Creator Spirit

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE ART OF BECOMING HUMAN

Steven R. Guthrie

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Foreword

Jeremy S. Begbie

This book has been provoked by something widespread in our culture: talk about the arts has a habit of veering into talk about “spirit,” “the spiritual,” and “spirituality”; and likewise, “spiritual” talk often slides into talk about the arts. In our culture, there seems to be an intuitive sense that “the spiritual” and the world of the arts are somehow intimately related.

And yet when we dig a little deeper we find that language about “the spiritual” covers, if not a multitude of sins, at least a multitude of meanings. We find ourselves in something of a semantic chaos. This might not matter much, if it weren’t for the fact that Christians, eager to find connections with the religious impulses of our culture at large, are prone to use the language of “spirit” in ways quite alien to the biblical texts. Most worrying, talk of “spirit” is used to justify a neglect, even a denigration of our humanness, especially our embodied, physical nature: to be “spiritual” is somehow to rise above our earthy, common humanity. And when the arts are drawn into this kind of confusion, the problems multiply.

Guthrie brings a welcome dose of fresh air into this foggy territory. He is immersed in the biblical texts, with an acute grasp of the multidimensional moves of the Spirit portrayed in the New Testament. He shows us that at the heart of the Spirit’s work is the renewal of our humanity—through the Spirit, as we are changed into the likeness of Christ. We are re-humanized by the Spirit, not de-humanized. With this perspective in mind, he invites us to enter the world of human artistry and reenvision the arts in ways that are illuminating, compelling, and always down to earth. Throughout, Guthrie is careful not to denigrate or downplay the stirrings of the Spirit beyond the church: this is a charitable, hospitable theology, eager to listen as well as speak. (Indeed,
the book breathes the generous spirit of its author, with whom I was once fortunate enough to coteach a course on the Holy Spirit at the University of St. Andrews.) But Guthrie’s is a discerning generosity—as he shows, the eagerness to baptize everything in the arts that attracts the language of “spiritual” is naïve and in the end helps nobody.

In these pages, you will encounter John Coltrane, Annie Dillard, and Wassily Kandinsky. You will rub shoulders with Augustine, Miroslav Volf, Gordon Fee, and—Guthrie’s main theological companion—Athanasius. You will encounter a first-rate teacher who seems to be able to draw on a vast range of images and metaphors to press each point home. You will encounter a theologian who can bring clarity out of confusion without ever stifling a sense of openness and wonder. And most important, you will, by God’s grace, encounter the work of the Spirit, sharpening your thinking and enlarging your vision, the Spirit who alone can, and will, remake all things.
Introduction

The LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

Genesis 2:7

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:18

For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2:10 (NLT)

Theology involves careful thought and speech about God. The theologian employs words and concepts in reflecting on God and God’s ways with the created world. But while words are the tools of the theologian’s trade, they are not, on the whole, dedicated tools. Words and concepts are not kept encased in glass, awaiting the moment they are required by theologians. They are tools already in daily use, and they are formed, shaped, and bent by their employment.

Here is one such word: spirit.

Plainly, it is an important word for the theologian. It is also—plainly—a word that does a good deal of work outside of Christian academic theology, particularly as the root of the word “spirituality.” Everything from home decorating to corporate management techniques are addressed in that nebulous region of the local bookstore labeled “Mind, Body, and Spirit.” Cooking, exercise, sex, and travel are likewise just a few of the activities that popular publications characterize as spiritual. So a Christian might well wonder: what does “spiritual” mean, what do the people who use this word mean by it when they employ it in these settings? And do these uses bear any resemblance to...
the word as it is used in a specifically Christian sense, such as when it is used to speak of the Holy Spirit of Christian belief?

The Spiritual and the Aesthetic

Years ago, as an undergraduate student in music, I was struck by the number of times I heard the language of spirituality used to characterize art and beauty. (In particular, I can remember a long conversation in the student lounge with a very intense vocal performance major who explained to me that one could not be a real musician without also being a deeply spiritual person!) A whole raft of popular publications bears witness to the fact that this association between the aesthetic and the spiritual is not idiosyncratic, nor is it unique to the music school I attended. Consider just a few titles from the past decade:

- Creativity: Where the Divine and the Human Meet
- The New Creative Artist: A Guide to Developing Your Creative Spirit
- The Spirit of Silence: Making Space for Creativity
- Releasing the Creative Spirit: Unleashing the Creativity in Your Life
- The Spirit of Creativity
- The Soul’s Palette: Drawing on Art’s Transformative Powers
- Art Heals: How Creativity Cures the Soul
- The Zen of Creativity: Cultivating Your Artistic Life
- Spirit Taking Form: Making a Spiritual Practice of Making Art
- Drawing as a Sacred Activity: Simple Steps to Explore Your Feelings and Heal Your Consciousness

The best known book in this vein is probably Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity.* This book has sold more than a million copies since its publication in 1992, and Cameron has followed it with a host of companion volumes, seminars, conferences and workshops.

Why should so many identify art (or beauty or music) as spiritual? What could it mean to characterize a painting, or a Brahms string quartet, or the act of drawing in this way? Is the description even meaningful? Or is “spiritual” in this context simply shorthand for “things-I-really-like” or “that-which-gives-me-goosebumps”?

The association hasn’t only been made frequently, however. It has also been made thoughtfully, in careful and considered ways. When we move beyond the realm of popular and self-help books and back behind the last couple of decades, we continue to find the aesthetic and the spiritual set alongside one another. Tolstoy, Plato, Schleiermacher, Augustine, Tillich, Schopenhauer, Santayana, and Schiller are just a few of the notable thinkers who have believed that spirit and art (or beauty) are—in one way or another—closely related to each other.

It is this “in one way or another,” in fact, that I want to consider in the pages that follow. We will survey some of the various ways and some of the various reasons the aesthetic and the spiritual have been paired. In light of the preceding lists of thinkers and publications, it should go without saying that my survey will not be exhaustive. I do hope, however, that it is representative. I also have made an attempt to listen to the voices of artists as well as those of theologians and philosophers; similarly, I’ve tried to attend not only to scholarly works but also to popular ones.

16. Details about Cameron and some of the publications and activities connected with *The Artist’s Way* can be found at http://www.theartistsway.com.
In chapter 1 the proposed connection we will explore is *mystery and ineffability*. Some have suggested that art and spirituality are closely related because in each we move into a realm beyond words and concepts.

In chapter 2 the proposed resemblance has to do with *expression and emotion*. A number of artists and philosophers have suggested that art is spiritual because it arises from and gives voice to the deepest places in us (our “spirit”). Art on this account is spiritual because through it we are enabled to give voice to who we are most truly—or enter most deeply into the humanity of another.

The third chapter considers the idea that *spiritual* means something like “non-material” or “non-physical.” Taking this as a starting point, many artists and philosophers have argued that art and spirituality each take us beyond the world of matter and appearance, into a world of spiritual realities.

Chapter 4 observes that art and religion have been regularly paired not just within various philosophical systems but also in the actual worship and religious rituals of nearly all human cultures. Art—particularly music—is the persistent counterpart to human religious practice. In light of this, some have suggested that art is connected to spirituality because of its *power to enact and embody the shared life of a community*.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 consider an idea from ancient philosophy that continues to find currency on the lips of artists and lovers of art: *the artist is literally in-spired*—enspirited—and creates by virtue of allowing the unimpeded flow of the Spirit (or the Muse, or some other sort of “Higher Power”). Here, then, the connection between spirit and art is that of direct cause and effect.

Chapter 8 explores a related idea, that art is a matter of *discernment*. On this account, art arises from unusually sensitive individuals who are able to recognize the “spiritual meaning” latent in all things. The world is full of spirit. The artist is the one able to see this and is also the one through whom others’ eyes are opened.

Finally, in chapters 9 and 10 we will consider the idea that the connection between the spiritual and the aesthetic is *eschatological*. The artist has caught a glimpse of heaven and provides an “advance screening” for those of us on earth. Beauty is spiritual, according to this account, because it offers us a foretaste of the better and brighter world to come.

Right away this outline of the chapters alerts us to the fact that spirituality and the aesthetic enjoy not just one but several areas of verbal and conceptual overlap. Mystery, ecstasy, inspiration, creation and creativity, “giftedness,” the relation of the seen to the unseen, “taste” and discernment, completion and perfection; each of these is an important issue in theology as well as in the realm of art and beauty.

**Theologies of the Spirit**

The preceding outline of chapters also draws our attention to an even more important point: every association, every proposed connection between art and
Spirituality is also a theology of the Spirit. The person who says “thus and such is spiritual,” also advances—often by implication—a particular understanding of “spirit.” They offer, in other words, a pneumatology. One of the central tasks of the chapters that follow will be to evaluate these pneumatologies (some secular, some religious; some popular, some scholarly), comparing and contrasting them with an explicitly biblical and Christian theology of the Holy Spirit.

This is different, then, from a “natural theology” of the Spirit, in which one might attempt to extrapolate from an experience of beauty to a theology of the Spirit, or work one’s way up from some instance of art to a full-blown pneumatology. We won’t undertake to prove—or disprove—that any particular experience of art or beauty is an experience of the Holy Spirit (who, after all, “blows where it chooses” [John 3:8]). Instead we will be comparing and evaluating various ways of talking and thinking about the Spirit.

This sort of comparing and contrasting is helpful and instructive, not because at every point the theologies in question turn out to be entirely different, nor because at every point they end up being entirely the same. But rather, setting various conceptions of spirit alongside one other provides an occasion for sharpening and refining our words and thoughts. It is an opportunity to say both “Yes, that’s exactly what I mean as well” and “No, I don’t mean that, I mean this.”

**Spirit-uality**

Finally, in the chapters that follow I will outline a Christian theology of the Spirit. Based upon this pneumatology, I also will propose one reason why so many have sensed an affinity between the aesthetic and the spiritual.

As I do this I will be thinking about the aesthetic in relation to one very particular Christian understanding of “spirituality”—one that I believe is foundational to all other Christian uses. Namely, I will be thinking about Christian spirituality as, in the first instance, Spirit-uality. For Christian theology, the “spiritual” is manifestly the realm of the Holy Spirit. This conviction is firmly rooted in the biblical use of the adjective pneumatikos (“spiritual”). The word occurs twenty-six times in the New Testament, with twenty-four of these occurrences arising within the Pauline epistles. Plainly, then, the word has a “strong Pauline stamp.” It does not occur in the Septuagint, and it is not often found in Hellenistic texts. So what does Paul mean when he uses the word “spiritual”? In its Pauline usage, Gordon Fee writes, “the word functions primarily as an adjective for the Spirit, referring to *that which belongs to, or pertains to, the Spirit.*” In the New Testament, “spiritual” is not simply a way

18. Ibid., 29, emphasis original.
of denoting one’s own beliefs, tendencies, practices, or experiences (except insofar as those relate to the Holy Spirit of God). For Paul, a “spiritual person” is “a person of the Holy Spirit.”

On this account, understanding spirituality will mean first of all arriving at an understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Throughout this book I will argue that one of the principal works of the Holy Spirit is to make and remake our humanity. In creation, incarnation, and redemption, the Holy Spirit is the humanizing Spirit.\(^19\)

In creation, the Spirit is the Breath of God that animates the dust of the ground and creates a living human being. Similarly, in the coming of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is the incarnating Spirit. It is by the Spirit that the eternal Word of God becomes truly and fully human. The Spirit likewise rests upon and empowers the humanity of Jesus, and so we call him the Christ, the Messiah—that is, the one anointed with the Spirit. Finally, in the work of redemption and consummation, the Holy Spirit is the re-humanizing Spirit. The Spirit is poured out on God’s people, so that by the Spirit they may become truly and fully human, recreated in the Image of the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ.

This theme is likewise reflected in the structure of the book.

After the first chapter, chapter 2 makes the basic argument that the work of the Spirit is to restore, rather than extinguish, our humanity. Chapter 3 focuses on the role of the Spirit in the creation and re-creation of our physical bodies. Chapter 4 explores the work of the Spirit in re-making human community (as well as the role of Spirit-filled community in remaking us individually).

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 look at the Spirit as the bringer of human freedom, re-creating persons who are, in turn, able to create. The Spirit’s work includes the restoration of our voices. And not only does the Spirit recreate, but God’s Spirit also invites and enables us to share in his work of re-creation. In light of this, chapter 8 considers one way in which the Spirit restores not only human volition and the human voice but also human vocation. Finally, the work of the Spirit has an eschatological orientation. The Spirit’s work is to perfect and complete our humanity—and not our humanity only, but all things. Chapters 9 and 10 are devoted to this eschatological and perfecting work of the Spirit.

If the work of the Spirit is to make and re-make our humanity, then this suggests a couple of interesting possibilities with respect to the “spirituality” of the arts. First, it may be that human beings have associated the arts with spirituality precisely because art-making is a paradigmatically human activity. The work of the Spirit is to restore our humanity, to restore our bodies, to restore our voices, to restore our freedom and our

Artistic activity, likewise, is a powerful means of connecting us to our physical selves. It is one of the fundamental ways human beings have of establishing a community’s identity. And for cultures around the world and across time, artistic activity has been a powerful way of “finding one’s voice” and shaping one’s environment. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that many have had the intuition that there is something spiritual about art. The work of the Spirit is to restore our humanity. To the extent that artistic activity helps us realize and connects us more deeply to our humanity, art may indeed be said to be not only “spiritual,” but Spirit-*ual.

Second, the pneumatology I have described gives a distinctly artistic character to the Spirit’s work. Making and remaking; perfecting and forming—this is what the Spirit does. The Spirit is involved with bringing human beings into right proportion, rightly arranging them both within themselves and in relation to the world around them. Moreover, the Spirit’s re-creative work takes the form of following a pattern—that of Jesus Christ—and then of creatively re-imagining that pattern in new and varied settings. We become, Paul says, God’s poiema—“his masterpiece” (as the New Living Translation vividly renders Eph. 2:10). Not only does our theology of the Spirit enable a better understanding of art and why it moves us, in addition to this, the world of art provides us with helpful and appropriate imagery for thinking about the work of the Spirit.

**Athanasius and the Re-creation of Humanity**

In developing this material we also will have a theological traveling companion—through the first half of the book in particular. In these chapters I will often turn for help to one of the greatest theological minds of the early church, St. Athanasius (c. 296–373). Some might find this surprising; Athanasius’s theology has at times been criticized (his early theology in particular) for neglecting the Holy Spirit.\(^{20}\) His mature work, however, more than makes up for any early deficiency. In fact, his *Letters to Serapion* is the first Christian theological treatise devoted entirely to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.\(^{21}\)

But the main reason for turning to Athanasius is that at every point in his long career he powerfully articulated the theme at the center of this book: humanity made and remade. Athanasius recognized, as clearly as any theologian has, that the story of *redemption* is the story of *re-creation*. This re-creation includes especially the remaking of our humanity, in and through the humanity of Jesus Christ. Athanasius also draws attention to a critical role that the Holy Spirit has in this work of re-creation. It is by the Holy Spirit that we are joined to the perfect humanity of Christ and remade in his image.

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Who This Book Is For

This book arose from lectures I gave at the University of St. Andrews in the Autumn of 2001. Jeremy Begbie, then my colleague at St. Andrews, invited me to co-teach a course with him entitled “The Holy Spirit: An Exploration through the Arts.” The idea was to teach an upper-level undergraduate course on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in which the arts would act as a primary conversation partner, opening up and focusing important issues in pneumatology. We ended up teaching the course three times together over the next few years—Jeremy lecturing one week and I the next. (Anyone who has ever heard Professor Begbie speak will know what a fool’s mission I had accepted!)

In 2005 I came to Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, to help launch a new program in religion and the arts. In my teaching at Belmont, I continue to use some of the same material I developed in St. Andrews, but now primarily in an upper-level undergraduate course called “Faith and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics.”

So, in St. Andrews, this material was presented to students with some background in theology, but who in many cases had not spent much time thinking about the arts. At Belmont, I teach this material to students who have some training and a great deal of interest in the arts—but who for the most part have relatively little background in theology. My hope is that this book will prove useful to readers who fall into each of these categories. For this reason, I often will provide background information or definitions for names and terms that will seem awfully basic to an art or music student (“John Coltrane,” for instance, or “mimesis”) but which may be new to a student of theology. Similarly, terms and names already very familiar to students of theology (“Athanasius” or “perichoresis”) will be briefly explained for the benefit of those whose primary experience is in the arts. I hope that all of those reading will be patient at these points where I pause and offer a bit of explanation for the benefit of readers entering the conversation from a different direction.

Finally, I should say that although this book originated in (on the one hand) a course on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and (on the other hand) a course on theological aesthetics, it does not itself aspire to function as a comprehensive introduction to either area. A discussion of the filioque controversy, for instance, could hardly be omitted from a general introduction to pneumatology. Here it is barely mentioned, however, and this is because this book is not a general introduction to pneumatology. Instead, it is an evaluation—from the perspective of Christian theology—of the ways and reasons art and beauty have been linked with spirit.
Is There Anything to Talk About Here?

_Spirit and Mystery_

“Holiness”—“the holy”—is a category . . . peculiar to the sphere of religion . . . It contains a quite specific element or “moment,” which sets it apart from “the rational” . . . and which remains inexpressible . . . in the sense that it completely eludes apprehension in terms of concepts. The same thing is true (to take a quite different region of experience) of the category of the beautiful.

Rudolf Otto¹

There is probably no conviction more deeply rooted in modern aesthetics than this, that works of art express what cannot be expressed in ordinary discourse.

W. E. Kennick²

Why a Theology of the Spirit?

What exactly is so “spiritual” about the arts? Among the many answers to this question that have been suggested, there is one we should consider right at the beginning. If it is correct we can stop—in fact, we will have to stop—before going much further.


There is an anonymous but often repeated quip that goes: “Talking about music is like dancing about architecture.” The conviction behind this one-liner is that words and music, concepts and song, are not only different but incommensurable media. Words and music each have a kind of meaning, certainly. But what is “said” in one domain really cannot be said in the other. “Is there a meaning to music?” asks composer Aaron Copland. “My answer would be ‘Yes.’ . . . ‘Can you state in so many words what the meaning is?’ My answer to that would be, ‘No.’ ”

Here, some have said, we’ve found the important resemblance between the spiritual and—not just music, but art generally. Each, it seems, moves us out beyond words and definitions, beyond concepts and logical distinctions. Each opens us up to realities and experiences of great profundity, but realities that wither on the examination table of the philosopher or the theologian. And—if this is the case—then ineffability, the “unsayable-ness” of art and spirituality, isn’t a limitation to be overcome. It is instead precisely the virtue we value. In these areas we are given the privilege of speaking languages beyond language and knowing truths beyond knowing.

So, theologians, go home! If art and the spirit reside entirely within the domain of ineffability, then our study has both begun and ended. The last thing we should want in this case is a theology of the spirit, or a theological reflection on the arts. If the spiritual always runs out beyond our words and categories, then a conceptual, theological analysis of spirit seems misguided, or maybe even distasteful. Like producing a study titled The Exhausive Mechanical Physics of Lovemaking, it misses the point entirely. The first proposal we must consider is this: the most important resemblance between art and Spirit is that we really can’t talk about either one.

Art and Mystery

This is an idea that appears throughout a study by Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, titled Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist. The book’s dust jacket claims that “artists have become the spiritual vanguard of our time.” Increasingly, Wuthnow says, when Americans look for spiritual guidance and insight, they are turning not to priests or theologians, but to poets, musicians, sculptors, and dancers.

Why should artists—artists particularly—be singled out as the spiritual vanguard of our time? Why would people be inclined to seek spiritual insight

3. The quotation has been variously attributed to Elvis Costello, Martin Mull, David Byrne, and even Clara Schumann.
from a poet or a painter, rather than (say) a dentist or an electrician? A number of the artists Wuthnow interviews answer along the lines we have just suggested. The arts usher us into the “spiritual” realm of ineffability. They invite us to stand open-mouthed before the mystery of things, and this, Wuthnow suggests, is the “spirituality” of art.

This is not a new idea. Particularly during the Romantic era the idea that the arts “say the unsayable” becomes something of a philosophical cliché. In a famous study of Beethoven’s music, the nineteenth-century critic E. T. A. Hoffmann insists that “music reveals to man an unknown realm . . . a world in which he leaves behind all precise feelings in order to embrace an inexpressible longing.” In Hoffmann’s breathless tribute music “reveals,” though what it reveals remains somehow “unknown” and “inexpressible.” Music has “significance,” but what it signifies escapes—and in fact, exceeds—words.

These same ideas appear in Wuthnow’s book, in an interview with wood sculptor David Ellsworth. Ellsworth creates free-form wooden objects that are difficult to define, and in fact, Wuthnow writes, “This is the essence that he is most intent on expressing. ‘Without a definition,’ he explains, ‘we’re left with wonderment.’” “Being without definition is the key to Ellsworth’s understanding of spirituality,” Wuthnow continues, observing that an emphasis on mystery occurs repeatedly in artists’ accounts of their work.” Wuthnow believes that artists are sensitive and responsive to mystery because they recognize the futility of attempting to explain, define, or categorize their own creative work. He notes that the artists he interviews likewise place mystery and ineffability at the center of their spiritual lives and “emphasize the impossibility of fully understanding God.”

For Ellsworth, then (as for many of the other artists Wuthnow interviews), mystery (what cannot be fully known or seen), and ineffability (what cannot be defined or spoken of) are the hallmarks of “the spiritual.” And an interesting

8. Ibid., 102, emphasis added.
10. Ibid., 2.
11. Ibid., 3.
12. Ibid.
conviction follows from this belief, namely, that those who are at the furthest possible remove from spirituality are theologians and clerics—those who deal in reason, words, and explanations.

According to Wuthnow, artists insist “on the limits of rationality in spirituality.” They recognize “that spirituality is more than a system of knowledge,” and so, for them, the value of Scripture “lies less in its theological propositions than in its accurate description of human experience.” “They agree that God is ultimately too great to be fully comprehended by fallible human intellect.” Moreover they emphasize a lifestyle of faith “as opposed to simply ascribing intellectually to a set of abstract doctrines.” This, Wuthnow observes, “is a corrective to those philosophers and theologians who seem to think that the key to faith is having logical answers to every conceivable question.”

Artists, Wuthnow says, are unwilling to “settle easily for a faith that emphasizes intellectual arguments. They are drawn to artistic expressions of spirituality because they have experienced life in a way that cannot be reduced to words.” They are “uneasy with theological systems that claim to understand God through reason alone. Indeed, reason compels them to believe in a God who ultimately defies rational understanding.” Author Madeleine L’Engle echoes these sentiments in her interview, quoting one of her poems:

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason,
There’d have been no room for the child.

“She elaborates: ‘We try to be too reasonable about what we believe. What I believe is not reasonable at all.’” L’Engle tells Wuthnow that theology “in today’s complex world” must be “more about questions than answers.” She recalls that when her children were young, she removed them from Sunday school when she discovered that “they were being taught questions that had answers.”

According to this perspective, knowledge, answers, and reason are toxic to mystery. Wuthnow reports that artists believe the “mysteries of life are too great

13. Ibid., 159.
14. Ibid., 162.
15. Ibid., 267.
16. Ibid., 273.
17. Ibid. (Who are these logic-obsessed theologians, by the way? I haven’t yet met any of this crowd of theologians who believe that logic can answer “every conceivable question.”)
18. Ibid., 59.
19. Ibid., 159.
20. Ibid., 143.
21. Ibid., 141.
to be captured fully in any religious community.” They insist that “spirituality should not be reduced too readily to doctrines or creeds.” The verbs—capture, reduce—insist upon a hostile relationship between what is fixed and known (religious communities, creeds, doctrines) and mystery. These are alternatives between which one must choose: “faith is more important to spiritual life than abstract knowledge.” Doctrinal formulations and theological systems obstruct rather than illuminate spiritual realities. Wuthnow believes that this may be why “many Americans,” when faced with difficulty “turn more often to the music of Aretha Franklin or Jessye Norman than they do to theologians. Their spirits are uplifted as much by the concert on Saturday night as by the sermon on Sunday morning.”

The Spirituality of Non-Knowing

Perhaps the artists interviewed by Wuthnow would be surprised to learn that this same antipathy toward creeds and precise theological description is also common among theologians. At about the same time that “ineffability” assumed a prominent place in philosophical aesthetics, the idea of the “unknowable” and “unnameable” became important in theological discussions. The great theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) would be especially influential in moving the verbal and the conceptual away from the center of the Christian faith. While we must speak and reason, Schleiermacher argued that whatever can be contained in words and concepts is not “the essence of religion.”

This idea and its connection to the arts is at the heart of Schleiermacher’s beautiful little dialogue, Christmas Eve. The dialogue describes a pleasant gathering of friends in a middle-class German home on the eve of Christmas. Much of the dialogue revolves around the contrasting characters of Sophie, a deeply pious and musical little girl, and Leonhardt, a skeptical, analytical lawyer. While Sophie displays “that childlike attitude . . . without which one cannot enter the kingdom of God,” Leonhardt is (only somewhat teasingly)

22. Ibid., 9.
23. Ibid., 10.
24. Ibid., 22.
25. Ibid., 10.
described as “the evil principle . . . among you.” While Leonhardt represents learning, Sophie’s piety is marked by a “deep underlying intelligence of feeling.” While Leonhardt analyzes things rigorously, Sophie feels things deeply and musically. “She knew how to treat each note aright; her touch and phrasing made each chord sound forth with an attachment which can scarcely tear itself from the rest but which then stands forth in its own measured strength until it too, like a holy kiss gives way to the next.” In Schleiermacher’s dialogue it is the child—who sings, who feels, and who does not think and analyze—who shows us what true piety is.

In the same way, Agnes, one of the women participating in the conversation, admits that Leonhardt can reason and speak “better and finer than I,” but this does not cause her any distress. Words are not at the heart of faith.

For I do not know how to describe with words how deeply and ardently I have felt that all radiant, serene joy is religion; that love, pleasure, and devotion are tones making up a perfect harmony, tones which fit in with each other in any phrasing and in full chord.

Agnes’s relative awkwardness with words is no great deficit in the religious sphere, nor are Leonhardt’s rhetorical and conceptual powers any great advantage. Leonhardt summarizes Agnes’s perspective: “You have yourself stated how you would have [the truth] expressed,” he says, “namely, not by words, but in music.”

Music and religion, the dialogue suggests, reside primarily in the domain of experience and feeling, not that of ideas and knowledge. That is why, as one of the characters observes,

we can well dispense with particular words in church music but not with the singing itself. A Miserere, a Gloria, or a Requiem: what special words are required of these? Their very character conveys plenty of meaning and suffers no essential change even though accompanying words may be replaced with others, so long as they fit the timing of the music; and this is true no matter what the language. Indeed, no one would say that anything of gross importance was lost even if one didn’t get the words at all.

Karl Barth sums up the message of Schleiermacher’s dialogue: “Exactly because of its lack of concepts, music is the true and legitimate bearer of the message

29. Ibid., 85.
30. Ibid., 36.
31. Ibid., 31.
32. Ibid., 63.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 47.
of Christmas, the adequate expression for the highest and final dialectical level, a level attainable by singing, by playing on flute and piano.”

More recently, the philosopher John Caputo stakes out similar territory in his essay On Religion, claiming a central place for the unsayable in religion. The spiritual life, according to Caputo, has to do not with answers but with mystery, not with knowing but with uncertainty, not with theological definitions but with that which is unspeakable. In fact, he goes so far as to say that non-knowing is “the condition of [religious] passion.” From Caputo’s perspective, the danger against which the spiritual person must guard is precisely the tendency to try to nail things down, tie things up, draw things to a close—choose your metaphor—through answers and definitions, creeds and doctrines. In so doing we deaden ourselves to the limitless possibilities and unfathomable mysteries of God and “close down” faith. “The name of God,” he insists, “is the name of the ever open question . . . the name of infinite questionability.” Caputo, then, advances the same opposition between faith and knowledge we find in Wuthnow: “The very highest passion is driven by non-knowing.”

Caputo is frustrated with those who think that the spiritual life is about having all their theological i’s dotted and all their doctrinal t’s crossed. Schleiermacher likewise feels that the one who stands closest to the kingdom is not the lawyer, the philosopher, the dialectician—but the musician. This is the case, not despite the absence of words and concepts in instrumental music, but because of it. It is the musician who says what cannot be said in words. On these points the theologian Schleiermacher and the philosopher Caputo stand cheek to cheek with artists like L’Engle and Ellsworth. All locate both art and spirituality in the domain of mystery—that which cannot be fully explored, understood, or known—and ineffability—that which exceeds verbal, rational, or conceptual articulation.

**Ruach and Untameable Mystery**

As I explained in the introduction, for Christians spirituality is most properly Spirit-uality—life in and by the Spirit. And certainly if we are thinking in terms of Spirit-uality there is some validity to the connection between spirituality, mystery, and ineffability that Schleiermacher, Caputo, and Wuthnow have


38. Ibid., 19, emphasis added. It’s not clear whether by this Caputo means that religious passion always and only exists in the state (“the condition”) of non-knowing, or that non-knowing is the prerequisite (“the condition”) of religious passion.

39. Ibid., 130.

40. Ibid., 134.

41. Ibid., 129.
highlighted. It is difficult to say much about the work of the Holy Spirit in Scripture without employing adjectives like mysterious, untamed, unseen, and surprising.

The very name “Spirit” (ruach in Hebrew; pneuma in Greek) has an element of uncharted wildness about it. The words ruach and pneuma mean not only “spirit,” but also “breath” or “wind.” Spirit, then, is a word that suggests movement, and movement of an organic (rather than a mechanically regular) sort. Neither breath nor wind can easily be seen or kept contained. The wind comes unexpectedly and cannot be directed or turned aside. Both breath and wind are connected with natural processes, processes that are difficult to control or map with precision. Who knows when the wind will turn or in which direction? Though we may try—for a little while—to hold our breath, or do our best to catch our breath, ultimately it is our breath that holds and catches us. It is most intimately connected to us; we could not survive apart from it, yet we cannot dictate its arrival or cessation.

It is this unpredictable and mysteriously sovereign character of the Spirit’s work that Jesus seems to have in mind as he speaks with Nicodemus: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The wind [pneuma] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit’” (John 3:5–8, emphasis added).

Interestingly, these words are also a good description of the Spirit’s descent upon the church at Pentecost: “They were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. . . . All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:1–2, 4). Just like the wind in Jesus’s dialogue with Nicodemus, a rushing sound is heard, but they “do not know where it comes from” (we read that it descended upon the believers “suddenly”). Certainly they could not have known where the wind was going. By the end of

42. “Ruach as ‘wind’ commonly refers to the strong wind of the storm, the raging blast from the desert, like the one that divided the Red Sea at the Exodus (Exod. 14.21). This driving wind is not identical with the ruach of God himself, but its elemental power made it a powerful image of divine strength” (Alasdair Heron, The Holy Spirit [London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1983], 4). See also Hendrikus Berkhof, The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit (Atlanta: John Knox, 1964), 13–14.

43. “Perhaps the first thing that strikes us as we come to the Old Testament is the tremendous emphasis on the Spirit of God as a violent, invading force. It is like the wind that hurtled across the desert or whistled through the cedars or rushed down the wadis. . . . In speaking of the ‘Spirit of the Lord’ the Old Testament writers significantly retain this emphasis on God’s violent invasion from outside our experience, disturbing and mysterious like the wind. It is their way of stressing that the Beyond has come into our midst, and we can neither organize nor domesticate him” (Michael Green, I Believe in the Holy Spirit [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975], 19–20).
the book of Acts it would sweep them all the way to Rome! The Spirit comes roaring in—unexpected, irresistible, and with extraordinary effect. These pneumatic traits of movement, power, and spontaneity mark the work of the Spirit throughout the New Testament.

Holy Spirit as Boundary-Breaker

Throughout the New Testament the Spirit drives the church along like a skiff out ahead of a gale, scattering across geographical, social, and racial boundaries, out into uncharted waters. At Pentecost Peter declares that when God pours out his Spirit upon all flesh “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17–18).

In Acts, the Spirit is “poured out” with such force as to burst the channels and banks of social division. Not only sons but daughters, not only youths but the aged, not only masters but slaves now have a share in the Spirit. The implications of this become increasingly clear to the church. As Peter will recognize to his astonishment a little later in the book of Acts, if both Jews and Gentiles have the same Spirit, then these two “unlike” parties are now, in a very significant sense, alike. Those with the same Spirit can eat at the same table and stay under the same roof: “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. . . . Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days” (Acts 10:44–48).

In fact, the apostle Paul will observe, those who share the same pneuma—the same Spirit, the same breath—may well be said to be “one body.” “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13).

In this way the powerful and unpredictable Spirit breaks through impassable barriers, opening up new paths and allowing free converse between those who were once separated.

Holy Spirit as Plan-Disrupter

Not only does the Spirit-wind blow down social fences and cultural boundary markers. In the New Testament the Spirit also disrupts plans and itineraries, like electrical lines tangled in the gusts of a thunderstorm.

Philip, after baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch, is “snatched away” by the Spirit of the Lord (Acts 8:39) and finds himself at Azotus—traveling north to Caesarea, though previously he had been journeying “towards the south . . .
down from Jerusalem to Gaza” (Acts 8:26). In a similar way, Paul and Timothy believe they are headed to Asia, but when they attempt to enter Bythynia, “the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (Acts 16:7). And so a new, unexpected itinerary takes shape, carrying them through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia, and eventually bringing the gospel to the city of Philippi in Macedonia. Later in his career, Paul would be led back to Jerusalem, “as a captive to the Spirit . . . not knowing what will happen to me there” (Acts 20:22).

Even Jesus, who calms the winds of the storm, is “driven” by the wind of the Spirit. The Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends upon Jesus at his baptism. After this, “immediately” the Spirit “drove him out into the wilderness” (Mark 1:12, emphasis added). The powerful and unpredictable Spirit literally “casts Jesus out” (ekballei) into the desert—the word is the same forceful term used to describe the “casting out” of demons (cf. Mark 3:22).

**Holy Spirit as Surprise-Bringer**

So the Spirit often disrupts settled plans already in place. What is more, the Spirit also brings about new and altogether unexpected states of affairs. We’ve already mentioned some of these surprising incidents: a sudden relocation to a different region; a church composed of Jew and Gentile—none of these would have seemed very likely developments. Other Old and New Testament events connected with the Spirit seem almost worthy of tabloid headlines: “Virgin expecting baby!” (see Luke 1:34–35); “Dead raised to life!” (see Rom. 8:11); “Man kills lion with bare hands!” (see Judg. 14:6); “Fire falls from heaven!” (see Acts 2:3).

The ruach of God “blows where it listeth,” unable to be contained by social boundaries, human plans, or expectations of what is and is not possible. We cannot say with certainty, “the Spirit will lead this way or that,” or “the Spirit is at work over here but not over there.”

It seems fair, then—entirely appropriate—to associate Spirit with mystery and the ineffable, as Wuthnow’s artists have done. The Spirit moves in ways we do not expect and acts with a power we cannot easily describe. This is a point at which artistic intuitions can serve as a powerful reminder and opportunity for Christian theology.

When we recognize the Spirit as the ruach—the breath, the wind—of God, it is right that we should be put in mind of the wild, uncharted regions of which we can say little. When we remember that the Spirit is the ruach, we remember to be humble before a sovereign God, whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts and whose ways are higher than our ways. We remember that while we may hold doctrines, our doctrines don’t hold God—neither controlling him nor containing all there is of him.

If we were to describe all of this in terms other than mystery and ineffability, we might say that the work of the Spirit is characterized by dynamism. The
Spirit is active and agile; the Spirit moves. Moreover, the movement of the Spirit cannot be contained or constrained. The Spirit moves in ways we may not have expected, to places we may not have chosen to go, bringing about effects we may not be able to put into words. The energy and motion of the Spirit is not like that of a billiard ball, which shoots off in this way or that because it has been struck or aimed. The activity of the Spirit is more like that of the wind: who can see its source or how it has been set in motion? It is a *sovereign dynamism*.

The Communicative Spirit

But this is not all that we can say of the Holy Spirit. At the very same time, Scripture connects the work of the Spirit with understanding, knowledge, guidance, and speech.

Jesus speaks of the Spirit as the one who “will guide you into all the truth” and who will “declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:13). The apostle Paul also identifies the Spirit as a teacher—the one from whom Paul and his associates have received their message and training: “We speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:13). Later in the same letter, wisdom and knowledge are the first two examples that come to mind when Paul speaks of the gifts given by the Spirit: “To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:8).

Actually, it would be more accurate to say that in this passage Paul associates the Spirit with wise and knowledgeable speech (rather than simply with wisdom and knowledge). And this raises an interesting point of contrast with the suggestion advanced by Wuthnow and Caputo. Our artists have suggested that whatever else we may say about spiritual reality, we must say that it is unsayable. The spiritual (it is claimed) has to do with mystery and ineffability, and the ineffable is that which cannot be spoken or fully articulated. We’ve seen that within the Christian Scriptures there are grounds for this association of the Spirit with the ineffable. The Spirit brings surprises and makes possible what would have seemed impossible. The Spirit (Paul says in a well-known passage) prays for us “with sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26).

And yet, the wisdom and knowledge that the Christian Scriptures associate with the Spirit’s work is not simply an inward and inarticulate wisdom—a “secret knowledge” as it were. Rather, over and over again, the Spirit is specifically connected with communicative action. The Spirit, Jesus says, “will take what is mine and *declare* it to you” (John 16:14). The Spirit gives not only inward illumination but—specifically, particularly—words, speech, language, communication. Jesus comforts his followers by assuring them that when persecution comes, and when they are made to answer for their beliefs,
the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:12; cf. Mark 13:11).

Indeed, when Peter and others begin to speak up in challenging situations, they speak “by the Holy Spirit”: “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders . . .’” (Acts 4:8, emphasis added). We read that the rulers in turn recognized that this was no ordinary display of rhetoric. “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

Where the Spirit is given, there is speech: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak” (Acts 2:4, emphasis added). Or, perhaps we should say, where the Spirit is given there is communication. At Pentecost the followers of Jesus speak, but what is more remarkable is that those to whom they speak—those who are in Jerusalem “from every nation under heaven”—are able to declare: “In our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11, emphasis added). And of course the supreme instance of the Spirit bringing the Word and knowledge is the incarnation. By the Spirit (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:20) the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14), revealing, declaring, and giving knowledge of the unseen God (John 1:18).

Ruach and pneuma, as we’ve said, mean not only wind, but breath. Spirit is not only the mysterious wind that blows “wherever it listeth,” but is also the breath that carries speech from speaker to listener. We’ve said that the activity of the Spirit can be characterized as a sovereign dynamism. In addition to this we can say that the movement of the Spirit is fertile. The ruach not only moves, but carries—gifts, power, words, insight, and so on. It is movement-between.

(John V. Taylor’s apt description of the Holy Spirit is The Go-Between God.) What belongs to Jesus is carried to his followers (John 16:14); the words of the Pentecost believers are carried to their hearers (Acts 2:11); the gospel is carried to Gentile believers, out beyond the ordinary boundaries of the Jewish believers (Acts 10:47–48).

Knowledge Toward

We’ve arrived at an interesting paradox. The Christian Scriptures associate the Spirit with both mystery and knowledge. Despite the criticisms of theologians we surveyed earlier, both poles of this paradox are embraced in the earliest Christian theological writings on the Spirit.

In fact, Athanasius’s Letters to Serapion is written to counter precisely the sort of small-minded rationalism about which Wuthnow and Caputo are concerned. The letters were prompted by the teaching of a Christian group who were unwilling to acknowledge the full divinity of the Spirit. If both the Spirit...
and the Son share in the being of the Father, they reasoned, then doesn’t this amount to saying that God has two Sons? Or, if we say that the Spirit comes to us from the Son, then it seems we are saying the Spirit is the Son of the Son, which would make him the Father’s Grandson! In countering these complaints Athanasius reminds his opponents of the ineffability of God. “It is only in the Godhead,” Athanasius declares, “that the Father is properly Father and the Son properly Son.” In other words, we learn what fatherhood is and what sonship is by looking to God; we do not deduce what God can or cannot be by logical analysis of human categories. God cannot be forced into the constraints of our words and concepts. “For what discourse can suitably interpret the things that are above originated nature?” he asks. “Or what hearing can understand what it is not possible for human beings to either hear or speak?”

In his Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit, Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330–90) speaks to the same sort of complaints Athanasius countered. Like Athanasius, Gregory argues against the petty rationalism of those who denied the Spirit’s divinity. And like Athanasius, Gregory insists that while we must use words to speak of God, our words cannot contain all the reality of God. Just because we speak of God as “Father” and Christ as “Son,” he points out, “it does not follow that we ought to think it essential to transfer wholesale to the divine sphere the earthly names of human family ties.”

Basil the Great (c. 330–79) in his treatise on the Holy Spirit also addresses a group who seem unable to accept mystery and ineffability. These teachers complain of the mathematical irrationality of Trinitarian teaching. How can God be three and one? they ask. Isn’t this just numerical nonsense?

Basil replies, “The Unapproachable One is beyond numbers, wisest sirs; imitate the reverence shown by the Hebrews of old to the unutterable name of God. Count if you must, but do not malign the truth. Either honor Him Who cannot be described with your silence, or number holy things in accord with true religion.”

Each of these theologians insists that our speech and our categories must conform to who God is, and not the other way around. We must begin with

45. Ibid., 216.
46. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius, trans. Lionel Wickham (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 121. T. F. Torrance summarizes this insight of the Greek Fathers: “We cannot but use language taken from our common experience in this world when we make theological statements, but even so it is the subject that must be allowed to determine the meaning. It would be inherently wrong to use expressions like ‘right hand’ or ‘bosom’ or even ‘father’ and ‘son’ as if they meant when applied to God the same thing they mean when used of creatures” (T. F. Torrance, Theology in Reconstruction [London: SCM Press, 1965], 30).
the mystery of God rather than trying to squeeze God into our philosophical systems—and here Athanasius is in hearty agreement with the criticisms of Wuthnow, L'Engle, and Caputo. “It is not fitting to enquire in this way about divinity,” writes Athanasius. “God is not as a human being, so that anyone should dare to ask human questions about him.”

At the same time, however, this does not mean that Athanasius thinks of the Spirit-life as permanently inhabiting Caputo’s “condition of non-knowing.” It is precisely because “it is impossible for . . . us human beings to speak appropriately of the things that are ineffable,” that Athanasius emphasizes the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit. As T. F. Torrance observes, “It is only the Spirit of God who knows the things of God, [so] it is only in the Spirit and by his power that we may really know God and apprehend his Truth. The revelation of the unknowable is the peculiar function of the Spirit.”

In the Letters to Serapion Athanasius identifies the Spirit with this work of opening ears and eyes, of making us participants in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. While Jesus is “the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb. 1:3), this image must be seen, must be recognized as the image of God for it to be of value to us. For revelation to become knowledge there must be eyes that see and ears that hear. Athanasius appeals to the biblical image of light. The Father is light, he writes, and the Son is the radiance of the Father’s glory; but it is the Spirit “in whom we are enlightened.” Changing metaphors, he writes, “The Father is fountain, and the Son is called river, [yet] we are said to drink of one Spirit.” The Spirit’s distinctive work is to make God’s revelatory work in Christ actual and effective. The metaphors of fountain, river, and drink make clear that Athanasius is not talking about the kind of static rationalism caricatured by Caputo and Wuthnow. It is an image of intimacy, nourishment, and life; it is knowledge set in motion toward the one known. By the Spirit, we are given the knowledge that enables us to respond, to drink, to actively participate in the life of God. Athanasius’s theology of the Spirit can comfortably accommodate both knowledge and mystery because it is built on a broader foundation of participation, worship, and love.

49. Ibid., 217.
50. Torrance, Theology in Reconstruction, 30, emphasis added.
51. Athanasius, Letters to Serapion, 218, emphasis added.
52. Ibid., emphasis added.
53. In his discussion of Athanasius’s Letters to Serapion, Alan Torrance offers a powerful exposition of this theme. “The transforming presence of the Holy Spirit who is ‘of one Being with the Father’ is the necessary subjective condition for the recognition of Jesus as the incarnate Word. . . . If God is not present as the Holy Spirit in and with the ‘mind’ of the church, then there is no possibility of that ‘mind’ recognizing or being informed by the presence with humanity of God the Son—‘flesh and blood’ does not, cannot, and will not reveal this in and of itself!” (“Being of One Substance with the Father,” in Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism, ed. Christopher R. Seitz [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001], 55).
Love as Source and Goal

The life of the Spirit arises in love and culminates in participation, and the route along which we travel the spiritual life is neither that of blind mystery nor dogmatic knowledge, but of worship. We know the Spirit in and through response and adoration. At this point we find ourselves in agreement with Caputo, who expresses this idea eloquently. “The love of God is my north star,” he writes; “Love is the measure.” As we’ve seen, however, Caputo believes that knowledge must be set aside in order to make room for the highest passion, the greatest love. We find better guides in Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Athanasius. They are convinced that the pursuit of knowledge springs from the experience of worship. In particular, they believe that worship nourishes a passion for the kind of doctrinal, theological knowledge disparaged by Wuthnow’s artists. Moreover, they are convinced that this pursuit of knowledge finds its consummation in worship, in a richer and fuller adoration of the beloved.

Basil’s treatise on the Holy Spirit is a good example of this. It was not written for an academic conference or in the hopes of achieving tenure. Basil is defending his congregation’s practice of prayer, which had recently been criticized by the Pneumatomachoi (literally, “the fighters against the Spirit,” a group who denied the Spirit’s divinity). Basil explains, “While I pray with the people, we sometimes finish the doxology to God the Father with the form ‘Glory to the Father with the Son, together with the Holy Spirit,’ and at other times we use ‘Glory to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.’” The arguments that follow are offered in support of what the worshiping congregation does. Likewise, for both Basil and Athanasius, one of the strongest arguments in favor of the Spirit’s divinity is the church’s practice of baptism—in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In each of these cases, then, doctrine arises in large part as men and women reflect on the practices of the worshiping church. For his part, before he begins arguing with his opponents concerning the interpretation of various biblical passages, Gregory declares, “For the present it will be sufficient for us to say just this: it is the Spirit in whom we worship and through whom we pray.”

And as we’ve said, for Basil, Gregory, and Athanasius, a right theology of the Spirit is not only grounded in, but oriented toward, adoration. Athanasius urges his readers “to confess and cling to the Truth,” not because he has a compulsive addiction to logic, but “according to the model of true worshippers.”

55. See, for example, ibid., 115, 129.
57. Gregory, Orations 31.12, 125.
Art and Ineffability

It is here, in fact—in worship, in adoration—that we find a far richer resemblance between art and spirituality; not in ineffability understood simplistically as “not-knowing,” but in a movement that arises from love, is carried along in worship, and finds fulfillment in participation.

In terms of Christian spirituality we have seen that “ineffability” captures only part of what the Scriptures want to say about the activity of the Spirit. The same is true of the arts. Certainly, ineffability captures something of the artistic experience. A verbal or conceptual description of a painting will fall far short of the experience we have when standing before it; a written review or a thematic analysis of a play by Shakespeare is not even a pale substitute for attending in person. When it comes to beauty, “our findings are, as one might say, all first-person, and discussions of a piece of music that is described but never heard are necessarily vacuous.”

But, of course, the same frailty of explanation applies to all first-person experience. A wasp sting, David Cooper points out, “also causes a feeling that a description of the sting fortunately does not.” Artistic ineffability “is simply a special case of the ineffability of first-person awareness—the impossibility of translating ‘what it is like’ into a description.” What we value in art is not merely unsayable-ness. Rather, the distinctive feature of artistic ineffability lies close to what Calvin Seerveld calls “allusivity.” Works of art both beckon and point beyond by “hinting or referring indirectly, referring to without explicit mention, referring to in a covert, or passing way.” Why should this indirectness be an artistic value? Because in this way the artist invites us not merely to exist in the vicinity of the work, but to participate in it. We are drawn in, drawn out of ourselves. To be experienced as art it must be received, reconstructed, as it were, in the perception of the listener or viewer. By enlisting our active perception, the work of art “depicts the subject-matter as experienced.” There is a paradox here: the expressive character of art is directly related to what it does not say (explicitly). In support of this point Roger Scruton sets out the rich allusions in several lines of poetry by Rimbaud. He observes that none of these resonances and connections are explicitly stated by the poet, “but precisely because it is not stated, the lines can be understood only by a leap into subjectivity—by attaining the first-person perspective that binds these images together.”

60. Cooper, “Ineffability,” 223.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
Scruton concludes that “the expressive and the ineffable go together.” In gesturing and beckoning rather than exhaustively defining, the work of art invites us “to ‘enter into’ its expressive content.” In the artwork there is veiling as well as disclosure, and as in some exotic dance, it is the veil as well as the disclosure that we find alluring. Not all the work is done for us, precisely in order to enlist us in the work of making meaning and experiencing delight. Micheal O’Siadhail gives an eloquent poetic testimony to the power of allusivity.

Revelation

Our train gains ground into the evening light.
Among the trees the sun catches in its fall
Glints and anglings of a stone in a distant gable,
A broadcast of facets, one and infinite.
I glance at you. There’s so much unexplained.
Plays of your light keep provoking my infinity;
Already something in your presence overflows me,
A gleam of a face refusing to be contained.
How little I know of you. Again and again
I’ve resolved to be the giver and not the taker,
Somehow to surpass myself. Am I the mapmaker
So soon astray in this unknowable terrain?
Twenty-one years. And I’m journeying to discover
Only what your face reveals. Stranger and lover.

We could offer (forgive me!) a prosaic exposition of at least some of the elements of the narrator’s experience:

Once my wife and I were riding on a train—and actually, it occurs to me that there’s a sense in which in our married life, she and I are on a “journey” together as well. Anyway, we were on this journey and I looked out the window and saw a stone in the archway of a building. It kind of shimmered and glittered in the sun, and that got me thinking about how you can look at something simple and familiar but continue to see it from different angles and discover new things in it. I guess it’s kind of that way with the face of someone you love or know very well. Really, it’s that way with my wife’s face, the one I know best. It continues to surprise and reveal more; it’s both familiar and mysterious.

Clearly this description is a desecration of the original. While the prose paraphrase articulates at least some of the conceptual material from O’Siadhail’s sonnet, the artistic beauty, the allusiveness, and the poetic ineffability are lost. In a word what is lost is love: the allure of beauty and the experience of participation. In

66. Ibid.
the original the narrator is on a journey, sees a gable, sees a face, and various connections among these experiences begin to play in his mind. Through what is said and, equally, what is not said, the poem invites us to participate in these experiences—rather than simply offering us a prepared explanation of them. The poem draws us into a similar first-person experience of discovery. If we set out to understand the poem then we, like the narrator, will have the experience of actively making connections between one image and another and exploring the richness of these juxtapositions. In this way the poem reproduces in us the narrator’s experience of discovery and “revelation.” In the same way, Anne Sheppard observes that often we do not respond as deeply to a trompe-l’oeil painting (that is, a painting designed to “deceive the eye” into believing that it is reality) as we do to less literal, less illusionistic representational works. Rather “we value representational art which gives scope to [the] capacity of the imagination.” In the trompe-l’oeil work “there is little room . . . to exercise the imagination and no opportunity for the mental balancing act involved in seeing a picture both as a representation of something else and as a configuration of shapes and colors.” The illusionistic painting, like the prose description, “does the work for us.” While in the case of the trompe-l’oeil painting there may be other elements we enjoy, there is less of a fascination, less a sense of the ineffable. “That which cannot be uttered” (Latin, ineffabilis) has been uttered. So we admire the skill of the artist, but are not ourselves drawn into the work.

And this “drawing in” is what artistic ineffability reaches toward. We value artistic ineffability, not because it leaves us in a state of perpetual unknowing, but because of the way description is set aside in favor of invitation: come and see. The poet limits what her words reveal, not to bar the way but to draw us forward. O’Siadhail’s poem not only embodies but illuminates this dialectic of mystery and participation. The face of his beloved is mysterious, and this mystery keeps him “journeying to discover only what your face reveals.” And not only mystery, but also beauty. “Beauty brings copies of itself into being,” Elaine Scarry observes. “It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people.” The work of art calls forth a response. It is desirable and calls for our gaze; it is allusive and asks us to enter into first-person experience. The narrator continues to gaze at the face of his wife because she is beautiful, because she is his beloved. Through desire and beauty he is drawn out beyond himself: “Plays of your light keep provoking my infinity.” Mary Mothersill argues that this is one of the “fundamental truths” of beauty: that it is “linked with pleasure and inspires love.” In fact, she believes, “falling

71. Ibid., 274.
“in love” is a singularly appropriate description of the aesthetic experience. A similar idea has a prominent role in R. G. Collingwood’s influential aesthetic theory. Collingwood argues that an artifact only functions as a work of art as it is “reimagined” in the mind and “reexperienced” in the perception of a viewer or listener. “The kind of contact that is required,” he writes, “is a collaborative contact in which the audience genuinely shares in the creative activity.” Significantly, Collingwood likens aesthetic activity to speech, and he points out that “speech is speech only as far as it is both spoken and heard. . . . Mutual love is a collaborative activity.”

A communicative act that aims at the collaborative activity of mutual love—here we have a much richer, much more satisfying way of thinking about artistic ineffability. And it is fair to say that in this richer conception there is indeed a structural similarity between the aesthetic and the spiritual experience. In each case the experience (1) communicates and reveals and yet (2) cannot be reduced to words; each (3) originates in love and (4) culminates in participation. Madeleine L’Engle, Caputo, and the others we’ve heard are right to sense that the experience of art—and the experience of spirituality—cannot be reduced to receiving information or dogmatic answers. The role of mystery, however—again in both art and the life of the Spirit—is not that we would remain in a constant state of “not knowing.” Rather, we are given a taste—but only a taste—that we might accept the invitation to come to the fountain.

“This is perhaps the best answer to the question with which we opened this chapter: if God is mysterious, then isn’t any sort of “theology of the Holy Spirit” profoundly misguided? The Spirit’s work is to call forth response, to give us speech, and to make us participants in truth. There are many ways of responding to such an invitation, but the proper response of friend to friend, or lover to beloved, is not enduring silence. The Spirit, like beauty, draws us toward participation: “The Father is fountain, and the Son is called river, [yet] we are said to drink of one Spirit.” “All God’s deeds are inexpressible,” acknowledges Hendrikus Berkhof. “We can dishonor them all by speaking about them in an irreverent way. But all God’s deeds want to be confessed, in spite of—no, on account of—their inexpressibility. God wants us to love him with all our mind and with all our strength. True theology is an act of love. In this act we cannot be silent about a single one of God’s mighty inexpressible deeds.”

72. Ibid.
74. Ibid., 317, emphasis added.
75. Athanasius, Letters to Serapion, 218.
The goal toward which the Spirit carries us is not numinous silence but
the ecstatic speech of Pentecost, not simply standing in wordless awe over the
unknowable depths but kneeling down at the spring to drink. We account for
the ineffability of biblical Spirit-uality not by denying but by insisting that
the Spirit also invites us to speak. Spirit-uality may be described as ineffable
not only because of the Spirit-Wind who rushes in unexpectedly, but also and
precisely because of the Spirit-Breath who brings word and speech. The Spirit’s
ineffability is not the refusal of words. Quite the opposite. It is an invitation
and an enabling by which we speak and respond.

The Personal Spirit

There is one other observation worth making here. We have been speaking about
communication and desire, love and participation, invitation and response, all
of which place us squarely in the realm of the personal. Acts like love and
invitation are—or find their archetypes in—the acts of a person. It is interesting,
then, that the artists in Wuthnow’s book generally describe a spiritual reality
that is nonpersonal—as a force, an energy, or a “Reality.” Artist Jon Davis
speaks of “some form of Truth or Reality”; dancer Jamal Gaines “regards
spirituality as a kind of energy that flows through and empowers people.”

The biblical portrayal of the Spirit, however, is able to hold together
ineffability and knowledge precisely because it understands the Holy Spirit
as person. It is persons with whom we speak and who speak to us, and it is
persons who remain always beyond what we can say about them. It is persons
whom we most genuinely speak of “knowing,” and it is persons who are
most truly always beyond our knowing, who always remain, to some degree,
mysterious. Indeed, the mysterious is preeminently the domain of the personal.
Things (how a television works; how many galaxies there are in the universe)
may be unknown—but they are not mysterious per se. They are things that
could be known, given additional research and exploration. But no amount
of data or scientific analysis could ever eliminate the ineffable wonder I felt
when I first held my children; no philosophical speculation could ever resolve
the mystery of my wife’s face. With artistic ineffability as well, I have argued
that what we value is allusivity. An artist calls us out of ourselves; a person
beckons us to experience something from a first-person perspective. It is not
the stone as a brute material fact that is ineffable, but, rather, considering it
from the perspective another has inhabited.

Some of the artists and authors we have surveyed have insisted that God
and spirituality cannot be defined nor contained and analyzed by rational
formulations. But we should notice at once that it is precisely impersonal

77. Wuthnow, Creative Spirituality, 26.
78. Ibid., 33.
things, things like forces, energies, and so on, that can be quantified, defined, and plotted out mathematically. We can articulate rules and generalizations and principles when we speak of a force; we can apply the physical principles of gravity, electromagnetism, weak and strong nuclear force. It is when we enter the realm of personhood that we move outside of definitions and enter into mystery. It is precisely because the Holy Spirit is a person, and not a force, that we cannot box him into doctrinal formulations. It is because he is a person that he is mysterious.

At the same time, it is his personhood that provides boundaries and precision and definition. When we speak of the Spirit, we are not speaking about an amorphous field of force, but about a person. To be a person is to have a name; it is to be a particular, to occupy a particular “space,” to have a particular history. What is more, we more naturally speak of knowledge or wisdom coming from persons rather than things. We may study a force or a natural phenomenon, but it is only in a metaphorical sense that these can “speak to” us or “teach” us. In fact, they do not teach—we observe, study, and learn, and draw our conclusions. Neither can a “power” or “energy” reveal something to us. To “reveal” requires both self-awareness (“here is something I know”) and intention (“this thing I know, I will make known”); and self-awareness and intention are things, once again, that we associate with persons.

As stunningly complex as some of the universe’s systems and forces may be, it is still surprising that so many would believe that a force, or a cosmic energy of some sort, or a divine Ground of Being, might be more mysterious or possess greater “depths” than a person. Colin Gunton urges us that when speaking of God we “should not be afraid of . . . personal language, as if it were somehow inappropriate to the divine mystery. There is . . . nothing higher than the personal.”

Because the Holy Spirit of God is personal, it is right that we react against sterile definitions—in the same way we would if someone were to describe a friend or a family member entirely in terms of her chemical composition. But precisely because the Spirit is personal, neither should we abandon all attempts to develop a theology of the Spirit. The response of friend to friend, or lover to beloved, is not silence. Because the Spirit is a person who encounters us, the proper thing—really the only polite thing—is to respond, to say something, whether in paint or tones or words on paper, however inadequate, about the One who meets and remakes us.