

EXPERIMENTAL THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS



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Catalyzing a Field of Inquiry

DEFINITIONS & DEMARCATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Since prehistory, humanity has known that, if well made, artifacts and built environments can not only communicate/support religious doctrine and rituals but also, and effectively, facilitate experiences that make those very teachings spiritually real and the presence of God felt. We also quickly learned that beauty played an inordinate role in attaining such results. In the West, scholarship in theological aesthetics has been speculating and providing various rationales for such successes for several centuries. The challenge has not been in lacking insightful theories but being unable to determine their validity solely based on argumentation. Enter the incredible steps that the empirical sciences and allied technologies (e.g., mobile eye-tracking, biosensors, AI, self-reporting questionnaires, mobile EEGs, fMRIs, etc.) have made over the past generation that allow us, for the first time, to test the various theological aesthetics claims with some confidence.

And all this is occurring at the same time when other disciplines are displaying a growing interest in the topic, such as architecture (semiotics, phenomenology, typology), psychology (cognitive psychology, psychology of religion, environmental psychology), the arts (visual and non-visual), material culture, contemplative neuroscience, neuroaesthetics, etc. These developments make possible the pursuit of a genuine, empirically based interdisciplinary field addressing theological aesthetics afresh.

We call this field of inquiry Experimental Theological Aesthetics (XTA) and define it as an empirically oriented investigation of the interrelationship between God, faith, and theology, and human experience, beauty, and the arts (Garrett, 2011). We define XTA as follow:

Experimental Theological Aesthetics is the interconnected project of empirically testing, theologically interpreting, and creatively generating aesthetic experiences to (i) identify how such experiences cognitively and affectively contribute to our understanding of and relating to God and/or (ii) create refined aesthetic experiences, to promote spiritual flourishing.

XTA involves a shift from the traditional focus of theological aesthetics on ethical, metaphysical, and symbolic issues to incorporating interdisciplinary, experimentally focused methods to probe long-held (agreed or disagreed) tenants in

the field. It is a shift that finds inspiration in Experimental Philosophy, a movement that started in the early 2000s that uses empirical means to elucidate old, seemingly intractable philosophical questions (Appiah 2007, Knobe and Nichols 2008).

The potential for using the scientific method and the resulting empirical evidence to advance the state-of-the-art in spiritual-religious aesthetics can prove consequential, perhaps enabling a paradigm shift in our understanding. The results of this effort will serve the following key groups of people:

- 1) **ARCHITECTS, ARTISTS, AND DESIGNERS.** Sacred aesthetic experiences provide access to spiritual realities and information because architects, artists, and designers have intentionally created rich aesthetic experiences for such purposes. XTA will provide key information on the evidence-based efficacy of design strategies for sacred experiences among particular religious populations.
- 2) **THEOLOGIANS.** Theologians provide a depth of rationale and theory for the formation of religious aesthetic experiences. XTA will augment this thinking beyond the 'why' to the 'how,' providing new layers of theological reflections across various sub-disciplines, including theological aesthetics, ecclesiology, practical theology, cultural apologetics, missiology, liturgical studies, and general religious studies.
- 3) **CHURCH LEADERS.** The formation of new sacred aesthetic experiences most often begins with the church leader and ends with the church leader. Theologians theorize, architects and designers create, but church leaders live. Yet, most church leaders lack an understanding of how religious aesthetic experiences can support their ministry goals. At the denominational or multi-church leadership level, the results of XTA will bring new gravitas to facilitate active conversations on how to think about sacred space and the role of aesthetic experiences in the believer's life. Currently, within the Christian faith, the role of building aesthetics, and aesthetic experiences in general, in facilitating spiritual understanding or evangelism is under active reconsideration within the Catholic tradition and the evangelical Protestant tradition. Thus, XTA significantly contributes to informing these conversations.
- 4) **RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALS SEEKING RELIGIOUS GROWTH.** XTA seeks to understand how individuals access spiritual information via architecture/arts. For those religious individuals desiring deeper growth in their faith, the results of XTA can encourage them to intentionally seek out designed space and other aesthetic experiences in their process of sanctification and contemplation.
- 5) **BUILT ENVIRONMENT RESEARCHERS.** Scholars and researchers in built environment studies (i.e., environmental psychology, physical anthropology, phenomenology, neuroaesthetics, cognitive neuroscience, art history, interior design, urban planning, etc.) who have an active agenda and interest in the empirical examination of human interactions with the constructed environment – XTA provides a focused field of inquiry for their work.

DISCIPLINARY FOCUS

The focus of XTA is to empirically test, theologically interpret, and creatively generate research-informed aesthetic experiences.

Thus, the method of XTA involves identifying and testing hypotheses, developing experimental design methods, utilizing relevant technologies, interpreting data from a scientific and theological frame, and communicating results of replicable findings.

XTA, by its nature, is an interdisciplinary endeavor. As such, a mutual and important dialectic will take place between the theoretical side (theologians, philosophers, creatives, etc.) and the empirical side (psychologists, statisticians, neuroscientists, etc.) of XTA. While, in general, we might expect the theoretical disciplines to be strongest in generating hypotheses and the empirical disciplines in testing and refining, XTA encourages and expects a more dynamic relationship between theory and practice.

CONCEPTUALLY LOCATING XTA

We conceive XTA as conceptually distinct from related fields, including Theological Aesthetics, Experimental and Empirical Aesthetics, and Creative Practice. The following chart highlights key distinctions between fields that study aesthetic experiences.

CONCEPTUALLY LOCATING XTA

Aspect	Experimental Theological Aesthetics	Theological Aesthetics	Empirical & Experimental Aesthetics	Creative Aesthetic Practice
Demarcations	Integrates theological reflection, empirical observation, and creative experimentation.	Integrates doctrinal analysis and philosophical /theological reasoning.	Integrates empirical methods like experiments, perception studies, and cognitive science.	Integrates intuitive, iterative, and process-driven creation.
Methodologies	Eclectic, valuing intuition, divine revelation, empirical adequacy, and generative practice.	A priori approach, thought experiments and valuing divine revelation.	A posteriori approach, empirical experiments.	Synthetic generation.
Priorities	Seeks to balance sacred meaning, human perception, and innovative forms of expression.	Maintains alignment with theological doctrines and spiritual values.	Understands universal patterns in how humans experience and value aesthetics.	Values originality, experimentation, and created impact in the creative process and product.
Application	Engages designers, artists, theologians, and scientists in collaborative projects and experimental works that provoke reflection.	Primarily serves theological education, worship, and the contemplation of divine truth.	Applied in design, marketing, and studying human behavior related to art and beauty.	Used in artistic creation, education, and influencing cultural trends.
Strengths	Combines theological depth, scientific rigor, and artistic innovation to refine aesthetic experiences and promote spiritual flourishing.	Deep grounding in sacred traditions and mXTAphysical frameworks.	Offers measurable insights into human perception and aesthetic experience.	Generates diverse, contextually fitted aesthetic products and correlated experiences.
Weaknesses	Risk of over analysis leading to forced creativity and/or diluted religious aesthetic experiences.	Can be overly dogmatic, limiting innovation and relevance to modern contexts.	Can over emphasize scientifically measurable facets of aesthetic experiences.	May lack theoretical rigor or fail to address deeper philosophical or theological questions.

INAUGURAL SYMPOSIUM ON EXPERIMENTAL THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

Establishing Theoretical Foundations

California Baptist University

February 26, 5pm – February 28, 9pm, 2026

In order to properly ground this new discipline, important foundational questions ought to be addressed. For the inaugural working symposium on XTA to be held in Spring 2026, we propose an exploration of the following set of questions.

Theological Considerations

1. How does an individual's relationship with God and state of sanctification influence interpretation of aesthetic experience?
2. How does an individual's view of reality, (e.g. sacramental vs mechanistic, i.e. theology of place) alter our ability to interpret aesthetic experience?
3. Can theological propositions or doctrines (e.g. *imago dei*) be measured or observed via empirical methods? (X-Th)
4. Can aesthetic experiences be considered a form of theological reasoning, inquiry, understanding? (theology through the arts)
5. How does experimental theological aesthetics relate to other theological concerns such as creation, providence, sin, salvation, grace, evangelism, discipleship, doctrine of God?
6. Is aesthetic experience an instance of experiencing God? How does sensory experience in general align with God's self-disclosure (e.g. Special Revelation or General Revelation)? Does art / beauty / aesthetic experience serve as a reflection of the divine nature, a participation in it, or a distinct phenomenon?
7. In what ways does aesthetic experience serve the Church? Evangelism and apologetics? Discipleship? Worship? Community formation?
8. Which theological aesthetic theory or proposition(s) offer the best chance to be productively tested and/or result in significant understanding and why?

Philosophical Considerations

1. What is the rationally preferred philosophical analysis of aesthetic experience for XTA (and related cognates such as aesthetic objects, properties, and judgements)?
2. What is the rationally preferred philosophical analysis of understanding for XTA (and related cognates such as cognitive excellence, knowledge, the epistemic value of emotions, direct acquaintance, mindful attention)?
3. What is the rationally preferred philosophical analysis of creativity for XTA (and related cognates such as novelty, surprisingness, inspiration, and agency)?
4. What is the role of the imagination in our aesthetic experience?
5. How does our understanding of humans as narrational animals who live according to a story, and are located in the true story of the world shape, our aesthetic experience?
6. How does an individual's relationship with God and state of sanctification influence interpretation of aesthetic experience?
7. Is aesthetic experience an instance of experiencing God? How does sensory experience in general align with God's self-disclosure (e.g. Special Revelation or General Revelation)? Does art / beauty / aesthetic experience serve as a reflection of the divine nature, a participation in it, or a distinct phenomenon?
8. How does a creative process and products reconcile the application of objective principles with contextual fittedness in creating religious aesthetic experiences?
9. How can phenomenology and scientific inquiry be reconciled particularly when considering the high qualitative nature of religious/spiritual experience?

Creative Considerations

1. How does varying sources of creative form (inspiration, theological reasoning, empirical findings) alter the creative process or product?
2. How does a creative process and products reconcile the application of objective principles with contextual fittedness in creating religious aesthetic experiences?
3. Does the reliance on empirical evidence in the creative process steer it toward a deterministic outcome, or does it instead open pathways for unpredictability and innovation? How can the application of empirical evidence in the creative process allow for variances in religious populations, experiential / spiritual preferences, and or movement of God?

4. What is the relationship between creative innovation and established tradition of liturgy or spiritual practice?
5. How does the artist's relationship with God inform their creative process and output?
6. Is creative development within XTA best understood as a process of discovery, creation, or both? How does this differ from innovation as understood in other fields?
7. Is the creative process a form of theological inquiry?
8. What experimental or empirical inputs should inform XTA? By what measures should a creative output be judged within XTA? For the individual? For the community?
9. How can the state of the art in Architectural Semiotics, Phenomenology, and/or Typology be tested and advanced utilizing empirical methods?

Empirical Considerations

1. What are the best technologies today to be used in XTA?
2. What unique research methodologies may be applied to design and execute successful XTA studies?
3. What existing empirical studies and work may be brought to illuminate XTA questions and issues?
4. What can the unique insights, knowledge-base, and culture of an empirically grounded discipline (e.g., cognitive psychology, neuroscience, computer science, medicine) effectively communicate and advance XTA?

The symposium is made possible in part by *Templeton Religion Trust* grant TRT-2023-31928 "Spiritual Understanding and Architecture: A Multi-method, Empirical Investigation Across Religious and Non-religious Populations."

SYMPOSIUM FORMAT

Unlike other academic conferences where papers are presented in isolation, this symposium aims to foster discussion via shorter, thought-provoking talks, cross-disciplinary response panels, current work showcases, and ample time for full group discussions.

The symposium will feature several different types of sessions, meant to foster interdisciplinary conversations. Session types include:

Keynote Addresses feature 30-minute presentations from leading thinkers in theology, philosophy, architecture, and experimental disciplines. These talks set the tone of the symposium, offering bold insights that shape the conversation and provide the main points of departure for dialogue.

Perspective Talks are 15-minute explorations in which scholars engage a single question from the symposium brief. Rather than final answers, these talks present working reflections and further questions designed to deepen the foundation of XTA.

Interdisciplinary Panels serve as official respondents to the keynote and perspective talks. Drawing on abstracts received beforehand, panelists each offer a five-minute response and then join in leading the wider discussion. Their role is to enrich the exchange with clarifying remarks, probing questions, and disciplinary augmentation.

Current Work Presentations provide 20-minute windows into ongoing projects in the field or sub-fields of XTA. These sessions give participants an opportunity to share developing ideas, methods, or findings that contribute to the larger conversation.

Full Group Discussions bring all participants into open dialogue. These sessions invite questions, proposals, and reflections, with the shared aim of collaboratively shaping the emerging foundations of XTA.

SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE

THURSDAY FEB 26, 2026

KEYNOTE SESSION

5:30 - 6:00	Keynote Address Gordon Graham
6:00 - 6:30	Keynote Address Anjan Chatterjee
6:30 - 6:45	Interdisciplinary Responses <i>Moderator:</i> Julio Bermudez <i>Panelists:</i> Roberto Chiotti, Brian Ballard, Mark McInroy
6:45 - 7:30	Open Discussion

FRIDAY FEB 27, 2026

PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 9:00-9:45 Perspective Talks
 Adam Pelsner, Brian Ballard, Paul Gould
- 9:45-10:00 Interdisciplinary Panel
 Moderator: Matthew Niermann
 Panelists: Sam Welbaum, Philip Tallon, Michael Crosbie
- 10:00-10:30 Full Group Discussion
- 10:30-11:00 Break

CURRENT WORK SESSIONS

- 11:00-12:00 Current Work Presentations
 Moderator: Jacob Slagill
 Presenters: Michael Crosbie, Derek DeGroot, Milton Shinberg

- 12:00 - 1:30 Lunch

ACHITECTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 1:30 - 2:15 Perspective Talks
 Craig Hartman, Julio Bermudez, Roberto Chiotti
- 2:15 - 3:00 Interdisciplinary Panel
 Moderator: Sarah Alfaro
 Panelists: Yoshio Nakamura, Gordon Graham, Wes Vanderlugt
- 2:30 - 3:00 Full Group Discussion
- 3:00-3:30 Break

CURRENT WORK SESSIONS

- 4:00 - 5:00 Current Work Presentations
 Moderator: Yoshio Nakamura
 Presenters: Matthew Niermann, Robin Jensen

- 5:00- 6:30 Dinner

KEYNOTE SESSION

- 7:00 - 7:30 Keynote Address
 Craig Hartman
- 7:30 - 8:00 Keynote Address
 Mark McInroy
- 8:00 - 8:15 Interdisciplinary Responses
 Moderator: Matthew Niermann
 Panelists: Sarah Alfaro, Paul Gould, Adam Peslner
- 8:15 - 9:00 Open Discussion

SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE

SATURDAY FEB 28, 2026

THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 9:00-9:45 Perspective Talks
 Philip Tallon, Wes Vanderlugt, Kevin Magas
- 9:45-10:00 Interdisciplinary Panel
 Moderator: Paul Gould
 Panelists: Sam Welbaum, Sarah Alfaro, Derek DeGroot
- 10:00-10:30 Full Group Discussion

---- 10:30-11:00 Break

CURRENT WORK SESSIONS

- 11:00-12:00 Current Work Presentations
 Moderator: Kevin Magas
 Presenters: David Kinnaman, Ian Church, Taylor Worley

---- 12:00 - 1:30 Lunch

EXPERIMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 1:30 - 2:15 Perspective Talks
 Anjan Chatterjee, Ian Church, Robin Jensen
- 2:15 - 3:00 Interdisciplinary Panel
 David Kinnaman, Yoshio Nakamura, Milton Shinberg
- 2:30 - 3:00 Full Group Discussion

---- 3:00-3:30 Break

FINAL DISCUSSION

- 4:00 - 6:00 All Group Discussion
 Moderator: Matthew Niermann & Julio Bermudez

---- 6:00 Dinner & Closing of Symposium

SYMPOSIUM CONFIRMED PARTICIPANTS

HOSTS

Matthew Niermann – California Baptist University
Julio Bermudez – Catholic University of America

THEOLOGIANS

Kevin Magas – Mundelein Seminary
Wes VanderLugt – Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
Philip Tallon – Houston Baptist University
Mark McInroy – Oxford University

ARCHITECTS / DESIGNERS

Sarah Alfaro – Ball State University
Roberto Chiotti – Larkin Architect Limited
Michael Crosbie – University of Hartford
Derek DeGroot – Aspen Group
Craig Hartman – SOM
Milton Shinberg – Catholic University of America
Jacob Slagill – California Baptist University

PHILOSOPHERS / HISTORIANS

Brian Ballard – Concordia University in Irvine
Ian Church – Hillsdale College
Paul Gould – Palm Beach Atlantic University
Gordon Graham – Edinburgh Sacred Arts Foundation
Adam Pelser – Airforce Academy
Sam Wellbaum – California Baptist University

EXPERIMENTALISTS / SCIENTISTS

Anjan Chatterjee – University of Pennsylvania
Robin Jensen – University of Notre Dame
David Kinnaman – Barna Research Group
Yoshio Nakamura – University of Utah
Taylor Worley – Wheaton College