

GOD'S WIDER
PRESENCE

RECONSIDERING
GENERAL REVELATION

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Preface

What are we as Christians to make of those occasional encounters with God in our everyday lives that seem more real than everyday reality, more fundamental than everything else? Whether observing a sunset that serendipitously becomes the occasion for something More, being overcome by the Gift and the Giver at the birth of one's child, feeling awe as we have joined others and the Other in communal acts of justice, or being ushered into the divine Presence by a work of art, music, or literature, such experiences are deeply cherished and remembered in their unpredictability. They are more than mere deductions based on the footprint of God's act of creation. They are more than mere echoes or traces of his handiwork, though that is sometimes how they are described by Christian theologians. Those who experience the Numinous speak instead of a transformative moment, something illuminating, even if precritical and hard to adequately name. While not having to do with one's salvation in any direct way, and occurring outside the church and without direct reference to Scripture or to Jesus Christ, such encounters, for that is what they are experienced to be, are seen, heard, and read as foundational to life. This book attempts to think constructively—both critically and imaginatively—about such experiences. What is the inherent value of God's wider revelation, of experiences of God's Presence not directly tied to our salvation? And how are they to be understood theologically?

The impetus for writing this book comes from at least three sources. The first is a personal experience.¹ On my nineteenth birthday I went with my sister to see the movie *Becket*. In my book *Reel Spirituality* (2006), I described the event.

1. Interestingly, this is often the case for those writing on general revelation. Kutter Callaway notes (private correspondence, July 15, 2009) that Tim Gorringer (*Discerning Spirit: A Theology of Revelation*) wrote his book about the movement of the Holy Spirit outside religious and

Nominated for twelve Academy Awards and starring Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole [1964], the film *Becket* tells the story of Henry II, the Norman king of England, and his drinking buddy, Thomas à Becket. King Henry wanted free rein to live and act as he chose, to whore and wage war and tax the citizenry as he saw fit. His one obstacle to complete license was the archbishop of Canterbury, who had his own independent authority as the leader of the Church of England. The archbishop often frustrated Henry's designs. In order to solve his problem, King Henry ingeniously decided to appoint his companion in "wine, women, and song," Thomas, as the next archbishop. Brilliant, except for one problem: Thomas decided to take his new vocation—his calling to be God's servant—seriously and to serve God rather than the king. King Henry tried to persuade him to compromise and accommodate to his old friend's (and king's) wishes. But Thomas remained steadfast. As a result of his faithfulness, Thomas was martyred in Canterbury Cathedral on the altar steps.

When I first saw this film as a freshman in college, I did not much identify with Thomas's martyrdom (or subsequent sainthood!). But I did hear God calling me to the Christian ministry. My struggle with accepting the call to become a minister was with my image of the pastor as needing *first* to be a holy person. My Young Life leader, who ministered to me during high school, was such a person, as was my church counselor. I knew I was no saint. In the film, however, I heard God saying to me through his Spirit, "You need not be holy. Thomas was not. You only have to be obedient to my call." And I responded like Thomas and said, "God, I will be loyal to you with all my being."²

Interestingly, when I once told my story at a conference, one of the other speakers, Father Gregory Elmer, a Benedictine monk who often uses film in the spiritual retreats he leads, commented that he too had heard God speak to him while watching *Becket* for the first time. He, too, had had an experience of God's wider revelatory Presence. It was a different scene that had triggered his numinous encounter, and his call had been into the monastic life. But what is noteworthy in this "coincidence" is that while watching the same movie the two of us heard God's call to service in unique ways. I heard God's call to active service in the world, and I became a professor of theology and culture; Father Elmer heard a call to purity of heart and single-minded devotion, and

institutional boundaries after having such an experience. Avery Dulles (*Models of Revelation* and *A Testimonial to Grace*) writes on revelation in light of his experience of God's general revelatory Presence in nature. Bruce Demarest's interest in the topic (*General Revelation*) arose from questions posed in his missionary experiences. G. C. Berkouwer wrote his book (*General Revelation*) in reaction to the German church's misuse of general revelation to baptize Hitler's assent to power.

2. Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 37–38.

he became a Catholic monk and mystic. Others went home and ate ice cream! The revelatory Presence of God's Spirit spoke (or didn't speak) into the differences of our lives in unique ways, but it was the same cultural artifact—the movie *Becket*—that was the catalyst for these experiences.

It is not just human culture that occasions such experience. It happened to me as well when I was sitting alone under the stars at night beneath towering pine trees in the mountains near Lake Arrowhead in Southern California, as well as when, as a boy, I heard the account of Jim McReynolds, who after coming down with polio was reduced to life in an “iron lung.” I can recall vividly “hearing” God's call to pray for him daily, which I did for the next several years. How was it fair (I doubt I would at that age have said “ethical”) that Jim would never move again? Culture, creation, conscience—our experiences as humans in each of these three arenas become in God's good pleasure the occasions for the in-breaking of God's revelatory Presence.

Many describe similar experiences, as we will note in the pages that follow. But there has been next to no constructive theological reflection on how we are to understand these experiences—experiences that happen to Christians and non-Christians alike. What sense can we make theologically as Christians of these moments of Transcendence? Others in the movie theater that evening saw *Becket* and experienced nothing remotely spiritual. It was simply an epic drama. Were they insensitive? Others knew of Jim McReynolds's tragedy and felt no inner, divine compulsion to pray. Were they too callous? Surely not. But part of the mystery of divine Presence is that at particular moments in time, God revealed himself to me. And though these experiences are singular to me, they are by no means unique as a category of experience. Most of us can name such experiences out of our past.

When, for example, I ask students to speak or write about movies that have been significant to them spiritually, for I teach courses in theology and film, perhaps a third of my students also speak of meeting God at the Cineplex (but more of that in chapter 3). And when I share with friends or when speaking about my encounter with the Creator (as when I once rounded the corner while driving only to confront a huge full moon barely above the horizon and filling my whole environment with its Light), I inevitably hear similar creation-based stories concerning walking on the beach or seeing a sunset or perhaps a rainbow. And though my childhood conscience was divinely pricked by the total paralysis of a friend, for others they experienced God's Presence while in a crowd singing “We Shall Overcome” during protests against the Vietnam War, or while in a group crying out for justice for one wrongly accused. My experience, though singular, is also common; though particular, it is also universal. You, as readers, have no doubt already plugged in your

own experiences. What are we to make of our experiences and those of our neighbors? It is this question that has motivated my research over the last decade and has led to this book.

Besides the need to make sense theologically of those experiences of God's wider revelation that are common to most of us, however infrequent, a second motivation for writing this book in constructive theology is the growing disconnect between how the church has traditionally spoken of God's self-revelation outside the church and how those who are not Christians speak of that same reality. Christians, on the one hand, have typically downplayed the importance, the significance, of God's self-revelation through creation, conscience, and culture, finding in such experiences at best a mere echo of the divine Presence. This trace of divine reality is thought insufficient to provide any real insight—in many cases, only enough, given our sinful condition, to condemn humankind for not responding to God's light. Certainly, it is claimed, these experiences are insufficient to compel obedience or devotion. Typically, such general revelation has been defined as what can be known of God by all people at all times and in all places, if they would but look and listen. This knowledge (and it is knowledge, not divine encounter) is based on what can be inferred about God based on his creation and/or what can be intuited about God based on his creation of humankind in the *imago Dei* (image of God).

Those outside the church, on the other hand, have responded to such numinous encounters by describing them as foundational and even transformative in their lives. Take, for example, this description by Janet Soskice, a philosopher: "In my case . . . faith came from a dramatic religious experience. . . . I was in the shower, on an ordinary day, and found myself to be surrounded by a presence of love, a love so real and personal that I could not doubt it. . . . Above all, I felt myself to have been addressed, not with any words or for any particular reason, and certainly not from any merit—it was in that sense gratuitous—but by one to whom I could speak."³

While the church has feared idolatry and self-deception, those outside the church have often described their responses in terms of humility and awe. Such disparity, though long-standing, has simply multiplied as we have entered what many have labeled "postmodernity," where spirituality is once again considered a public virtue. It has also been heightened by our engagement with those of other faiths who in our global village are now figuratively, or literally, our neighbors. The disconnect between church and world is growing, though it has gone largely unnoticed by too many in the church. Is it any wonder that

3. Janet Martin Soskice, "Love and Reason," in *Philosophers and God*, ed. Michael McGhee and John Cornell (New York: Continuum, 2009), 77–86.

in such circumstances, a growing number of people in the West are finding the church irrelevant, if not judgmental? Is it any wonder that we have become a largely “post-Christian” culture in the West? Rather than affirming with our brothers and sisters God’s Presence throughout God’s world, Christians have too often been pouring cold water on that spark. The unfortunate result has been twofold: on the one side, there has been for those of us in the church a loss of opportunity for dialogue and witness. If Christians are uninterested in our neighbors’ spirituality, why should they be interested in ours? And on the other side, turning from what might be labeled “evangelism” to that which is often termed “discipleship,” if God has indeed revealed himself to others through creation, conscience, and culture, then we ourselves are impoverishing ourselves in our relationship with and knowledge of God to the degree that we are insensitive to that divine Presence in others.

Last, my interest in writing this book has been triggered by wider changes that are going on in Western culture, particularly around the ordering given to what are often labeled life’s transcendentals—truth, beauty, and goodness. In the 1960s, Christianity’s theological orientation circled around notions of truth, and as a culture we would have ordered the transcendentals as truth, then goodness, and finally beauty. To give one example, at Fuller Seminary, where I teach, this was the decade where the seminary rewrote its statement of faith in order to be more accurate in setting forth the truth of the gospel. It was also the era when students sometimes removed the first “o” on the sign for Fuller Theological Seminary so that it read, “Fuller The logical Seminary.” By the ’70s and ’80s, however, our Western culture, having lived through the Vietnam War and having seen the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., had reordered these verities. We now began with the need for goodness, before moving on to truth, and finally to beauty. To again use Fuller Seminary as an example, this was the period in which the seminary wrote its “Mission beyond the Mission,” which centered on a call to act responsibly in the world. It also was the time when the seminary aggressively recruited women as well as men for training for ministry, worked for empowerment of ethnic churches by setting up a series of institutes to train their leaders, and sponsored a major conference on peace. But as modernity came to an end and the millennium dawned, the sterility of the West’s rationalism imploding in on itself, the ordering of the transcendentals again changed. As we are now comfortably into the new century, increasing numbers are saying that we should begin with beauty, and then move to goodness, before considering truth.

Such seismic shifts in the cultural plates of the West have had deep implications for theology. And one of these is surely an ever-increasing openness to a neo-Romanticism in our culture. Here is our growing openness as a society

to spirituality, particularly as it is mediated through culture and the arts, even as that same culture increases its suspicions of institutionally defined religious truth. Again, to use Fuller Seminary as a case study, over 20 percent of the student population comes today to the school because of our recently opened Brehm Center for Theology, Worship, and the Arts. As Pope John Paul II said in a speech to artists at the turn of the century, it will be beauty that will prove to be the church's connection with its youth and with those outside the church. This surely is the experience of my seminary. Here is a third impetus for attempting a new constructive theology of general revelation. What are we to make of the increased importance given to beauty? How are we to understand those spiritual experiences often testified to with regard to the arts? How might a constructive theology of God's wider revelatory Presence be instructive?

Two brief comments triggered by theological colleagues might be helpful to readers as I close this introduction. In her book *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson quotes Mary Collins: "One of the best gifts for the critical mind and for a living tradition is the gift of a new question."⁴ Here is what Johnson herself offers readers as her feminist glasses help deconstruct faulty theology from the past; glimpse new possibilities from Scripture, church tradition, and life; and reconstruct theology in a new key. Johnson's stated goal is to change the discourse about God's revelation. As a white male Protestant, my purview is obviously different from Johnson's, but our goal is the same: to change the discourse about revelation. By wearing a new set of spectacles, one focused on God's wider revelation, I hope to allow a new set of questions to emerge.

In seeking to address this question, I have found a word picture provided by another good friend and theological colleague, Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, to be of help. She speaks of the interdisciplinary, theological task central to constructive theology as an *interlacing* of various disciplines or approaches.⁵ One needs to look at theology's subject matter from a variety of vantage points, she argues, letting each inform the other. Here is what I will attempt in this book. My intention is not to look only at the intersections, or convergences, that might be present, but instead to interlace insights from experience and our contemporary culture both with reflections on authoritative biblical texts and with conversations with theologians of the church, past and present, mindful of the importance of the illuminating Presence of the Holy Spirit

4. Mary Collins, "Naming God in Public Prayer," *Worship* 59 (1985): 291–304, quoted in Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad / Herder & Herder, 1992), 29–30.

5. Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 87–100.

if new insight is to emerge. My goal will be to construct a strong interwoven cable. (As the Preacher says, “A threefold cord is not quickly broken,” Eccles. 4:12.) Loose ends are inevitable, but as with any cord, if the strands are woven together sufficiently, such loose ends do not compromise the integrity of the cord. Thank you, Cecilia, for naming the “obvious.” “Interlacing” is in fact what the constructive theological task entails.

But enough by way of introduction.

God's Wider Revelation

George Steiner, in his wonderful book *Real Presences*, writes of the “triumph of the secondary” in our Western culture. What he bemoans is not, “as Ecclesiastes would have it, that ‘of making many books there is no end.’ It is that ‘of making books on books on those books there is no end.’” Rather than concentrate on direct encounters with God’s “real Presence” through art, music, and literature, we seek out talk about such talk—talk that is a diversion, “both in the sense of deflection and of entertainment.” He writes, “We seek the immunities of indirection. In the agency of the critic, reviewer or mandarin commentator, we welcome those who can domesticate, who can secularize the mystery and summons of creation.”¹ Steiner’s comments remind me of the story Søren Kierkegaard once told. He said that in the vestibule of an auditorium there were two doors. Above the one door was a sign labeled “heaven.” Above the other door was a sign labeled “lecture about heaven.” And people flocked through the door labeled “lecture.”

For many, Steiner’s and Kierkegaard’s critiques of Western civilization’s Enlightenment project seem particularly apropos of theology. Book after book is written as a dialogue with other books on the same subject. Little attention is given to the Original source of their reflection. Everything seems second order. While there is much to be gained from the wisdom of others, there is also much to be said for beginning from the beginning, with first-order

1. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 39.

experience, particularly when the subject matter is God's revelation to us. Rather than understanding theology as "knowing God," what some today label "spirituality," we instead have defined theology over the last several centuries as "knowledge about God." Rather than reflecting on our personal experience with T/transcendence, we have too often settled for intellectual conviction based on detached philosophical argument.² It is such sterility that has led to a dead end in regard to the topic of general revelation that this book seeks to address. The time for an experientially rooted, biblically based theology of God's wider revelational Presence is surely at hand.

Some Initial Stories

As modernity comes to its end and we move ever more strongly into the post-modern era, the use of first-order testimony is increasingly important. The overreliance on detached argument has become suspect. Most of us now recognize that we think perspectively. For this reason, we long for story, whether others' or our own. And theology is no different. Consider these two examples.

While many commentators on Paul Tillich's theology have referenced his method of correlation as key to understanding his thought, others have rightly noted an experience he had as a young adult that proved foundational to his thinking. Living through the horror of World War I as an army chaplain on the front lines, Tillich was granted a furlough. Traveling back to Berlin, he went to an art museum for respite. There he saw a painting by Botticelli titled *Madonna and Child with Singing Angels*. Tillich likened the event to a baptism. He said the experience was transformative of his spirit (he called it "almost a revelation"), opening him to an element of depth in human experience that provided him a "potent analogue" for talking about religious experience more generally. What happened to him, he said, was a "breakthrough."³ Tillich labeled this early experience with Botticelli's painting "revelatory ecstasy." He wrote, "A level of reality opened to me which had been covered up to this moment, although I had some feeling before of its existence." Tillich had, he said, "an encounter with the power of being itself."⁴ We will return to this experience in chapter 3. It is enough, here, to note that in Tillich's theological formulations, his primal experience of God's Presence, mediated through

2. See David Hay, *Something There: The Biology of the Human Spirit* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), 128.

3. Paul Tillich, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 27–28.

4. Paul Tillich, "Human Nature and Art," in Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 12.

and within a painting, proved foundational for all his later theological reflection. Without rooting his thought in this revelatory event, readers of Tillich's theology risk reducing his thought to a system, in the process failing to grasp adequately its origin in mystery and wonder.⁵

In a similar way, one cannot understand the theology of C. S. Lewis without reading his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. In that book, Lewis describes a series of sporadic experiences that occurred during his youth—playing with the toy garden his brother made for him in the lid of a biscuit tin, listening to Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkin* read by his mother, smelling a currant bush, listening to Wagner, reading Norse mythology, and, while at university, encountering Euripides's *Hippolytus*. Most significant, he said, was his reading of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*. These experiences surprised him with "Joy." He reflected: "It was as though the voice which had called to me from the world's end were now speaking at my side. It was with me in the room, or in my body, or behind me. If it had eluded me by its distance, it now eluded me by its proximity—something too near to see, too close to be understood, on this side of knowledge."⁶ Again, we will return to a fuller dialogue with Lewis later in the book. But what is to be noted here is that crucial to his understanding of theology were these foundational encounters with the Divine that occurred outside the church and without any explicit reference to Jesus Christ.

Tillich later labeled his experience of God's wider Presence a "feeling of ultimate concern." Lewis spoke of a "Bright Shadow," or simply "Joy." We will in the pages that follow consider Friedrich Schleiermacher, who wrote of "a feeling of absolute dependence," and Rudolf Otto, who described such experiences as a "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*" (a mystery that is awe-filled and yet inviting). It is not just theologians, however, whether liberal or conservative, who reference such experiences as foundational or transformative to their life and thought. Such encounters are the repeated subject of artists, as well. For example, in her novel *All New People* (1989), Anne Lamott has Nanny Goodman, her quasi-autobiographical young heroine, say about her parents, "Now my father didn't believe in God, but he believed in the existence of the sacred, of the holy; it was pretty hard not to believe in anything in the face of Bach, or our mountain. . . . My mother believed that God lit the stars and spoke directly through family and friends, musicians and writers, madmen and children, and nature—and not, as she had been raised to believe, through

5. See Kenneth Hamilton, *The System and the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

6. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World / Harvest Books, 1955), 180–81.

a booming voice from the heavens.”⁷ Writing in a similar vein, John Updike has one of his characters, David Kern, speak of an experience he has had as “supernatural mail on foreign soil.” His transcendent experience took place while on his way home from the hospital where his wife was giving birth to their daughter, as he helped a dying cat that had been hit by a car. The juxtaposition of death and life, life and death, came together for him as a moment in time, yet out of time. David concluded, “The incident had the signature, decisive but illegible.”⁸

Two Reasons for the Importance of Our Investigation

One of the characters in Ingmar Bergman’s film *Fanny and Alexander* (1982) speaks in similar terms of the arts as providing “supernatural shudders.” This is seemingly also what happened to Albert Einstein when he went to a concert early in the career of the violinist Yehudi Menuhin. After the concert, Einstein said to the musician, “Thank you, Mr. Menuhin; you have again proved to me that there is a God in heaven.”⁹ In narrating the story, Richard Viladesau concludes, “Aesthetic experience seems to play a major role—at least for some people—in the exercise of the practical judgment for belief in God—perhaps a great deal more than the traditional ‘proofs’ of God’s existence set forth in apologetic theology.”¹⁰ Confirming such a judgment, George Barna in a poll taken in 2000 found that 20 percent of Americans turned to “media, arts and culture” as their primary means of spiritual experience and expression, and the percentage was growing.¹¹

If the reality of “media, arts and culture” as a primary locus of spiritual meaning for many in Western society is one stimulus for reconsidering our theology of God’s revelatory Presence outside the church and without direct reference to Jesus Christ, our increasingly frequent encounters with adherents of other religions is a second. What are we to make of the faith-filled insights and numinous experiences of those we meet who are not Christians? The witness to God’s wider revelatory Presence in life is the testimony of many, perhaps most, people.¹² David Hay and Kate Hunt report, for example, that

7. Anne Lamott, *All New People* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1989), 29, 37.

8. John Updike, “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car,” in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, Crest, 1962), 172.

9. Albert Einstein, quoted in Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 104.

10. Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 107.

11. George Barna, *Revolution* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2005), 48–49.

12. See A. W. Tozer in his classic devotional book *The Pursuit of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1948), 78–79: “Everyone of us has had experiences which we have not been able to explain: a sudden sense of loneliness, or a feeling of wonder or awe in the face of

in a national sample in England taken in 2000, while less than 10 percent of those polled went to church, 76 percent reported having a spiritual experience of some kind, and these 76 percent clearly went beyond those with a Christian background.¹³ Hay and Hunt also observe that their findings are consistent with the evidence from comparative religion, where there are few, if any, limitations on where or when such moment(s) of religious awareness can take place: "There are records of such moments during childbirth, at the point of death, during sexual intercourse, at a meal, during fasting, in a cathedral, on a rubbish dump, on a mountaintop, in Islam, in association with a particular plant, stone, fish, mammals, bird and so on ad infinitum . . . though it is worth repeating that there seems to be no way of 'switching them on.'"¹⁴ With this testimony and warning, Hay and Hunt echo what believers have recognized for centuries. As Irenaeus said in his *Against Heresies*: "For man does not see God by his own powers; but when He pleases He is seen by men, by whom He wills, and when He wills, and as He wills."¹⁵

The theologian Paul Metzger says he was converted to Christ in a Buddhist temple. For my student David Johnson, a significant encounter with God came while watching the movie *Grand Canyon* (d. Kasdan, 1991). For another student, Chris Min, it was while watching *Magnolia* (d. Anderson, 1999); for me, it was while watching *Becket* (d. Glenville, 1964); for Patrick Oden, it was while reading Milton. According to the vision statement of Sanctus 1, an emerging church in Manchester, England: "We believe that God is already active in our world." "We recognise God's indefinable presence in music, film, art and other key areas of contemporary culture." This church states that it wishes to affirm and enjoy all in our culture that gives voice to one of the many voices of God, while challenging those areas that deafen the call of God.¹⁶

the universal vastness. Or we have had a fleeting visitation of light like an illumination from some other sun, giving us in a quick flash an assurance that we are from another world, that our origins are divine. What we saw there, or felt, or heard, may have been contrary to all that we had been taught in the schools and at wide variance with all our former beliefs and opinions. We were forced to suspend our acquired doubts while, for a moment, the clouds were rolled back and we saw and heard for ourselves. Explain such things as we will, I think we have not been fair to the facts until we allow at least the possibility that such experiences may arise from the Presence of God in the world and His persistent effort to communicate with mankind. Let us not dismiss such an hypothesis too flippantly."

13. David Hay and Kate Hunt, "Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go to Church," Research Report, Centre for the Study of Human Relations, University of Nottingham, August 2000, www.facingthechallenge.org/nottingham.php.

14. Ibid.

15. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.5.

16. See Sanctus 1 Manchester, "What is Sanctus 1?," under "What do we believe?," www.sanctus1.co.uk/.

In my teaching in theology and the arts, it is a common experience for me to hear students relate stories of their own transcendent experiences that they have had while reading a book or viewing a movie. *March of the Penguins*, *Magnolia*, *Lars and the Real Girl*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Field of Dreams*, *American Beauty*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Departures*, *The Tree of Life*—the list of movies referenced by them includes secular and religious themes, documentaries and feature films, movies that are “G” rated and “R” rated, gritty and romantic, studio and art house. We will return to look at these testimonials more carefully in chapter 3. Others speak of such revelatory moments as occurring at the birth of their child, as with David Kern, or when on a mountaintop, or when listening to music, or when joining others in a march for justice. One cannot predict or produce on demand these revelatory moments that occur outside of the church; they come as moments of grace. But however infrequent and serendipitous, they are nonetheless the experience of most of us. The experiences do not come from the arts alone, nor are they only a response to encountering nature, or participating in the furtherance of goodness. Unable to be coerced, they come randomly, but persistently, through creation, conscience, and culture. We will need to consider these three loci of God’s wider revelational Presence in some detail as the book unfolds. But here it is enough to note the phenomena.

The question I wish to deal with in this book is this: What are we to make theologically of these repeated descriptions of wider experiences in life that are understood by the participants as “revelatory” of God? How, that is, are we as Christians to understand such divine moments that seem not to be primarily directed toward our salvation and/or judgment (except, of course, in the larger sense that all God’s activity is ultimately interconnected), but rather focus simply on grace and encounter. (Think Job, not John; Abimelech, not Joshua.) How are we to understand those theological experiences of God that find their trinitarian roots pneumatologically, not christologically? Such revelatory experiences seem not to be deducible by human reason as we observe God’s footprints in creation, though some such deduction/imprint/vestige/trace (what Luther called “natural knowledge”) might have its own very limited validity. Nor are they producible solely by human effort, though they can be invited and certain aspects of creation, conscience, and culture seem more conducive to their reception than others (e.g., a sunset rather than a concrete parking lot; music of Mozart rather than the sound of nails on a chalkboard). No, the experiences that many judge revelatory are more than the reception of an echo of God’s past activity or human projection of that which is transcendent to ourselves. Rather, these encounters with God’s wider revelatory Presence are always serendipitous, something that lies beyond all

human wisdom or agenda, but that nevertheless has inherent and at times transformative value for those experiencing them. It is on such revelatory experiences that we will focus in this book.

Revelation outside the Walls of the Church: A Largely Neglected Topic

Revelation, said Karl Barth, “is what human beings cannot tell themselves.”¹⁷ It is, in Tim Gorringer’s words, “the bridge between heaven and earth, human experience and the transcendent.”¹⁸ Yet Christians have largely ignored that bridge when it has occurred outside the Christian community and without direct reference to Jesus Christ. They have too often been leery and skeptical to talk about God’s wider revelatory Presence. Perhaps this is because we are unsure how to sort out human projections from such revelation—“the making-known of what we truly *cannot* tell ourselves in and through the events we experience and in our language,” to again quote Gorringer.¹⁹ It appears to many, particularly among those Christians of a more conservative theological persuasion, that, to paraphrase Barth, those testifying of such transcendent experiences are simply speaking of God by shouting “man/woman.”

But though some of us are quick to posit such judgments, we also live uneasily with our own sporadic experiences of the “More”—with those moments of Grace that seem to put all other moments into perspective. We are unsure what to say about those liminal occurrences that cross the threshold beyond human projection. As C. S. Lewis came to realize, the joy he experienced through art and nature was not of his making, but was his response to a “Joy” that he encountered from beyond. But how can we be sure? Again, the question intrudes: How are we to understand theologically such “sacred” encounters?

There have been in the last fifty years relatively few monographs written on “general revelation”—the term usually given to that communion with the divine that takes place outside the church and its Scripture, and without direct reference to Jesus Christ. (In the pages that follow, I will argue that the term is a misnomer, as these experiences are far from general, occurring not everywhere and to all people but sporadically to individuals in their everyday lives. But more on this below.) And there have been even fewer such books as of late. Perhaps here is one reason for the present disconnect between the

17. Karl Barth, quoted in T. J. Gorringer, *Discerning Spirit: A Theology of Revelation* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 6.

18. Gorringer, *Discerning Spirit*, 6.

19. *Ibid.*

burgeoning literature on spirituality in our broader, post-secular culture and the specifically Christian literature on spirituality and church life that has simultaneously arisen, texts either turned inwardly to a focus on building up the body of Christ through worship and contemplation or outwardly in service, whether to humanity or the environment. What has been largely ignored is reflection on God's revelation through creation and creature, conscience and creativity, art and science, family and public life.

Among the few theological studies on general revelation, one thinks of H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), G. C. Berkouwer's *General Revelation* (1955), Avery Dulles's *Revelation Theology* (1969), H. D. McDonald's *Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study, 1700–1960* (1979), Bruce Demarest's *General Revelation* (1982), T. J. Gorringer's *Discerning Spirit: A Theology of Revelation* (1990), and Jürgen Moltmann's *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (1992), though the purview of most of these studies is broader than general revelation per se. A more philosophical exploration has been made by Ingolf Dalferth in *Becoming Present: An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God* (2006). Interestingly, a majority of these studies of revelation outside the walls of the church have arisen because of a personal experience of God's wider Presence by the author. Without such compelling attraction, theologians have more typically been content to write historically referenced studies on correlative topics—common grace, prevenient grace, natural revelation, or natural theology—related subjects to be sure, but also distinct.

Explaining the Silence

Too Narrow a Definitional Focus

Why is there this dearth of theological and experiential reflection on God's revelatory Presence in the world, in the arts, and in the experience of non-Christians, particularly when the topic is increasingly a central concern for postmoderns? One reason, perhaps, is a sometimes faulty definition of general revelation itself. Rather than understand general revelation as any encounter with the Transcendent that occurs outside the believing community and that is not directly concerned with redemption, many have wrongly reduced it to a perceived "lowest common denominator" by limiting "general revelation" to those general truths that are communicated by God to all persons at all times and in all places. If revelation is revealed only to certain people, but not to others, then, as the logic goes, it is not "general," but some sort of "special" revelation. General revelation, so the argument has gone, is "information that is

common knowledge to all.”²⁰ Similarly, as it is argued, general revelation cannot be the result of human choice, nor can it prove transformative in the compelling power of its new affection. Rather, “it is divinely generated revelation imposed on the whole human race and impossible for mankind to avoid.”²¹ And what is that revelation that is conveyed? It is, argue some, information about God that humankind invariably rejects (Rom. 1:18) or twists to his or her own purposes—that God exists and is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, that God is righteous and sovereign, self-sufficient and transcendent, and so on. Defined thusly, general revelation remains largely an abstraction—something that Deists might affirm, but far from the wonder that is at times generated in some by God through a sunset or in the transformative reality of a new birth.

A better description of “general” revelation would recognize that God reveals himself not only through Scripture and in the believing community but also through creation, conscience, and culture. Here is a more expansive locus for God’s gracious, ongoing involvement in and through his Spirit. Some would use alternate descriptors—nature, conscience, and human creativity; or cosmos, conscience, and the human spirit. Others would say general revelation occurs through nature, history, and the inner being of the human person. The scope of general revelation is hard to pin down, as God’s interaction with humanity extends across both history and creation. What one can say, however, is that the content of such revelation is much more than mere knowledge. Rather than simply conveying new information that is then ignored, general revelation instead involves a numinous encounter, one that is often transformational.

Traditionally, theology’s definition of general revelation derived from reflection on Romans 1 and 2. For this reason, we will consider these texts in more detail in chapter 6 when we turn to insight from the Christian tradition. The church has often spoken of the outer (creation, see Rom. 1) and the inner (conscience, see Rom. 2) loci of general revelation. But such a delineation is unduly restrictive. For general revelation’s inner locus involves not only an ethical but also an aesthetic aspect. (Conscience is not a sufficiently expansive term; the imagination is also a portal for divine encounter given God’s ongoing mystery.) And the outer is accessed not only through creation but also through history. Without a description that matches human experience, one that makes room for wide-ranging, serendipitous encounters with the divine, a theology of general revelation will continue to fail in gaining traction. It will

20. Robert L. Thomas, “General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics,” *The Masters Seminary Journal* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 10. Cf. Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 17; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 154; Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 28.

21. Thomas, “General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics,” 10.

fail despite a renaissance of interest in those who experience God through the arts, or despite the growing need to find avenues for authentic dialogue with adherents of other religious faiths. Those seeking answers or explanations for the revelatory events they or others experience will find Christianity wanting.

Too Narrow a Biblical Focus

If too narrow a definitional focus is one reason for the paucity of helpful theological reflection on God's revelatory Presence, a second part of the answer as to why most Christians have undervalued the topic has to do with the focus of Scripture itself. The Bible centers its power and meaning on God's mighty acts in history, culminating in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—that is, on saving grace. Special revelation's focus on salvation history has rightly defined theology's central conversation. But we must also ask if all of Scripture has truly been listened to. That is, have we come to the Bible in its entirety asking the right questions, wearing the right "spectacles"?²² Or have we allowed past priorities and past questions to color present interpretation unduly, so that portions of Scripture have been overlooked and/or wrongly interpreted? What of the Bible's creation-centered texts, for example? Why has this portion of God's Word been largely ignored in discussions of revelation? Or, conversely, why is it that the biblical discussion of God's revelation outside the believing community has usually focused only on an interpretation of Romans 1 and 2, John 1, and perhaps Acts 17? (And why, despite no textual evidence to support the interpretation, have many marginalized the narrative in Acts 17 by considering it a failed effort on Paul's part, an example of what not to do in missional preaching?)

What of the recorded experiences in Scripture of men and women who were outside the covenant community and yet experienced God's revelation? Melchizedek? Abimelech? King Neco? King Lemuel? King Nebuchadnezzar? Balaam? The Pharaoh in Moses's day? Why are their stories largely ignored in discussion of God's revelatory Presence, giving priority by default in our theological inquiry regarding general revelation to the overarching, second-order reasoning of New Testament writers whose purposes were elsewhere, as they sought to spell out the logic of salvation? Theology's bias toward the redemptive over the creational, and toward the propositional over the narrative, is perhaps a second explanation for the relative paucity of theological thinking

22. In using the metaphor of "spectacles," I am of course playing with an image from John Calvin, but reversing its meaning. It is not Scripture that provides us "spectacles" by which to look at culture, but culture that can provide us a new set of questions and experiences (i.e., new "spectacles") by which to look at Scripture.

on general revelation. First-order, primary experience has been ignored, and thus biblical source material limited. As a result, general revelation is more typically judged to be a side issue, a necessary inference from a theology of redemption, but little more.

Too Pessimistic a View of Humankind

A third reason for the marginalization and subsequent sterility of much theological reflection on general revelation has been the theological judgment that sin has so clouded and warped human receptivity to divine revelation that general revelation, even though present, is of little if any value other than to confirm our sin—our “hardness of heart.” What we believe to be revelatory, it is thought, is more often simply disguised humanism, or worse, idolatry. Here, in a nutshell, is the theological interpretation given by many to Romans 1 and 2, and John 1. While general revelation has been acknowledged, the effect of sin has been thought to be so devastating as to preclude any positive contribution from God’s continuing Presence among us. Avery Dulles labels this typically “Reformed” approach to general revelation “Revelation as Doctrine,” associating it with the biblically centered, more propositional theology of conservative evangelicals like B. B. Warfield, Carl Henry, and J. I. Packer.²³ More recently, one could add John Piper.

Perhaps most representative here is G. C. Berkouwer in his monograph *General Revelation* for his series *Studies in Dogmatics*.²⁴ Although Berkouwer takes pains to distance himself from those like Barth who would equate the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus Christ with the exclusivity of revelation in Jesus Christ, in practice this important distinction seems to matter little to him. In particular, although Berkouwer recognizes that there is a “natural” knowledge of God and his will that is outside of the revelation of Jesus Christ, he allows such general revelation to be overwhelmed by human depravity. Though revelation is present to us, we simply choose to remain ignorant of it as human beings. When Scripture seems to suggest otherwise, Berkouwer “finds” other explanations for what the text might mean. For example, Berkouwer believes that the nature psalms do not really suggest that a knowledge of God is possible for all in and through creation, though this is what they might seem to be saying. Rather, such knowledge is dependent on redemption categories. Those psalms that glory in creation (e.g., Pss. 8; 19; 29; 65; 104; 147) are, for Berkouwer, actually rooted in “faith knowledge,” arising out of the community

23. See Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).

24. G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, *Studies in Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955).

of Israel as a response to the saving acts of God. Creation alone is insufficient to mediate God's Presence to us regardless of what these psalms seem to say. Writes Berkouwer, "The Creator of heaven and earth is adored even as the Redeemer of Israel is praised: for Israel the two are identical. Hence it is impossible to appeal to the 'nature psalms' on behalf of a natural theology."²⁵

At one level, Berkouwer is no doubt correct. The book of Psalms is Israel's hymnbook, her response to the saving acts of Yahweh. But can creation theology be so easily conflated with redemption theology and then dismissed? Surely the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament would resist such leveling, given its repeated borrowing of creation texts from other cultures and its choice rarely to appeal directly to God's mighty acts of redemption in Egypt for supporting authority. To bring the Wisdom texts under the rubric of "salvation history" was the mistake of a past generation of biblical scholars that has today largely been rejected as unhelpful in understanding these texts on their own terms. And Berkouwer is again correct to resist "natural theology," if it means something apart from the continuing illumination and activity of God through his Spirit. We do not whisper God by shouting "man," and creation on its own must be read "tooth and claw," but, again, things are somewhat more complex than Berkouwer suggests. For if "natural theology" is more to be equated with "natural revelation," with the Creator speaking in and through his creation, then the nature psalms and books like Job do give voice to God's revelatory Presence through nature.

Similarly, Berkouwer discusses Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, concluding that "Elijah shows, on the basis of the irrefutable facts of God's deeds, that there is no *revelation* in the Baal worship."²⁶ No power, yes. But does Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Baal irrefutably show that God cannot be seen in creation, even as he shines in all that's fair? Idolatry has wrongly been generalized outward to include all experiences with nature. Or again, Berkouwer's sense of human depravity is so far-reaching that when he comments on Paul speaking in Romans 1:25 about the gentiles "knowing" God, he must reinterpret Paul, saying that Paul was simply using "hyperbole." That is, for Berkouwer, because of our sin, no real knowledge of God is possible. Paul could not mean what he seems to have said. Although for Berkouwer, "knowledge and revelation are *not* identical,"²⁷ the fact of human blindness cancels out any value or possibility that general revelation might have. Thus, though

25. *Ibid.*, 137.

26. *Ibid.*, 124–25.

27. *Ibid.*, 314.

Berkouwer tries to distinguish between “salvation as being only in Christ” and “revelation being also outside of Christ,” in the end this is a formal distinction without substance, having no experiential consequence except to condemn humankind given our hardness of heart. There is no possibility for Tillich’s “revelatory ecstasy,” or David Kern’s “supernatural mail on foreign soil,” or Yehudi Menuhin’s violin.

Reacting, in part and rightly, to the German church’s misuse of general revelation to baptize Hitler’s ascent to power, Berkouwer wrongly concluded that, though revelation has priority over knowledge, because of sin, general revelation is sufficient only to make known to humankind our guilt. Writes Berkouwer: “Contact with God in the community of life is broken and man, though continuing to take his place in created reality, accordingly no longer understands its purpose, the language or song of creation. God’s greatness and glory are no longer observed by a lost humanity.”²⁸

But is this true? What are we to make of the repeated testimony to God’s greatness and glory that those outside the church give to God, based in their experiences of creation, conscience, and culture? How are we to understand the repeated witness of humankind to revelatory experiences of a *mysterium* that is simultaneously *tremendum* and *fascinans*—that is, a mystery that is both awesome and compelling?²⁹ We will look at some of this testimony in chapters 2 and 3. How are we as Christians to reconcile our theology with the experiences of the numinous, or sacred, that Christians and non-Christians alike describe? If truth is one, should not our understanding of God through our experience of the numinous, not to mention the narratives of transcendence from others in our wider culture, match Scripture’s and the Christian tradition’s understanding of how God has in fact revealed himself? We are thrown back upon the question of theological hermeneutics. Who qualifies as God’s messenger (Hermes)? How do we hear God’s revelation to us? That culture/experience is theology’s context and application is today little debated; but can culture/experience also be more than this, a means as well of hearing God’s story?

The Question of Theological Hermeneutics

Jürgen Moltmann tells the story of Galileo, who “wanted to show his opponents Jupiter’s satellites.” But “they refused even to look through the telescope.” They believed, as Berthold Brecht puts into their mouth in his *Life of*

28. *Ibid.*, 312; cf. 305–14.

29. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923).

Galileo, "that no truth can be found in nature—only in the comparison of texts."³⁰ Rather, Moltmann argues,

There are no words of God without human experiences of God's Spirit. So the words of proclamation spoken by the Bible and the church must also be related to the experiences of people today, so that they are not—as Karl Rahner said—merely "hearers of the Word," but become spokesmen of the Word, too.

But this is only possible if Word and Spirit are seen as existing in a *mutual relationship*, not as a one-way street.³¹

Barth uses an even more basic metaphor when he speaks of the theologian having a Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.³² That is, the theologian's task is a dialogical one. My colleague Bill Dyrness understands theological method in similar terms, believing that the theologian must bring together in reflective obedience the telling of our stories and the hearing of God's stories.³³

One can add components to theology's basic methodological schematic, but theology's two-way dialogical task remains. The hearing of God's story is not only through Scripture but also through the church, past and present. And our stories reflect both our own experiences (sometimes of God) and those of the wider culture (including those of the Transcendent). My own understanding is that the theologian has five resources at his or her disposal through the work of the Spirit. All are interactive, even while the Bible's ultimate theological authority for faith and practice is recognized. Hearing God's story has three components—one's particular worshiping community, the whole of the Christian tradition, and Scripture—while telling our stories includes our own experiences as well as the insights and expressions of the wider culture. As theologians, we (1) read the authoritative biblical text (2) from out of a worshiping community (3) in light of centuries of Christian thought and practice (4) as people embedded in a particular culture (5) who have had a unique set of experiences. Such a process is not linear, as the description might suggest, but dialogical, multiperspectival, and ongoing. The aim is to

30. Berthold Brecht, preface to *The Life of Galileo*, trans. D. I. Vesey (London, 1967).

31. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 3.

32. Karl Barth, quoted in "Barth in Retirement," *Time*, May 31, 1963. Barth made similar remarks in an early letter to his friend Eduard Thurneysen (November 11, 1918). See Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: The Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914–1925*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond: John Knox, 1964).

33. William Dyrness, "How Does the Bible Function in the Christian Life?" in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 159–74.

be generous in our assessments, inclusive in our reach, and coherent in our conclusions. Here is the theological process, the interlacing of various resources as we think Christianly.

Rather than through a hermeneutic of suspicion, or even of caution, with regard to human experience and culture, I would understand the revelatory experiences of Lewis and Tillich, of David Kern and Nanny Goodman's mother, as inviting dialogue and even appropriation by theologians interested in understanding God's revelatory Presence outside the church and without direct reference to Jesus Christ. We need a hermeneutic that includes not only Scripture and the tradition of the church but also cultural receptivity and human experience. Scripture and the theological formulations of the church past and present cannot be ignored, but neither can the witness of our culture and our own personal experiences. A robust, two-way conversation is called for. Not only can Scripture provide an interpretive grid for our experiences (we might use Calvin's metaphor of "spectacles" for this), but experiences from out of our individual and collective lives can also become the "spectacles" through which we reread the Scriptures and church tradition, looking for insight from God's Word that might provide further interpretation and illumination, and vice versa.

The experiences of those individuals with whom I began this introduction, and scores like them, are not simply subjectivity in disguise, though that remains at times a possibility. For creation, human conscience, and culture to be revelatory, there needs to be God's in-breaking Presence. Berkouwer provides the helpful example of astrology to illustrate the truth that revelation is not to be thought of as being resident in creation or creature independent of God's illumining Spirit. Astrology is not to be confused with astronomy. Some Romantics made the mistake of confusing the artist with the divine muse, as if we could, like the astrologist, conjure up revelation by an act of the imagination. Rather, it is through creation, conscience, and culture that we can observe how God acts and hear him speak. Each retains the possibility of actually being an encounter with God's Spirit, as God chooses to be present. There is, in Jürgen Moltmann's words, an "immanent transcendence," paradoxical but not dialectic, unifying rather than competing.³⁴ Here, as we will explore in chapter 7, is the subject matter of general revelation, and it is to be seen as complementary to special revelation.

The nonoppositional nature of general and special revelation is perhaps best seen in Psalm 19. Here the psalmist relates, "The heavens are telling the glory of God. . . . There is no speech, nor are there words . . . yet their voice

34. Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 7, 17.

goes out through all the earth” (Ps. 19:1–6). Creation’s “wordless speech” finds its analogy, perhaps, in C. S. Lewis’s description of Joy’s experience as a “bright shadow,” something on this side of knowledge, too close to be seen or heard. Such is the “immanent transcendence” of our Creator God. It is worth noting that the divine encounter of this psalmist is referenced not to “Yahweh,” Israel’s covenanting God; it is with *elohim*, the generic name for the God of the universe. It is the experience of *elohim* within nature that elicits the songwriter’s praise.

In Psalm 19, the songwriter follows his praise of God’s glory in creation with parallel praise for God’s revelation through his Word, the law (Ps. 19:7–10). The songwriter experiences Yahweh’s commandments as vivifying, making wise, causing rejoicing and enlightenment, as being true, righteous, and enduring, as preeminently desirable, like fine gold or honey. Here the focus is on God who has revealed his name, *Yahweh*, to his people and covenanted with them, providing them further revelation as to how to live. Creation and the law, *elohim* and *Yahweh*, general revelation and special revelation—the paradox is united, but never confused, in the experience of the psalmist. God is to be praised, both as Creator and as Redeemer.

Our Path Forward: Adopting an Experiential Focus

It is experience that allows the psalmist in Psalm 19 to unite that which otherwise might remain distinct, whether in creation or redemption, whether in general or in special revelation. And it is this same experiential focus that offers the best potential for a more robust theology of general revelation today—one that would no longer reduce God’s wider revelatory Presence to little more than the “footprint” of God’s past activity, or subsume general revelation under special revelation, creation theology under salvation theology, the work of the Spirit in Creation under the Spirit of Christ. But this, of course, is to get ahead of the argument.

Given the witness of those within and without the church as to the present Presence of God’s Spirit in their lives—given, that is, the witness of many to revelatory experiences through creation, conscience, and culture—we need to again rethink our theology of general revelation. Thus, in chapters 2 and 3, we will first listen carefully to the testimonies of many, not prejudging their merits before hearing them out. We will then need to reread the Scriptures as to what they might be saying to us in this regard. We need to ask, What would it mean for our biblical interpretation to wear the “spectacles” of our wider experiences of God as we read through the text? How might we reread the

Scriptures so as to fall prey neither to a natural theology that eliminates the present in-breaking of God's revelatory Presence, finding only traces of past activity, echoes of God's earlier involvement, footprints of God's previous Presence, nor to a redemptive triumphalism that reduces general revelation merely to the grounds by which humankind is declared guilty by God and in need of his saving grace? Those biblical narratives that describe divine revelation outside the people of God, or without reliance on prophet or temple, Christ or his church, do not allow such soteriological heavy-handedness. They will be the focus of chapters 4 and 5.

As we seek a robust two-way dialogue between (1) our actual experiences of Transcendence outside the church and (2) the Scripture's authoritative descriptions and discussion of God's wider revelation, are there theologians who can help us? In chapter 6, we will look at the church's traditional understanding of general revelation, one rooted in limited readings of Romans 1 and Romans 2. We will then turn to three historic theological discussions that have relevance for our topic: the heated dialogue that took place more than a half century ago between the theologians Karl Barth and Emil Brunner; the apologetic theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, which was written two centuries ago to his secular friends in the Romantic movement in Berlin; and the autobiography of C. S. Lewis, who described a series of divine encounters that he had beginning as a child. Here are resources from the church's tradition that can help guide us in our investigation of God's wider revelatory Presence.

Having attempted to redress that which has resulted too often in a paltry understanding of God's wider revelatory Presence outside the church and without direct reference either to Jesus Christ or to Scripture, we will then turn in chapter 7 to three theologians who can help us build a more vibrant constructive theology—the missiologist John V. Taylor, the Protestant Jürgen Moltmann, and the Roman Catholic Elizabeth Johnson. They will help us explore the theological role that the Spirit plays in God's wider revelation. It is the Spirit who is God's revelatory Presence in the world. It is not Christology, but pneumatology, that provides the primary direction and insight for our theological explorations. If we are truly trinitarian in our theology with regard to God's revelation beyond the walls of the church, are we open also to moving from Spirit to Word in our theological pilgrimage, as well as from Word to Spirit? And more particularly, are we open to the testimony of the Spirit of Life in and through creation, conscience, and culture, as well as the work of the Spirit of Christ in redemption? It is the same Spirit.

With this as our orientation, we will turn in conclusion in chapter 8 to again consider traditional notions of God's wider revelation that have flowed out of creation, conscience, and culture. Such a reconsideration of the traditional

loci for God's wider revelation will help clarify our constructive theological proposal. Finally, we will take up as a case study for a constructive theology of God's wider revelatory Presence a theology of religions. What might be the practical consequence of a reconstituted and more robust constructive theology of general revelation? Obviously, the ramifications of a reappraisal of the scope and significance of God's revelatory Presence throughout humankind extend to the whole of one's Christian theology. But one example will prove instructive of its potential: How are we to understand God's revelatory Presence in and through other religious traditions? Such a study, however brief, will serve both to illustrate the book's constructive theology and to integrate praxeologically our various theological probing—experiential, biblical, and theological.