

TEACHING BIBLICAL STUDIES CREATIVELY:

A theological perspective

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Abstract

The essay translates concepts from the theory of creativity into a biblical framework. It demonstrates that creativity lies at the heart of the biblical message of humility and sacrificial love.

Teaching the Bible creatively does not depend on external, formal techniques, but on unravelling the inner core of the biblical message as creative communication.

The creativity with which the Bible deals is not the privilege of a few, but accessible to all.

1. Introduction

I have been asked to discuss the theme 'Creating creative thinking in religion', but I have decided to adapt the theme somewhat. As it was originally put to me, the emphasis was on a creative approach to religion (which I take to mean the Christian faith). This approach leaves a number of important issues unresolved, such as: 'Is creative thinking desirable in religion? Does religion stimulate or stunt creativity? How high should we value creativity? How does creativity relate to other values?' I have therefore decided to give a few basic outlines for a theological perspective on creativity - keeping in mind that the context of our discussion is that of teaching the Bible to children and students (my approach is therefore narrower than that of Gaboury [1972] who, in the vanguard of Tillich, tried to describe the relations between creativity and faith as such).

The emphasis changes from: 'How can we stimulate ourselves and our pupils to think (and act?) more creatively when they are busy with "religion"?' to: 'How may we perceive the biblical message as a framework which creates liberating horizons for life as a whole?' In short, I will attempt to give brief indications of how we may discover the Bible itself as a source for creativity.

In the end, hopefully, the circle will be completed and the mind and heart which have roved over these horizons will return to the Bible and faith invigorated with new perceptiveness. One recalls the remark by Harvey Cox (1969:28) that what we

call intellectual problems with religion are on the contrary rather problems of a starved fantasy. We have trouble in believing a lot of things not because we cannot construe them according to the laws of logic ('Indeed a religious explanation of the universe may be just as conceptually adequate as another one' [Cox 1969:28]), but because our faculties of intuition and aesthetic experience are starved. If Cox is right, it is not our reason that prevents us from believing, but our inability to picture imaginatively what we are supposed to believe! Here, amongst other things, lies the need for the development of the faculty of creativity.

The essential need for the faculty of creativity is related to man's chief aim: to praise God and enjoy Him. Praise always feeds on creativity - is creative. Here we are at the heart of the matter.

2. The relative value of creativity

Let us be reminded at the outset that creativity should not be overvalued. C S Lewis (1981:15-26) has already remarked in 1939 that there is a 'disquieting contrast between a whole circle of ideas used in modern criticism and certain ideas recurrent in the New Testament...' He calls this contrast 'a repugnance of atmosphere, a discordance of notes, an incompatibility of temperaments' (Lewis 1981:17). Lewis is talking about literary criticism, but what he says holds true for all the arts as well as for the relation between creativity and Christian faith.

The incompatibility lies in the preference given to values such as 'creative' as opposed to 'derivative', 'spontaneous' as opposed to 'convention' and 'freedom' as opposed to 'rules' (Lewis 1981:17) in modern criticism, whereas in 'the New Testament the art of life is itself an art of imitation' (Lewis 1981:21).

He continues:

'Originality' in the New Testament is quite plainly the prerogative of God alone... The duty and happiness of every other being is placed in being derivative, in reflecting like a mirror. Nothing could be more foreign to the tone of scripture than the language of those who describe a saint as a 'moral genius' or a 'spiritual genius', thus insinuating his virtue or spirituality is 'creative' or 'original' (Lewis 1981:21,22).

I agree with Lewis and therefore I choose for one of two main strains of opinion about creativity, that of human creativity as being reflective like a mirror, or playing the role of midwife, bringing into life that which is already existing, a receptive view of human creativity. The second strain which has become dominant for the better part of the last two centuries, stresses fecund originality. It is best represented by an artist such as Picasso, the quintessential genius depicting himself as a virile minotaur endlessly copulating and begetting new creatures.

Of course, in the end it is very difficult to draw sharp distinctions between the two. My purpose is simply to avoid an apotheosis of human creativity. Precisely by relieving us from the compulsion to be deadly serious about our own creativity, the

door is opened for the flights of fantasy. After all, as G K Chesterton remarked somewhere: 'Angels can fly because they take themselves so lightly'.

I also draw the distinction between human and divine creativity to explain why we find so little preoccupation with originality in the Bible. Not that it is missing, but it always seems to be a by-product, the result of being occupied with something else than creativity.

Whereas the second strain of opinion is fashionable at the moment, the first has an impeccable ancestry in Western intellectual and artistic thought. The image of the midwife, for instance, is the key to the understanding of the Socratic method. He is presented by Plato as denying that thoughts and concepts originate with him. He only helps to bring them to light. Added to this the Socratic daemon gives expression to Socrates' receptive posture.

Human creativity as a receptive activity was graphically and movingly expressed in the late Renaissance by Michelangelo. The figures sculpted by him, he declared, were already residing in the marble. He only had to chisel away those parts of the rock which held them captive (Blunt 1976:78,79). The Afrikaans poet, Opperman would later refer to this as the 'angel hidden in the rock' (*die engel in die klip*). To my mind this is the definitive metaphor. As Christians we can only try to release through our science, art and religious practice the angel in the rock.

It is also the old Michelangelo, in one of his late sonnets (cxlvii, circa 1554) who movingly recognised the limits of human creativity; that in the last instance it is not creativity that carries us over the final chasm:

No brush, no chisel will quieten the soul, once it is turned to the divine love of Him who, upon the Cross, outstretched His arms to take us to Himself (Blunt 1976:86n46).

But even before the limits of human creativity are drawn by the redeeming Creator one should keep in mind that it is relativised because creativity should serve external goals, some of them effervescent and intangible like beauty and truth, others more concrete and practical like functionality or simply mundane like 'mere' entertainment.

When this is forgotten, creativity becomes indulgent, whether it be in the arts or in technology (with its proliferation of useless and eccentric 'gadgets').

Having argued about the limits of creativity, it still remains necessary to relate creativity to what is perceived as its opposites: routine and tradition. I propose that creativity and its opposites should not be viewed as mutually antagonistic. Human society cannot survive without both.

I have previously argued (Du Plessis 1986:78,79) that love is the psycho-social context within which creativity is positively related to routine and tradition and where each finds its proper place and function.

Love needs tradition and routine. A poignant expression of this is found in Antoine Saint Exupéry's modern fairy tale, *Le petit prince* (1966) where the jackal pleads with the little boy that he should visit him each day at the same time. The reason: then

the jackal can joyfully anticipate his arrival on the appointed time. Love allows the predictable on behalf of the anticipating happiness of the other. The predictable then becomes a sign of love's fidelity and loyalty (Du Plessis 1986:79).

On the other hand, love elicits originality and creativity. Just as much as love feeds on signs of fidelity, it grows on originality and surprise. Who does not know that lovers invent their own words and phrases as a sign of the intimacy between them? And does love not find solutions for the loved one which seem hidden to outsiders?

Without the context of love all tradition and routine, as well as all creativity, become 'a resounding gong or a clanging symbol'. Regarded in this way, we simply cannot divorce creativity from the most fundamental of Christian virtues. Creativity in relation to Christian faith cannot be practised or developed merely as an intellectual facility, but more of this later on.

3. What is creativity?

The time has now come to give a description of what constitutes creativity. Modern research on creativity, especially the demonstration of the relationship between artistic creation and scientific or other forms of creativity - owes much to Arthur Koestler. His work *The act of creation* (Koestler 1964), is a landmark in the research on creativity. It is Koestler who introduced the term 'bisociation' to describe the essential pattern of creativity:

I have coined the term 'bisociation', to make a distinction between the routines of disciplined thinking within a single universe of discourse - on a single plane, as it were - and the creative types of mental activity which always operate on more than one plane (Koestler 1979:113).

Koestler describes bisociation as 'the perceiving of a situation or idea in two self-consistent but mutually incompatible frames of reference or associative contexts' (Koestler 1979:113,114 Koestler's emphasis). Thus the 'conscious and unconscious processes underlying creativity are essentially combinatorial activities - the bringing together of previously separate areas of knowledge and experience' (Koestler 1979:129). That is why so much stress is laid in practical creativity training on juxtaposing (seeming) unrelated concepts, images, etc (cf Arens, Richard & Schulte 1977:18-25; De Bono 1971,1977; Adams 1988).

Koestler names three key types of combinatorial activities which are all part of the same continuum: that of the scientist whose purpose is to achieve synthesis; that of the artist who aims at a juxtaposition of the familiar and the eternal and the humorist who tries to contrive a collision. He labels them with three catch-words which describe the human reaction to these three types of creative activity:

Scientific creation elicits an eureka or *aha!* reaction; artistic creation an *ah...* reaction and humor: *haha* (Koestler 1979:129).

The concept of bisociation can be illuminated at the hand of the familiar story of David and Goliath (1 Sam 17). Firstly there is a definite problem begging for a

solution: Goliath taunts and humiliates Israel. Within the area of conventional military knowledge and experience there is no solution. Goliath's size, power and weaponry preclude it.

Now enters David from a (seemingly) completely different sphere of experience, that of shepherd. He is outraged by the behaviour of the Philistine and publicly airs his views (v 26). This elicits a rebuke from his elder brother (v 28), who disparagingly refers to David's area of experience. Eliab is patently unable to make any connection between the spheres of shepherding and war. We have the first intimation that David can relate these two in his reply to Saul (v 34): tending sheep included the experience of fighting for life - albeit against wild animals.

We see the beginning of a combinatorial process between two seeming unrelated fields of experience. Furthermore, David appeals to the fact that God has saved him as shepherd (i.e. provided a solution to the problem of tending his flock). He therefore expects that God will be able to bring about a solution for the present problem. He is receptive to the creative power of God.

There is no clear indication why Saul decides to let David fight Goliath. We may surmise that David's confident trust in the ability of God to resolve the situation convinced Saul. Is the implication of the text that Saul recognised a charismatic figure of destiny? In any case Saul does not understand that the solution lies in relating the world of military experience to that of the shepherd: he offers David his own armour for the battle (v 8).

This results in a comical demonstration of the inadequacy of any attempt to solve the problem on the plane of conventional military experience. David is forced by the act of Saul to realise that the armour and conventional weaponry make him incapable of gaining victory over Goliath (v 39). He has to use the weapons of the shepherd's world. The sphere of shepherd and that of soldier overlap. As so often happens it is by 'chance' that the overlap is made. The believing reader of this biblical narrative, though, perceives that it is God himself who, step by step, has combined these two diverse fields of experience in a creative solution to the problem facing Israel.

As with all acts of creativity the solution seems in retrospect so logical: it is indeed only by using the sling that Goliath could have been beaten! David does not claim that he had the creative insight into the solution of the problem, all he claimed beforehand was that there had to be a solution to the problem (v 46: 'This day the LORD will hand you over to me...' - NIV) and that the Lord would create the solution.

Through the bisociation of the worlds of shepherd and soldier the story becomes the outstanding example of the possibility of the bisociation of two other seemingly completely incompatible frames of reference: weakness and victory. David versus Goliath signifies that God is creative enough for 'small' to conquer 'gigantic'. The believing reader is induced to accept that there is no end to the creative possibilities of God; in fact, that no matter how disparate two given continuums may be, bisociation is possible. This brings us to our next section.

5. The super-natural as a source of creativity

The belief that there is another reality besides that of ordinary, every day experience, is part of the fabric of Christian faith.

With this second continuum, this additional frame of reference, the possibilities for bisociation are squared: everything 'down under' becomes transparent, metaphorical, sometimes even allegorical.

In terms of creativity theory this means that Christians believe that there is another continuum, a second frame of reference which has been and which can combine with that of ordinary everyday existence: a virgin gives birth; a few loaves and two fishes multiply and feed a multitude; someone walks on water... rises from the dead. Fact becomes stranger than fiction.

I find it therefore extremely short-sighted when, for instance, a religious education book for 12-14 year olds is advertised with the recommendation that the second, upper story be explained away:

This approach may help overcome the scepticism often felt by pupils when asked to accept stories such as walking on the water and the crucifixion as having equal validity, when the one story can be explained by a mis-translation, yet the other is supported by a great deal of historical evidence (Edward Arnold religious education 1988:9).

Rather, the art of religious education is precisely not to cave in to scepticism, but to foster trust in the creative capabilities of God. Excluding the additional continuum cripples creativity. Both the author of the above mentioned book and the author of the excerpt bow down before and are intimidated by the humdrum ordinary 'reality'. They both propagate a view of reality which is at heart dull and monotonous, which cramps the mind and imagination. The child or student is deprived of the exponential new possibilities for bisociation opened by the super-natural dimension when nothing is as it seems when the second story is added: the mind and the imagination boggle - and rejoice!

6. The humble as a source for creativity

In the previous paragraphs we have discussed creativity as a combinatory activity 'upwards', now we are going to look at bisociation 'downwards'.

Let me recall for a moment the story of David and Goliath again: Eliab, David's eldest brother, could not visualise that David could be instrumental in solving the problem confronting Israel in the person of Goliath, because David was too humble in his opinion: the youngest brother and military untrained. Yet, it was precisely the fact that David was untrained and had to rely on his despised background as a shepherd that enabled him to achieve the seemingly impossible (not least because Goliath himself could not recognise the creative military possibilities opened up by the presence of the humble boy).

The recognition of the creative horizons opened by unworthy, the poor, the humble and the humiliated is intrinsic to the biblical narrative and the Christian message. The fundamental creative lesson is: 'Never despise!'

One of the most provocative realisations of this insight in Western art is found in a drawing by Rembrandt (Schwartz 1977:B90). In the background of the painting one sees the Good Samaritan delivering the victim of the robbers at the door of the inn. The foreground is taken up by the drawing of a dog on its hunches, defecating. The viewer is shocked. Such irreverence and irrelevancy! Until creative reception which has learnt not to despise the humble, lays the connection.

The parable of the Good Samaritan embodies the acceptance of the despised Samaritan. The despised is elevated by the parable to an example. If that holds true, we should beware not to look down on the dog defecating as too despicable to form the foreground to a religious backdrop, displacing the sacred by the crudely mundane. Faeces becomes a parable testing our understanding of God's inclusive acceptance.

This recognition of the seeming unworthy as a continuum which can provide combinatorial possibilities for problem solving is a mode of creativity which fits in well with the mood of the times.

The connection with theologies which focus on the poor is obvious. But this perspective is also closely connected to an important attitude in the art of the present century: to create from humble, instead of from expensive and admirable material.

A famous example of an artwork produced by this attitude, is Picasso's 'Head of a steer' (Berger 1965:101). It was fashioned from a discarded bicycle saddle and handlebars: the saddle turned down to form the head of the steer and the handlebar placed horizontally on top, signifying the horns. The bicycle which had ended its life in rejection, lives on in a new form. Scrapheap and art gallery, bicycle and steer, technological artefact and animal, functional and aesthetic, rejection and admiration are all combined to new syntheses.

The sculpture made from material disdained by previous generations of sculptors becomes material for a religious metaphor: on the scrapheap of humanity, amongst the broken bodies at the place of skulls, God found the rejected Jesus of Nazareth and fashioned him into a resurrected figure of glory, bisociating flesh and spirit, time and eternity, guilt and holiness, despair and hope.

7. Failure and creativity

Let us now try to gather the threads, turning once again to the story of David and Goliath.

We have said that the story of David and Goliath bisociates weakness and victory presenting a perennial vision of hope to the weak, inspiring confidence that gigantic foes can be conquered. The story tells of one instance where the seemingly

impossible happened. But, as we all know, this is the exception. What if, as so often happens, the statistically probable does happen - and 'Goliath' conquers 'David'? What are the indications in the subsequent biblical narrative that failure can possibly form one of the continuums of a creative combination?

It is in the report on the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth that we are confronted with the pathos of the frail succumbing to overpowering forces. Jesus resists the religious and social authorities. He is convicted by his own people and sentenced to a cruel and shameful death by the imperial power. The creative intervention of God remains absent. Jesus dies with a cry of abject misery: 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' Failure seems to be the all-encompassing frame of reference. Symbolically speaking, the story of Jesus' crucifixion is the end of David. David's and all victories over gigantic opposition are relativised: they are but intermittent flickers of doomed hope. The end is despair.

Then, however, the unimaginable: the creative leap from tomb to resurrection... Death and life bisociate.

Not merely the weak can conquer, but the vanquished can overcome; not merely saved from death, but saved although dead; not only God's favourite, but also those rejected by God can be rewarded. In Jesus 'David' suffers first rejection, only to be vindicated in the end, but also, because the rejected Jesus is justified eventually, 'Goliath', the initially rejected, is accepted.

Here the humble and the super-natural meet. Without the miraculous intervention of God himself there is no vindication of the vanquished. Only a possibility that transcends the natural, can turn the grave of all human possibilities and expectations into the cradle of a new creation (Romans 8:18-25). In the bisociation of two mundane continuums the blind leap of creativity must afterwards be vindicated by logic (in hindsight we can appreciate that David could have conquered Goliath only with a sling). But this final leap of God's creativity leaves man for ever perplexed, in awe of the boundaries of human creativity.

The resurrection turns all defeat, whenever 'David' is conquered by 'Goliath' - which is the rule rather than the exception in everyday life - into prologues for the final and irreversible victory.

In redefining the meaning and significance of death decisively, the Christian story redefines failure decisively. By doing this, creative perspectives on everyday life are opened. The Dutch philosopher, Anthonie Van Peursen (s a:1723), introduced the concept of the innovative sacrifice (*inventive caputilasie*), a concept well known to chess players. Van Peursen argues that the Christian faith teaches us that sacrifice can be unexpectedly profitable. Sometimes you must lose first in order to win later.

Here we are at the heart of Christian, creative behaviour. The innovative sacrifice includes, or rather presupposes love without which the will to sacrifice would be absent. But we can go even further, love also enlightens, sharpens the senses and intellect, and enables one to recognize new and unexpected ways in which sacrifice might save and help. Faith is necessary, without which the seeming failure of sacrifice becomes the only, pathetic reality.

8. Conclusion

The paradigm for Christian creativity can now be summarized as follows:

Allow for the impossible.

Don't be intimidated by ordinary, everyday reality.

Learn to love, specifically: have compassion.

Never despise.

Be prepared to make sacrifices.

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