



PHILOSOPHY,
ART,
and
RELIGION

Understanding Faith and Creativity

GORDON GRAHAM

Philosophy, Art, and Religion

At a time when religion and science are thought to be at loggerheads, art is widely hailed as religion's natural spiritual ally. *Philosophy, Art, and Religion* investigates the extent to which this is true. It charts the way in which modern conceptions of "Art" often marginalize the sacred arts, construing choral and instrumental music, painting and iconography, poetry, drama, and architecture as "applied" arts that necessarily fall short of the ideal of "art for art's sake." Drawing on both history of art and philosophical aesthetics, Graham sets out the historical context in which the arts came to free themselves from religious patronage, in order to conceptualize the cultural context in which religious art currently finds itself. The book then relocates religious art within the aesthetics of everyday life. Subsequent chapters systematically explore each of the sacred arts, using a wide range of illustrative examples to uncover the ways in which artworks can illuminate religious faith, and religious content can lend artworks a deeper dimension.

Before taking up his post at Princeton Theological Seminary, Gordon Graham taught philosophy at the University of St. Andrews, where he was also founding Director of the University Music Centre, and at the University of Aberdeen where he was Regius Professor of Moral Philosophy. The author of many essays on a wide range of philosophical topics relating to art, ethics, politics, and religion, his books include *Philosophy of the Arts* (third edition, 2005), *The Re-enchantment of the World* (2007) and *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion* (2014). He has been Sheffer Visiting Professor of Religion at Colorado College, Stanton Lecturer in Philosophy and Religion at the University of Cambridge, and an Adjunct Professor of Sacred Music at Westminster Choir College.

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Philosophy, Art, and Religion

Understanding Faith and Creativity

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Princeton Theological Seminary



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*Dedicated with gratitude to the presidents, faculty, and
students of Princeton Theological Seminary during my tenure
there from 2006 to 2018.*

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Preface

This book is the culmination of a decade offering courses in philosophical aesthetics to divinity students. Before my appointment (in 2006) to a newly established position in philosophy and the arts at Princeton Theological Seminary, I had taught aesthetics over many years in the philosophy departments of two largely secular universities. Covering an appropriate curriculum in these contexts allowed limited reference to religious art, but it certainly did not require it. Books and papers were few in number, and in fact the subject of the relationship between art and religion was infrequently and only lightly touched upon in the growing number of guides and handbooks to aesthetics that were coming out from academic presses. Even the college text I myself published (*Philosophy of the Arts*, 3rd revised edition 2005) made only fleeting references to religious art. As a consequence, the move to teaching aesthetics in a divinity school presented both a challenge and an opportunity.

The challenge was to engage with second degree students who generally had little or no background in philosophy and no knowledge of the traditional topics of aesthetics, while at the same time convincing them that philosophy in the Anglo-American analytical tradition could have interesting things to say about the subjects that interested them most – namely, Christian faith and practice. In addition, there was the challenge of ensuring that it was indeed *philosophical* aesthetics to which they were being introduced, and not the burgeoning area of *theological* aesthetics that was developing at the same time. This meant largely ignoring the rapidly growing literature in theological aesthetics, even though any alternative literature I could call on for reading lists that would be directly relevant to the topics of my courses was very limited indeed. At the same

time, the other side of this challenge was a corresponding opportunity to uncover new connections between philosophy, art, and religion, and to preserve philosophy's distinctive mode of thought with its emphasis on conceptual clarity, dialectical exchange, and argumentative cogency while avoiding the level of abstraction that often leads philosophy to leave the substantial content of art and religion behind.

I had already begun to think about the issue for the Stanton Lectures in Philosophy and Religion that I gave at the University of Cambridge in 2004 (subsequently published in 2007 as *The Re-enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion*), but it took some years of experimentation to find the right way of combining a serious education in philosophical aesthetics with a deep interest in religion. Part of the solution lay in focussing less on general concepts such as beauty, aesthetic experience, and aesthetic judgment (or "taste"), and more on the philosophy of the arts, especially those arts that have had a prominent place in the history of religion, chiefly music, visual art, and architecture. But a larger part of the solution, it turned out, was to engage a little more than analytical philosophy customarily does in the cultural history and anthropology of art and religion, to think about art in the context of religion as a distinctively human *practice*, and to explore and reflect on both major and minor religious artworks and artists.

The result might be called "empirically enriched philosophy," a phrase that some anthropologists have used to describe their subject.¹ But the difference with anthropology, as I see it, is that philosophy has the additional aim of attempting to resolve the problems and paradoxes that arise when we try to combine certain concepts and ideas that are central to the arts – music and emotion, depiction and resemblance, truth and fiction, beauty and usefulness, for instance. It also has an essentially normative element – the desire to determine the human significance of the phenomena it seeks to understand. It is interested not only in the character of the human practices that constitute art and religion, but in why and to what extent they matter.²

¹ I owe the expression to Professor Tim Ingold, a former colleague at the University of Aberdeen. He illuminatingly sets out his distinctive conception of relational-ecological-developmental anthropology in the introduction to *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), though he does not use the expression there.

² My own conception of the kind of understanding philosophy seeks is articulated at length in 'Philosophy, Knowledge and Understanding' in *Making Sense of the World: New Essays in the Philosophy of Understanding*. Ed. Stephen R. Grimm. (New York: Oxford University Press, in press).

Most of the examples I drew on in class were taken from the Christian religion, a natural consequence of the fact that I was teaching in a Christian seminary. But I tried, as did many of my students, not to lose sight of the fact that it was the philosophy of art and religion, not one particular religion, that we were primarily there to study and to teach. In this book, accordingly, the range of examples is much wider, and though I am most familiar with Christian music, painting, literature, and architecture in the Western art tradition, I have also drawn, so far as my knowledge will allow, on Judaism, Islam, and the religions of the East.

My position in Princeton proved to have some additional benefits. Its relative novelty gave rise to conferences, exhibitions, and other events that included artists, musicians, theologians, and educators among the participants. In these contexts also there was the challenge of showing that philosophy has something distinctively interesting to say, as well as something to learn from other rich disciplines. A number of invitations to lecture elsewhere gave me occasions to organize my thoughts in a more sustained way. One especially valuable stimulus was the invitation to teach for a couple of years as an adjunct professor on the Masters degree in sacred music at Westminster Choir College in Princeton.

This book is an attempt to capitalize on all this. The literature relevant to philosophy, art, and religion is more extensive than it was, but not very much more so, and my hope is that this book will constitute both a contribution and a stimulus to its expansion. It traverses some of the same ground as *The Re-enchantment of the World*, but in a sufficiently different way, I trust, to make it worth reading as well. It also makes a special effort to assume as little familiarity with philosophy on the part of the reader as possible. [Chapters 2](#) and [4](#) contain substantially reworked material that first appeared in the journals *Faith and Philosophy* and *Theology Today*. [Chapter 5](#) builds on a lecture I was invited to give at the University of Nice.

I owe a great debt to Princeton Seminary. Having created the Henry Luce III Chair in Philosophy and the Arts, the faculty left me completely free to realize its ambitions in whatever way I thought best. But I owe an even greater debt to several generations of students whose questions and comments, both in class and outside it, constantly stimulated me to think more imaginatively and productively than I would otherwise have done.

Art, Religion, and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life

Reweaving the Rainbow

For several decades, the cultural world of Europe and North America has been marked, dominated, it might be said, by the “clash” between religion and science. A recurrent theme of much discussion in newspapers, radio, television, and online is whether the rise of science inevitably means the decline of religion. As the use of “rise” and “decline” suggests, these apparently related phenomena are easily viewed as just two sides of one coin. Science, it is commonly held, at both the level of theoretical explanation and of practical manipulation, has proved to be far more successful at doing what in the past the Christian religion (and religion more generally perhaps) claimed to be able to do. Modern science, this view of the matter contends, offers far better explanations of the physical world, the biological world, and the social world than the theological stories about creation, providence, and miracles we find in the Bible. Still more importantly, by producing technologies that give human beings much greater control over their lives and prospects than prayers and rituals ever did, science has fundamentally altered the human condition. We don’t need God (or the gods) anymore, because thanks to technology we can protect ourselves from the elements, literally dispel the terrors of the night (with artificial light), and, by using modern methods of transportation, eliminate most of the dangers historically associated with travel. Medical science, too, has played an important part in this change, rendering redundant archaic spells and petitionary prayers for healing. Of course, these age-old practices persist. In reality, however, or so this new scientific enlightenment claims, the superiority of medicine is acknowledged even by people who cannot quite bring themselves to let go of

their religious beliefs. Modern “believers” still offer up prayers of healing certainly, but this does not lead them to abandon drugs, physicians, and medical research, in which, in truth, they actually place far greater hope.

If this way of seeing things is correct, then it does make the rise of science/decline of religion idea very plausible. Given that religion and science are competitors, huge scientific advances such as there have undoubtedly been, on two fronts – the explanatory and the practical – must mean that religion inevitably, and ever more rapidly, is forced to beat a retreat. And yet, even in highly developed societies it has not died out completely. No modern state is entirely secularized, but in many religion has been pushed out of the public sphere and into the sphere of privatized spirituality.

The line of thought just expounded has many adherents, and in some quarters would be taken to be stating the obvious. Yet in other quarters it remains an open question and a matter of serious debate whether religion and science are indeed rivals. Claims about the triumph of science and the end of religion were especially prominent at the turn of the twenty-first century, but it is important to remember that such claims have a long history. They stretch back to the eighteenth century at least, and even to the seventeenth. With the appearance of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1857, the “conflict” between science and religion received fresh stimulus, and claims about the triumph of science and the death of religion generated widespread debate for most of the remaining nineteenth century. After some time, the debate receded, though it never quite disappeared, perhaps. At any rate it has gained great attention once again. Some scientists have written books that sell millions of copies, often with the aim of finally destroying “the God delusion.”¹ Some philosophers have joined enthusiastically in “breaking the spell”² of religion, by which, they allege, large numbers of people are still held captive. Meantime, theologians, other philosophers, and a few scientists have responded, often no less vigorously, either with the aim of restoring religion’s scientific credibility,³ or showing that the two are not rivals at all.⁴

In this way an old debate has been revived, though it has not proved any more conclusive than previously. Part of the reason for its inconclusiveness is that the practical “triumph” of science is not as straightforward

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (London: Bantam Press, 2006)

² Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, (New York: Viking, 2006)

³ John C. Lennox, *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (London: Lion Hudson, 2009); Alister E. McGrath, *Why God Won’t Go Away*, (London: Nelson, 2011)

⁴ Stephen J. Gould, *Rocks of Ages*, (New York: Random House, 1999)

as many of its protagonists suggest. Modern technology has at best been a *qualified* source of good. If science has given us penicillin, it has also given us the atomic bomb, and while truly extraordinary advances in telecommunications have been immensely valuable, the technology of the internet and the smart phone has also aided criminality, been a stimulus to vindictive abuse, and encouraged child pornography. It has also been widely used for “sharing” information that is essentially trivial. Of course, enthusiasts for modern technology can argue with some plausibility that these “downsides” are more than offset by the immense social and commercial benefits that have been made possible.

Perhaps this is true, though difficult to estimate with any degree of confidence. Still, the value of technology does not settle the issue about science and religion. It is easy to find powerful voices on the other side of the theoretical debate also. Philosophers have presented compelling arguments that constitute serious challenges to the explanatory superiority of science, and powerful analyses that expose the “atheist delusions”⁵ upon which a lot of scientific triumphalism rests. Even professedly atheistical philosophers do not always sign up to the unqualified success of science. Some of the most distinguished have denied that natural science adequately explains the phenomena of “mind and cosmos,”⁶ while others argue that if we consider the issues between science and religion more closely, we will find that the most prominent warriors in the battle are mistaken about “where the conflict really lies.”⁷

The existence of opposition to the pretensions of science is not surprising. As was observed earlier, though the debate was renewed with special energy at the turn of the twenty-first century, it is both an old and a recurring one. While its most recent occurrence has undoubtedly witnessed new voices and some fresh angles, it is also true that claims which sound novel to new audiences are often re-articulations of long established positions. To describe them in this way is not to dismiss them, of course. There is both demand for and value in, new ways of restating old views. At the same time, while genuinely innovative thought on these matters can never be ruled out, in times past when the debate has subsided, it has generally been because scientists, philosophers, and theologians find themselves repeatedly treading exceptionally well-known ground,

⁵ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)

⁶ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)

⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

occupying the same positions and rehearsing the same arguments. Once this happens, a kind of exhaustion sets in, and attention moves elsewhere.

One direction in which those who have tired of the science/religion debate might move, is to consider religion's relationship to another important aspect of modern culture – art. Here, it is common to suppose, defenders of religion should find themselves on more congenial ground. If the intellectual “battle” between science and religion has inevitably cast them as cultural rivals, art and religion, by contrast, are widely held to be cultural allies. The histories of art and religion, especially in Western European culture, are intertwined and their aspirations are mutually supportive. Or so it is quite widely thought. The agreeable expectation, consequently, is that investigating their relationship holds out the prospect of a conversation rather than a contest.

This hope is undoubtedly rooted in fact. Religion and art are often in sympathy with each other. It is not only religious believers who worry about the cultural dominance of science and the conception of reality that the success of scientific ways of thinking appears to validate. Poets, painters, and composers also often lament the materialism this success brings with it. As they see it, when human beings subscribe wholeheartedly to a scientific conception of reality, the result is a kind of spiritual impoverishment – a “disenchantment of the world,”⁸ to use Max Weber's famous phrase. By objectifying and quantifying everything, the artistic mind alleges, science robs human experience of its humanity.

This lament is not new either. It was given a memorable expression, possibly its most memorable, in the early nineteenth century by the English poet John Keats (1795–1821). What we call “science,” Keats called “natural philosophy,” a more familiar name at the time. He writes:

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
in the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine –
Unweave a rainbow.⁹

⁸ Max Weber, ‘Science as a Vocation’ in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited and introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1948)

⁹ John Keats, *Lamia*

But why should science have the effect of “disenchancing the world” and “unweaving the rainbow”? The answer implied by Keats’s poem is that while the scientific method of inquiry has proved a successful method of investigation in many respects, it requires us to re-conceive the *whole* of reality, the reality of our own minds as well as our bodies, in purely mechanical terms. That is to say, science, (or “natural philosophy”) understands reality as a vast complex of interlocking, measureable and quantifiable systems. The explanatory power and the impoverishing effect of scientific ways of thinking have the very same source. The sciences of astronomy, physics, biology, and psychology uniquely help us to understand and master the worlds of nature and the human mind, but only by interpreting them as systems whose internal relations can be exhaustively captured within the formulation of quantifiable causal laws.

If this is true, it seems that the underlying vision of the scientific world view, broadly speaking, is “deterministic.” This makes it indifferent to human beings as *subjects*. By becoming an object for investigation and manipulation, humanity is importantly separated from its subjectivity, its self-conscious awareness. Science presents nature to us both as a source of knowledge, and as a means to satisfying the desires that our biology generates. Viewed in this way, though, the world in which we find ourselves ceases to be an *environment*, which is to say, a place to be at home, to love, and to delight in. It becomes, rather, a vast machine of which we are just one functioning part. Keats’s lines, then, give compelling voice to this lament: while a scientific vision of reality may be highly effective in conquering “by rule and line,” it simultaneously eliminates the “feel” of experience, and thereby our delight in the mystery of existence. That, after all, is the point; science aims to explain *everything*,¹⁰ and with the aid of explanation, bring as much as possible under the subjugation of human needs and desires.

The belief that there is no aspect of reality that the natural sciences cannot capture and master, is not itself a discovery of natural science. It is a metaphysical view about the power and value of a particular form of investigation and explanation. For that reason, it is more accurately referred to as “scientism.” But even the most ardent proponents of scientism will agree that their aspirations in this regard are far from complete. They readily accept that there is much we still do not know, and much that we cannot yet control. They take the undeniable fact of scientific *progress*,

¹⁰ The great aspiration of modern physics is often described, in fact, as a “theory of everything” or TOE.