

CSL 528: Interpersonal Foundations  
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The Artist, the Art, and the Essence:  
 A Theological Anthropology

“... My feelings about art and my feelings about the Creator of the Universe are inseparable. To try to talk about art and about Christianity is for me one and the same thing. . .”

—Madeleine L’Engle (2001, p. 7)

Who is God but an Artist who etched into a blank canvas of the universe Her Spirit and Her goodness? What was nothing—or a dense ball of something—became everything, shaped from the Artist’s skilled hand. God looked at all She created and called it “good”; and then after forming humankind from the dust, She called it “very good!” (Genesis 1:12-31, NLT). Because it was She who created it, the whole universe, from the greatest of nebula to the tiniest of quarks, holds divinity in its form and image. “The presence of God’s spirit in all living things is what makes them beautiful,” writes the early Celtic Christian Pelagius. “There is no creature on earth in whom God is absent” (as cited in Newell, 1997, p. 11). So this is where a theological anthropology must begin, with the Artist forming space, nature, and humankind from nothing and calling it “good,” followed by humankind reciprocating creation through co-artistry.

To call God an Artist and to stop there is insufficient. God is definable, but also wholly *undefinable*. “A God you could prove makes the whole thing immensely, oh, *uninteresting*,” laments John Updike’s (1986) character Roger Lambert, a doubting theologian, “Pat. Whatever else God may be, he shouldn’t be pat.” But God is paradox: She is both immanent, in the world, knowable to Her creation, but she is also “*emmanent*” (Dillard, 1977, pp. 69-70). The Artist’s presence, Her Essence, is *in* her art, but She Herself is not the artwork. And so it is with humankind. God, the Artist, loves Her creation, but She is separate from it. She transcends it.

She is Other. But art always reflects the Artist. As theologian Karl Barth (1960) writes, “Man cannot escape God, because he always derives from Him” (p. 345).

The complexity of God exists not only in Her undefinable nature, but also in her form: She is one, but she is three. If artists are as Madeleine L’Engle (2001) describes as “birth-givers” then what better picture of the Trinity do we have of the Artist giving birth to art (p. 12)? And it’s not just the art, creation, she gives birth to, but to her very Being: the Artist begets the Incarnate, the Living, Breathing Art. And the Living, Breathing Art gives birth to the Essence of Her art—the color, the form, the medium. And it’s through the Essence, the very spirit of the Artist, that humankind can co-creates with God.

The Artist made humans in Her image and gave them Her Essence; therefore the Artist finds “correspondence in that image”—it’s they who carry out the work the Artist began at creation (Moltmann, 1985, p. 220). “It is one-sided to view creation only as the world of ‘God’s hands,’ and as his ‘work,’ something that has simply and solely to be distinguished from God [herself],” writes theologian Jurgen Moltmann (1985). “Creation is also the differentiated presence of God the Spirit, the presence of the One *in* the many” (p. 14). Humans co-create with God by living out their Genesis 1:28 (NLT) calling: to build families, to care for the earth. And most importantly, humans co-create with the Artist through their relating with others.

Humankind’s role as co-artists with God is dulled by sin. This, however, does not mean that sin changes the nature of humans as God’s finishing touch: “very good!” Rather, sin color blinds humans from their true identity as the art of God and as co-artists with Her. It’s as Pelagius describes the sinner: as a drunkard, drinking more and more, often unable to stop. Newell (1997) writes,

At any moment such a person may choose to drink less, ‘but the more he drinks the more he wants, and so the more difficult it becomes to restrain himself.’ . . . The more wrong is multiplied, the more our essential nature becomes buried and thus harder to recover, even to the point where we suppose . . . we entirely lost it. (p. 17)

But humankind hasn’t “lost it.” When sin entered the world through Adam, the nature of humankind did not change. The curse recited to Adam and Eve in the garden was not the Artist revoking Her “very good!” or Her taking away the Essence from creation. Sin makes it, as musician David Bazan (2009) wails, “hard to be, hard to be, hard to be a decent human being.” Sin created a *delamination*, dividing layers, between the Artist and the artwork. So to bring Her and humankind together again, the Creator had to enter the art Herself.

The second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, can be understood as the Artist lowering Herself and entering into Her art. Saint Paul describes Incarnation as the Artist who “though he was God . . . gave up his divine privileges” and “took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being” (Philippians 2:6-7, NLT). Christ came as the great Paradigm, the example-setter, showing humankind how to live in their goodness again. He taught His disciples how to heal the sick and raise the dead; He taught them how to love each other, to the extent of laying down His life for both his friends and enemies. Jesus, the Artist-on-Earth, came not solely for showing, however, but He came to atone, to make humankind *at-one* with God again.

Humankind bears the image of the Artist God through creation, but is drawn into Her family through Christ. Humans are kin with Christ, believed Julian of Norwich. Writer Janet Soskice (2007) writes of the early church mother:

Julian sees Christ as continually ‘in travail,’ laboring to give birth to humankind in the fullness of its intended being. Our human mothers, whose office is a great one, bear us to

pain and death, but Christ—true Mother and ‘All-love’—bears us to joy and eternal life.

In this divine pregnancy, ‘he carries us within him in love and travail, until the full time when he wanted to suffer the sharpest thorns and cruel pains that ever were or will be, and at last he died. (p. 150)

After Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension, the work of the Incarnation did not end. “God, or more particularly Christ, is our Mother because his work is not completed at Bethlehem,” says Soskice (2007, p. 150). Christ set the example, made humans at-one with God again, but He also gave humankind the power of the Incarnation.

Now that the Artist is no longer physically on earth, God’s power is carried out through humans. “The power is still with God, not with us,” writer Ronald Rolheiser (1999) emphasizes, “but in the incarnation God has chosen, marvelously, to let his power flow through us, to let our flesh give reality to his power” (p. 92). This means through the Essence of the Artist and with the authority of the Artist-on-Earth, Christians have the power to heal the sick, to forgive sins, to answer prayer (pp. 86-91). These actions point to something else as well: living a life evoking the power of the Artist is not something done in solitary. To live out the Incarnation is to be *with* people as Christ was with people. By engaging in genuine relationship with one another, Christians co-create with the Artist and bring out the goodness in them and those around them.

“All actual life is encounter,” writes philosopher Martin Buber (1970, p. 62). That relationship begins with the Artist, relating within Her three persons, is expanded through Her creation of humankind, and is completed through Her art interacting with one another. A human cannot know himself or herself without interacting with others. “I require a You to become,” writes Buber (1970), “becoming I, I say You” (p. 62). The human personality is unformed, incomplete without the other. “The personality, or self, is not something structured into the

person, Sullivan suggests,” says Mitchell (1997) of Harry Stack Sullivan’s psychological work. “Personality is shaped in interaction with others and emerges in interactions with others” (p. 69). The Artist made humans so they would be like Her, not just in their ability to create, but in their need for relationship—a need so intrinsic, that a person cannot be fully human with interactions with others. “It is not good for the man to be alone,” said the Artist of Her first human being. “I will make a helper who is just right for him” (Genesis 2:18). And from one human being, the Artist created another. No human is meant to live life alone, without community or partnership. “No man is an island,” writes 16th century poet John Donne (2012), “Entire of itself / Each is a piece of the continent / A part of the main [...] / Each man’s death diminishes me / For I am involved in mankind.”

In order, though, for humans to live fully into their roles as relators, they must always tread on Buber’s “narrow ridge”—ready to surrender their whole being to the other, while still maintaining their *I*-ness (Kramer, 2003, p. 78). Humans cannot simply use another person. True relationship does not occur when one tries to “experience” the other, as one might experience a work of art, but not try to enter into it. Buber’s (1970) “genuine encounter” is achieved only when one brings his or her whole self—their personality, culture, beliefs—to the other and then is willing to surrender it all for the sake of the other. “Because surrender seeks to discover,” writes psychologist Roy Barsness (2006), “we must dispense of our authoritarian tendencies and remain open to a reciprocal mutual influence” (p. 48). When a genuine encounter like this occurs, life is created. Humans are bonded to each other through communication, not unlike the ribbons in M.C. Escher’s sketch *Bond of Union* (see Appendix). The ribbon both creates the humans and binds them together. And there exists in between the two humans something new, what Buber (1970) calls the “in between,” where the Essence reveals herself.

The Artist-on-Earth, when speaking to His disciples, proclaimed, “For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20, NLT). And the Artist is there among Her people. When humans meet in genuine communication, forgoing all of their prejudices in order to be present fully with the other, the Essence is between them, binding them together and revealing Her face. It’s here, too, that the Artist is on earth, though not as the Living, Breathing Art, but in the actions of humankind, co-creating with Her.

The art of God, humankind, as literal co-artists—writers, painters, musicians—have a special role in carrying on this co-creation. Not only do they co-create through the life-giving acts of birth and relationship, but through creative acts as well. “All true art is incarnational,” writes L’Engle (2001); so the gift of the human artist is to bring forth life through her artwork (p. 19). By pouring her whole self into her art, she imitates God, revealing Her to the rest of the world. Through art, even, the transcendent Artist can be glimpsed. It is the artist’s calling to live fully into this: not working for her own glory, or for money, or for ego satisfaction. No, the human artist creates so the Artist can walk on the earth once again, not in flesh, but in pastels, guitar plucks, and graphite.

The Artist, the creator of the universe, stars, and planets, created human beings in Her image. And because She entered into Her art, by the Incarnation, humans bear the image of Christ as well. By declaring Her art “very good!” (Genesis 1:31, NLT), humans carry with them the very Essence of God and are called to co-create alongside her. Co-artistry is most beautifully lived out through speech acts, when two humans interact in a genuine encounter. This co-creation slows, though, when sin enters the picture. It’s sin that blinds humans from their true goodness and their role in creation, but it does not redefine the Artist’s view of humankind. Sin separates humans from God but through the Artist’s entering into the world, the Incarnation,

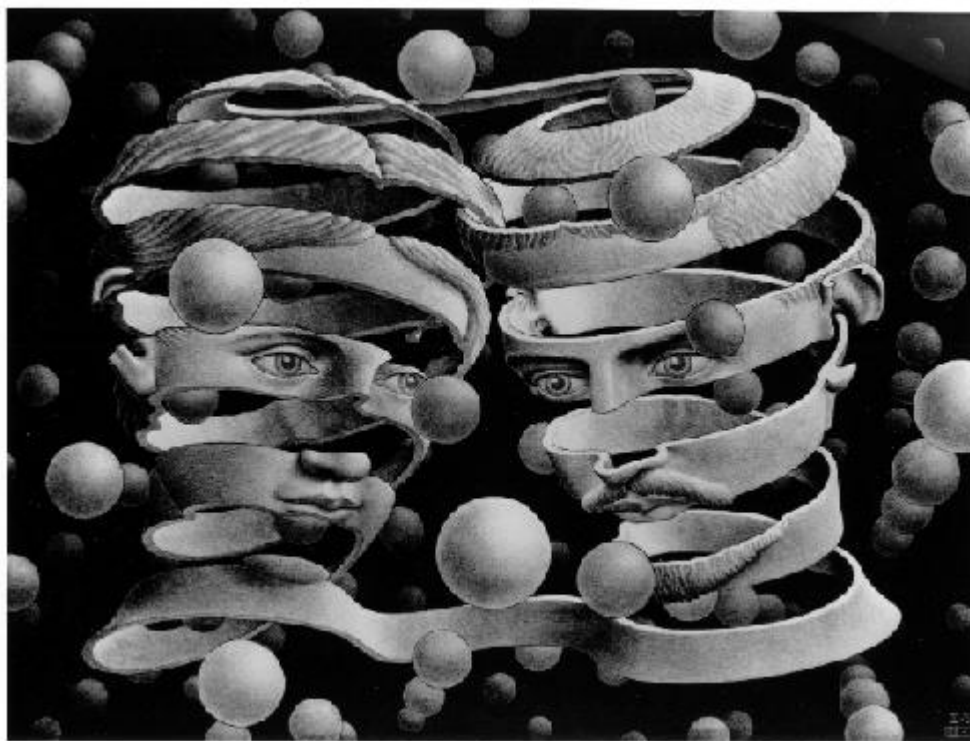
humans can be at-one with Her again. And in that oneness, humankind can invoke the very power of God.

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## Appendix



M.C. Escher's *Bond of Union*, 1956. Retrieved from [mcescher.com](http://mcescher.com).