

Preface

One summer a young boy, living in a little house on a prairie, rides his pony to fetch the cows for milking. Three thunderheads rise higher and higher above the western horizon. As they approach, the air turns electric, a cool breeze shivers his spine, his little horse lifts its head. Where he is there are no cattle; they are grazing just over the rise in a nearby ravine. He is alone in the vast reaches of ranchland. Suddenly he wonders and thinks and realizes he is being pursued by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. He continues his search for the cows, finds them, and returns to the ranch house with a memory he will never forget.

This boy had grasped what struck Stephen Daedalus, James Joyce's stand-in for himself in his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Man*. Stephen's musings are triggered by a list of words he had written on the flyleaf of his geography text. Beginning with his name and specific geographical location, he added his county, country, and continent, ending with "The Universe." Then he pondered.

What was after the universe? Nothing. But was there anything around the universe to show where it stopped before the nothing place began? . . . It was very big to think about everything and everywhere. Only God could do that. . . .
God was God's name just as his name was Stephen.¹

On and on he ponders, moving from names to things, from colors to politics, becoming lost in endless pondering. The young boy may have done something similar. He doubts it; Stephen is more sensitive and more philosophical than that small boy. It took him longer to do such pondering. I know because I was that small boy on the prairie.

1. Joyce, *Portrait*, 16.

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This book deals with experiences like those above—emotional, intellectual, highly charged, usually sudden, unannounced, often odd, some weird, others glorious. Do these experiences mean anything? Are we puzzling over questions we can't answer no matter how long we try? Is that puzzling itself meaningful? If so, is that meaning significant? Are these experiences actually *signals* that there is something more than to human life—*our* human life, *my* life—perhaps something transcendent?

This book meditates on the facts or experiences that lie behind such statements as:

We step and do not step into the same river (Heraclitus).

Whereof we *cannot* speak, thereof we must be silent
(Ludwig Wittgenstein).

I think; therefore I am (René Descartes).

Even the most awesome statement of all that ever is or was or ever could be:

I Am Who I Am (Jahweh).

Nonetheless, this book does not pretend to be brilliant (Augustine), eloquent (Pascal), expansive (Calvin). And, though I draw on all of them, I hope it is not arrogant (Dawkins), wrong-headed (Emerson), cryptic (Bashô), phantasmal (MacLaine) or, most importantly, obscure (Wallace Stevens).

Let me be more specific: This book is about what Peter Berger calls *signals of transcendence*. Others name these experiences *spots of time* (William Wordsworth), *oceanic feeling*, *cosmic consciousness* (R. M. Bucke), *altered states of consciousness* (psychologists), *holes torn in life* (Os Guinness), *windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world* (William James).

I prefer the label *echoes of a voice* given these experiences by N. T. Wright. *Echoes of a voice* emphasizes not only the signal but the personhood of the signaler, the Creator who stands behind, before, below, beyond all creation, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the awesome God of the Universe, who is, after and before all, both the greatest mystery and the greatest revelation, the transcendent who transcends and the immanent who is eternally present, both the only Other who made us like

himself and the *Totaliter Aliter*, the Totally Other who is like nothing else, for he is, in the final analysis, *Being* himself, all there really is.

Here we approach the limits of language and should probably stick with Wittgenstein: *Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent*. But we must also recognize that what comes in silence may be more “telling” than that which comes in many words. In other words, we must be sensitive to the *echoes of the only Voice* that counts, the voice that *signals*, often in silence, both who he is and who we are.

The book ends with a discussion of the need for an apologetic that includes a wide range of biblical revelation—not just religious experience, but historical and scientific evidence and rational arguments involving both a positive case and a negative refutation of objections. It envisions such an apologetic as a stage on which plays a variety of dramatic scenes that, when enacted with zest and care, give a highly credible witness to the truth of the Christian faith. But this is to leap past the voice that speaks directly from the arena of the divine. So do listen and hearken to the voice that speaks directly to us throughout both time and space.

Note: As the present book is published, so is my *Eclectic Apologetics* (InterVarsity Press, 2014). The two books are both similar and different. The present book—*Echoes of a Voice*—focuses on *signals of transcendence*, delving deeply into their nature, their varying power to lead to God and the many alternative explanations that can be given for such amazing religious experiences. *Eclectic Apologetics* examines the wide variety of good evidence and good arguments for Christian faith in everything, especially literature. Readers of both books will find similar, sometimes identical, commentary on two of Hopkins’s poems (“God’s Grandeur” and “I wake and feel the fell of dark”) and Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Years*. The duplicated commentary is necessary to the arguments of both books. Cascade Books and InterVarsity Press have both granted permission for this dual publication.