

Article

Theological Empiricism, Natural Science and Sacred Art

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Abstract

Theological empiricism is the view that knowledge of God must ultimately rest on human experience. This puts it in opposition to theologies that rely exclusively on conceptual analysis and biblical revelation, or some combination of the two. Theological empiricism is not new. It has forerunners in the natural theology of the 18th century, and the appeal to feeling and intuition characteristic of some 19th-century theologians. What is new is the concept of ‘experimental theology’ and the suggestion that in seeking to secure an empirical basis for knowledge of God, theology should turn to the methods characteristic of the natural sciences. This paper argues that empiricism in theology is more plausible if it resists this suggestion. It gives special attention to the faculty of imagination in both science and art, and seeks to articulate the ways in which literature, painting, music and architecture can be said to embody empirical knowledge of a broadly theological kind.

Keywords: empiricism; imagination; arts; Templeton

1. Theology’s Empirical Turn

On what is our knowledge of God to be based? In *The End for which God Created the World*, the celebrated 18th century American theologian Jonathan Edwards expressly relies on two sources—‘Chapter I: What Reason Teaches’ and ‘Chapter II: The Testimony of Holy Scripture’. The ‘Reason’ that Edwards calls upon is entirely analytic and conceptual. He analyses the distinction between means and ends and then uses this analysis in an exploration of the concept of God as ‘the fountain, the sum and comprehension of everything that is excellent’ (Edwards [1765] 2021, p. 52). His aim is to derive necessary truths about the ultimate purpose of the created cosmos from this analysis and exploration. Edwards’s short dissertation is an impressive intellectual accomplishment, not least because it systematically considers and responds to anticipated objections. Yet, however impressive, the work is decidedly out of line with the most influential intellectual development of the century in which he lived. This was the era that witnessed a radical methodological shift in the sciences—away from the venerable, but sterile, methods of Aristotelianism to the observational methods of Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton. These new methods were widely held to have revolutionised ‘natural philosophy’ (which is to say physics) and for the first time in many centuries secured major advances in scientific knowledge. Not surprisingly, a similar move began in moral philosophy, and then theology. Even in theology, less reliance came to be placed on logical deduction and biblical exposition, and greater use made of evidence grounded in experience of the natural and social worlds. This shift is what came to be known as ‘theological empiricism’.

Theological empiricism took its cue from the English philosopher John Locke whose hugely influential *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke [1689] 1975) elaborated at great length the contention that all knowledge must ultimately rest on human



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experience. According to Locke, we have no innate idea of God. Rather, ‘the knowledge of God [is] the most natural discovery of humane Reason’ (EHU I/IV/17). Much later in the same work, he says that ‘the invisible things of God are seen from the Creation of the World’ (IV/X/7), thereby opening up the contention that knowledge of God is derived from knowledge of the world around us. If theology is to make the sort of progress the natural sciences have made, it should adopt the same methods. Inductive, not deductive, reasoning became the order of the day.

Reasoning from world to God was not new, and natural theology never wholly replaced revealed theology. Still, it came to much greater prominence and retained its ‘scientific’ appeal through much of the nineteenth century. At its height, however, the philosophies of David Hume, and especially Immanuel Kant, were already undermining it, and the advent of evolutionary biology offered a scientific alternative to the ‘design argument’ on which much natural theology rested. As a result, in the first half of the twentieth century, the whole enterprise fell into abeyance. Then, as an ensuing dialogue between science and theology developed, the idea that theology should adopt the methods of the natural sciences made an appearance once again, this time in a slightly different guise than its eighteenth-century version. A search for the knowledge of God should not rest content with induction from straightforward observation, but adopt the advanced experimental methods of modern scientific investigation.

2. John Templeton’s Benefaction

A major proponent of this contention was John Templeton, whose book *The Humble Approach*, first published in 1981, was subtitled ‘Scientists Discover God’. In ‘The humble approach’, Templeton says, ‘has much in common with but is not the same as natural theology . . . or empirical theology’ (Templeton [1981] 1995, pp. 34–35)

Men cannot learn all about God, the Creator, by studying nature because nature is only a contingent and partial manifestation of God. Hence Natural theology which seeks to learn about God through nature is limited. Recently a new concept of theology has been born which is called Theology through Science. This denotes the way in which natural scientists are meditating about the Creator on the ground of their observations of the astronomic and subatomic domains, but also on the ground of investigations into living organisms and their evolution, and such invisible realities as the human mind. (p. 35)

In this short passage, Templeton captures the spirit and content of an influential vision of how theology should proceed if it is to make progress. Much more significant than the book’s articulation of this vision, however, was the vast amount of money Templeton made available for research projects based upon it.

Between 1984 and 1996, Sir John Templeton established three major foundations—the Templeton Religion Trust, the John Templeton Foundation, and the Templeton World Charity Foundation, with endowments whose combined value runs to many billions of dollars. Thanks to the funds available to these foundations, huge numbers of research projects involving leading scientists, philosophers and theologians have been undertaken. It is a key condition of receiving a grant from any of these benefactions that the research envisaged accords with Sir John’s founding intention—to make progress in the investigation of spiritual reality by employing scientific methods—the intention that he elaborated at length in *The Humble Approach*.

It is important to observe that Sir John was not a philosopher or theologian, nor an academic of any kind. His book is interesting, fluent, thoughtful and well informed, but it cannot and ought not to be treated as a systematic treatise in theology, or philosophical methodology. The aim of the present paper, then, is neither to expound its message nor to

pick it apart, but to ask quite generally how some of its key concepts are best construed. It should also be noted that the book reveals assumptions and enthusiasms that were more plausible fifty years ago than they are now. For example, it is grounded in a progressive conception of history and takes progress in the natural sciences to be the hallmark of intellectual progress in general. People have become less sanguine about human progress. Levels of educational attainment have risen markedly, right across the globe, and yet ignorance and prejudice remain powerful social and political drivers. In short, education need/does not always bring enlightenment.

Templeton also attributes success in the natural sciences to a distinctive scientific mindset that he characterizes as marked by open-mindedness. He contrasts this favorably with the closed-minded attitude he attributes to many, perhaps most theologians and religious leaders. The history of science, however, does not confirm his view on this matter. The open-mindedness that Templeton rightly treasures is by no means a universal feature of the natural sciences, and dogmatism is not the mark of theologians alone. Scientists widely acknowledged to be of the highest caliber have nevertheless sometimes held tenaciously to theories that it seems are shaped more by personal commitments, institutional affiliation and vested research interests than by impartial inquiry. Conversely, it is to be observed that in pursuit of open-mindedness much modern Christian theology has abandoned the hitherto all-important division between orthodoxy and heresy.

Still, if some of Templeton's claims reflect the presuppositions of his time and place, this does not diminish the interest of his key contention, namely, that knowledge and understanding of spiritual reality can progress significantly if the empirical methods of experimental science are employed in its investigation. To understand this contention, however, and assess its cogency, we need to address two philosophical questions. First, what is spiritual reality? Second, what methods are rightly regarded as scientific?

3. The Reality of the Spiritual

With regard to the first of these questions, *The Humble Approach* offers a few pointers. We are only now, Templeton says, beginning to find evidence of 'dimensions of reality which transcend the invisible space-time field which holds together within its astonishing configuration all that man can observe in space and time'. He speaks of 'experience at the frontiers of knowledge' and 'catching glimpses of unexpected aspects of reality' (Templeton [1981] 1995, p. 4). What is the nature of these unexpected aspects? The book regularly invokes a contrast between the material world and the spiritual world of which we are citizens. A large part of the point of this is to reject philosophical materialism, which is to say, the supposition that what we call 'the spiritual' is ultimately a product of neurophysiological processes in the brain. Spiritual realities, he says, find 'their ultimate expression in a realm outside and beyond these earthly confines' (ibid.).

These spatial metaphors-outside and beyond-might lead us to suppose that Templeton's rejection of materialism means that he endorses metaphysical dualism, the view that there are two ontologically different worlds—the world of the natural and the world of the supernatural. On this way of thinking, the natural is the ordinary world of sights and sounds, while the supernatural is an extra-ordinary world inhabited by souls, angels, divinities and God. So conceived, this extra-ordinary world requires a no less extraordinary means of apprehension, one that goes beyond the five senses and, say, relies on mystical visions, divine revelation, extra-sensory perception and the like.

Metaphysical dualism of this kind is philosophically problematic. Chief among its problems is the seeming impossibility of explaining the relationship between natural and supernatural. Persons are *both* bodies and souls. If these are ontologically distinct entities, how could they comprise a single *person*? Descartes' famous attempt to locate the

connection between mind and body in the pineal gland speedily reveals the problem. The pineal gland is a bodily organ. To claim that it is at the same time the seat of a spiritual soul explains nothing. It simply reasserts the proposition it is intended to amplify—that human beings are both bodies and souls. The connection between the material and the spiritual within one person remains opaque. There may be spirits that are not embodied—God is the obvious case—and there are certainly bodies—rocks and waterfalls, for example—that are devoid of spiritual characteristics. The two, it seems plausible to say, are different kinds of being. However, it is evidently a mistake to try to classify human beings with one or the other. The distinctive feature of human beings, it can plausibly be held, lies precisely in their resisting any such classification. All attempts to place them on either side of this familiar divide will prove to be reductionist.

Understanding the relationship between body, mind and soul, of course, has a long philosophical history and a few sentences cannot be expected to resolve the perplexing issues that inevitably arise around this topic. For present purposes, however, it is enough to observe that *The Humble Approach* need not confront this problem. While Templeton does use the distinction between natural and supernatural, he expressly emphasizes a necessary interconnection between them. The approach he is advocating, he says, sees an ‘intimate relationship of physical and spiritual reality’ and this intimacy exists ‘whether we are students of the natural or the supernatural’. Later in the book he writes that ‘what is required to draw Science and Religion together . . . is the disclosure of the naturalness of the supernatural . . . [E]ven as the contribution of science to Religion is the vindication of the naturalness of the Supernatural, so the gift of religion to Science is the demonstration of the supernaturalness of the Natural’ (Templeton [1981] 1995, p. 78).

The expressions ‘the naturalness of the Supernatural’ and ‘the supernaturalness of the Natural’ could be construed as oxymoronic formulations that simply *dodge* the issue. But it would be a mistake to dismiss them in this way. Though Templeton himself does not refer to metaphysical dualism, these phrases can be understood to signal a determination to reject metaphysical dualism, no less than metaphysical monism. Both philosophies conflict with the essential integrity of the material and the spiritual as these are found in human beings. We are undoubtedly biological organisms, but we are also ‘citizens of the spiritual world’. ‘As human beings, we are endowed with mind and spirit. We can think, imagine and dream.’ (Templeton [1981] 1995, p. 1) ‘We are spirits from the day of our conception’, he says, with the implication that our process to maturity integrates organic and spiritual development. ‘Love, loyalty, patience, and mercy are more real than tangible objects, and God seeks to instill these spiritual realities into our . . . lives in [the] here and now’ (Templeton [1981] 1995, p. 17).

We can throw light on what it means to say that the supernatural is natural and the natural is supernatural if we focus on one of Templeton’s examples of spiritual reality—love. Consider, for instance, the relationship between sexual desire and romantic love. Lust and love are equally real features of human existence, and we share sexual desire and its satisfaction with many other creatures. In the case of human beings, however, lust can be transformed by love. Transformation is not elimination. It is, rather, the integration of a biological activity into a human relationship, and this integration results in a dimension of meaning and value beyond that of desire satisfaction. The same point can be made about the love between parent and child. In common with many animals, biological evolution has given human beings both maternal and filial instincts. These instincts successfully guide the nurture of the infant, but as time passes, they fade, to the point where parent and offspring go their separate ways. In the case of human beings, however, these instincts do something more. They form the basis of a developing personal relationship which completely transforms them. The biological instincts that grandmothers

and great-grandmothers once possessed have long since been replaced by similar instincts in a new generation. Yet they nevertheless remain mothers to their sons and daughters, and it is in these personal relationships that the value and meaning of love is realized.

Templeton, in common with a long-established way of thinking, locates spiritual realities on a developmental trajectory, one that transcends both material causality and biological death. Spiritual realities find ‘their ultimate expression’ he says ‘in a realm outside and beyond these earthly confines’. That is how God, ultimately, enters the picture. Yet, it is important to note that this way of thinking does not make spiritual realities exotic or occult; they are aspects of our ordinary experience, even if their fulfillment necessarily lies beyond it.

We should conclude, then, that the philosophical understanding of human experience which informs the intention behind Templeton’s remarkable benefactions, offers a coherent conception of the integration of natural and supernatural. Templeton makes no claim to philosophical novelty, and indeed my reconstruction of the basic idea behind *The Humble Approach* shares the aim of many philosophical predecessors, namely to overcome the apparently exclusive choice between materialism and metaphysical dualism, and thereby avoid the philosophical difficulties that both sides of this division encounter.

It might be alleged, of course, that this way of thinking cannot in the end avoid some alternative metaphysical monism, ultimately perhaps, a version of pantheism. Once again, the issue is too large to resolve in a small compass. The point here (in the spirit of Wittgenstein) is to resist *any* move to metaphysical explanation, monistic no less than dualistic¹. Instead, we should persist with a sustained and systematic description of spiritual experience as the experience of *persons*, which is to say, entities within which physical, biological and psychological characteristics are integrated. It is against the background of this non-metaphysical conception that it is most profitable to think about Templeton’s interest in spiritual reality. Or so I suggest.

4. The Investigation of Spiritual Reality

Central to Templeton’s purpose is the claim that our understanding of spiritual reality can be furthered by scientific methods of investigation. This idea is distilled in his concept of ‘experimental theology’, which, he tells us, is ‘the study of unseen spiritual realities by concentrating on observable data resulting from spiritual events, changes and differences in physical phenomena’ (p. 69). As befits the general theme of *A Humble Approach*, Templeton is modest in his aspirations.

Experimental theology can reveal only a very little about God. It begins with a few simple forms of inquiry, subject to little disagreement, and proceeds to probe more deeply in thousands of other ways. Spiritual realities are not quantifiable, of course, but there may be aspects of spiritual life which can be demonstrated experimentally one by one even though there be hundreds of failures for each success. This approach is similar to that of experimental medicine’. (p. 35)

We are then offered a number of potential research projects. The list includes the phenomena of being ‘Born Again’ and comparative rates of healing between believers and non-believers.

When people are ‘born again’ or ‘filled with the spirit’ they say they are no longer the same. Has anyone yet subjected such changes to rigorous testing? Scientists might be able to detect visible evidence about how the Holy Spirit alters or improves the lives of people who say they are filled with it. (p. 75)

Some doctors agree that the patients’ rate of healing, after having the same operation, varies as greatly as three hundred percent among different people.

In addition to studying the biological, anatomical, chemical, and psychological reasons for this, studies into the religious attitudes of patients might show a correlation between spiritual conviction and physical recovery. (ibid.)

The problem with these research projects, and all the others that Templeton suggests, is not that they ‘can reveal only a very little about God’, but that they cannot be taken to reveal anything at all about God. That is because the differences rigorous scientific investigation may detect, even if they prove interesting and substantial, can only be interpreted as the impact of *belief in* God. Perhaps believing in the providential oversight of a loving God does indeed have valuable psychological and physiological benefits. This general proposition about human beings, however, even if it is true, does not show that our lives are providentially governed, that God is love, or even that God exists. It only shows that *belief in these things* is often beneficial. This is clear in the example of being ‘born again’. Scientists might indeed be able to detect visible evidence of change and improvement in the lives of people who say they are filled with the Holy Spirit. But contrary to Templeton’s assumption, this would not show that the cause of the alteration and improvement was the work of the Holy Spirit. While a correlation uncovered by scientific investigation may be interesting and important, its underlying explanation remains unknown. The evidence, however extensive, is quite compatible with its having a material basis.

In short, experimental theology as Templeton conceives it encounters an evidential gap. The benefits of religious belief and practice, however well established, provide no evidence that God is at work in the world. They only show that what we believe can make a difference to our well-being, and as a general truth, this hardly counts as a novel discovery.

The same point applies, importantly, to the results of neurophenomenological experiments. Several major research projects have employed sophisticated technological devices, together with immense computational power to manage data, in the close investigation of aesthetic experience and its relation to religious awareness. Are there identifiable and measurable differences in brain states when people encounter churches, mosques and temples, for example, in comparison with their encountering impressive architectural structures built for strictly secular purposes? Do brain images reveal notable differences in the response to sacred music as compared to secular music? The resources made available by the Templeton funds have facilitated a wide range of experiments, designed and conducted with great sophistication, whose purpose has been to produce an answer to these questions. The main problem, though, does not lie with experimental design, but with the interpretation of the results. Let us suppose that there are indeed recordable differences of this kind. This would not show, and could not show, that the difference is to be explained by an apprehension of the numinous in one case and not in the other. Sacred buildings and sacred music have different properties from their secular equivalents. That is what makes it possible to select them for comparison. By the same token, however, the apprehension of those properties is likely to be different. The mere observation of difference, accordingly, does not indicate or even suggest a different dimension of experience. In other words, differing brain states give us reason to suppose that the experiences are different, but no reason to suppose that we have moved from the natural to the supernatural.

What I shall call the ‘evidential gap’ is the same here as in the previous case. Sophisticated neurological devices may enable us to detect differences between objects believed to have a sacred dimension from those that are not thought of in this way. What they cannot show is that those objects really *do* have that dimension.

5. The Phenomenon of ‘Genius’

How are we to close this evidential gap? The remainder of this paper aims to do so in a way that both respects the vision outlined in *The Humble Approach* and at the same

time departs from it in certain important respects. We can begin with the observation that while Templeton's concept of 'experimental theology' is novel, his general contention about scientific method is not. The demonstrable success of natural science, Templeton believed, gives us good reason to use its methods in areas of inquiry where progress in understanding is much less evident. This is precisely the contention that underlay many of the innovative inquiries initiated by Enlightenment philosophers. David Hume (1711–1776) is the most famous and probably the most influential example of this. Though he knew nothing of the radically innovative investigative techniques of the 20th century, Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739/40) was expressly built on extending the 'experimental' methods successfully deployed by the natural sciences of his day to the study of human nature. Later in life, he dissociated himself from this youthful work in preference to its re-working in his two *Enquiries*, but it was the *Treatise* that set the agenda for many of the most important thinkers who followed him.

One of these thinkers, highly regarded by his contemporaries but now virtually unknown, was Alexander Gerard (1728–1795), a Scottish Enlightenment philosopher and theologian, as well as an influential clergyman and educational reformer. Gerard wrote two major philosophical works, an *Essay on Taste* (1758) and an *Essay on Genius* (Gerard 1774). It is the second of these that is relevant to the themes of *A Humble Approach*.

The etymology of the word 'genius' is 'spirit'. While for contemporary speech (as for Gerard) 'genius' refers to a special capacity for creativity, its original connotation is preserved in the associated concept of 'inspiration', with the implicit suggestion that genius draws on a special or unusual spiritual source. Gerard's *Essay on Genius* is clearly shaped by the agenda Hume sets in the *Treatise* (to which the essay makes occasional references). Hume himself refers only fleetingly to genius, though he does link it to imagination. It is this connection, between genius and the imagination, that Gerard explores at length.

Gerard identifies four active powers or faculties in the human mind—sensation, memory, judgment and imagination—the abilities to sense, remember, assess and invent. By Gerard's account, genius is essentially a very high-level exercise of the imagination. Empiricism relies on conscious experience, but for all of us, he argues, this does not consist solely in the things we presently see, hear, feel and taste. There is also the constant flow of associated ideas, some of them remembered and some of them imagined. If our minds were confined to immediate sensation, as those of even the most sophisticated animals are, we could not engage in history, philosophical reflection, scientific inquiry or artistic creativity. All these activities require the ability to call up and consider thoughts and ideas that are not immediately present, seeking connections between them. Genius is simply the ability to do this to a highly productive degree.

Genius enables us to uncover and explore new and surprising connections between quite disparate phenomena. It requires a no less important exercise of 'judgment', however, which is to say an ability to assess the intellectual significance of the products of the imagination. Judgment separates imaginative insight from mere 'fancy'. This is how all thought progresses, science requires genius no less than music, painting and storytelling. It was genius that made Isaac Newton's scientific achievements so remarkable. His imagination, famously, postulated a connection between two seemingly wholly unrelated phenomena—an apple falling off a tree, and the movements of the heavenly bodies. Scientific imagination, however, was only the starting point. Having *imagined* the connection, Newton called upon his astute judgment to assess its scientific significance. In other words, imaginative genius prompted Newton's astonishing intellectual achievement, but judgement was required to assess and confirm its value. This illustrates how, in combination, imagination and judgment can bring about dramatic advances in natural science.

Accordingly, Gerard identifies a key role for imaginative genius in science no less than in the arts. Yet he also thinks the two are importantly different because they serve quite different ends. The ultimate end of science is arriving at the truth. The ultimate end of art is creating something beautiful. On the face of it this division runs counter to John Keats's famous assertion (in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*) that 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', but the general question of their relation is one that need not be explored here because Gerard sees another way in which art serves science, namely as a source of evidence in the exploration of the mind and its faculties. He himself makes striking use of this by drawing extensively on Shakespeare's plays to frame generalizations about casts of mind and personality.

Shakespeare's genius lies in an outstanding ability to imagine characters, events, plots and dialogue. He is not a scientist tracing psychological connections or formulating general laws based upon experimental evidence. Nevertheless, his creations rest upon his imaginative insight into human motivation and behaviour. This insight, combined with an astonishing mastery of language, enables him to embody psychological insight in detailed characterization, vivid description, compelling plots and memorable dialectical exchanges. As a result, Shakespeare's plays do more than provide theatrical entertainment. They constitute a rich repository of mental, moral and emotional phenomena.

It is in this way that the dramatist, the novelist and the poet provide an evidential base in which philosophical theorists like Gerard ground their understanding of the human mind and soul. In light of this, it would not be misleading to adopt Templeton's terminology and express the point by saying that artistic genius contributes to and advances our knowledge of *spiritual* reality, just as scientific genius advances our knowledge of *physical* reality. To return to an earlier theme: human beings are bodies, but not simply bodies. They are functioning organisms, but also not only this. The investigations of anatomy, physiology and so on have hugely increased our understanding of these aspects of human existence. The activities of painters, poets, dramatists and so on have increased our understanding of the human spirit. There is this important difference, however. Physical and biological investigations *abstract from* the whole person. Creative imagination, by contrast, cannot abstract; it can only reveal aspects of *embodied* spirits. That is why some philosophers have described the objects of artistic imagination as 'concrete universals'.

What are the phenomena of spiritual reality? If we stick with the human spirit, among the most obvious components are precisely the things that Templeton cites, namely love, loyalty, patience and mercy, with, of course, their negative equivalents—hatred, treachery, impatience, and cruelty. All these familiar phenomena provide material for works of art, most evidently in novels, poetry, plays and films, but also in paintings, statues and music. When creative imagination is embodied in memorable characters, speeches, events, and so on, the artist does much more than entertain. Art captures the spiritual reality of human nature just as science captures humanity's biological and physical reality. The ability of artworks to do this lies in their construction of 'concrete universals'. That is to say, imagined objects of this kind manage to combine particularity *and* universality. Shakespeare's Othello, for example, is a particular character to whom Shakespeare has given individual character traits. And yet the very same figure serves as the distillation of a universal phenomenon. Othello reveals the curious interrelationship between love and jealousy, in which the latter has the potential to consume and destroy the former. In a drama such as this, human nature is revealed and explored no less than in the investigations of the biologist.

6. Science and the Arts

There is of course this evident difference. Imaginative genius makes use of insight rather than survey or experiment, the stock-in-trade of the natural and social sciences. Still, even from a highly empiricist perspective such as Templeton's, artistic genius can

be incorporated into a process of thought that is properly described as scientific. That is because it can serve a scientific ambition, namely, to arrive at empirical generalizations grounded in supporting evidence. When genius rather than experiment is the source of this evidence, it is not based on systematic observation, but on artistic insights as these are revealed and expressed in works of art. The generalizations that are formulated in this way are still empirical, but they relate to the spiritual rather than physiological life of human beings.

This contention should not be taken to imply that artists are in some sense scientists. Creative artists are not formulating theories or generalizations that are then subjected to critical examination. They are presenting a specific object for the reflective contemplation of an audience. If characters in novels and plays, or figures in drawings and paintings, lose their individuality and are generalized rather than particularized, they become caricatures rather than characters, stereotypes instead of archetypes. To claim that the pursuit of knowledge and understanding can seek evidence from artistic imagination is to say that works of art can serve as the evidential basis for generalizations about the life of the spirit as manifested in human beings. Thus, truths about the life of the human soul are grasped and presented by works of artistic imagination, just as facts about the life of the human body are observed and theorized by scientific imagination.

This contention might well be accepted by those who, like Templeton, still look to experimental psychology for additional understanding of human experience. Why should the artistic route be exclusive? Why can carefully designed experiments not also reveal something about our aesthetic experience and its relation to the sacred? While it would be foolishly dogmatic to rule such a possibility *a priori*, one important observation is worth making.

Suppose that by means of ‘experimental theological aesthetics’ we could establish a striking correlation between distinct brain states and the aesthetic experience of sacred ‘objects’ such as churches, religious paintings, icons, chorales, and so on. It is a condition of doing this successfully, of course, that we must first be able to identify the objects with which this correlation is made as, in the relevant sense, ‘sacred’. How are we to do this, except by endorsing cumulative religious experience, which is to say, the character bestowed on these objects by the religious traditions out of which they spring? There may be much to be learnt from such correlations, just as there may be much to be learnt from the inductive generalizations referred to earlier. For instance, there may be interesting differences with respect to perception when individuals *regard* an object as sacred. It is however, a further step to suppose that such results mean we are encountering or uncovering ‘the sacred’ itself. To take this further step, a *prior* encounter with the sacred is a necessary condition of the possibility of formulating generalizations and correlations between human apprehension and divine reality.

7. Knowledge of God

How do these reflections on theological empiricism and its implications for the arts connect with the pursuit of theological knowledge? The foregoing remarks on the concept of artistic genius suggest a direction in which we might profitably think further about how Templeton’s project can best be pursued. So far, I have been exploring the similarities and differences between scientific and artistic genius. Following Gerard, I have claimed that imagination plays a key role in both. It is not difficult to see how artistic genius can properly be described as revelatory. Scientific psychology has uncovered many interesting facts about human beings (as well as other animals), but if you want to understand the heights and depths, strengths and weaknesses of the human spirit, art is a more promising

place to look. The question then becomes—how do we move our investigation from the human spirit to the divine?

The title of an obscure 17th century gives a clue to a possible answer—Henry Scougal's ([1677] 1948) *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. Scougal was concerned to discern 'true religion' from among the competing religious fashions of his time—strict adherence to abstract theological doctrines, on the one hand, and dramatic conversion experiences on the other. For the present purposes, it is not necessary to examine this competition in detail. It is sufficient to note Scougal's reservations with respect to both. Abstract theological doctrines are spiritually lifeless; propositions do not animate the human spirit. Conversion experiences, however dramatic, are episodic and ephemeral, too fleeting to shape human behaviour. The pursuit of true religion accordingly requires a sustaining source that is both enlivening and sustaining. True religion requires the cultivation of what Jonathan Edwards calls 'religious affections', that is to say, the human spirit infused by the spirit of God.

This way of thinking casts light on religious artworks. These make religious affections manifest in literary, visual, architectural and musical forms. While it is true that religious artworks do not, in themselves, advance theological understanding, they do provide an evidential basis with which more systematic theoretical reflection can work. With this thought in mind, it is worth returning to *The Humble Approach*. In the chapter entitled 'Spiritual Progress' Templeton writes:

An age of "experimental theology" may be beginning. This term is used to indicate the study of unseen spiritual realities by concentrating on observable data resulting from spiritual events, changes, and differences in physical phenomena. Religious researchers should discuss ideas and propositions as openly as philosophers and devise experiments to uncover new data about spiritual laws in the same way that scientists study the laws of nature. *The great challenge at the moment is to distinguish the real differences between methodologies* used to study the nature of physical phenomena and the methodologies to be used in inquiry into the nature of spiritual reality. (Templeton [1981] 1995, p. 69, emphasis added)

It is arguable that many of the research projects undertaken with the assistance of the Templeton foundations have not taken this challenge to heart but tried to investigate spiritual phenomena with broadly the same methodologies as have proved so successful in the investigation of the physical. The main point of this paper is to respond to Templeton's challenge by sketching a quite different methodology, namely the systematic study of religious artworks. In so doing, however, it may be best not to start with the famous paintings of the great masters, but with the music and poetry embodied in hymns and liturgies as these are used in the sacred spaces that have been intentionally constructed for them. Communal worship at its most compelling integrates the arts of music, poetry, drama, movement, and architecture. It is from the study of worship, arguably, that we are most likely to derive 'observable data resulting from spiritual events, changes, and differences in physical phenomena'.

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Note

¹ For further discussion of this point see my *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion* ([Graham 2015](#)).

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