INTERPRETER

A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship

Volume 58 · 2023 · Pages vii - xxiv

"Signals of Transcendence"

Daniel C. Peterson

Offprint Series

© 2023 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at InterpreterFoundation.org. You can find other articles published in our journal at Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org.

"Signals of Transcendence"[1]

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *Hints of a different and better world — sometimes dimly remembered, often intuited, and commonly hoped for — and of a glorious, mighty power behind the world in which we currently live, are all around us. They are not so powerful that they cannot be missed or even ignored, but they have been and remain present for those with eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to feel. As he always does, God has not left us without witnesses but he does not seek to compel. He loves us, but he also respects our agency.*

It seems to have been the French Protestant Reformer John Calvin who coined the term *sensus divinitatis*. By it, he intended an innate sense of the existence of, and to at least some degree, the nature of God.

> That there exists in the human mind and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity [*sensus divinitatis*], we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead… this is not a doctrine which is first learned at school, but one as to which every man is, from the womb, his own master; one which nature herself allows no individual to forget.[2]

This instinctual sense of the divine is not to be confused with explicit revelation, although it might, in a Latter-day Saint view, be regarded as a particular *type* of revelation given to *all*. It is certainly distinct from a conclusion that one might reach as the result of an argument or as

1. The phrase "signals of transcendence" comes from the eminent Austrian-American sociologist of religion Peter Berger. See Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1969), 65.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 55.

a reasoned deduction from a series of propositions. Instead, it is, in a sense, an immediate perception, unreasoned, even pre-rational.[3]

The English Romantic poet William Wordsworth is an especially good representative of this intuitive sense of the divine, and he often alludes to the theme. In his "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798," for example, he writes:

> The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to me
> An appetite: a feeling and a love. . . .
> And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.[4]

Still, although Wordsworth is an eloquent spokesman for a *sensus divinitatis*, he is far from alone. Consider, for example, these characteristically simple words from the American poet Emily Dickinson:

> I never saw a moor,
> I never saw the sea;
> Yet know I how the heather looks,
> And what a wave must be.
>
> I never spoke with God,
> Nor visited in heaven;

3. By "immediate perception, unreasoned, even pre-rational," I mean something like this: When I see a mountain, I don't consult the dictionary definition of *mountain* and then inventory and analyze the features that I see in order to identify whether what I'm seeing is, indeed, a mountain. Being already familiar with what a mountain is, I instantly know when I'm seeing one.

4. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 77–81, 94–103.

Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given.

Or these breathless lines from a very different poet, e. e. cummings:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)[5]

The California poet Robinson Jeffers contended that it is God's tendency to go extravagantly beyond the merely functional or the merely necessary in nature that awakens in us a sense of the divine presence:

Is it not by his high superfluousness we know
Our God? For to be equal a need
Is natural, animal, mineral: but to fling
Rainbows over the rain
And beauty above the moon, and secret rainbows
On the domes of deep sea-shells,
And make the necessary embrace of breeding
Beautiful also as fire,
Not even the weeds to multiply without blossom
Nor the birds without music:
There is the great humaneness at the heart of things,
The extravagant kindness, the fountain
Humanity can understand, and would flow likewise
If power and desire were perch-mates.[6]

---

5. e. e. cummings, "i thank You God for most this amazing day."
6. Robinson Jeffers, "The Excesses of God," in *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 72.

And it's not only poets. Says Elaine Scarry, "Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation."[7] "We are . . . convincingly aware," wrote the great Harvard philosopher and pioneer psychologist William James,

> of the presence of a sphere of life larger and more powerful than our usual consciousness, with which the latter is nevertheless continuous. The impressions and impulsions and emotions and excitements which we thence receive help us to live, they found invincible assurance of a world beyond the sense, they melt our hearts and communicate significance and value to everything and make us happy. They do this for the individual who has them, and other individuals follow him.[8]

It is perhaps for such reasons that most of humanity, today and historically, has been persuaded of the existence of a divine dimension behind ordinary mundane reality. In fact, so pervasive is religion and religious belief that the anthropologist R. R. Marett once suggested that a more appropriate term for humankind, *homo sapiens*, might be *homo religiosus*.[9] Clyde Kluckhohn, another anthropologist, has written that, "Until the emergence of Communist societies we know of no human groups without religion."[10] (For those who traveled in the Soviet Union, of course, it is not altogether clear that Communism can truly be regarded as non-religious — and that is even more obviously so with regard to today's North Korea under the quasi-deified Kims.) Mircea Eliade, one of the greatest of all scholars of comparative world religions, argued that "the 'sacred' is an element in the structure of consciousness and not a

---

7. Elaine Scarry, "On Beauty and Being Just," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 21, ed. Grethe B. Peterson (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2000), 21.

8. "Letter of William James to Henry W. Rankin, 16 June 1901," in *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 2:149–50.

9. R. R. Marett, *Sacraments of Simple Folk* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 3.

10. Clyde Kluckhohn, "Forward," in *Reader in Comparative Religion*, ed. William Lessa and Evon Vogt (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), v.

stage in the history of consciousness."[11] Rudolf Otto maintained that "the holy" is *a priori*, innate within the human mind.[12]

A passage from Wordsworth's 1804 "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" that was once widely known among Latter-day Saints suggests that we actually bear within us dim memories of a pre-mortal childhood in which we lived with God:

> Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.
> The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting, and cometh from afar.
> Not in utter nakedness, and not in entire forgetfulness
> Do we come,
> But trailing clouds of glory, from God, who is our Home.[13]

Particularly in his later writing, Wordsworth returned again and again to the ability of the natural world to evoke in us an aching sense of longing for something that seems, ultimately, to lie beyond it. "It seemed as if there was an ecstatic desire for union with nature, or some 'sweet melancholy' that seems to have no rational cause, yet is saturated with spiritual meaning."[14]

Longing seems to be an important part of the sense of the divine as many people experience it. Most of us, at one time or another, have felt some sort of yearning for a better world. Perhaps even this is, in some sense, evidence of a kinship with the divine, or of our origin in a better place — that "the soul that rises with us, our life's star, hath had elsewhere its setting, and cometh from afar," "from God, who is our home."

"The visible Universe," wrote the Spanish essayist and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno,

> strikes me as too narrow. It is like an over-small cage against whose bars my soul beats its wings. I need more air to breathe: more, more, always more! I want to be myself and, without ceasing to be myself, to be others as well, to encompass the totality of all things visible and invisible, to extend myself to the limitless in space and prolong myself to the endless in

---

11. Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, trans. Willard Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 1:xiii.

12. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 112–74.

13. Wordsworth, "Intimations of Immortality," lines 58–65.

14. Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 2004), 117.

> time. Not to be everything and not be it forever is the same as not being at all. At least let me be altogether myself and be so forever. And to be altogether myself is to be all others. All or nothing![15]

C. S. Lewis is one of the most eloquent of those who have written about this sense of longing or yearning for something beyond our quotidian world. He referred to it using the German word *Sehnsucht* ("yearning," "longing," "desire"). He told, for example, of an experience that he had while reading as a very young man about the death of Balder or Baldur, son of Odin and brother of Thor, in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Saga of King Olaf*:

> I knew nothing about Balder; but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale and remote) and then . . . found myself at the very same moment already falling out of that desire and wishing I were back in it.[16]

He also describes how, one day in his early childhood, he was standing by a flowering currant bush. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, a memory powerfully came to him:

> [T]here suddenly rose in me without warning, as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's "enormous bliss" of Eden . . . comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? Not, certainly, for a biscuit tin filled with moss, nor even (though that came into it) for my own past . . . and before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for a longing that had just ceased. It had only taken a moment of time; and in a certain sense

15. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 43–44.

16. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), 17.

> everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison.[17]

Lewis describes *Sehnsucht* as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction … anyone who has experienced it will want it again."[18]

And, importantly, it seems that no transitory thing can ever really fill the need or still the yearning. *Quia fecisti nos ad te*, wrote St. Augustine, addressing God, *et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te. "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."*[19]

Yet there is a natural human tendency to *try*, over and over and over again and quite in vain, to find lasting satisfaction in such things. They cannot and do not satisfy. We are never fully content, and never content for long. There is always a bigger house, greater power to be had, more money, a more desirable mate, some more intense pleasure to be sought, a faster car, more status, more prestige.[20]

In a very interesting essay or sermon entitled "The Weight of Glory," Lewis contends that human desires are self-defeating. Whatever we desire, when we achieve it or obtain it, seems to leave the desire unsatisfied, wanting still more:

> The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they

17. Ibid., 16.

18. Ibid., 17–18. For me, oddly, one of those moments — one of very, very many — comes quite predictably at a certain moment, and then, again, at another, in J. S. Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D-minor*. I know what can be said musicologically, about the need for, and the satisfaction of, resolution. But I do not believe that the experience can be reduced to mere aesthetics. And what strikes me most about the particular musical passages I'm speaking of here is that my greatest pleasure comes not at the moment of resolution, but just prior to that, at the moment of greatest yearning.

19. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1v.

20. At the risk of offending some of my readers: I think that the monthly *Playboy* magazine "Playmate" illustrates this very well. The woman in the photograph is perfect. Also air-brushed, posed, and professionally photographed. No real woman — including the one in the photograph — would ever really, lastingly, satisfy. The magazine's impresario, Hugh Hefner, had hundreds if not thousands of sexual partners.

> are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.[21]

When I graduate from high school, many of us tell ourselves, I will be satisfied. When I graduate from college. When I secure a full-time job. When I'm married. When we own a house. When I land that promotion. When my income reaches $100,000 a year. When I get that boat. When we have that mountain cabin. Satisfaction is always just beyond the horizon. There's always another river to cross. We labor long to climb to the peak and, when we arrive, we find that another, taller, mountain lies beyond it.

As we grow older, too, we realize that many of our dreams will remain unfulfilled, many of our ambitions will never be attained. *Orbis non sufficit* ("The world is not enough") is a line from the *Satires* of the late-first- and early-second-century Roman writer Juvenal (IV.10). It shows up as James Bond's adopted Latin family motto in the novel *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. Whatever Mr. Bond (or Ian Fleming) might have meant by it, the point is certainly true in this sense: We yearn for completeness but know that we will never achieve it. "We are doomed to remain incomplete in our present existence. Our hopes and deepest longings will remain nothing but just that: hopes and longings."[22] "Those who have endured the void know that they have encountered a distinctive hunger, or emptiness; nothing earthly satisfies it."[23]

Even at our peak moments, we are conscious that things are not perfect. During the most exalted measures of Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto*, we know that the concert hall is hot and stuffy. We're acutely aware of the ache in our knees, or the overlarge person seated next to us. Long anticipated moments of great solemnity always come associated with flat tires and traffic jams and tears in fabric. Of the important twentieth-century Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden, it has been written that "He may have dreamed in his youth of redeeming the world through his poetic power or being destroyed in the effort, but as

21. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 4–5.

22. Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths: Building Bridges to Faith through Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 31.

23. Diogenes Allen, *The Traces of God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1981), 19.

an older man he found himself, as he often remarked, just a 'martyr to corns,' which afflicted his feet and made him comfortable only in carpet slippers."[24]

Even if it's nothing so definite as knee pain or corns, though, some indefinable something is always missing. In his philosophical dialogue the *Gorgias*, Plato compares humans to leaky jars. We are, he says, always partly empty, and we are therefore always aware, more or less, of a lack of fullness, an only partial and at-risk happiness.[25]

We are perpetually dissatisfied. And sometimes, in view of our continual disappointments, we are tempted to weariness and cynicism. But that is the wrong response. For one thing, this "divine dissatisfaction," as it has often been called, can be one of the chief wellsprings of human achievement. But it may also be an indicator of something far, far greater. Such human desires, deep and bittersweet, point beyond transitory objects that are incapable of satisfying us. As the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil expressed it:

> The danger is not lest the soul should doubt whether there is really any bread, but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry. It can only persuade itself of this by lying, for the reality of its hunger is not a belief, it is a certainty.[26]

Consider Thomas Carlyle's translation from the German of E. T. A. Hoffman's early nineteenth-century novella *The Golden Pot* (*Der goldne Topf*):

> Gracious reader, may I venture to ask you a question? Have you ever had hours, perhaps even days or weeks, in which all your customary activities did nothing but cause you vexation and dissatisfaction; when everything that you usually consider worthy and important seemed trivial and worthless? At such a time you did not know what to do or where to turn. A dim feeling pervaded your breast that you had higher desires that must be fulfilled, desires that transcended the pleasures of this world, yet desires which your spirit, like a cowed child,

24. Alan Jacobs, "Auden and the Limits of Poetry," *First Things* (August 2001): 29.

25. Plato, "Gorgias," in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 3, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 493b-d.

26. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951), 210. Simone Weil was the sister of the great French mathematician André Weil.

> did not even dare to utter. In this longing for an unknown Something, which longing hovered above you no matter where you were, like an airy dream with thin transparent forms that melted away each time you tried to examine them, you had no voice for the world about you. You passed to and fro with troubled look, like a hopeless lover, and no matter what you saw being attempted or attained in the bustle of varied existence, it awakened no sorrow or joy in you. It was as if you had no share in this sublunary world.[27]

Many, if not all of us, have, at one time or another, felt as did Hoffmann's fictional student, Anselmus, here:

> He felt that an unknown Something was awakening in his inmost soul, and calling forth that rapturous pain, which is even the mood of longing that announces a loftier existence to man.[28]

C. S. Lewis used the metaphor of hunger to explain the significance of our unfulfilled yearnings. It is, he maintained, a human sensation that corresponds to a genuine human experience. Our hunger, our need for food, points unmistakably to the existence of food, which will satisfy it. Any individual human may, of course, starve to death. But we would not have the sensation of hunger if food did not exist.

> A man's physical hunger does not prove that man will get any bread; he may die of starvation in a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will. A man may love a woman and not win her; but it would be very odd if the phenomenon called "falling in love" occurred in a sexless world.[29]

I recall reading somewhere that even Jean-Paul Sartre admitted that he experienced a need for God, arguing that humans needed to be cured

27. E.T.A. Hoffmann, "The Golden Pot," in *The Nutcracker and The Golden Pot* (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), 17. *The Golden Pot* was published in 1814; Carlyle's English translation appeared in 1827.
28. Ibid., 18.
29. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 6.

of their natural inclination to believe in the divine. That there appears to be a widespread—even, perhaps, universal—yearning for God suggests, as C. S. Lewis argues, the likelihood that something exists to satisfy that yearning. If this is so, the burden of proof that no God exists rests with the atheist, not with the theist.

The great thirteenth-century Sufi Muslim mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi is another eloquent articulator of the human yearning for deity:

> Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?
> I have no idea.
> My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,
> and I intend to end up there.
>
> This drunkenness began in some other tavern.
> When I get back around to that place,
> I'll be completely sober. Meanwhile,
> I'm like a bird from another continent, sitting in this aviary.
> The day is coming when I fly off,
> but who is it now in my ear who hears my voice?
> Who says words with my mouth?
>
> Who looks out with my eyes? What is the soul?
> I cannot stop asking.
> If I could taste one sip of an answer,
> I could break out of this prison for drunks.
> I didn't come here of my own accord, and I can't leave that way.
> Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.[30]

In beautiful lines near the beginning of his great poetic work the *Masnavi*, Rumi (as interpreted by the American poet Coleman Barks) uses the plaintive song of the reed flute to represent the human desire for God. And he does so in terms that parallel Wordsworth's idea that "the soul that rises with us, our life's star, hath had elsewhere its setting, and cometh from afar," "from God, who is our home":

> Listen to the story told by the reed,
> of being separated.
>
> "Since I was cut from the reedbed,
> I have made this crying sound.

30. Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. John Moyne (Edison NJ: Castle Books, 1997), 2.

> Anyone apart from someone he loves
> understands what I say.
>
> Anyone pulled from a source
> longs to go back.
>
> At any gathering I am there,
> mingling in the laughing and grieving,
>
> A friend to each, but few
> will hear the secrets hidden
> within the notes. . . ."[31]

In another passage, Rumi recounts the story of a man whose momentary doubt is healed by a dream-visit from Khidr, "the green one" or "the verdant one," a figure in Islamic lore who is often associated with the Prophet Elijah:

> One night a man was crying,
> *Allah! Allah!*
> His lips grew sweet with the praising,
> until a cynic said,
> "So! I have heard you
> calling out, but have you ever
> gotten any response?"
>
> The man had no answer to that.
> He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.
>
> He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,
> in a thick, green foliage.
> "Why did you stop praising?"
> "Because I've never heard anything back."
> "This longing
> you express *is* the return message."[32]

Now, obviously, there are and will be those who will say that they feel no such longing. As the Anglo-American philosopher John Hick observed,

> Many others must have been where Wordsworth sat, on the bank of the river Wye a few miles above Tintern Abbey, without the scene stirring within them any such sense of transcendence. So we can say that, in itself, the scene on the

31. Ibid., 17–18.
32. Ibid., 155.

> Wye is religiously ambiguous – capable of being experienced both religiously and non-religiously.[33]

Is Calvin's idea of a *sensus divinitatis* innate to all humans therefore false? Perhaps. Or perhaps those who deny having experienced it are being disingenuous. Or perhaps they feel it, or have felt it, but without recognizing it. There's no real way of knowing.

Moreover, our attitudes vary with the seasons of our lives. The churches in the former Soviet Union were, notoriously, filled with frail old widows. Observers of the scene wondered what would happen to the Orthodox Church, and to Russian Christianity, when those old widows passed on. But, as it turned out, there were always new generations of old-widows-in-training ready to take their place. Why? Because their approaching deaths, brought acutely to mind by the deaths of their husbands and friends, got them to thinking. At that point, no more evasion was possible. The sight of the hangman's noose, Samuel Johnson famously observed, concentrates the mind wonderfully.

The wall or veil separating us from God might become thin, or might even be burst, at any moment. In this context, I think of a couple of passages from *Das Stundenbuch* ("The Book of Hours") by the brilliant early twentieth-century Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke. They and the verses that surround them have sometimes been called "love poems" to God:

> Ich kreise um Gott, um den uralten Turm,
> und ich kreise jahrtausendelang;
> und ich weiß noch nicht: bin ich ein Falke, ein Sturm
> oder ein großer Gesang. …
>
> I circle around God, that primordial tower.
> I have been circling for thousands of years,
> and I still don't know: am I a falcon,
> a storm, or a great song?[34]

In another passage from *Das Stundenbuch*, Rilke suggests that the veil or barrier that prevents him from truly knowing God is made

33. John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 111.

34. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Widening Circles," in *Rilke's Books of Hours*, trans. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (1905; repr. New York, Riverhead Books, 1996), https://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/Poets/R/RilkeRainerM/Ilivemylifei/index.html.

up of false concepts, mistaken notions that hinder contact even when, inwardly, he is most sure of the presence of the divine:

> Du, Nachbar Gott, wenn ich dich manchesmal
> in langer Nacht mit hartem Klopfen störe—
> so ists, weil ich dich selten atmen höre
> und weiß: Du bist allein im Saal.
>
> Und wenn du etwas brauchst, ist keiner da,
> um deinem Tasten einen Trank zu reichen:
> Ich horche immer. Gib ein kleines Zeichen.
> Ich bin ganz nah.
>
> Nur eine schmale Wand ist zwischen uns,
> durch Zufall; denn es könnte sein:
> ein Rufen deines oder meines Munds—
> und sie bricht ein
> ganz ohne Lärm und Laut.
>
> Aus deinen Bildern ist sie aufgebaut.
>
> Und deine Bilder stehn vor dir wie Namen.
> Und wenn einmal in mir das Licht entbrennt,
> mit welchem meine Tiefe dich erkennt,
> vergeudet sichs als Glanz auf ihren Rahmen.
>
> Und meine Sinne, welche schnell erlahmen,
> sind ohne Heimat und von dir getrennt.

> You, neighbor God, if sometimes in the night
> I rouse you with loud knocking, I do so
> only because I seldom hear you breathe;
> and I know: you are alone.
> And should you need a drink, no one is there
> to reach it to you, groping in the dark.
> Always I hearken. Give but a small sign.
> I am quite near.
>
> Between us there is but a narrow wall,
> and by sheer chance; for it would take
> merely a call from your lips or from mine
> to break it down,
> and that without a sound.
>
> The wall is builded of your images.

> They stand before you hiding you like names.
> And when the light within me blazes high
> that in my inmost soul I know you by,
> the radiance is squandered on their frames.
>
> And then my senses, which too soon grow lame,
> exiled from you, must go their homeless ways.[35]

Happily, though, as the apostle Paul promises, the day will come when we shall know the divine even as we are divinely known (1 Corinthians 13:12).

In the meantime, though, what about those who deny an innate sense of divinity? As he often does, William James offers a cogent observation here. He points out that, even for those who insist that they have never felt a sense of the numinous nor ever desired to do so, "nothing can be more stupid than to bar out phenomena from our notice, merely because we are incapable of taking part in anything like them ourselves."[36] Such perceptions of the seeming divine claimed by very many individuals throughout history, both by articulate and prominent members of the elite and by obscure members of the "masses," need to be taken into account.

Perhaps, as Gerard Manley Hopkins expressed it in his poem "God's Grandeur," that grandeur has simply been "bleared, smeared with toil." Or perhaps the "signals of transcendence" are so common about us that they have become commonplace. The American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson made this point in his 1836 book *Nature*:

> One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. … If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.[37]

---

35. Rilke, "You, Neighbor God," in *Rilke's Books of Hours*.

36. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, 1902), 107.

37. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature" in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903), 7.

The great Jewish existentialist philosopher Martin Buber, indeed, believed that every true encounter with a "You" – every truly personal relationship that is not merely an instrumental relationship with a person objectified into an "It" – points to the personal "You" of God:

> Extended, the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal You. Every single You is a glimpse of that. Through every single You the basic word addresses the eternal You.[38]

I close with a passage from the British writer A. N. Wilson:

> It is a grand, and a beautiful thing. But is it true? It has sustained thousands and thousands of human lives in the course of its history. It has inspired some of the most heroic acts of virtue, some of the most splendid architecture, some of the most sublime music, some of the most overwhelming paintings. Sometimes, at times of great doubt and confusion, the most I have been able to say as I entered a church was, "I cannot believe this religion. But I wish to be at one with those who have believed it, and who do. My mind cannot grasp what the great Christians of the past were able to proclaim with such confidence. But at least I can use the words that they used, and kneel in the places where they knelt. For I would rather be one with them than with the materialism or atheism of my contemporaries."[39]

We who are affiliated with The Interpreter Foundation committed ourselves long ago to "contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3). I express my gratitude here to the authors, reviewers, designers, source checkers, copy editors, donors, and other volunteers who make possible the Foundation's work of commending, defending, and elucidating the claims of the Restoration. In connection with this particular volume of the Foundation's journal, I thank the authors who have contributed their time and effort to their articles, along with those directly responsible for managing and producing the journal as a whole: Allen Wyatt, Jeff Lindsay, and Godfrey Ellis. Like all of the other officers of The Interpreter Foundation, they are volunteers. I'm deeply grateful for their devoted and literally faithful service.

38. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970), 123.
39. A. N. Wilson, *How Can We Know?* (New York: Doubleday Image, 1991), 96.

Daniel C. Peterson *(PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor emeritus of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University, where he founded the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Latter-day Saint subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the* Qur'ān *and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled* Muhammad: Prophet of God *(Eerdmans, 2007).*