

That openness to testing his theory beyond the confines of explicit faith reflects the generous and sacrificial God whom Jim portrays here and who makes possible our own creative efforts in whatever field we follow and however humble they may be. Readers will, I'm sure, leave the book heartened by the thought that loss of self in the traditions of their craft and respect for their materials is a worthy ambition, indeed precisely the kind of loss that Scripture reminds us becomes a true gain.

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