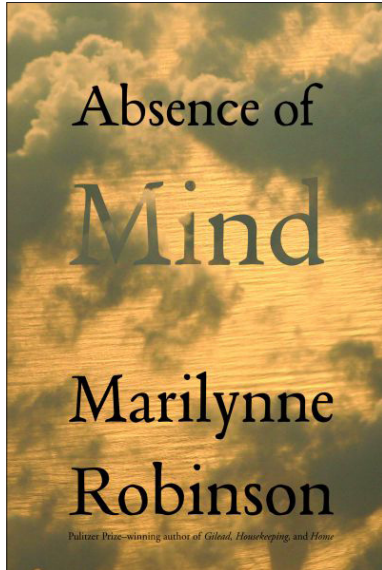


News

'Crowned with glory and worship': Marilynne Robinson's humanist Calvinism



Absence of Mind:
The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self by Marilynne Robinson.
New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010.

Philip Christman

Ten years or so ago, when I began reading Marilynne Robinson, not many of my friends seemed to have heard of her. She hadn't written a novel since *Housekeeping* (1980), and her last two books had been deeply demanding works of plague-on-all-your-houses polemical nonfiction – not, in other words, the kinds of things that turn up on bestseller lists. Since then, Robinson has published two more novels in rapid succession, won a Pulitzer and an Orange Prize, given innumerable interviews and headlined literary festivals throughout the world (including the 2006 and upcoming 2012 Calvin College Festival of Faith and Writing). She's even turned up on "The Daily Show." Most remarkably, she's done all of it while calling herself a Calvinist.

Nor is her Calvinism an odd but finally irrelevant biographical detail like Arthur Conan Doyle's late forays into spiritualism, or Prince's recent lurch into the arms of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Calvinism has informed Robinson's aesthetics, her choice of subject matter, and the whole mood that permeates her books during her period of highest productivity and public acclaim. The novel that won her the Pulitzer, *Gilead*, is about a middle-aged Congregationalist pastor, steeped in Reformed thought, who lives in the titular Iowa town. To grasp just how strange this is, consider that the last major modern novel to use "Gilead" as a place name

was Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – it's the name of a theocratic dystopia.

A Tale of Two Calvins

Theocracy and dystopia are, of course, what many people imagine when you mention the name John Calvin to them. We'll have to take a quick detour through history to understand why this is, and how such a nasty person has inspired some of the most intelligent, lucid, compassionate writing in modern English.

On the one hand there is the Calvin of reputation, who invented predestination and taught that wealth is a sign of God's favour. This Calvin enjoyed a theocratic reign of terror in Geneva, where the national pastimes were frowning and burning heretics. He is more or less an invention. To find another example of an intellectual so successfully lied about to so many people in free societies, you'd have to read up on Noam Chomsky. Calvin's teachings on wealth are in line with the Christian tradition generally: he was suspicious of it, and encouraged in his followers a degree of charity that would scandalize the modern Western middle class. As for sixteenth-century Geneva, of course no modern person would want to live there; the sixteenth century was an awful time for anybody not excited by torture, illiteracy, disease, poverty, and heads on spikes. When considered against this background, Geneva looks good. It offered better opportunities for the poor, the illiterate, and women than did most other major cities in Europe. (See E. William Monter's "Women in Calvinist Geneva (1550-1800)," which appeared in the Winter 1980 issue of the women's studies journal *Signs*, for a nuanced take on the last of these topics.) On Geneva especially, scholarship and popular discourse seem to operate from different sets of facts. You can read all sorts of lurid stories about Calvinist Geneva in tertiary sources that don't turn up in primary and secondary ones.

Calvin did teach predestination, and he did connive in the burning of the heretic Michael Servetus. The latter is indefensible, so I won't waste time defending it. (It is true that Calvin's human-rights record is generally better than that of other major sixteenth-century intellectuals. Still: tell

that to Servetus's next of kin.) Predestination, of course, has terrified children and occupied dissertators for centuries. Its consequences are impossible to accept – but so are the consequences of the opposing view, that God wills the salvation of everyone but leaves the working-out of that salvation up to us. (Earn my way to heaven? I can't even keep up with my laundry.) Cruel paradoxes lie buried in any worldview, religious or not, that tries to take account of time and suffering. Calvin faced and embraced these paradoxes, sometimes with an enthusiasm that makes readers flinch. But even here, it's Calvin's theological system, with its strict categories of the elect and the reprobate, that provided the theological scaffolding on which the later theologian Karl Barth built his argument for the possibility of universal salvation – the only really defensible one I know.

So much for the Calvin of reputation. Robinson draws on the less-known side of Calvin: the Renaissance humanist. This Calvin, like many of his artistic and philosophical contemporaries, has fallen in love with the beauty and possibility of the human person – so much so that his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* begins by announcing that knowledge of God and knowledge of humanity are connected to the point of inseparability. In other words, if you want to know God's majesty, you can look at stars or mountains – but you must first look at your loser cousin Fred, for he is made in the image of God. It is this high view of humanity – this sense that grandeur and majesty, so far from being opposed to us (as in the thought-world of pagan Greece and Rome), are actually found in our silly selves – that animates Robinson's novels. She pays loving attention to drunks and eccentrics, showing them with a fullness that reminds me of Proust and a generosity that reminds me of, well, Christ.

Defending the Human Person

So Robinson's fiction praises the image of God as found in people. Her nonfiction, so different in tone and content, achieves the same goal indirectly by defending a high view of human nature and possibility against fashionable denials of it.

There is widespread belief in the existence of a "history of warfare of science with theology." A nineteenth-century book by that title – a farrago of made-up facts that historians of science gave up on generations ago – has set the tone for this debate and, not incidentally, includes some fake anti-science quotes attributed to Calvin. In any case, it's a notion so fuzzy that neither scientists nor theologians should be happy with it. Perhaps it survives because it serves some peoples' psychological needs: some Christians, for example, may find it easier to harass biology teachers than to actually obey Christ's risky injunctions. And some scientists probably find that a huge, vaguely-defined enemy gives their jobs a little more romance. Such writers offer definitions of "religion" so transparently self-serving that they would raise suspicions as to the authors' mental fitness – if these same definitions weren't so clearly intended to nourish that heady sense of lonely superiority that makes a book popular among college kids. The philosopher Daniel Dennett, for example, describes religion as a group attempt to secure the God's or gods' favour. It's as if he's never heard of the Protestant Reformation.

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Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self, Robinson's most recent book, argues that the "scientific worldview" from which writers like Dennett claim to speak owes more to bad philosophy than to science. It is a sort of lobotomized logical positivism, censorious toward metaphysical ideas (the soul, human exceptionalism, etc.) because of their long association with religious thought, but constantly slipping, unaware, into metaphysical claims – as when sociobiologist E.O. Wilson, for example, deduces from the existence of biodiversity the

moral rightness of awe toward it. Robinson argues further that this tendency is as inimical to science as it is to any other human pursuit, because it renders felt experience indescribable, and creates a vacuum in which weak accounts of human nature flourish. "If 'mind' and 'soul' are not entities in their own right," she writes, "they are at least terms that have been found useful for describing aspects of the expression and self-expression of our very complex nervous system." And if these terms, in the twinned histories of religion and philosophy, are sometimes used to block rather than to enable inquiry, Robinson shows that this tendency enjoys a robust enough life without them.

She is likewise unimpressed by biologists' efforts to explain away human kindness. One popular theory suggests that when you help a stranger, it's because of a misfiring of the emotional responses that our self-protective genes have evolved to manoeuvre us into preserving our kin (and, thus, themselves). "What are 'we,'" she responds, "if we must be bribed and seduced by illusory sensations we call love or courage or benevolence? Why need our genes conjure these better angels, when, presumably, the species of toads and butterflies ... flourish without them?"

Absence of Mind is scathing and funny on all these subjects and many others – memes, Richard Dawkins, Freud, Nietzsche. Robinson prefers to these self-congratulatingly austere visionaries the account of humanity offered in Psalm 8, Geneva translation: "Thou hast made him a little lower than God, and crowned him with glory and worship." Change a few pronouns, and I'm not sure that modern thought offers us a more progressive, liberal, or humane understanding anywhere – nor, when his full body of work is considered, a more Calvinist one.



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