

EXCERPT

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Balm in Gilead *A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson*

Available April 2, 2019 | \$28, 250 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5318-2

"Marilynne Robinson's work is saturated in theology—not only in that it is pervaded by engagement with Christian belief in general but in that it is shaped by years of deep engagement with the texts of the Protestant (especially Calvinist) tradition. We have waited a long time for a collection like this. It is certain to be a rich source of interest and delight."

Jeremy Begbie, Thomas A. Langford Distinguished Professor of Theology, Duke University

Our Urge to Be Right

I suggested in these reflections on Marilynne Robinson's novels that there is a very deep Christological theme at work here, something to do with the fact that our basic Christian narrative is the narrative of divine solidarity with the human race—not just with the good. But this of course is an essential aspect in thinking about where the community of Christ should be speaking, living, and acting into a world that is deeply obsessed with being good. One of the paradoxes of our own age is that whereas most of the traditional markers of Christian virtue seem to have disappeared, there is an intense preoccupation with being good and being right. We look constantly for new ways of reassuring ourselves that we are good and right and entitled to judge. For all sorts of mostly good reasons, we enshrine in law and regulation standards by which we can assure ourselves of our rightness and limit our risks. At worst, we have created, and are still creating, societies (and a global society) in which our ethical life as a human race is increasingly a zero-sum game; part of the attraction of my rightness is your wrongness. We sensitize ourselves to every possibility of injury, to ourselves or others, and are passionately unforgiving when injury is experienced. To say that there are some moral elephant traps here is not for a single moment to say that past insensitivities, abuses, injustices, and inequities are anything other than blameworthy and repugnant. The point is that we need some sensitizing also as to how new forms of moralism end up serving the same old violence of the ego longing to be right, good, and secure in its judging.

For a society and a culture that's so often thought of as relativistic, we are extraordinarily absolutist about a whole range of things. This absolutism is an emotional, rather than an intellectual matter, an absolutism which says, I must never be wounded by the effects of my incapacity or limitedness; I must never be left not knowing; I must never be left in a moment's uncertainty about where I stand. I say "I" because of course we here are all part of this; it's not them over there who are doing all these bad things, it's you and me, unfortunately. I reach for those images which help me not be wounded and which assure me that I do know, rather than accepting that my life, my well-being is constructed by grace precisely as the cracks appear, and the models of goodness are dissolved.

But in a culture where we have this paradoxical urge to be good and right, Christian witness, direct and indirect theological, literary, imaginative, whatever, has to be one of those factors which brings into our common life an awareness of the perspective we don't have and can't have; which brings into our Christian life a sense of the inevitability of the crack, of the wound, and which therefore is deeply systematically suspicious of all those strategies that we devise our societies to alienate and distance the stranger. My Methodist friend, writing about his experience of ministry with people living with HIV, writes with passion about the way in which certain kinds of rhetoric about God's embrace of the marginal, the sinful, the compromised, and the unclean were thoughtlessly deployed by those who thought they were being kind and generous "good." "God loves everybody, even someone like you," is not necessarily the best pastoral approach.

My friend's writing made me see, as few things have that I've read recently, just how deep this goes in us. We think we are being, to use the fashionable word, *inclusive*, when we say "even you"—rather than beginning with "even me" or simply "us." God doesn't love "even" you; though God certainly loves "even" me. Above all, God loves us, as we are

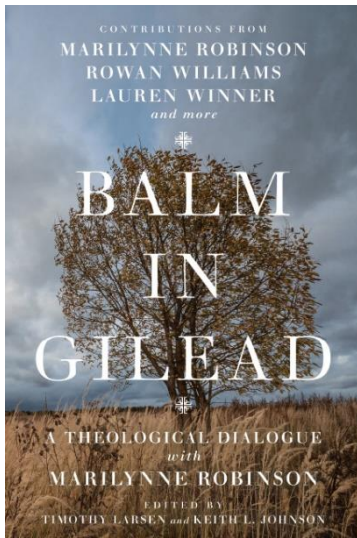


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together. And apart from that togetherness our healing doesn't happen. I don't need to elaborate the ways in which on both sides of the Atlantic, political rhetorics of exclusion and otherness dominate at the moment. We are currently a profoundly anxious civilization, for a variety of reasons, good and bad—mostly bad; a civilization which is so unsure of itself that it scrapes around to articulate the "values" that it is supposed to hold so firmly in order not to have to listen to the stranger.

And so we forget a history that is formed by immeasurably plural and often deeply compromised strands. We forget the history of diversity, interaction, migration, conflict, tyranny, genocide, slavery, empire. We forget what's made us who we are. But if we forget all that, then our sinful ancestors and our sinful fellow human beings have even less chance than they would otherwise have of reconciliation and homecoming. You remember that haunting phrase in Hebrews about how our ancestors "without us are not made perfect." And that seems to me to be yet another expression in Scripture of solidarity as the key to our understanding.

So in sum, what I'm proposing is that we read the *Gilead* narratives, and many other fictions we could talk about, as a systematic question placed against our "goodness"—not as a kind of romantic flirtation with the "beyond-good-and-evil" language which is still fashionable in some quarters, nor even as an obsessive, tragic interest in evil as the last but one step toward good, or sin as the last but one step to sanctity. These popularly distorted echoes of Graham Greene, or indeed Dostoevsky, are a long way from Gilead. All that Gilead puts to us is the plain reminder that goodness is not enough. Goodness, self-defined and self-contained, is something which will be poisonous if we're not careful. Without the wound, the openness, the crack that connects us to reality, to one another, and to God, healing doesn't happen. The "good" can so easily come to believe that healing is natural and simple. But revelation tells us that healing is indeed the restoration of a broken nature, but precisely because our nature is broken, this healing must be more than "natural."

Did God choose Israel because Israel was larger, wealthier, more successful, and more developed on the other nations? No, says Hebrew Scripture. Does God choose us because we are cleverer and more pious than others? No, says St. Paul in 1 Corinthians. We are implicated in a world of deep shadow and extensive compromise. But as Saint Antony of Egypt is said to have remarked, "Our life and our death are with our neighbor." Understand our implicatedness in a sinful world, and we begin to understand why we are saved not by goodness, but by a new level of connection which we call the body of Christ. We don't know how the grace of life from that body will actually reconstruct and make whole lives that we see around us as broken and shattered, but we may and must hope, for the simple reason that we are who we are because of them, and they because of us. At the heart of it all is the great connection made by the incarnation. And that incarnation is God's act of affirming the connectedness of what God has made, and its connectedness with its maker and lover.

Fiction, if it's doing its work, will always, I've suggested, take us deeper into connectedness. And in a fiction that works with and is inspired by Christian themes we are taken into the deepest connectedness of all; in the light and in hope of which we live and pray for one another.

—Taken from "Beyond Goodness:
Gilead and the Discovery of the Connections of Grace," by Rowan Williams

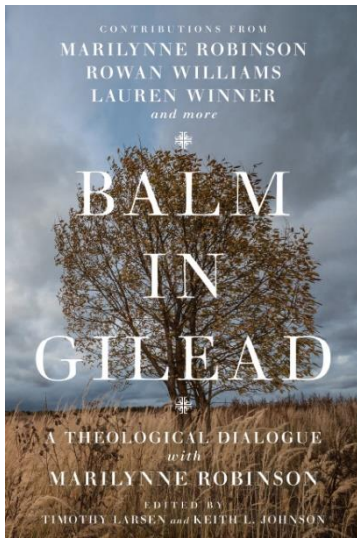


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Alan Jacobs, distinguished professor of humanities, honors program, Baylor University

"The Most Vital of Living American Novelists"

Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Marilynne Robinson is one of the most eminent public intellectuals in America today, and her writing offers probing meditations on the Christian faith. Based on the 2018 Wheaton Theology Conference, this volume brings together the thoughts of leading theologians, historians, literary scholars, and church leaders who engaged in theological dialogue with Robinson's work—and with the author herself.

Editors:

Timothy Larsen is the Carolyn and Fred McManis Professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College and an honorary fellow in the school of divinity, the University of Edinburgh. He has been a visiting fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge, and All Souls College, Oxford. His recent volumes include *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2014), *George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles* (IVP, 2018), and *John Stuart Mill: A Secular Life* (Oxford University Press, 2018). ("The Theological World of the Reverend John Ames")

Keith L. Johnson is associate professor of theology at Wheaton College. His research focuses on modern and contemporary systematic theology with an emphasis on the work of theologians from the majority world, dialogues between Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant theologians, recent developments related to the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology, and theological accounts of race. He is the author most recently of *Theology as Discipleship* (IVP, 2015) and *The Essential Karl Barth* (Baker, 2019). ("The Metaphysics of Marilynne Robinson")

Contributors:

Marilynne Robinson is the author of the novels *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* (winner of the Pulitzer Prize), *Home*, and *Lila*. She also is the author of several books of nonfiction, including *Mother Country*, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, *The Death of Adam*, *Absence of Mind*, *The Givenness of Things*, and *What Are We Doing Here?* Robinson began teaching in the MFA program at the University of Iowa in 1989 and became a member of the faculty of the Writers' Workshop in 1991. In 2016 she retired as the F. Wendell Miller Professor and assumed the title of professor emerita. ("The Protestant Conscience")

Rowan Williams, Baron Williams of Oystermouth served as the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, Metropolitan of the Province of Canterbury and Primate of All England, from December 2002 until December 2012. He was previously the Bishop of Monmouth and Archbishop of Wales. He currently is the Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. A prolific author, his most recent work is *Being Human* (SPCK, 2018). ("Beyond Goodness: Gilead and the Discovery of the Connections of Grace")

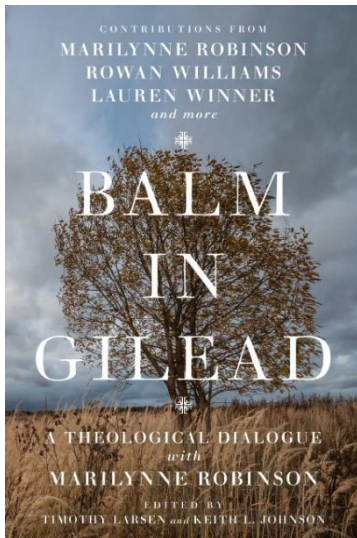


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Lauren Winner is associate professor of Christian spirituality at Duke Divinity School. She writes and lectures widely on Christian practice, the history of Christianity in America, and Jewish-Christian relations. Her books include *Girl Meets God*, *Mudhouse Sabbath*, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*, and *Wearing God*. ("Thinking About Preaching with Marilynne Robinson")

Patricia Lynn Andujo is associate professor of English at Azusa Pacific University. Her research and teaching interests include African American literature, nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, and religious studies and literature. Her dissertation study, *Gendering the Pulpit: Religious Discourse and the African American Female Experience*, traces the entry of African American women into religious discourse and their continuous appropriation of a literary tradition that grants them voice. ("Marilynne Robinson and the African American Experience")

Timothy George has been the dean of Beeson Divinity School since its inception in 1988. In addition to his administrative duties, George teaches church history and doctrine. The author of several books, he serves as senior theological advisor for *Christianity Today*, is on the editorial advisory board of *First Things*, and serves as the general editor of the Reformation Commentary on Scripture with IVP Academic. His books include *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (IVP Academic, 2011) and the revised edition of *Theology of the Reformers* (B&H Academic, 2013). ("Marilynne Robinson and John Calvin")

Han-luen Kantzer Komline is assistant professor of church history and theology at Western Theological Seminary. A graduate of Wheaton College (BA), Princeton Theological Seminary (MDiv), and the University of Notre Dame (PhD), she also has studied at the University of Tübingen in Germany on a Fulbright fellowship. ("Heart Conditions: Gilead and Augustinian Theology")

Tiffany Eberle Kriner is associate professor of English at Wheaton College, where her research focuses on the intersections between race, place, theology, and literature. She is the author most recently of *The Future of the Word: An Eschatology of Reading* (Fortress, 2014). When she is not working at Wheaton, she is farming sixty acres of woods and fields with her husband and two children at Root and Sky Farm (rootandskyfarm.com). (Space/Time/Doctrine: Marilynne Robinson's Gilead Novels")

Joel Sheesley is emeritus professor of art at Wheaton College, where he is known as a master painter and teacher. He recently published a reproduction of many of his most recent paintings in *Lincoln Marsh Journal: Landscape the Knowable Mystery*. His work can be viewed at joelsheesley.com. ("Heaven and Earth: Reading Gilead Through the Landscape of the Fox River")



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