

## John Oman on feeling and theology

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**Abstract:** This article revisits Oman's idea that an intuitive felt knowledge of the divine underlies the articulate knowledge found in faith and theology. Such feeling, Oman claims, is analogous to ordinary perception and gives rise to the attempt to evaluate, understand, and respond to the divine. Theology is the formalized attempt to respond to the intuition of the divine. The article argues that Oman's emphasis on the experiential and experimental character of theology is helpful, but that his analysis of the logic of faith requires reformulation.

John Oman is a largely forgotten Scottish theologian and philosopher.<sup>1</sup> This neglect stands in contrast to the assessment of his contemporaries. F. R. Tennant reflected a common sentiment when he called him 'one of the most original, independent and impressive theologians of his generation and of his country' (Tennant (1939), 335). The reasons for the indifference to Oman have been variously put down to the difficulties of his prose, perceived either as reflecting profundity (Healey (1965), 7) or overindulgence (Clark (1978), 730), and/or the ascendancy of neo-orthodoxy in the 1930s (Healey (1965), 6). Whatever the cause 'Oman is certainly one of the British theologians of . . . [the twentieth century] who deserves a renaissance' (Schwöbel 1992), for arguably his work can make a valuable contribution to discussions in theological method, religious epistemology, the philosophy of religions, the doctrine of God, and theological anthropology. This article will focus on his understanding and use of the concept of feeling in the analysis of faith and the implications for his view of theological inquiry. Oman once wrote that 'One of the greatest and most difficult labours is to carry on the work of our predecessors without being burdened by it' (Oman (1929), 403). I take this as an encouragement to the kind of critical engagement that is clear-eyed over the strengths and weaknesses of an interlocutor with the aim of breaking through to new insight. In my conversation with Oman I shall, first, outline his view of the role of feeling in faith; second, show how this shapes

his idea of theology as an experiential and experimental inquiry; third, comment on some weaknesses of his view; and, fourth, suggest the enduring value of his idea of theology.

### **Oman's understanding of faith and feeling**

For Oman faith, or religious knowledge as he tends to call it, is essentially to be understood as the believer's experience of and response to the supernatural or divine,<sup>2</sup> which is an extra-mental reality present in ordinary human experience. In his talk of the human encounter with the divine Oman wishes to affirm two points and rule out another. He rejects the idea that the encounter with the divine is a matter of experiencing the divine will and presence through authoritative propositions and stories transcribed in a holy book or in traditions. Oman has two reasons for excluding this approach. First, he holds that such a view cannot long survive the anomalies and archaisms of the holy books themselves as these are revealed through modern scholarship. Second, he argues that the idea of grace necessitates that human beings have a genuine opportunity to accept or reject the divine will. Since the notion that God reveals his will through set propositions would, in Oman's view, take away the possibility of genuine human choice, there are, accordingly, theological reasons for rejecting the propositional thesis.

More positively, Oman has a twofold view of the way in which humans actually do encounter the divine. In the first place, through feeling there is a universal, intuitive awareness of a transcendent sphere. Primordially this awareness has the character of a feeling of dread or awe, which is a response to an encounter with that which is 'apart and awe-inspiring' (Oman (1931), 59). In Oman's view, in its most primitive form this feeling is occasioned by a sense of the transcendent quality of the whole human environment as one awe-inspiring whole. Just as we encounter a tree through sight, touch, and smell, so, says Oman, we encounter the divine through the form of perceptual experience appropriate to it; through a feeling of awe. There are clearly, however, differences between perceiving the divine and a tree. A key difference is how one evaluates the significance of what has been perceived. There is, for Oman, built into the perception of the divine the evaluation of this sphere as being, to use Otto's terms, both awe-inspiring and fascinating. That is, there is in the perception of the divine the root of competing desires: the desire to escape from and the desire to draw close to and understand the divine.

Second, Oman argues that as people pursue the desire, deriving from the intuition of the divine, to understand more of the nature of the divine and to respond appropriately to it in the light of their best insights into its nature, there is an encounter with the divine will. The encounter that Oman is speaking of is an intensely personal one, for God deals with each person individually, revealing his

will to them progressively as they pursue insight and live out their best understanding of the divine will. Clearly the idea of knowledge here is not only that of learning propositionally what the will of God might be, but of the 'inward and full persuasion of the mind', as Locke puts it, of what God wills for one in a particular context (Locke (1947), 26).

If the divine is present and knowable in the human environment through the feeling of the holy, there is then the question of how the divine is known. In seeking to answer this question Oman is guided by two axioms: that 'there is no knowledge that is not our knowing', and 'there is no knowledge except it is of an object existing apart from our knowing and in its own right' (Oman (1931), 151). This leads him to argue that all knowledge of the environment is garnered through the coming together of perceptual experience, which is to say feelings of various kinds, psychological certitude, evaluative processes, and intellectual reflection. In other words, he argues that there are elements of human passivity and activity in the forming of knowledge. A human being perceives through feeling; the nature and significance of what is perceived is then a matter of interpretation, which involves evaluation and thought.

Oman's use of 'feeling' raises the question whether he is arguing that humans perceive the divine through an emotional event. Oman, himself, denies that this is the case. In affirming Schleiermacher's views he writes:

In spite of all criticism, nothing has been done to challenge his general conception that religion is an experience of a reality which is known to us, as other reality is, by the intercourse of feeling as intuition . . . Feeling [for Schleiermacher] is neither sensation nor emotion [merely subjective sentiment], but the contact with reality, which, while it precedes clear intuition, is not a mere cause of it but passes into it. Thus religion and perception are both contacts with reality and united at their source. (Oman (1929), 404)

Oman argues that both ordinary perception and the perception of the divine are rooted in feeling. Since he wishes to argue that feeling, in this sense, is an intuition of extra-mental realities, he is keen to distance it from 'sensation' and 'emotion', which he regards as primarily subjective events with no extra-mental reference. In this regard, Oman is somewhat critical of Otto, holding that Otto's analysis of the suprarational part of religion tends to overemphasize the 'profound and heart-shaking' aspect of the encounter with the holy (Oman (1931), 60). In contrast, Oman argues that the feeling of the holy is not an instance of an emotional event, because emotional events are episodic and often intense, whilst the feeling of the divine is a continuous mode of awareness and one which is, like touch, not generally at the forefront of one's consciousness (*ibid.*, 60–64). In Oman's view what characterizes the feeling of the holy is not the intensity of the feeling, but the fact that it is related, unlike other feelings, to a sphere of absolute value. It is worth

noting that Oman's criticism of Otto has been called one-sided, in that he focuses only on Otto's 'tremendum' to the exclusion of his 'fascinans' (MacQuarrie (1963), 217). Had Oman given more attention to the latter he may have seen greater convergence between his own position and that of Otto, since the 'fascinans' is that which conveys the absolute value of that which is encountered in the 'numinous consciousness'.

If 'feeling', for Oman, is not an instance of an emotion, what then is it? Perhaps the key to clarifying Oman's meaning is his use of the concept of touch. According to Oman, touch is 'the general basis' of all the (normal) senses. That is, it is the resistance that the world gives to our bodies and the mental awareness that accompanies this that is the foundation of all perceptual knowledge. Similarly the feeling of the numinous is a 'general basis' for all our knowledge of the divine (Oman (1931), 132). That is, it is the implicit mental awareness that all human beings have of being in touch with or being constrained by a divine sphere that is the basis of all putative knowledge of the divine (Baillie (1962), 146). One interpretative issue here is whether Oman is using the idea of touch as it relates to the divine as an analogy or a metaphor. Using Kenny's definitions of analogy as the drawing of a comparison within a specific sphere of discourse or language game and of metaphor as the application of a concept outside of its usual language game, it seems to me that Oman's use of 'touch' is analogous rather than metaphorical (Kenny 2011). It is analogous in that he views feeling as a mode of perception, so that there is an analogy to be drawn with physical touch. That is, both physical touch and the feeling of the divine are part of the perceptual language game, and as such there is an analogy to be drawn between them. On this point it could be argued that Oman would be on more secure logical ground if he understood touch as it applies to the divine as a metaphor rather than as an analogy. The conditions that apply to 'touch' in its primary use in everyday life would appear to include physical contact with that which is sensed, which includes exerting pressure and modifying, however slightly, that which is sensed (Macmurray (1957), 107). Since, clearly, the feeling of the divine does not meet these conditions, then it may be more appropriate to think of it as a metaphor meant to convey the sense that, as with touch, so in the feeling of the divine there is an encounter with an extra-mental phenomenon.

Another aspect of 'feeling' is that it can be characterized, in its most primitive form, as awe. Indeed, for Oman, the evaluation of a feeling as a response to that which is awe-inspiring is that which identifies the feeling as a response to the divine, for an encounter with the awe-inspiring brings one into the region of religious worship and quest. *Prima facie*, there may seem to be a difficulty here, in that Oman wishes to argue that the feeling of the holy is both characterized by awe and yet non-emotional. That is, since 'awe' has an emotional dimension, perhaps the feeling of wonder and of self-abasement, then it is difficult to understand how

the feeling of the holy can be non-emotional. This contradiction is, however, only apparent, for Oman's point is simply that the feeling of the divine is not an occasional emotional spasm, but the ever-present, implicit context of all human experience. In this regard, Oman might have helped his reader by a more sustained discussion of 'emotion'.

The claim that the divine is known, in the first instance, through feeling raises the question of what this knowledge actually amounts to. Certainly, one point that Oman wishes to affirm is that through feeling there is a real, immediate encounter with God and that this has a cognitive though not a conceptual content. Oman holds that 'knowing . . . [is the] way to knowledge' (Oman (1931), 168). Human beings have a real acquaintance with God through feeling, which is the basis of all subsequent interpretative knowledge, though this is not to say that there is absolute certitude about the attributes of the God who is encountered. But the search for absolute certitude is a demand too far anyhow, since in the divine will the intuitive knowledge given to us of the divine is always only a 'half-lifted veil' pointing to the higher meaning of the material environment (*ibid.*, 213).

Oman attempts to analyse the character of the underlying felt knowledge of the divine in his idea of awareness. Awareness, for Oman, refers to the general consciousness which underlies our more specific knowledge of our environment. It is the form of consciousness that finds an analogy in the 'dreamy mood' in which we 'have a vivid sense of all that is about us, without attending to anything in particular' (*ibid.*, 120). An aspect of this moment of consciousness is that it involves the apprehension of the environment as one undifferentiated whole. With the absence of focus there is a corresponding absence of differentiation. For Oman this undifferentiated way of apprehending the environment is an essential constituent of an objective view, since the environment, both material and spiritual, is essentially a unified field. Oman argues that it is only as the unity of the world is grasped that it is possible to move towards objective knowledge and that there is a lack of objectivity if entities within the world are treated as fundamentally discrete. This is the case because all entities are located within a unified physical and moral field.

Oman integrates his discussion of 'awareness' into a broader analysis of the other dimensions of knowledge as he sees them, namely, apprehension, comprehension, and explanation, and these are mapped on to his understanding of the various mental powers, namely, feeling, thinking and evaluation. However, in lieu of exploring this rather complicated area of his thought, it need only be said that Oman sees the awareness generated by feeling as the basic form of all knowledge of environment and holds that all other forms of knowledge are more or less focused attempts to identify and understand that which is primitively, intuitively known through feeling. This is true both of knowledge of the material and immaterial worlds.

### Feeling and the task of theology

In the light of his understanding of the role of 'feeling' in faith, Oman has an experiential and experimental view of the nature and task of theology. He thinks of theology as experiential in the sense that it arises, as a human activity, out of the immediate encounter of the human being with God through feeling. Since the desire to explore the supernatural is intrinsic to the encounter with the divine, theology is a basic human reflex. The informal search for a satisfactory way of interpreting the divine environment is the root of the more formal activity of theologians. More specifically, the aim of Christian theology is to enable Christians to better understand and respond to the God who is known intuitively. In this regard, it is pertinent to note that Oman developed his theology initially within the context of a pastoral ministry that was marked by 'a penetration and insight into human nature that would be difficult to equal' and a concern to apply religious insights to the 'difficulties and tasks' faced by 'ordinary mortals' (Wright (1965), 152). Indeed, it was during his pastoral ministry in the North of England that Oman rendered Schleiermacher's *Speeches* into English for the first time and, according to Healey, the thing that most impressed him about Schleiermacher was his desire to view religion as a 'vital' element in human life (Healey (1965), 21).

Oman holds that Christian theology arises out of experience and with the end of clarifying the nature and will of God. In this regard he argues that theology is inherently prophetic, for it aims to discover the progressively disclosed will of God, the good, the true, and the beautiful, in order to help in the renewal of human experience in the light of the gathering insight into the divine will. This is a bold and positive view of the role of faith and theology! Tennant, in reviewing *The Natural and the Supernatural*, comments that 'it presents an argument to the effect that religion . . . is presupposed in natural knowledge and is determinative of the progress of human culture' (Tennant (1939), 213). Whereas the view of religion in relation to the wider culture is often that it is, at best, reactive and, at worst, reactionary, it is refreshing to encounter a way of thinking of faith and theology that thinks of it as exploratory and forward-looking. This approach may be contrasted with other, more conservative views of the nature of Christian faith and theology. Arguably all theologies, both in style and content, will bear the hallmark of the age from which they come: all will be, in some respect, shaped by the conceptuality and concerns of their age. Thus, for instance, it has been argued that contemporary religious fundamentalism – which *prima facie* rejects accommodation to its context – is in fact deeply shaped by the 'modern' that it putatively rejects (Ruthven 2004). It is not, then, a matter of whether a theology will be contextual, but how the relationship with context will be understood. Theological perspectives that place a premium on letting the message reverberate into the world, (Barth (1949), 11) are prone to be somewhat defensive in relation to the contemporary context. In contrast, Oman's emphasis on discovering the voice of

the divine within human experience allows him to be affirmative of contemporary insights and discoveries, and imaginative in anticipating fresh insights into the will of God for humankind and the world.

Oman also argues that theology is experimental. That is, since it aims to explore the divine realm disclosed in feeling, so it will involve a rigorous and critical search for an adequate understanding of the reality to which it relates. In this regard two aspects of the theological quest should be noted. First, theology attempts to interpret the meaning of human experience in the light of a basic framework of Christian belief and practice, what John Baillie calls the 'Christian Frame of Reference' (Baillie (1962), 146), which will guide persons of faith in their quest for the divine will. If faith is an ongoing quest to understand the divine as it discloses itself, there are some basic axioms that guide that quest, such as the conviction that God treats people as autonomous moral agents and therefore does not disclose infallible truths that will override their need to make moral and spiritual discoveries for themselves. If we think of Christian belief as a network of interrelated beliefs, then these axioms come near to the centre of the web and they will be relatively impervious, in the manner of Wittgenstein's riverbed, to modification. Or, to change the metaphor, if the attempt to interpret the will of God is like trying to understand a complicated piece of music, a figure that Oman himself uses, then the aspiring interpreter needs schooling in certain basic axiomatic musical matters before he can successfully capture the meaning that the composer had in mind when composing the music.

Second, since the theological focus is on the progressive interpretation of the will of God, which is only disclosed in a way that is coordinate with the development of the intellectual and moral resources of the Christian community at any one time, there will be an expectation that the Christian tradition will be subject to ongoing revision in the light of new knowledge and moral insights. This is not to say that Oman advocates the wholesale rejection of the Christian tradition, only that he is unwilling to regard it as 'an unchanging, fixed set of irreformable beliefs' (Ward (1994), 47). This approach, in my view, affirms a revisionist understanding of theology, which will seek to 'provide reasons for faith, in becoming aware of and responding to alternatives and criticisms; in articulating basic beliefs and recontextualizing them in relation to developing knowledge' (*ibid.*, 31). A helpful analogy that could be used here is Oakeshott's (1991) concept of 'conversation'. His idea is that the different idioms of human speech, such as science, poetry, and history, cannot be subsumed under one single character, but can only converse with each other through a recognition of their irreducible differences. Part of what must be recognized, says Oakeshott, is that different idioms are not even involved in the same inquiry about the world or ourselves, for this would be to reduce all to the status of 'argumentative discourse, the voice of "science"' (*ibid.*, 489). This means that the conversation of humankind, in that it embraces different idioms or voices, is a kind of creative Babel, in which the

certainties of different idioms are thrown into question or revealed as being only possibilities through their juxtaposition with other modes of thought. Moreover, this is a creative engagement: ‘Thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other’s movements and provoking each other to fresh exertions’ (*ibid.*). Oakeshott’s work here is highly suggestive for interpreting Oman. Oman’s position is consistent with the view that the religious life generally and theological work in particular involves a commitment to an ongoing conversation with as wide a group of interlocutors, past and present, as possible. This is because a central thread of the Christian life is the honest appraisal of the will of the divine as it is revealed through experience in its entirety. The aim of such a conversation is greater insight into the will of God through the extension of the ‘process of reflection’ into the meaning of the Gospel for contemporary men and women (Ward (1994), 33). Oakeshott’s interpretation of the conversation of humankind suggests that theology will find the interplay with other idioms destabilizing, but creative. Moreover, Oakeshott’s work leads to the view that the creative interplay that theology enjoys with other idioms will not be easily classifiable in terms of correlation or translation because each idiom is *sui generis*, which is to say that there is genuine contingency in what different theologians will draw from the conversation with other idioms.

### **Oman and theology**

Oman’s idea of the role of ‘feeling’ generates a helpful view of theology as experiential and experimental. Particularly noteworthy is his emphasis on the freedom of the theologian in relation to Church beliefs and practices, for, as Smart notes, some theological traditions display very unfortunate features (Smart (1993), 63) and the cause of truth is best served, as Popper averred, by the open society of free intellectual inquiry (Popper (1994), 4). But this is not to say that Oman’s position is free from limitation. One issue is the possible lack of coordination between his epistemology and his view of faith. Again, there are problems connected to his basic thesis that theology be understood as the exploration of the will of God as it is progressively disclosed in experience.

The suggestion has been made above (pp. 6–7) that Oman regards religious faith as deeply personal, involving an individual response to the divine marked by an inward conviction of the truth of one’s interpretation of the divine and a concomitant commitment to live in the light of the truth that one has perceived. In this sense, it has been argued that there is the suggestion of the idea of ‘praxis’ in Oman’s work; that is, that he posits a close relationship between knowledge and practice, such that to live faithfully and honestly is a precondition for the gaining of further religious insight, whilst the striving for understanding is a precondition of faithful living (Bevans (1992), 60–61). Moreover it has been pointed out (p. 11) that Oman’s view of theology is that it aims progressively to augment religious



understanding guided by the 'Christian Frame of Reference' that models basic Christian beliefs about how the relationship between God and humankind is to be understood. However, it may be suggested that this highly personal and Christian understanding of faith and theology sits somewhat uneasily with Oman's general religious epistemology. In that Oman claims that the primordial moment of the human encounter with the divine lies in a felt, undifferentiated awareness of the oneness of the world, it is difficult to see how he can plausibly make the transition to the affirmation that, for the Christian, the world as a whole is encountered as deeply personal, nourishing, and sustaining; an environment which invites a personal response from human beings.

Oman wishes to argue that theological reasoning operates on the same ground as other forms of reasoning. This claim is founded on the putative analogy between knowledge of the material world and knowledge of the divine. Since both are based on the primitive sensing of the environments to which they relate, so both are experiential and experimental forms of inquiry. This view leads Oman to the assertion that theology aims progressively to discern the will of God, the good, the true, and the beautiful, as these are disclosed through the human relationship to the material world. This approach generates permanently useful insights into the nature of theology, as we have seen, but it also arguably perpetuates a less than helpful expectation as well. Much of Oman's writing is concerned with which approach to life and thought is most likely to yield true knowledge of the supernatural. Oman talks of sincerity and sensuousness as the essential preconditions of objectivity in our thinking about the supernatural (Hood (2003), chs 6 and 7). Valuable as his insights into these matters are, they might, less helpfully, be thought to suggest that if only we can be sufficiently sincere and sensuous in our thinking it will be possible, within historical constraints, to arrive at an objective, universal perspective on the divine will. The difficulties with this implied position are at least fourfold. There is, first, the empirical problem that, whilst there are many sincere and sensuous people operating inside and outside of all major religions, yet unanimity of perspective on spiritual, moral, and aesthetic issues is most marked by its absence. Katz (1978) has shown, for instance, that in the sphere of mystical experience, a sphere where one might have hoped for convergence of insight, there are significant divergences of understanding between major religious traditions.

Second, the empirical differences between people of goodwill may reflect a basic incommensurability between the values and procedures that underlie the beliefs and practices of different religious communities and sub-communities. It was Berlin (1980, 152–153) who pointed out that values, such as liberty and equality, have a radical incompatibility, and Williams has made a similar point with regard to the procedures that may be used in moral reasoning, arguing that often in a moral conflict there is not only an absence of agreement on conclusions, but also an absence of agreement on the type of evidence that would decide an

issue (Williams (1995), 557). Taking these points of view into account, one might be led to suggest that the idea that, in human experience, it is possible to discover particular choices or actions that are the will of God is misconceived. If there are basic incommensurabilities of value, this suggests that in most circumstances choices and actions will be tinged with ambiguity. Accepting that to be the will of God an action or choice would need to be unequivocally good, we may conclude that the concept of the will of God has little purchase on specific day-to-day decisions. It might, then, be better to reserve the idea of the will of God for the axiomatic framework beliefs that form the Christian Frame of Reference. That is to say, it would be permissible to affirm, for instance, that God wills that all should pursue goodness and truth and avoid evil, whilst recognizing that the significance of this for patterns of belief and conduct will be far from clear and always subject to disagreement. In this regard it is useful to reflect on Oman's statement that 'absolute moral independence and absolute religious dependence are not opposites but necessarily one and indivisible' (Oman (1919), 33). The meaning here is that religious humility (religious dependence), expressed in an openness to further disclosures of moral, spiritual, and scientific truth over the entire range of human experience, underpins the personal, individual search for truth (moral independence). This is to say that for Oman religious dependence sits alongside an awareness of the provisionality of all human understandings. This point of view appears quite consistent with my suggestion that the 'will of God' be reserved for the general trajectories of divine agency.

Third, in that Oman stresses the need for an open conversation in matters theological, one might infer from this that this should include, in principle, an inter-faith dimension. That is, whilst Oman does not himself discuss inter-faith dialogue as a mode of Christian theology, one might plausibly argue that his advocacy of an experimental method suggests the necessity of inter-faith dialogue. However, his stress on the unity of the will of God, when taken alongside the radical differences between religious traditions, generates the idea of a continuum of religious progress along which religious traditions will be placed.<sup>3</sup> Christians would be tempted to place Christianity at one extreme of this continuum. In this way, the stress on the unity of the will of God may undermine the implicit necessity for a sincere conversation with other religious traditions.<sup>4</sup> There is, in this sense, a tension within Oman's approach.

Fourth, Oman's emphasis on faith as the attempt to discover the will of God through experience, sits somewhat uneasily with his stress on human autonomy. On the one hand, Oman puts forward the robust view that:

A person is thus distinguished from a mere individual by the call to rule, in his own power and after his own insight, his own world. The essential quality of a moral person is moral independence and an ideal person would be of absolute moral independence. (*ibid.*, 57)<sup>5</sup>

This understanding of moral independence leads Oman to stress that in morality, as in spirituality, one must seek to live by 'personal insight, inquiry and decision', thus eschewing fixed and given ideals, moralities or theologies (Oman (1941), 10).<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, when discussing the character of religious freedom Oman suggests that it is essentially the freedom to discover God's truth for oneself, and not to be coerced by external authorities. He writes:

The sole perfect order is knowing God's truth of our own insight and doing God's will of our own discernment and joyful consecration . . . what distinguishes children of God from mere works of God is just search for truth however imperfect and aspiration after righteousness however inadequate. (*ibid.*, 18)

Oman, at this point, appears to say that God graciously offers human beings epistemic freedom – which explains 'the painful and wandering way man has had to travel' – in order that human beings may rise to a personal faith nurtured by inward conviction of truth. If, however, the autonomy that humans enjoy is limited to the choice as to whether to search for and, when found, accept the will of God, then human freedom is less radical than Oman seems to suggest. Alternatively, if one regards the 'will of God' in the way outlined above, as referring to the general axioms of the Christian Frame of Reference, then it is possible to give more substance to Oman's talk of the divine gift of autonomy. For if one locates the concept of God's will within the Christian Frame of Reference, then one can affirm human freedom and responsibility to interpret the significance of the faith in space and time.

### **Towards a view of the theological task**

The difficulties in Oman's understanding of theology are serious, but it is still, in my view, possible and illuminating to think of theology, in a modified sense, as experiential and experimental. If one allows that Oman's understanding of how faith and theology arise from an intuition of the divine is problematic, it remains possible to think of a range of ways in which theology may continue to be conceived of as experientially grounded. One intriguing recent suggestion is that of the 'Cognitive Science of Religion'. This approach aims to offer explanations of religious belief in terms of the evolution of 'particular mental facilities and social arrangements' (Barrett (2009), 76). It suggests that 'naturally occurring properties of human minds' can account for the historical, cross-cultural belief in the gods (*ibid.*, 77). Whilst such an approach may, in the hands of anti-theists, be used in a reductionist way, Justin Barrett holds that the identification of a natural and cross-cultural disposition to belief in the gods may, in fact, correspond with the Christian affirmation that God wishes a personal relationship with all of His creatures and so

has shaped the evolutionary process to predispose people to belief in supernatural beings (*ibid.*, 96–99). Barrett goes on to speculate that the diversity of forms of belief in God may be accounted for in terms of sin, whilst the Incarnation, the coming of God as the man Jesus, may be God's way of accommodating himself to the putative anthropomorphism that is natural to humankind when thinking of the gods.

Barrett's idea that there may be an intuitive basis for religious belief in ordinary experience coheres well with Oman's own approach. The difference between Barrett and Oman is to do with the analysis of the character of the intuition that gives rise to belief. Barrett's approach, because it takes a naturalistic tact, avoids some of the difficulties that have been identified with Oman's assertion of felt intuition as the basis of religious knowledge. However, Barrett's perspective is attractive in that it potentially remains hospitable to a theological interpretation.<sup>7</sup> In this sense the Cognitive Science of Religion offers one possible way, amongst others, of continuing to think of religious belief as experiential.<sup>8</sup> The predisposition to belief in the gods can be thought as giving rise to a variety of specific beliefs, which are shaped both by the primal insights of religious visionaries, such as Jesus, and the development of religious traditions in response to these primal disclosures within particular historical and cultural settings.<sup>9</sup> Seen in this light, theology, as reflection on faith, is experimental in that it is concerned with reshaping a tradition's understanding of the God who is intuitively imagined, in the light, on the one hand, of current circumstances, knowledge, and insights and, on the other, what are perceived to be the enduring themes or insights of the faith. The theological imagination, at best, aims to construct plausible ways of picturing God, the world, humankind, and salvation, which is to suggest, further, that theological construction will, by nature, be tentative and exploratory. The subject of such work is the Church and the object to reassess what 'we are to think and say' in our time and circumstances (Barth (1949), 12). The criterion of success in such work could be that of whether the tradition is shown to offer ways of thinking and acting in relation to God, the self, the world, and others that is consistent with contemporary knowledge and insight and able to address fruitfully key issues facing a society at a particular point in time. Theology, thus construed, is not concerned with sketching definitive beliefs and practices, but with continually extending the conversation as to the significance of the Christian tradition in the modern world.

This article has sought to elucidate John Oman's understanding of the role of feeling in religious faith and Christian theology. In Oman's view, both faith and theology arise from and relate to a felt awareness of the divine that is implicit in our ordinary experience of the world. In this sense both are experiential, which leads on to the view that both ought to be experimental, concerned with the exploration of the supernatural sphere that is disclosed in and through all human experience. Since the basic character of the supernatural is that it is personal and invites a personal response from humankind, it follows that our intellectual and

practical response to the divine will always be provisional and capable of being revised.

In evaluating Oman's work, I have suggested that his understanding of the role of feeling in faith fails to provide us with the tools for making sense of the sheer diversity of faiths and theologies that one finds. Moreover, there is a clear conceptual tension in his approach between his dual emphases on human autonomy and the divine will that is disclosed in ordinary experience. In this sense Oman's analysis invites reformulation in order to retain his helpful emphases on human autonomy, the experiential ground of belief, and the tentative nature of religious understanding, whilst avoiding the difficulties associated with his view on the felt intuition of the divine. I have suggested that the findings of the Cognitive Science of Religion might be useful in this regard.

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## Notes

1. John Oman (1860–1939) was born in Orkney in 1860. He studied for the Presbyterian ministry in Edinburgh and was elected in 1889 to the pastoral charge of Clayport Presbyterian Church of England, Alnwick, England where he remained until 1907 when he was appointed Professor of Theology at Westminster College, Cambridge. Whilst Oman had already published two books during his time in Alnwick, his appointment to Westminster began a new stage in an illustrious scholarly career that was to bring him, amongst other honours, honorary degrees from Oxford and Edinburgh, membership of Queens' College, Cambridge, an Honorary Fellowship at Jesus College, Cambridge, and membership of the British Academy. Oman was also Principal of Westminster College from 1922 until 1935, during which time he served for one year as Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of England. By common consent, Oman's two most important books are *Grace and Personality* and *The Natural and the Supernatural*. See Hood (2012) for fuller discussion of Oman's thought and work and the provenance of his ideas.
2. The supernatural, for Oman, refers to the realm of absolute value.
3. Cf. Part IV of Oman (1931), where Oman develops a classification of religions along these lines. Oman, in tending towards an evolutionary understanding of religion, was typical of his time. It has been argued, for instance, that in the late nineteenth century William Robertson Smith's influential work in Biblical Studies was shaped by an evolutionary schema that saw Christianity as the pinnacle of religious development and Presbyterianism as the pinnacle of Christian development (Livingstone (2004), 18)!
4. Admittedly this is only one of the conceptual factors that might inhibit inter-faith dialogue; others might include different understandings of God's nature or the person of Christ.
5. Cf. also chs 6, 7, and 8.
6. Cf. also ch. 4.
7. In this sense Barrett's approach is that of epistemological, but not ontological, naturalism. Perhaps his position may be thought of as 'naturalistic theism'. Cf. Drees (2010), 105–107.
8. Another possible way of thinking of faith as experiential is to see it as arising out of and in response to perennial human issues, needs, and questions such as the existential and moral problems issuing from personal annihilation. Personal annihilation is an existential issue in that it threatens the self with non-existence; it is a moral issue in that 'We must feel we have "more than a worldly destiny", or we're just meaningless animals' (Lubbock (2004), 15).
9. Cf. Ward (1994), part I, for an extended analysis along these lines.