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THE METAPHYSICS OF MARILYNNE ROBINSON

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MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S NOVELS are meant to become transparent as we read them. The stories are not ends in themselves. They are windows that allow us to see the true nature of reality, the way things actually are. They present us with a metaphysics, a description of the being of the world and the people within it. To read these novels is to be called to a conversion, not only of the heart and soul, but especially of the mind. Robinson wants us to recognize that we have squandered an intellectual inheritance that took our ancestors centuries to build. She calls us to repent of embracing the wisdom of an age that has left us isolated and fearful. She asks us to come home, to embrace an old way of being, and to recognize that the world and our neighbors are radiant with the love of God. "A person can change," Lila says. "Everything can change."[1]

A person reading this volume likely has been changed in some way by the writings of Marilynne Robinson. But Robinson is more than simply a novelist who converts her readers to a new way of seeing through stories. She also is a theologian who explains what this conversion means. She develops this theology primarily in her essays. Many of the most important ones are

[1]Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 153.

collected in a series of books published over the last two decades, from the single-subject *Mother Country*, published in 1989, to the recent *What Are We Doing Here?*, published in 2017.

These books make for invigorating reading in part because Robinson is fearlessly contrarian. In an age marked by split-screen polarization, she typically rejects both sides of every argument. "The prevailing view of things can be assumed to be wrong," she says, and "its opposite, being its image or shadow, can also be assumed to be wrong."[2] Robinson then carves out a new space, not by simplifying issues, but by illuminating their complexity. She cuts behind contemporary debates by drawing on sources from the past, ranging from Calvin and the Puritans to great American thinkers such as Dickinson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson.[3] The result is a realistic yet optimistic vision for American life that weaves new threads connecting the red and blue states. Conservatives hear a sympathetic voice who rejects identity politics and extols the virtues of faith and tradition. Progressives see a self-proclaimed liberal who advocates for better wages, environmental protection, and access to health care for the poor.[4] Robinson is an ally and critic of everyone at once.

Undergirding Robinson's arguments is her distinctly theological view of reality. This is the secret power behind her work. Marilynne Robinson is able to write with such insight on so many topics because she has spent a lifetime thinking about the nature of being itself. And her arguments resonate with so many because her view of being is centered around Jesus Christ, the one "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). Christ is key to Robinson's metaphysics and the power behind her writing.

My goal in this chapter is to describe Robinson's metaphysics as she develops it throughout her essays. I hope to unveil reality as Robinson sees it so we can appreciate the virtues of her Christ-centered vision and recognize how it undergirds her writing. Then, from this posture of appreciation, I will

[2]Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998), 1.

[3]She calls the nineteenth-century American thinkers purveyors of "America's old-time religion" of reverence for the ordinary. See Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was A Child I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), xiv.

[4]Robinson, *Death of Adam*, 258.

raise some critical questions to see if there might be additional treasures hidden in Christ that might bring further illumination.

The Void

The fact that Robinson even has a metaphysics makes her countercultural. A recurrent theme in her essays is that we live in an age of "constricted empiricism" where reality is identical to that which we can verify through scientific observation.[5] This approach presumes that the enlightened among us have crossed a threshold by moving out of the dark bigotry of the past into the unbiased light of comprehension. Now every part of the world, from politics to education to sports, can be translated into data to be assessed by the latest metrics. Education involves learning to discern the signal from the noise so that we can exercise clarity of judgment. Wisdom is identical to the tactical deployment of one's time and resources to achieve maximal productivity. Time is something that is spent, and the cost of engaging in disciplined reflection on the good, the beautiful, and the sacred is too high. "Metaphysics has been abandoned as if it were a mistake sophisticated people could no longer make," Robinson says, "an indulgence an illusionless world would no longer entertain."[6] It is no accident that, in a world without metaphysics, the largest major at most colleges and universities is business. The humanities have been displaced by economics because students know that they need to be prepared to enter the "real" world. As a result, much of what we call education "would better be called training," Robinson says. "We have persuaded ourselves that the role of the middle ranks of our population is to be of use to the economy."[7]

This diminished view of human value is the most prominent consequence of the modern abandonment of metaphysics. Robinson describes this shift as the "eclipse" of humanism.[8] Centuries ago, renaissance thinkers began with the presupposition that humans are exceptional because they possess a rational mind. They sought wisdom from the ancients because they assumed that humans have the capacity to see and understand the world

[5]Marilynne Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 264.
[6]Marilynne Robinson, *The Givennness of Things* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 190.
[7]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 86, 93.
[8]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 32.

around them. Plato and Aristotle may not have had access to modern science, but they had access to reality and the ability to comprehend it. Philosophers have as much to teach us about the world as the most gifted modern scientist. The same could be said for religious thinkers such as Isaiah, Paul, Augustine, and Calvin. The Renaissance, and the theology that arose alongside it, operated with the assumption that the human experience of the world, as received and interpreted by the human mind, is a viable source for discerning the truth about reality.

Modern thought rejects this approach as a nonstarter. "I propose," Robinson says, "that the core assumption that remains unchallenged and unquestioned through all the variations within the diverse traditions of 'modern' thought is that the experience and testimony of the individual mind is to be explained away, excluded from consideration when any rational account is made of the nature of human being and of being altogether."[9] She argues that modern society instead operates largely on the basis of Darwinian and Freudian premises. The testimony of the human mind cannot be trusted because humans are not exceptional. Like every other animal, we are the product of centuries of competition with nature, other animals, and with one another. The consequences of this competition can be read off our genes, and this data tells us who we are. The human mind does not give us access into the nature the world; rather, the nature of the world gives us access into the truth about our minds. And the truth is that we have been deceived into thinking too highly of ourselves. The traits we thought made us distinct, including our experience and emotions, are actually the by-product of an economy of survival where the weak have been cast aside and the fit have prevailed. We will live in line with our nature only when we strip off the myths that entangle us and refine ourselves to prevail in a competitive world.

Robinson laments this modern approach as both demeaning and destructive. Our "conception of the significance of humankind in and for the universe has shrunk to the point that the very idea we ever imagined we might be significant . . . now seems preposterous," she says.[10] But it seems this way only because the scientific approach to human being excludes from

[9]Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 22.
[10]Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 75.

consideration the very mental capacities that make us distinct from other creatures.[11] The only traits that count in the modern view are those that correspond to a Darwinian economy where it is natural to pursue one's own self-interest at the expense of others. Robinson argues that this reduction of human nature to self-interest carries negative implications for every aspect of our culture, particularly our politics. One need look no further than the Oval Office to see that a diminished view of human worth leads to a corresponding "egoism based upon the assumption that it is only natural to be self-serving."[12] A similar dynamic can be found in the marketplace, and it is accentuated whenever corporations are treated as if they were people. This is a key argument in Robinson's book *Mother Country*, where she shows that whenever people and profit are placed on the same plane, profit prevails.[13]

But perhaps the most pernicious consequence of the reductionist modern account of human being is that religious experience has been excluded from the realm of the rational and true. "This really is an updated version of the myth of the Fall," Robinson says, "with the difference that it is, in this telling, we who banished God, reason and science being the flaming sword that makes the expulsion final."[14] The problem is that, in the West, banishing God from reality also means rejecting the premise that humans are sacred beings created in God's image. Robinson argues that this rejection leaves a moral vacuum in the heart of society. "To be free of God the Creator is to be free of the religious ethic implied in the Genesis narrative of Creation," she explains.[15] Modern science has nothing with which to fill this vacuum except an account of competitive self-interest ordered around the survival of the fittest. As a result, Robinson concludes that we "have stepped from a metaphysics into a void."[16] The value of human beings is now determined primarily by the market, and in that calculus, some groups of people always lose. She reminds us that, while the evolution of creatures is a biological fact, the theory of Darwinism "had its origins in polemics against the poor, and

[11]Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 37.
[12]Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 160.
[13]Marilynne Robinson, *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989).
[14]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 191.
[15]Robinson, *Death of Adam*, 48.
[16]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 203.

against the irksome burden of extending charity to them."[17] These polemics were held together with racial theories that presupposed the superiority of white Europeans.[18] While these presuppositions are no longer placed in the foreground of the theory, their legacy continues to shape society. As Robinson puts it: "We would not now have a sizable part of our own population walking around prepared to engage in homicidal violence if they truly believed that that young man in the hoodie was an image of God."[19]

Robinson laments that, instead of resisting the delegitimization of the human experience of God, modern Christians largely conceded to it. Both liberals and conservatives embraced the notion that theological claims can be counted as true only when they are verified historically. They simply disagreed about what the evidence showed. This left Christianity, Robinson says, to "tumble forever at its own threshold, fretting over the issue of belief versus disbelief, having accepted garden variety credibility or plausibility as the appropriate standard."[20] This methodological mistake was devastating for both sides. Among the liberals, the content of theology "was stripped out and replaced with fine sentiment—though never so fine as to startle the parishioner with any unreasonable demands."[21] The conservatives affirmed the content but reduced it to evidence, proceeding "as if [Christianity] really were battling science for the same terrain."[22] But this only reinforced modern presuppositions about reality and the human mind. "Creationism is the best thing that could have happened to Darwinism," Robinson says, "the caricature of religion that has seemed to justify Darwinist contempt for the whole of religion."[23]

The irony is that, now that Christians have embraced modern premises about human being and knowledge, contemporary science is finally catching up to where Christians were centuries ago. Robinson notes that one need only to start reading about dark matter to know that the "old nuts-and-bolts

[17]Robinson, *Death of Adam*, 47.
[18]Robinson points out that Darwin himself wrote that "the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world." See Robinson, *Death of Adam*, 34-35.
[19]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 170.
[20]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 145.
[21]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 150.
[22]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 257.
[23]Robinson, *Death of Adam*, 40.

physics" of empirically observable laws has been replaced by descriptions of a "volatile, intricate, and elusive substratum of reality."[24] Recent discoveries in physics show that the idea that science will progressively close the door to mystery is out of date. "The most spectacular achievements of science in the last 100 years have not closed gaps but opened chasms," Robinson says.[25] The defining marks of contemporary physics are mystery and wonder, and this shows us that science is far closer to religion than many scientists and Christians, with their shared modern prejudices, are willing to accept.

It will take centuries for the other branches of science and our culture as a whole to adjust to the latest discoveries in physics. In the meantime, our society remains mired in antimetaphysical premises and reductionist accounts of human being. The destructive consequences of these errors are visible everywhere, particularly in the lives of the most vulnerable. In response, Robinson argues that Christian theology has to "recover its old magisterial scale and confidence."[26] Theologians need to articulate a metaphysics that fills the void left by reductionist accounts of reality and create "a conceptual space large enough to accommodate human dignity."[27] And Robinson has a sense for what this kind of theological metaphysics should look like: "I propose a return to theist realism, by which I mean attention to the world as it is, without reductionist translation and transvaluation," she says.[28] "A theology for our time should help us to know that Being is indeed the theater of God's glory."[29]

Metaphysics

Robinson's metaphysics has its origins in her days as an undergraduate. During her sophomore year, she was assigned Jonathan Edwards's *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*. "Everything about this assignment suggested drudgery," she recalled. "But that hour felt like an awakening."[30] She was struck by Edwards's remark that, just as the light of

[24]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 188.
[25]Marilynne Robinson, "Credo," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 30.
[26]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 36.
[27]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 37.
[28]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 216-17.
[29]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 49.
[30]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 183.

the moon is continuously renewed by the sun, so the being of creation is continuously renewed by God. This argument transformed Robinson's view of reality. It was "my first, best introduction to epistemology and ontology," she says, "and my escape . . . from the contending, tedious determinisms that seemed to be all that was on offer to me then."[31] She realized that the world's existence is not the inevitable result of scientific laws. Rather, the world exists because God continuously wills it to exist.[32] This insight becomes foundational for Robinson's metaphysics: the existence of creation reflects the will of God, and so humans have to know God in order to know the nature of creaturely being.

Robinson explains how humans know God by drawing from the work of John Calvin. In his *Institutes*, Calvin argues that God "daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe" so that humans "cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him."[33] Humans have the capacity to understand this revelation, Calvin explains, because God has implanted an innate "awareness of divinity" in the human mind.[34] Robinson takes Calvin's argument to mean that humans are able to know God by reflecting on their experience of the world. "The beauty of what we see is burdened with truth," she says. "It signifies the power of God and his constant grace toward the human creature. It signifies the address of God to the individual human consciousness."[35] God speaks to humans through creation, and humans are able to hear and understand this divine speech by reflecting on their experience of creation.

This approach makes human experience central to our understanding of reality. Contrary to modern premises, Robinson believes we should pay attention to what our minds tell us about the world because our experience of the world is the means by which God relates to us. This experience is not subjective but collective, because the continuity of human claims about reality over time is the result of the human experience of the will of God as it

[31]Robinson, "Credo," 27.
[32]Robinson, "Credo," 27. Also see Marilynne Robinson, "Jonathan Edwards in a New Light," *Humanities* 35, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2014): 45.
[33]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.5.2.
[34]Calvin *Institutes* 1.3.1.
[35]Marilynne Robinson, "Preface," in *John Calvin: Steward of God's Covenant: Selected Writings*, ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 2006), xxii-xxiii.

has sustained creation through time.[36] "History and civilization are an authoritative record the [human] mind has left, is leaving, and will leave," Robinson says, "and objectivity deserving the name would take this record as a starting point" for our account of reality.[37] The development of this record through the centuries reflects God's providential will for human life. "The whole saga of human existence is a sacred narrative," Robinson says, "full of error and tragedy, as sacred narratives tend to be."[38]

What does this sacred narrative tell us about God's will for creation? Robinson addresses this question carefully in her writings. She never claims that humans experience God's inner being, as if they mystically merge into the life of God and comprehend the truth of the divine nature. The light comes from the sun, but it illuminates the moon. God's divine nature remains mysterious to us even as he discloses himself in creation.[39] But God's revelation in creation does give us knowledge about God's relationship with creation. If the existence of creation depends on the will of God at every moment, then the sheer fact of creation's existence means that creation is wanted by God. And this indicates that creatures are valuable, that they are worthy of being wanted.

This insight leads Robinson to Jesus Christ. When it comes to Jesus, Robinson leaves no doubt about where she stands: "My Christology is high in that I take Christ to be with God, and to be God," she says.[40] Her account of Christ takes its bearings from the prologue of the Gospel of John. This passage draws a connection between Christ the Creator, the one through whom all things were made, and the human man Jesus of Nazareth. To Robinson, this connection reveals that Christ's incarnate life was foreseen from the beginning and determines the being of creation itself.

> To me [Christ's activity in creation] implies that a quality which can be called human inheres in Creation, a quality in which we participate, which is manifested in us, which we epitomize. It implies that Jesus is the defining instance of this essential humanity. Christ is central ontologically, and what I have called humanity is ontological as well, profoundly intrinsic to Being because he was in the beginning with God and without him nothing was made that was made.[41]

Put differently: God created the world with the human life of the eternal Son in his mind. His life not only stands at the center of God's relationship with human beings, but it also intrinsically defines the being of creation itself. God wills creation to exist for the sake of the human life of Jesus of Nazareth. This means that human nature itself stands at the center of creaturely existence and has a privileged place within it. Humans are not accidental products of the natural processes of the universe. Rather, creation "has a quality at its center and in its substance to which we as human beings belong."[42]

Robinson believes, then, that a high Christology demands a high anthropology.[43] Our account of human being should correspond to the favored place human nature has in God's economy of creation. We must remember that when God sees humans, he sees his own image and the creatures to whom he has united himself in Christ.[44] When Christians speak of an incarnate Christ, they tell a story that elevates human nature to the highest possible place of honor. "I take the Christian mythos to be a special revelation of a general truth," Robinson says, "that truth being the ontological centrality of humankind in the created order, with its theological corollary, the profound and unique sacredness of human beings as such."[45]

Robinson believes the clearest revelation of this ontological truth took place at the cross. Her interpretation of Christ's death is distinctive. She acknowledges that, for most of Christian history, the crucifixion has been understood in sacrificial terms as an atonement for human sin. "I defer with all possible sincerity to the central tenets of the Christian tradition," she says, "but as for myself, I confess that I struggle to understand the phenomenon of ritual sacrifice, and the Crucifixion when explicated in its terms. . . . I suppose it is my high Christology, my Trinitarianism, that makes me falter at the idea that God could in any sense be repaid or satisfied by the death of

[36]Robinson, "Jonathan Edwards in a New Light," 17, 45.
[37]Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 133.
[38]Robinson, "Credo," 30.
[39]Robinson argues that human nature is analogous to the nature of God, but it is not identical to it. God remains infinitely different from us even as we exist in God's image and likeness. See Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 212.
[40]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 188.
[41]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 209.
[42]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 200.
[43]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 201.
[44]Robinson, *Death of Adam*, 243.
[45]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 222.

his incarnate self."[46] She notes that Scripture depicts sacrificial death as addressing a human rather than a divine need, and the widespread phenomenon of human sacrifice demonstrates that ancient cultures clearly had this need. But she does not have this need, and she says the concept of a sacrificial death "answers now to other spirits than mine."[47]

Robinson's alternative interpretation of the cross begins with an insight from Calvin's commentary on John 3:16 where he says that Christ's death stems from "the fervor of the divine love toward us." Human beings are "not easily convinced that God loves them," Calvin says, "and so to remove all doubt, [John] has expressly stated that we are so very dear to God that for our sakes He did not spare even His only begotten Son."[48] Robinson takes Calvin to mean that Christ's death is the definitive revelation of the most basic truth of creaturely existence: human beings are the beloved creatures of God. "This is an interpretation," Robinson says, "I find more beautiful and more consistent with my understanding of the nature of God than the thought of Jesus' death as a sacrifice."[49]

And now we are in position to understand the central claim of Marilynne Robinson's metaphysics: creaturely existence is determined in its depths by God's love for human beings. The reality of the world is that God so loved the world.

Ethics

Robinson's novels show us both the challenge and the glory of living in the reality of God's love. The characters in the novels testify to this reality by teaching us to see it and by showing us how to live within it. "Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration," John Ames says. "You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who would have the courage to see it?"[50] Courage is required because our willingness to see reality depends almost entirely on our willingness to change the way we treat the people around us. It is no accident that each of

[46]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 194.
[47]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 194.
[48]John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 1-10*, in Calvin's Commentaries, trans. T. H. L. Parker, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 74.
[49]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 197-98.
[50]Robinson, *Gilead*, 245.

Robinson's novels focuses on the slow movement of two people toward intimacy.[51] The people around us are the criterion of our realism: we live in line with reality when we see our fellow human beings as sacred and love them as God loves them.

Jesus shows us what it looks like to live this way, because his life is ordered around the love of God and neighbor. And Jesus knows that, in the midst of a fallen world, love for neighbor must take particular form. He makes this clear in his first sermon when he proclaims that he has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim the release of captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to free the oppressed, and to declare the Lord's favor for his people (Luke 4:16-19). We love like God loves when we care for our neighbors, particularly the poor and vulnerable. Jesus explains what this neighbor love looks like when, after a lawyer tries to negotiate its limits, he tells the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). This story shows us, Robinson says, that "considerations of self-interest should not be brought to bear when demands are made on one's kindness and generosity."[52] Reality is not competitive, and we do not correspond to our nature when we seek our own advantage. Instead, reality is ordered by love, and we live in line with our nature when we care for the vulnerable at our own expense.

We deny reality and reject the will of God whenever we hold ourselves and our resources back from the poor. This way of living is sin, an affront to God, because God is not neutral when it comes to human beings. God created humans in his own image, and they are sacred to him. He affirms their sacredness in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The events of Christ's life are "highly charged statements about the nature of Being and human being," Robinson says. "They are profound, and, so far as I know, unique assertions of the transcendent value of human life, asserting most forcefully the value of the lives of the powerless and obscure."[53] This means that the "misery or neglect or destruction [of the poor] is not, for God, a matter of indifference, or of merely compassionate

[51]Alex Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 13.
[52]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 247.
[53]Robinson, *Givenness of Being*, 168.

interest, but is something in the nature of sacrilege."[54] Sin is not a private, spiritual affair between God and us; rather, sin involves the social, structural, and embodied life we live in relation to other people. "The universality of the divine image," Robinson says, "would encourage another reading of the verse: 'Against thee and thee only have I sinned.'"[55]

Robinson points to Christ's words in Matthew 25 where he identifies with the stranger, the needy, the sick, and the imprisoned and then links our treatment of them directly to our treatment of him (Mt 25:30-46). That this passage is connected to the final judgment and damnation is significant, Robinson thinks, because it shows us that "what we do or fail to do really matters."[56] By identifying himself with the vulnerable and the victim, Christ makes the judgment of God "present and continuous and, in effect, makes our victim our judge."[57] Judgment day is every day as we either live in line with reality and treat the vulnerable as sacred, or we deny reality by ignoring their needs and living for our own advantage.[58]

Theological Dialogue

With this presentation of Marilynne Robinson's metaphysics now in hand, I am going to enter into a dialogue with her, one structured around the topics of the previous three sections.

First, I find Robinson's criticisms of modern reductionist approaches to reality and human nature to be both illuminating and incisive. Sometimes the things that are the most basic to our lives are the hardest to see. Many of us recognize that the threads of our society are frayed and that human life seems less valuable than before, particularly when compared to corporate interests. We often try to address this problem by using ideological and political solutions. But Robinson recognizes that our problem runs deeper than politics. It involves our view of being, or rather, our culture's implicit denial that such a view is possible or necessary. She shows that this denial is presupposed rather than proved, and she exposes its disfigured ideological

[54]Robinson, *Death of Adam*, 47-48.
[55]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 253.
[56]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 231.
[57]Marilynne Robinson, "Onward, Christian Liberals," *American Scholar* 75, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 47.
[58]Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 231. Robinson continues this line of argument in her essay for this volume, "The Protestant Conscience" (see chapter 10).

roots. She also makes visible the subtle ways these assumptions lead us to devalue ourselves and others. This insight makes her critique powerful. In a society that divides the left from the right, the urban from the rural, and the elites from the working class, Robinson helps us see that we share a common captivity. Powers need to be named so that they can be confronted, and Robinson gives us the language to name them.

Second, and more critically, while I believe Robinson's Christ-centered metaphysics moves in the right direction, I also think it remains too abstract. To begin, I think she rightly argues that God is love and that the world is determined by God's love from beginning to end. But I worry that she flattens the biblical story of God's love into a persistent state of being, such that our relationship with God is seen as a constantly available feature of our creaturely existence. For Robinson, grace has become nature. Our life with God is not determined by God's specific act to relate to us in time but by our act of recognizing God in our experience of creaturely being.[59] Robinson's account of Jesus Christ fits within these parameters. God's particular grace in the historical man Jesus of Nazareth does not stand at the center of God's relationship with us. Rather, Jesus simply reaffirms what has always been true of us by virtue of our creation. The cross is an expression of God's love but not a sacrificial atonement because no atonement is necessary. The relationship between God and humanity is never broken.

But the New Testament repeatedly connects God's love for us directly to Christ's atonement for our sins. "In this is love," John says, "not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). An atonement is necessary because we did not love God. Instead, we sinned against God and made ourselves God's enemies (Rom 5:10). There is a break, a rupture, in the relationship between God and humanity, not because God's relation to us changes, but because we have turned away from God and tried to establish existence on our own terms. This leaves us exposed to the power of death, which claims rights over us (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:56). Fortunately for us, God loves his enemies. He refuses to allow us to perish but instead sends his Son to atone for our sins so that we can be reconciled to God and share in his life.

[59]See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 40-41.

Robinson worries that this kind of atonement makes God's love for us contingent, as if Christ's death for our sins enables an angry God to love us again. But the Bible does not say that God loves us because Christ died for our sins; it says that Christ died for our sins because God loves us.[60] God is consistently depicted as the subject of the atonement, the actor, the one who gives himself in love by sending his Son to bear the consequences of our sin on our behalf. God did not send his Son as a sacrifice because he demands a blood price. Paul says that God "did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed" (Rom 3:25). God loves us, and he forgives us of our sins. But forgiveness without justice compromises goodness, because it tolerates evil. The God who created us will never compromise with the evil that destroys us. So God shows his justice by enacting his judgment on sin and the evil it has caused. But his mercy is that, instead of allowing this judgment to fall on us, he bears the judgment himself. God does this because he loves us. From beginning to end, the atonement is a divine act of self-sacrificial love.

This love changes everything. Christ's death for our sins is the judgment of an old creation and the revelation of a new creation: "everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17). This newness includes human being, because our nature now is defined, not by our creation or our fall, but by the flesh of the risen Jesus. "Set your minds on things that are above," Paul says, "not on things that are on earth; for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:2-3). And most significantly for us, the New Testament does not portray our salvation in Christ as a divine backup plan but as God's plan from the very beginning. Ephesians says that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world" and that God "destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ. . . . We have redemption through his blood," it says, "the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us" (Eph 1:4-5, 7). This means that God created us with our eternal destiny in mind. He gave us being knowing that reaching our destiny would depend on our redemption from sin through the blood of Jesus. God's love for

[60]See John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 172.

human beings defines the world from beginning to end, but this love runs through Christ's death for our sins on the cross.

I would argue that Christ's sacrificial death must stand at the center of our metaphysics because Christ is not merely our Creator but also our Savior. A true account of creaturely being must include the history of our sin and Christ's bearing of it for the sake of our salvation. This means that the being of the world should not be seen as the persistence of a beginning, but as the movement toward a future.[61] Or, put differently: the being of the world is in its becoming the future God intended from the beginning. God's plan for the fullness of time is to create a divine family, one adopted from every tribe and tongue, who stands before him in love because of the blood of the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8).

Third, my concerns about the role of the cross in Robinson's metaphysics prompt related concerns about her ethics. To be clear, these concerns do not detract from the beauty of Robinson's ethical vision or the power with which she articulates many of the best insights of the Christian tradition. She rightly argues that we correspond to reality as we love our neighbors in the way of Jesus. She also is correct to argue this love requires particular concern for the poor. The God who showed a special preference for the poor in his dealings with Israel demonstrates his solidarity with the poor by becoming a poor Israelite himself. It is no accident that, when God came to earth in Jesus Christ, he chose to live in poverty as part of a conquered and subjected people under the reign of an empire. As Robinson repeatedly emphasizes, Christ's example of self-giving love challenges the self-interested economics that shape the American empire and its economy today. Christ does not call us merely to display compassion for the poor; he calls us to sacrifice our interests and resources on their behalf. "We know love by this," John says, "that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (1 Jn 3:16-17).

The unique strength of Robinson's ethical vision is that she offers an entire metaphysics to undergird it. In the face of the devaluing of human life resulting from a reductionist view of reality, she argues that reality is defined

[61]See Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 66-67.

by God's love for human beings. And most importantly for her, this love is grounded in the intrinsic worth of human beings: "God's first act of grace toward us was to make us worthy of his attention and loyalty and love."[62] She argues that God loves us above all because we are his most sacred creatures, the highest part of creation, the beings most worthy of his time and attention. The entire world is ordered around this divine judgment about human worth. The incarnation confirms this judgment and renders God's love visible to us. This love should serve as the lens through which we see ourselves. As Robinson puts it: "To properly value this pledge of fervent love, the Incarnation, we must try to see the world as deserving of it—granting our almost perfect incapacity for seeing how God sees."[63] Christ shows us the unbelievably good news about how valuable humans truly are, and through his example, he calls us to recognize this value in our neighbors and treat them accordingly.

While Robinson is right both that God loves humans and that humans are the most sacred creatures, I think her claim that God loves humans *because* they are sacred needs refinement in order to avoid the modern economic presuppositions she hopes to counter. Robinson is correct to argue that humans are worthy of God's love because God makes them this way. The problem is that she depicts God's love for humans as a function of God's determination of their value in comparison to other things: God loves humans above all things *because* they are valuable and most deserving of his love. She makes this move because it enables her to use God's determination of human value as the template for our own ethical life. We are called to make the same determination about human value that God makes and then live in accordance with it by loving our neighbors. Note that in the case of both God and the human, the act of love is prompted by the worthiness of the human who is loved rather than by the nature of the one who loves. This parallel is problematic, because it does not sufficiently account for the distinction between divine and human love.[64] While human love is called forth by the worthiness of the object being loved, God's love is not drawn out by the worthiness of that which he loves. Rather, God's love flows from his own

[62]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 200.
[63]Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 201.
[64]On this distinction and its implications, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 20, a. 1.

divine nature, because God is love (1 Jn 4:8). While God creates creatures worthy of his love, God does not love creatures *because* they are worthy of it. An approach of this sort depicts God as if he were choosing the best possibility out of all the available options; as if God is simply making a rational, objective decision about which creature most deserves his attention and love. This picture of God's love is too human, modern, and even consumeristic. It would be better simply to say that, because God is the God of love, God creates beings who are worthy of his love.

What would an ethical vision that begins with this alternative premise about God's love look like? We can take our bearings from the passage cited above from 1 John 3:16-17. Note that John connects our love for those in need directly to Christ's death for our sins. This pattern is consistent throughout the New Testament: the call to love our neighbors is a call to imitate the sacrificial death of Jesus. "Be imitators of God," Paul says, "as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:1-2). Christ's death not only reveals *that* God is love; it also shows us *how* God is love. The cross reveals that God's love is not sentimental but self-giving. In the triune life, the Father and Son give themselves to each other in love through the Spirit who is the bond between them. The triune persons do not love one other because they are intrinsically valuable; they love one other because that is what it means to be God. When God gives himself in love at the cross of Jesus Christ, God is simply being himself.

This account of God's love means that the good news is even better than Robinson thinks: God's love for human beings is not a function of human worth but of God's divine nature. God lives in absolute freedom, outside any economy of worth and value. When God creates us and then relates to us, he is exercising this freedom. God does not love us because we are worthy of it, as if he is moved by something extrinsic to him. God loves us because that is simply who God is. The God of this world is the God who loves. And God sees us at every moment in light of how he has determined from the beginning to make us worthy of his love: by saving us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This is the central truth shown to us in the biblical history running from Israel to the church. The God who loves has freely decided to live his own eternal life together with us, saving us through the

death and resurrection of Jesus.[65] This divine decision for our salvation took place before the foundation of the world, and it determines our created being in its depths. God did not have to make this decision, and it is not based on a rational calculation of our value. It is strictly grace.

Starting with this divine decision means that our ethical life is not rooted in our judgment about human worth but in our participation in the love of God that takes place through the saving work of Christ and the Spirit. We are able to recognize the sacredness of our neighbors and then love them with God's own love, not because we recognize their value, but because "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). We can live in the pattern of Jesus, not merely because his example prompts us to duplicate his way of life, but because our old self was crucified with Christ and Christ himself lives in us. We now live our lives in and through the faithfulness of the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us (Gal 2:19-20). We love ourselves and others because God loves in and through us. Or, as John puts it: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 Jn 4:16). Our life in God through Christ and the Spirit is the basis of the ethics of a new creation. It is an existence propelled from beginning to end by the self-giving love of God. This love is rendered visible in this world as the people of God, filled with his Spirit, take up their crosses and follow Jesus by laying down their lives for their neighbors in anticipation of their future life before the throne of the Father.

[65]See Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 8.

5

THINKING ABOUT PREACHING WITH MARILYNNE ROBINSON

LAUREN F. WINNER

EARLY IN *GILEAD*, John Ames begins to think about his sermons—not so much the words hanging in his memory or lodged in his auditors' hearts, but the actual words-on-paper things: sermons filling boxes in the attic; more recent sermons stacked in closets. These are nearly his whole life's work, he says, "which is an amazing thing to reflect on" and yet he's never gone back to look at them, never gone to see if they're worth anything: 67,500 pages, he estimates, conservatively; 2,250 sermons. The equivalent of 225 books. It was wonderful, Ames wrote, the effort of "sifting" thought and "choosing" words: in these sermons, he'd tried to tell the truth about things. And yet he's hesitant to look at them again. Ames worries that maybe he wrote these sermons principally to keep himself occupied. They allowed him solitude, which was itself a "balm for loneliness": if he was working on a sermon and some member of his church came over for counsel or came over bearing a pie—well, people would mostly leave him alone if they came to visit and saw he was working on a sermon.[1]

[1]Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 18-19.

"This collection of thoughtful and erudite essays is a welcome addition to the growing interest in (and admiration of) one of the church's—and culture's—preeminent voices of the last thirty years. For readers who are familiar with Robinson's writing, this collection will provide much-welcomed insight into the theological depth of her essays and novels. For those unfamiliar with her work, this volume provides a lively and accessible theological introduction to one of the major creative thinkers of our time. A must-read for anyone who wants to understand the conversations and currents happening at the deepest levels between the church and culture today."

Michael Bruner, author of *A Subversive Gospel: Flannery O'Connor and the Reimagining of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth*

BALM IN GILEAD

A THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE *with* MARILYNNE ROBINSON

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For Shawn E. Okpebholo

Composer, Colleague, and Friend