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What is This?
Artful Creation and Aesthetic Rationality: Toward a Creational Theology of Revelatory Beauty

L. Clifton Edwards

Abstract
Much as we come to understand the world through “images” displayed aesthetically in advertisements or body language, we come to know something of God through creation’s beauty. Our knowledge functions through this sort of emotive and imaginative (yet rationally disciplined) communication, and such communication is rooted in creation’s aesthetically rational structure, or *logos*. As we become attuned to creation’s *logos* both aesthetically and epistemically, we also develop our ability to know God through the world’s beauty. This understanding of natural revelation prepares the way methodologically for a more extensive creational theology of revelatory beauty.

Keywords
beauty, epistemology, revelation, natural theology, aesthetics, creation, incarnation

Beauty is undoubtedly a poignant feature of the human experience of the world. Augustine, in the *Confessions*, says that he “questioned” the world implicitly through the attention he gave it; and notably, the “response” that he says he received from the world was its beauty. Like Augustine, we all implicitly “question” the world through the attention we give it. We pose our “how?” questions

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through our practical, causal, or scientific investigations and our “why?” questions de profundis of unexpected joy or suffering. What if Augustine’s implication is correct that the ultimate answers to our questions are somehow bound up in the response of the world’s beauty? Beauty might be a sort of guiding principle or vade mecum to God.

Despite biblical texts discussing the beauty and revelatory function of the natural world (e.g. Ps 19:1–4, Acts 14:17, and Rom 1:20), and despite a contemporary culture that values the natural world so highly, contemporary Protestant theology has not emphasized a natural revelation through beauty. But a more “creational” theology is surely in order—a theology engaging the natural world as a potential theological “source” akin to Scripture, tradition, reason, and religious experience. Toward this end, I present a preliminary and formative account of how human beings might gain a better understanding of God through an examination of the world’s beauty—that is, an account of how God is revealed in, and understood through, creation, especially through natural beauty.

Such an account is appropriate, because our knowledge of God is creationally mediated. That is, God makes himself known to his creatures through the medium of his creation—a created transmission of knowledge that has for its pinnacle the incarnate body of Christ. Creation’s mediation of all knowledge becomes apparent when creation is understood in the broadest sense. In this broad sense, creation encompasses not only what we think of as “nature”—that is, the non-human—but also the part of “nature” that is human: the mind-body, with its various capacities. As the conduit for our knowledge, this aesthetically rich creation mediates any understanding we have of God. And we might expect, given the arresting, even “saturated,” character of many experiences of beauty, that such experience could point to God in some intelligible way. The beauty of the world is, after all, an aspect of God’s creation—an ontology that is (at least partly) addressed to his ends, and in which he is intimately involved. A rich understanding of created beauty, then, might

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3. By “created beauty,” I mean the beauty of creation as opposed to the category of uncreated, divine beauty. The term applies in different ways to both nature and human art. Beauty is a notoriously slippery word to define, and of course there are many different “beauties” varying with one’s use of the word. In Wittgenstein’s terminology, the word beauty represents a very loosely bounded set or “family” of related and overlapping concepts. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), 66–71. The word is, therefore, probably approached better by diverse examples than by precise definitions. Such examples are also essential because we cannot adequately describe non-verbal experience of beauty in abstract, conceptual terms. The breadth and depth of our experience often outstrips or defies our vocabulary. What I have in mind is a “perceptual” take on beauty, which is primarily a matter of “sense” or “know-how,” not of theory. Thus I can perhaps best characterize my understanding of beauty by saying that it is “like this,” “not like that,” and “sometimes like this,” such that the less systematic my description, the truer to life and to actual word-use it becomes. By perceptual beauty, I have in
reveal something of God, especially considering how human knowledge functions through aesthetic modalities. By engaging our “aesthetic rationality,” the multifaceted phenomenon of beauty might even reveal various aspects of the divine nature, as well as aspects of humankind’s place within God’s reality. But, more modestly, my aim here is simply to outline a methodological approach to a “creational theology” engaging a beautiful world. This methodological approach is presented in three sections, the first characterizing “creational-incarnational” theology as opposed to traditional “natural” theology, the second exploring the contours of a disciplined, aesthetic knowledge of God through creation, and the third setting this aesthetically skilled knowing within a broader epistemological context.

“Natural” vis-à-vis “Creational-Incarnational” Theology

Some will question the significance and feasibility of knowing God through creation’s beauty. Beyond what Scripture or tradition might reveal, why should we pursue additional, and perhaps riskier, avenues into that which is ultimately incomprehensible? Are these time-tested theological sources insufficient for rendering knowledge of God? In contrast to more traditional theological sources, some might say of creation with Job, “Behold, these are the fringes of His ways; And how faint a word we hear of Him!”—God’s later response regarding creation notwithstanding (Job 26:14, NASB). But Scripture, as in Job, and tradition do point us beyond themselves toward creation. Furthermore, these more conventional sources of religious knowledge do not offer us by themselves all that we would like to know about God, nor do they always offer knowledge in the most existentially compelling ways. Such knowledge, rather than simply dispelling God’s mystery, also deepens it, and bids us


5. This is not to suggest that all of creation is beautiful, including its abundance of natural evil, death, decay, and suffering—not to mention moral evil. I am only claiming here that on the whole the natural world is experienced aesthetically as beautiful, recognizing at the same time that the natural world is often also experienced as cruel, unsafe, and unfair.
enter the depths. As that which both deepens and partially fathoms God’s depths, revelation need not be an expressly stated or unmistakable datum; rather, revelation in the broadest sense can be anything that communicates something of God’s presence, nature, or actions to us, even if revelation is not the primary purpose of the medium that reveals.

Moreover, our mind-bodies are also a created “medium” through which we must access revelation. Such mediation of revelation deepens God’s mystery further, because our minds are uniquely personal vantage points on the world, often mysteriously shaped by our biology, culture, and language. We thus experience God and the world only through this “created subjectivity,” which also mediates even direct religious or mystical experience by means of the soul’s spiritual capacities. Thus it is fair to say that creation “circumscribes” our knowledge of God, while at the same time making it possible. Creation also makes possible a subjectively colored but real knowledge of many other objectivities.

Given that all revelation is mediated through creation, if Scripture affirms that we see God’s nature through what he has made (Rom 1:20), a reasonable question would be, “How, or in what ways, might creation reveal God?” If the natural world is recognized almost universally to be (at least in large part) beautiful, and many have affirmed that God is beautiful in some sense, what is the connection? An examination of our epistemology should aid us in establishing a connection.

But if we undertake a theology of created beauty focusing on creation itself rather than on what Scripture or tradition says about creation (though we can certainly draw on both), we will not be able to say much without someone questioning the whole enterprise as a form of “natural theology.” Many different types of projects have been placed under this heading, and many have elicited negative responses from Protestant theologians. Some theologians have limited the scope of natural theology to theistic arguments and have accepted or rejected it on the basis of the perceived success of these so-called proofs for God’s existence. For many, the pens of Hume and Kant have rendered such arguments obsolete, but this limited understanding of natural theology is probably a holdover from seventeenth and eighteenth century England. Natural theology at this time was responding to biblical criticism, the success of the Newtonian worldview, and dissatisfaction with organized religion and its appeals to authority. The strictly empirical, quasi-scientific approach to natural theology at this time led many to deism.

6. See Richard Viladesau on revelation inviting us into mystery: Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art (New York: Oxford University, 1999), 93.
Probably with this Enlightenment style of natural theology in mind, some Reformed theologians such as Millard Erickson deny the appropriateness of natural theology, contending that it detracts from Scripture as the proper foundation of theology.\textsuperscript{10} Others such as Alvin Plantinga believe that natural theology depends upon an overconfident and misguided epistemology, and therefore fails to arrive at knowledge about God.\textsuperscript{11}

To avoid confusion with some of the more limited and extreme forms of natural theology, I will refer to my approach as creational theology. We would do well to adopt an approach to nature that includes much besides theistic arguments, especially considering the shifts away from Enlightenment epistemology that have occurred since natural theology’s heyday. Unlike Enlightenment epistemology, my approach is not strictly rationalistic or empirical, and unlike theistic arguments, it is not apologetic or an attempt to work outside of the Christian worldview. On the contrary, creational theology assumes a Creator, even an incarnate Creator, in accord with Scripture’s creation and incarnation narratives. But even with these assumptions, my approach draws not exclusively upon Scripture but also upon our experience of the world as a source for theology—“the world” meaning whatever falls normally outside of traditional theological sources, such as Scripture, tradition, and reason narrowly understood. This approach involves understandings drawn consciously or unconsciously from natural revelation, which I understand to be creation’s \textit{logos}, or the rational and aesthetic structure of reality—a structure that for poet Kathleen Raine is “word traced in water,” “inscribed on stone,” and the “Grammar of five-fold rose and six-fold lily.”\textsuperscript{12} Beauty is an aspect of this structured reality that could reveal something about God, if, as Henry Vaughan says, we “would hear/The world read” to us.\textsuperscript{13} And this beauty of the world is a structured reality present not only in the objective world that we see around us, but also within us—within the structure of our subjective experiencing of that world. In other words, we could say that beauty is a combined objective-subjective phenomenon. We have a certain structure of experiencing phenomena such as beauty, and we have created structures of thinking and reasoning about such experiences. These created structures also involve certain rational “disciplines” in any articulate thinking we might undertake, including theology—including those theological topics that are not based directly on special revelation, such as questions of how to recognize or interpret revelation. Whatever theological topic we engage, our experience, our worldview, and the structure of reality are at work in the process of engaging and interpreting revelation in order to formulate our theology.

\textsuperscript{10} See his discussion of Barth’s, Calvin’s, and his own position in \textit{Christian Theology} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 177–99.


\textsuperscript{13} Henry Vaughan, “The Tempest,” in \textit{idem, Silex Scintillans} (London: H. Blunden, 1650), 84.
As we formulate this theology, we abide by certain rational disciplines: for example, we cannot violate the law of non-contradiction; we cannot rest content with informal fallacies in our reasoning (such as the post hoc and false dilemma fallacies); we need some sort of reasons for the things we say, rather than merely wild assertions; we must be circumspect about our biases and our willingness to know the truth; we need to arrive at some level of confidence about what we claim to be true; and we need to do our enquiring within a collaborative community where others can test and sharpen our reasoning. These rational disciplines apply across cultural divides. This is why there is no Eastern or Western way of doing physics or mathematics; rather, the structured realities of the physical and mathematical worlds demand a certain manner of reasoning and discourse. Spiritual realities show a parallel continuity in our common human experiences: we all experience love and indifference, joy and suffering, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, and the rational disciplines apply to these spiritual matters as well, whether we are reasoning from special revelation or some other bit of knowledge about the world. So, there is continuity among our theological reasonings from different sources, even if someone like Erickson, who claims Scripture as the proper source of theology, might minimize such continuity.

Still, our theological reasoning from creation complements but does not overrule theology based upon special revelation, since special revelation enjoys a privileged epistemic position as theopneustos, or “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16). It is still essential that we conform our reasoning to God’s understandings, as far as we understand them, since God is the only one who is not a part of creation and therefore not confined to a perspective from within it. God’s understandings, as made available to us, correct our finite, limited, and often defective understandings. This conformity to special revelation is part of the discipline of a distinctively Christian creational theology. But just as special revelation is privileged as God-breathed, the created order also holds an important epistemic status as God-created. If the structure of the created world did not correspond intelligibly to the structure of the created mind, knowledge would be impossible. Moreover, modern science could not have arisen without presupposing an ordered creation to be known, and could not continue to progress without continuing to assume an ordered reality. Fortunately and surprisingly for science, so much of the world is describable mathematically and by other means. Based on this describable structure of reality, this logos, creational theology is still a matter of speaking about God that is based on God’s speaking, even if not based directly on special revelation.14 This continuity of God’s speech makes sense especially if, as Athanasius teaches, the logos revealed in creation is continuous with, and

preparatory for, the Logos revealed in incarnation.\textsuperscript{15} And through the incarnation, the rationality of God’s speech plays out not just verbally but aesthetically through Christ, “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). Accordingly, a creational focus on revelation by no means detracts from the christocentricity of revelation. In fact, it is the very possibility of incarnation—that God could put on flesh and identify with matter to this extent—that vindicates the concept of revelation through that matter.\textsuperscript{16} The incarnation changes forever the storied character of the world.\textsuperscript{17} And with this insight, creational theology also becomes “incarnational” theology and at once that far removed from the category of natural theology. An incarnational-creational theology focuses on the ontological and aesthetic implications of the incarnation more so than the moral work of Christ (that is, on ontological participation more so than our moral imitation or justification, although the latter is not excluded but rather bound up in the former). But this ontological focus is more than appropriate, if, as David Bentley Hart notes, the primal fact of existence is the divine aesthetic pleroma, upon which the moral category is merely an intrusion brought about by sin.\textsuperscript{18}

An incarnational-creational theology also speaks to traditional debates between Protestants and Catholics on such topics as natural revelation and the \textit{imago Dei} by refusing to enter into the “either-or” dilemmas that are often posed. Yes, nature and humanity are fallen, and our knowing is affected adversely. But this is not the end of the matter or the answer to a question: it is only the beginning of the matter and the question itself. For within creation, grace is also at work (whether common, special, prevenient, or irresistible is less important). It is certainly not an essential tenet for Protestants (though perhaps for the more Barthian than Barth) that nothing can ever be known about God through creation. As to the extent of creation’s fallenness and the epistemological effects, we must continue to discuss these questions. And in so doing, Protestants can and should consider Catholic answers, which are often not as “either-or” as one might suppose.

\textsuperscript{15} “He sojourns here as man, taking to Himself a body like the others, and from things of the earth...so that they who would not know Him from His Providence and rule over all things, may even from the works done by His actual body know the Word of God which is in the body, and through Him the Father.” Athanasius, \textit{On the Incarnation of the Word} 14.8 (NPNF, Second Series), 4:44.

\textsuperscript{16} An important corollary is that the maleness of Jesus’ matter is not of particular concern, nor is there a need to conclude that Jesus was particularly good looking. Rather, Jesus’ identification with humanity and with matter itself is far more significant and far more shocking. There is no reason to conclude that because Christ assumed maleness, the male form reflects God more fully than the female form. After all, Christ also assumed a race, a hair color, a digestive system, atoms, and much else, but we would want to be very cautious about spinning theological conclusions out of all of these factors.

\textsuperscript{17} Mark Wynn, \textit{Faith and Place: An Essay in Embodied Religious Epistemology} (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009), 249.

In fruitful dialogue, we must continue the discussion on a case-by-case basis, remaining in touch with our embodied experience of the world, and resisting theological generalizations or abstractions that would impose Procrustean molds upon our actual experience of reality.

**Disciplined, Aesthetic Knowing through Creation**

What is clear is that a creational-incarnational understanding of nature’s ontology demands a theological engagement with the natural world around us.\(^ {19}\) We would certainly be remiss to allow non-Christians a monopoly in interpreting this natural revelation. Furthermore, the beauty of creation deserves particular attention, since both Christians and non-Christians engage this common reality of zebra stripes, meteor showers, and dandelion seeds. And both Christians and non-Christians find that merely studying the natural world puts us in touch with a reality that can cause us to start contemplating ultimate reality.\(^ {20}\)

Scientific study of nature can even awaken quasi-religious emotion and reverence. Take for instance the BBC documentary “Lost Land of the Tiger” aired in 2010, in which scientists and photographers grew emotional and tearful upon seeing photographs of tigers, either recently killed by poachers or recently photographed alive in the wild.

Of course this sentiment is directly opposed by those who experience God’s absence in nature’s cruelty and ambivalence, or who find fuel for atheistic arguments from evil. Indeed, Hart actually seems to strengthen these objections with his rather sweeping claim that creation’s overall “style” somehow “corresponds’ to God.”\(^ {21}\) But in contrast to Hart, we might rather look to more particular beauties and experiences (such as the beauty and wonder of tigers) as countervailing artistically against creation’s ambivalent “style.” In this connection, even atheist Richard Dawkins concedes that “when you consider the beauty of the world…but you are naturally overwhelmed with a feeling of awe, a feeling of admiration, and you almost feel a desire to worship something. I feel this.”\(^ {22}\)

Our experience of creation’s beauty and divine spokenness certainly does seem to pose religious questions to us, and we wonder how much special revelation would interest us if it did not provide at least some answers to these questions already posed by our experience.\(^ {23}\) In fact, we recognize the value and uniqueness

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\(^ {19}\) McGrath also makes an appeal for theological engagement with nature. *Nature*, 24.


of special revelation by comparing it with our knowledge of the larger creation. Our experience of this creation poses questions about beauty—there is an aesthetic dimension to this reality in which we find ourselves—and so we discover that special revelation meets us on an aesthetic level, through poetry, through symbols, in a way that engages the aesthetic dimension of our being in the process of delivering a meaning. In a similar way, natural beauty fits within the artistic character of a creation designed to facilitate (among other things) our knowledge of God and the world. It may even be that as aesthetic creatures, we see revelation, at least in part, through the lens of our questions about, and our desire for, beauty. This is because we humans are lovers as much as, or more than, we are knowers, and what we know is bound up in what we desire. This desire involves our aesthetic sense and rationality, and quite appropriately so, if, as the nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin asserts, both art and philosophy, beauty and knowledge, are aspects of “the Heavenly Wisdom” manifest in creation. Heavenly wisdom so construed is not only concerned with beauty, but by virtue of that concern also “rejoices in the Truth.” Indeed, the ways in which beauty functions in our experience suggest that beauty could be a sort of divine “operation” within creation—an operation pointing us toward divine truth that we can practice believing with our intelligent bodies. Beauty is a human telos, part of the goal of human flourishing, and as such, instead of merely “pushing” our knowledge forward through the adoption of certain beliefs, beauty “draws” our knowledge of God along by desire, toward the world’s meaning, which is God. In this way the beauty of creation evokes the idea of epistemic, and even eschatological, journeying toward God.

In view of these epistemic possibilities in a beautiful creation, we should reconcile what we think of as creational theology with what we think of as theology of special revelation, with the recognition that the two are not entirely separable. Scripture and creation illuminate one another, and each confirms the other’s testimony. Our understanding of creation contributes to our understanding of Scripture, as Jesus confirmed in his use of earthy parables, and the psalmists assumed in their descriptions of nature. Of course, our understanding of Scripture also influences our outlook on creation. These two sources interpenetrate one another, sharing the same divine light

26. Wynn, Faith and Place, 79–80, holds that places draw our embodied knowledge teleologically toward the world’s meaning, namely God.
that illumines everyone (John 1:9). This relationship of sharing and interpenetration requires further refinement and formulation. But one rather immediate implication is that revelation and reasoning both depend upon created structures, whereas any duality between reason and revelation arises from an unduly secular epistemology that does not begin with creation’s logos. Neither the church fathers nor the early scholastics would have posed such a duality, but saw both our reasoning and our response to revelation as a participation in God’s own rationality: to reason correctly is already to be enlightened by God. Revelation is but a higher, more concentrated enlightenment. It is an enlightenment tied intrinsically to a created, symbolic event that discloses transcendent reality—the same reality to which other aspects of creation point, to some lesser degree. Such an understanding of revelation also invites beauty to function symbolically as revelation.

But, again, our engagement with this revelation requires certain disciplines. We must approach reality in a critical way rather than a naive or skeptical way. We cannot expect to know all or even most of reality with absolute certainty or without the colorings of our subjective vantage points. And these colorings can be both positive and negative, sometimes leading us toward knowledge, sometimes away from it. Our knowledge is also limited by our finitude, which limits possibilities, and by our fallenness, which limits actualities—that is, fallenness limits what we actually do come to know out of what is possible for us to know. But on the other hand, we cannot say responsibly that we know only very little of the reality that confronts us, or that we only “know” it in terms of its “cash value”—that is, what “works” by serving our own very limited ends. On the contrary, we apprehend reality subjectively but truly, with varying degrees of accuracy, but not with total relativity.

We also come to know the world in very diverse and subtle ways. We cannot reduce all knowledge to propositions or beliefs about information, or even to exact verbal descriptions; for how could we so reduce our knowledge of riding a bicycle, or of the yen in someone’s eyes? Our knowledge of individual people is not a matter of analytically reading their words and gestures—knowing a person is something

29. For example, special revelation can communicate very specific information that creation cannot. Special revelation also aids in distinguishing “is” from “ought” in the natural world in ways that might be unavailable in an examination of the natural world alone. See also the above remarks about special revelation’s epistemological pre-eminence.

30. In addition to Athanasius (previously cited), see for example, Justin Martyr’s first and second Apologies (ANF), 1:164, 178, 193, and Irenaeus’s Against Heresies (ANF), 1:468–69, 489–90. See also the forthcoming citations of Augustine.

31. That is, to come to know the world in concert with grace and the divinely ordained structures within the mind and within the world, not in willful defiance against them.

much higher and stranger that is hardly comparable. We come to know people and things produced by people, not so much through arguments, verbal information, or inferences from premises, but through a broad range of images or symbols displayed aesthetically—through a person’s dress, vocal tones, facial expressions, body-language, and through our own interactive employment of the same. These “images” can communicate personality and social standing to such a degree that we often form judgments about someone’s character based solely upon her hairstyle, or upon whether his belt matches his shoes. Such details of personal appearance may at first glance seem small and insignificant, yet they open up onto vast worlds of social skill, psychological health, identity formation, and meaning apprehension.

Communicative images of this sort are by no means static or “Platonic” but are “active,” in ways that might be compared functionally to Christ’s active living and interrelating in the world, or the *imago Dei* actively playing out through physicality and interpersonality. We engage these images and socially mediated symbols in ways similar to our experiential engagement of art, in ways that surpass conscious, discursive reasoning. Hence, I use reasoning in a broad sense that includes an aesthetic rationality. And in line with this aesthetic rationality, Mark Wynn, in his religious epistemology of place, points to “various habitual modes of seeing-feeling-and-acting” oriented to the artful and the beautiful. Such holistic perception of images, as Frank Burch Brown stresses, allows for what is often a more direct and powerful communication. And it is the directness of this aesthetic communication that enables media and advertising to pique our desires and draw our tacit knowledge, despite ourselves, along certain tracks toward certain commercial, but also mythological, goals. Advertising piques our desires for beauty, for human flourishing, even for paradise and godlikeness.Advertisers, perhaps

33. My use of “images” and “symbols” refers to artistic, non-verbal-but-communicative, (re)presentations of diverse kinds. I use symbol and image interchangeably to refer to the beautiful, but “symbol” conveys the communicative, representational nature of an object, while “image” conveys its non-verbal, artistic character. *Image* in this sense is not restricted to the visual, as there can be aural “images” and images composed of combinations of sense impressions. I do not use “image” or “representation” in the Platonic sense of imperfect copies; rather, I give beauty a proper artistic status of its own instead of an inferior status as “copy.”

34. Here again the ontological and moral aspects of the incarnation are linked inextricably. Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 90–93, suggests the idea of the *imago Dei* manifesting itself through physicality and interpersonality.


better than anyone, understand how human beings come to know through desire, and advertisers are able to convey information effectively apart from didacticism. In a similar way, we would expect our knowledge of “soft winds, and ringing streamlets, and shady coverts...the violet couch and plane-tree shade,” 38 and knowledge of God through such beauties, to be personal and aesthetically rational rather than discursive and propositional. Such knowledge would function not simply through propositions and inferences but through “beauty skills” that require training and development. And by functioning in this way, the beauty of Christian art and liturgy reflects the wisdom and skill of the Christian tradition.

So our knowledge is indeed deeper, richer, and more existentially grounded than any formalism will allow. But we do obtain knowledge, because, as Thomas Aquinas suggests, the mind-body’s created structures, in all their aesthetic richness, correspond intelligibly to the world’s created structures in all their artful complexity.39 We find certain explanations, interpretations, and understandings—certain “pictures,” “fittings,” and “shapings”—to apply immediately to our experience of the world. These interpretations or pictures are not always obviously correct: they are underdetermined by our experience; however, they are not underdetermined equally. That is, by testing, reasoning, observation, and education we are able to choose among interpretations and understandings, because we ask which ones best explain, or fit along with, our skills, knowledge, and experience of the world.40 Without this ability to choose among understandings and interpretations, we would be in a very awkward and unlivable quandary as to what to believe about anything. But we do continue to modify these interpretations as necessary to fit our continuing experience. In this way imagination also becomes an important rational discipline—even, for Wordsworth, “reason, in her most exalted mood”41—because our knowing requires us to explore and consider new possibilities continually. Imagination both receives and interprets reality, and this is distinct, on one hand, from merely analyzing and cataloguing the world, and, on the other, from departing from it into groundless faith.42 Through imaginative exploration, every moment of life becomes a sort of study, and all study becomes a sort of imaginative yet disciplined play. Even science demands this creative knowing in its theorizing and postulating of explanations for the world. We find knowledge, then, not naively in surface impressions of the world, nor esoterically in the depths of our

40. See David K. Clark on underdetermined interpretations: To Know and Love God (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 140, 161–63.
own interpretations, but in the interlocution or resonance between these two (subjective and objective) spheres of reality. We find knowledge in a beautiful world but also in and through ourselves as perceptors made in God’s image to perceive beauty as part of the created order. We find revelation in beauty not only in the way that its structure may reflect God, but also in the way that that structure affects us. In this way, beautiful pearls, sea spray, or mossy glades, as Wordsworth says, “do speak, at Heaven’s command, to eye and ear,/And speak to social Reason’s inner sense,/With inarticulate language,” bringing “authentic tidings of invisible things.”

“Aesthetically Skilled” Knowing in Epistemological Context

If our knowledge operates through skilled interpretation of experiences such as beauty, then we are not inferring or deducing our knowledge “from the ground up” based on unquestionable “foundational” beliefs. By contrast with this view of foundations as starting points for our reasoning, we find ourselves reasoning already, and if we begin anywhere, it is with potentially modifiable and often tacit working presuppositions resulting from our living and acting in the world. For most of our reasoning (outside the sphere of mathematics and formal logic), these presuppositions, these starting points, are not sacrosanct and immoveable; they need not be certain or yield certainty as “foundations.” We modify them as we learn and experience more. Our theological starting points are thus not necessarily “properly basic beliefs” delivered by a presumed “proper functioning” of the mind within conducive environments. Rather, our knowledge of God through creation is richer aesthetically and more nuanced epistemologically than such models (like Reformed epistemology) might suggest. The “proper functioning” of our reasoning from creation requires the development of aesthetic, epistemic, and religious skills with which to engage the world.

Here we may use John Calvin to supplement what is called “Reformed” epistemology. Calvin, borrowing from Augustine, emphasized the aesthetic dimension of our reasoning about God—our survey of creation’s “divine art” and

44. William Wordsworth, The Excursion, ed. Sally Bushnell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 2007), 4.1199–1201, 1138. Against the charge that Wordsworth was a pantheist, Stephen Prickett argues that Wordsworth’s ambiguous mixture of naturalistic and Platonic statements was a poetic formulation that was neither pantheism nor Platonism, but an effort to hold God’s transcendence and immanence in tension. Romanticism and Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976), 85–86.
“workmanship”—the “visible splendor” and engraved “insignia whereby he shows his glory to us, whenever and wherever we cast our gaze.” Such an account suggests that sin has neither annihilated creation’s revelation of God nor expunged human ability to receive such revelation. On the contrary, the aesthetic appreciation of divine art, for Calvin, led to “admiration of the Artificer.”\textsuperscript{47} Much as this may call into question certain theological models, the same goes for epistemological models: the appreciation and interpretation of divine art is not quite on the order of basic or foundational belief any more than our appreciation and interpretation of human art is. On the contrary, such understanding of creation’s art must be learned and developed through the use of aesthetic, religious, and epistemic skills that connect with our past experience and total human context. For example, we might see red, orange, and yellow leaves without really appreciating the beauty of autumn foliage, and we might appreciate a summer breeze without having the skill to compose Shelley’s “Ode, to the Breath of Summer.” In a similar way, human beings have always known God through creation by engaging or creating symbols as part of storied, aesthetic understandings of the world. We modify these storied and aesthetic understandings, these pictures of the world, to fit our experience with aesthetic and epistemic skill, such that metaphysics is always a properly poetic discourse. And as we continue to engage the beautiful in this way, we find that new interpretations emerge, including theological ones. But we should allow such beauty-experience to produce religious beliefs in its own way rather than merely confirm beliefs supposedly delivered more directly by, say, “faith-knowledge,” input-output proper functioning, or some other model approaching an epistemological \textit{deus ex machina}.

After all, our aesthetic perception certainly requires skill development, as exemplified by some Africans who are accustomed to seeing only in three dimensions, and so do not automatically recognize a photograph to be a two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional objects.\textsuperscript{48} As a result of their environment and prior range of experience, they must “learn how to see” a photograph. Most life-situations seem to require learning of this sort, and our culture influences our aesthetic and epistemic skill sets. Similarly, we come to adopt religious beliefs through a long process of learning that begins in early childhood. Parents and culture impart religious ideas to us, and we grow to reflect upon this “training” and to evaluate it based on our own learning and experiences. Such upbringing comes with its own sort of “reasoning” processes (such as accepting authority and parental testimony) however limited in scope they may be. This experience of how religious beliefs are actually formed speaks to the need for skilled reasoning and revising of religious beliefs. Such a process parallels our ordinary revising of aesthetic beliefs and practices as we grow and develop and acquire more aesthetic attunement to the world.


\textsuperscript{48} Personal conversation with Michael Partridge.
Our aesthetic and epistemic attunement to creation’s art carries with it this possible implication: it may be that we receive God’s revelation through creation by developing certain aesthetic skills, in a way akin to our learning to estimate speed or distance, and our learning to coordinate our movements in relation to the world. Much as we develop the ability to skip stones or paint with perspective, we might also develop a spiritual aspect of human perception—spiritually oriented beauty skills that deepen and enrich our experiences, and enable us to begin to see aspects of God’s nature displayed in a beautiful world. It seems that some poets, painters, and others have indeed developed their perception in this way. This development of beauty skills would apply in similar ways to both Christians and non-Christians: it would be the engagement of an innate general capacity in human beings—a capacity for developing more specific aesthetic and religious capacities with respect to the world. Much as we grow into adulthood by learning how to perceive the world correctly, we might also grow spiritually into our full humanity by learning how to perceive the beautiful.

Beyond this individual skill in perception and belief formation, we also need others to confirm our beliefs and pictures of the world once they see how we arrived at them. If we are all alone in our unique beliefs and pictures, we should be cautious. This is not to say that we must convince everyone or even be able to demonstrate how we know something. We might simply have a feeling about what beauty is and about how it speaks of God without making arguments and without being able to articulate our feeling precisely. Our fuzziness does not make our experience any less veridical, but such fuzziness is always in need of questioning and refinement. We do need help, training, and interaction with others in order to refine our feelings, hunches, and intuitions. This is another rational discipline—a communal one. If I am to be justified in my understanding of revelatory beauty, I do need to deal with any counterevidence honestly, and invite others to criticize or modify my understanding. That is, I need to be intellectually honest and circumspect.

There are those who are intellectually dishonest about their experience of the world, and who “suppress the truth” in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18). Such defective reasoning cannot account for all incorrect conclusions about God, because people also apply different culturally inherited interpretations to their experience. Thus, some non-monotheists might experience “splendour in the grass...glory in the flower” in much the same way as monotheists, and function cognitively quite well in that respect, while still explaining their experience in terms of the Tao or some other non-theistic concept. But these differing explanations should not be

49. We do not need to be polemically sophisticated in order to be justified in holding our beliefs; otherwise, most Christians could not responsibly hold core Christian beliefs. As Dulles, Models, 259, notes, “If we know more than we can say, and if we know tacitly more than we know explicitly, it should not be surprising that in matters of personal faith the evidences should sometimes be of a sort that cannot be marshaled for forensic debate.”

seen simply as the result of truth suppression or “epistemic malfunction,” as Plantinga, rather patronizingly, maintains of non-monotheists.\footnote{Plantinga, \textit{Warranted}, 184.} On the contrary, non-monotheists could be functioning well epistemically given the cultural resources available to them. But by learning different explanations and interpretations, different ways of looking at creation, non-monotheists could begin to understand their experience of a beautiful world in monotheistic ways. Some people will suppress the truth, but the noetic effects of sin are certainly not a sufficient or appropriate explanation for monistic belief. Neither do such effects of sin minimize the importance of an aesthetic sort of reasoning in religious belief formation—an aesthetic rationality through which non-monotheists are already appropriately engaged with the world. This engagement can also certainly inform Christian theology. But the Protestant emphasis on sin does suggest that virtue, including epistemic virtue, is an important factor in how we reason about God and the world.

So, while creational theology reasons about beauty from within the Christian worldview, fully deploying its intellectual riches and epistemic resources, we should seek more than a rational but incommensurable “faith knowledge” of beauty’s revelation. That is, we should seek to describe a knowledge through beauty that is at least partly accessible (even if not acceptable) to those outside the Christian worldview as well. As a created end and “image” of divine things, beauty speaks transculturally according to the \textit{logos} of creation and human experience. In this way, the experience of beauty, as a universal phenomenon, could provide a significant bridge between human experience and Christian theology.

\textbf{Concluding Thoughts}

In response to a beautiful world, we should not expect passivity to guide us into all truth; instead, we should train our mind-bodies—our intellectual virtue and aesthetic skills—and take part in the improving of our own epistemic function through practice and education. As creation confronts us with its beauty, we should apply ourselves and our aesthetic rationality to the world in intellectually virtuous ways. In so doing, we should entertain the possibility, with Wordsworth, of a “conformity to,” or an aesthetic and epistemic harmony with, “the end and written spirit of God’s works,/Whether held forth in Nature or in Man,/Through pregnant vision.”\footnote{Wordsworth, \textit{Prelude} 4.350–53.} Or in Augustine’s terms, we should pose our questions to the world, and investigate beauty’s response. And in interpreting beauty’s response, we should paint the most complete and vibrant picture—that is, the most compelling interpretation—that we can. In this way, theology, like art, apprehends truth by eschewing the oversimplified and the cliché.\footnote{See Richard Harries on art and cliché: \textit{Art and the Beauty of God: A Christian Understanding} (London: Continuum, 1993), 11. But all of this is merely a starting point for a
more fully orbed creational theology—a theology engaging an artful and beautiful world, fully expecting to encounter the divine artist.

Author biography

L. Clifton Edwards took his PhD at the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts at St Mary’s College, University of St Andrews, where he tutored in systematic and practical theology. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Irish Theological Quarterly* and *American Theological Inquiry*. His current project is a book tentatively entitled *Creation’s Beauty as Revelation: Toward a Creational Theology of Natural Beauty*. 