

## Exploring Devotional Epistemology and Religious Faith With Metaphysical Perceptions of Marilynne Robinson's Novel *Gilead*.

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### ABSTRACT

*Gilead* is concerned with theological epistemology, Marilynne Robinson's prize-winning Pulitzer book. In spite of his dad, sibling and godson all leaving the religion, the leading character John Ames, an aged and sick presbyterian priest in 1950, little town Iowa, maintained the religious views. However, Ames' commitment to current skeptical thinking does not lead to apologies: Ames strongly refuses to accept that argument is the duty to really believe in God. His epistemology founded confidence in spiritual experience, which Robinson called the shock of revelatory perception. Ames has the means to view the world clearly enlightened by Divine intervention and splendor. Ames is not only able to perceive God in experience: he is also generally inhibited by original sin. He is a universal human endowment. Only the mercy of God can restore your mind to correctly understand the Divine. In her article *The Death of Adam*, Robinson acquired the epistemology of Reformation philosopher John Calvin. He is seeking to renew his name in the history of the culture. In this paper the researcher discovers how the Calvinist epistemology in *Gilead* works with regard to general perception, guilt, and salvation and the research also involved Alvin Plantinga's analysis of Calvinist epistemology under philosophy, the non-fiction of Robinson, and the latest discourses on Calvinist epistemology. Robinson's dispute provides a sociocultural backdrop for *Gilead* with the New Atheists: Because of a profound discontinuity at the level of metaphysics, the way she interprets Christian belief is not open to New Atheist arguments in the way she sees them. *Gilead* represents for us the overwhelming majority of mankind, which are neither mystics nor rationalists, an experienced, religious epistemology.

**Keywords:** Epistemology, Calvinism, New Atheist, Theism, Metaphysics.

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### Introduction

Epistemology is uncompromisingly linked to metaphysics for Marilynne Robinson. This means that only in an understanding of which there is or what the universe is like metaphysical concepts can questions addressed as to what we know and how it is known. In the preface to *The Death of Adam*, she writes:

It all comes down to the mystery of the relationship between the mind and the cosmos. Those who would employ reductive definitions of...reality credit their

own perceptions of truth with fundamentalist simple-heartedness.... Is it not in fact a very naive conception of reality, and of its accessibility to human understanding, that would exclude so much of what human beings have always found meaningful, as if by this means fallibility or error or delusion could be localized and rejected? (3)

In this regard, Robinson takes into account neo-Darwinists like Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, who use natural selection as a theory of all, from socioeconomic and cultural trends to morality and denounce religion as a leading cause of human miseries and mistakes. In his book *The God Delusion*, Dawkins argues that religion is an unpleasant by-product of our otherwise beneficial adaptations, such as our inclination to follow and respect our elders or our desire to develop a relationship. Of course, psychological facts regarding the similarities between religious belief and other processes like trusting our elders or falling in love do not imply that there is a causal link between the two processes. Furthermore, the explanation of religion with these facts implies naturalistic metaphysics—a notion that denies the mind any vital reality, a relationship between the mind and the cosmos, based on basic genetic survival. It should be noted that naturalism is neither proven nor argued for but presupposed by Dawkins. How can one attempt to demonstrate that there is no non-physical element like naturalism? However, Just assume that epistemology means metaphysics for the time being, that Robinson receives them both from John Calvin.

In her foreword to *John Calvin Steward of God's Covenant*, Robinson conveys her view of the metaphysics of Calvin and its influence on its epistemology. From the *Institutes* of Calvin, she obtains a clear understanding of the link of the intellect to the universe and, moreover, of its relation to the creator and the cosmos itself:

It is as if we were to find a tender solicitude toward us in the fact that the great energy that rips galaxies apart also animates our slightest thoughts...The first assertion of Calvin's theology, both in order and in centrality, is the continuous, unmediated character of the relationship between God and any human soul (xvi-xvii).

### **Calvinism and Metaphysics**

This is the Calvinist metaphysics of Robinson; it is an understanding of the way the world is. Whether our understanding is restricted and how the most important thing we feel and know is the direct manifestation of God, the universe is designed for mankind to live and sense and to comprehend.

Calvin never pauses to dignify the question of the existence of God. To him God is simply manifest.... Calvin's implicit reply to those who denounced the subjectivism of the beliefs he defended is that God himself chooses to engage human consciousness thus intimately, that to do so is his being toward us, and

that to feel the presence and the meaning of his attention is our being toward him. It is important to note that this is a metaphysics consistently explored and developed throughout Calvin's writing. And it is an epistemology. (xx-xxi)

For Robinson's own religious epistemology, this metaphysic puts "the felt experiences of individual knowing and perceiving" (xii), which she calls "the basis of [Calvin's] theology and metaphysics." In an interview with Hoezee, *A World of Beautiful Souls: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson*, Robinson argues from the relational metaphysics of Calvin, in which "the omnipotence of God is so to speak the dynamic of being, the continual recreation which continuously expresses the existence of God". Since the being of God is everything that exists, we constantly confront Him in all experiences, inevitably meeting Him. Robinson says, "What am I being given to see, understand?" This prompts us to ask for our experience. It brings us to perception, in other words. We could organize it the best way: Human beings are essentially made aware of God by a sense of the presence of God in themselves, in the world, and in other people.

And the protagonist of *Gilead*, John Ames, is also endowed with a strong understanding of philosophy. He effusively praised George Herbert's quote "For Preservation is a Creation, and more, it is a continued Creation, and a Creation every moment" (126), which harkens back to Robinson's idea of a "continuous recreation that continuously expresses the being of God". The subject of existence and Being is continually on his mind, like in the following passage: "I have been thinking about existence lately. In fact, I have been so full of admiration for existence that I have hardly been able to enjoy it properly" (64). This is the textual embodiment of Robinson's Calvinist perspective of a universe filled with the awe of God, as seen through the eyes of the author. Moreover, as one should anticipate, given Robinson's view of the intertwined-ness of philosophy and theology, *Gilead's* understanding of God's understanding is consistent with Robinson's definition. The text you have read is a portion of Ames' explanation against the existence of evidence of God.

### **Metaphysical Perceptions in *Gilead***

According to Laura Tanner's essay, *Looking Back from the Grave': Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson's Gilead*, "reviewers who read *Gilead* as a celebration of the force of human consciousness in the face of death located the novel's power not only in its philosophical and religious vision but also in its immersion in the sensory details of lived experience" (228). In her article, Tanner argues that Ames's rendering of sense experience is so compelling because of "how dying shapes the sensory and psychological dynamics of human perception," and she provides examples from neuroscience research to support her claim. Unquestionably, this type of activity is taking place in *Gilead*; Ames' imminent death, as well as the possibility of the next life, serve to enhance his perception of this one. "When you read this," he writes to his son, "I am imperishable...not waiting for you, though, because I want your dear perishable self to live long and to love this poor perishable world, which I somehow cannot imagine not missing bitterly" (60-61). Nonetheless, I believe Tanner creates a false contradiction between *Gilead's* "philosophical

and religious vision" and its "immersion in the sensory details of lived experience," which I believe is incorrect. *Gilead's* Calvinist epistemology, which is based on its Calvinist metaphysics, is what gives the novel its strong perceptual impact, which is enhanced by Ames' impending death, rather than the other way around. "One Calvinist notion that has been deeply implanted in me is that there are two sides to your encounter with the world," Robinson stated in an interview with *The Paris Review*. When you see anything, it is not merely something that is physically there; rather, there is a visual aspect to all existence. It has significance because it is intended specifically for you... In the same manner that a mystic might draw from a vision, you too may draw from perception". The issue remains, though, as to what lies on the other side of Ames' perspective. When he perceives the world, what is about it that makes him feel as though it is burdened by the presence of God?

### Beauty in Devotion

Ames is awestruck by the beautiful nature of the planet. He speaks rapturously of his son: "Your hair is straight and dark, and your skin is very fair. I suppose you're not prettier than most children. You're just a nice-looking boy, a bit slight, well scrubbed and well mannered. All that is fine, but it's your existence I love you for, mainly. Existence seems to me now the most remarkable thing that could ever be imagined" (60). Ames is moved to a feeling of the innate goodness of Being in principle, and of all creation, by the particulars of sensory experience, particularly the characteristics of his son. With his pen, Ames transforms even a nonhuman patchwork of late-summer images into a work of art with an eye for aesthetics.

"The link between joy and beauty and the apprehension of God is one which is very vivid in Robinson," writes Andrew Brown in *The Guardian*. "One of the things that has really struck me when reading Calvin is how strong of a sense he has that the beautiful is the trademark of the divine," she remarked at the time.

Ames' perspective is so ingrained in this concept that he mimics Calvin's depiction. "And, first, there is no part of the world, no matter how little, that does not contain at least some glimmers of beauty; while it is difficult to view the vast and magnificent fabric as it stretches about you without being overwhelmed by the tremendous weight of splendor." (51), says Calvin in his *Institutes*. Compare that to this verse from *Gilead*: "The world can shine like transfiguration wherever you turn your eyes." You do not need to bring anything other than a willingness to learn. Who, on the other hand, would have the fortitude to witness it?" (280) Ames shares Calvin's belief that the beauty of everything, the aesthetic character of all things, speaks to him in the glory of God.

But how does this function in practice? It may be a sly teleological argument that goes something like this: Creation's beauty and intricacy indicate intentionality. Intentionality has to be the result of a determined mind. A mind capable of conceiving the order and beauty of galaxies must be enormous. We refer to God as a hugely brilliant, powerful, and creative Mind. Robinson, on the other hand, does not seek to make such an argument. She writes in *John Calvin: Steward* "To say that nature's order reveals divine intent is one thing, and to say

that the beauty that floods our senses has the meaning of vision and revelation is quite another. The beauty of what we perceive is tainted by reality. It represents God's might and his unfailing grace for the human being. It denotes God's approach to each unique human consciousness" (xx, xxii). God's presence is evident in the beauty of what exists; His existence does not need to be justified. Because He manifests Himself in created things, the human intellect may immediately sense His existence.

### Sorrow in Devotion

Ames' appreciation for the beauty of the world is not based on ignorance. Robinson deals with human sorrow in a realistic manner, yet this does nothing to lessen the beauty of the planet. If sorrow were not among God's most beautiful creations, it would not be burdened with such weighty significance. Towards the conclusion of *Gilead*, Ames remarks,

There are two occasions when the sacred beauty of Creation becomes dazzlingly apparent, and they occur together. One is when we feel our mortal insufficiency to the world, and the other is when we feel the world's mortal insufficiency to us. Augustine says the Lord loves each of us as an only child, and that has to be true. "He will wipe the tears from all faces." It takes nothing from the loveliness of the verse to say that is exactly what will be required. (280)

Similarly, sadness does not interfere with one's experience of God's presence. Instead, sadness has a tendency to direct one's thoughts toward God. This is best portrayed in *Gilead* by a narrative Ames remembers from his youth, which is very moving.

The Baptist church was struck by lightning at the end of a lengthy drought, just as Ames' father was tearing it down in the midst of a torrential downpour. His lunch for Ames, who had taken refuge under a cart with the other youngsters, was an ashy biscuit, and the rest of the employees joined him in singing Beneath the Cross of Jesus as a group. The biscuit is referred to as the bread of affliction by Ames, and it is associated with the Eucharist. His bitterness of that morsel has taken on new meanings for him as the years have gone by. "Sorrow, I believe, is a significant part of the substance that makes up human life," he writes (117-18).

The bread of Reconciliation is the food of anguish, and meeting God in the religious ceremony, or walking in the storm with his dad, is a moment in Gethsemane, the location of Christ's pain. And it is out of this suffering that the gift of faith is given, which leads to a lifelong commitment to the Christian faith.

This scene reveals "an emotional truth that emerges through the textured specificity of embodied experience: Ames's recollection of joy and sadness is immersed in the feel of rain, the sight of steam rising...and, most importantly, the touch of his father's body on his own preserved in the transfer of a biscuit blackened by his father's 'scorched hand'" according to

Laura Tanner (230). Tanner uses the term "emotional truth," but I am not clear what he means. That statement makes it sound like she is trying to entrap Ames inside his own mind. In the particularity of his bodily experience, Ames confronts reality, Being itself, not just his own feelings. Ames also sees how ultimate reality, God the Creator, reveals Himself in the feeling of joy and sadness in the created world. When his congregation receives Communion one Sunday, Ames chooses to lecture about the sacrament's establishment. "In the last few weeks, I have been thinking a lot about the body. Both blessed and betrayed.... I wanted to talk about the gift of bodily particularity and how it is used to mediate blessing and sacrament. I have been reflecting on how much I have enjoyed my physical existence recently" (79). Against the end of the ceremony, he gives the sacrament to his little boy, exactly as his father fed him the ashy biscuit, at his wife's request and against custom. "Christ's body, broken for you. Christ's blood was spilt for you.... Body and blood are the most amazing mysteries."

To those who would think that the experience of sorrow militates against, rather than for, the existence of God, Robinson writes in *John Calvin: Steward*:

Those of us who live our lives in relative security have difficulty understanding how overpowering assertions of faith will arise from precisely those extremes of trial and grief we might assume would instead raise questions about the goodness of God, or about his very existence. We must assume that our experience, fortunate as we are in it, nevertheless limits our understanding of most human experience. (xiv)

Indeed, Calvin believes that our experience of suffering teaches us about God. In *Institutes* Calvin says that "Because there is something akin to a world of misery in man, and our naked shame has revealed an immense series of disgraceful properties ever since we were stripped of the divine attire, every man, stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness, in this way necessarily obtains at least some knowledge of God" (38). When Ames encounters sadness in the world, he instinctively goes to the source of blessings, the maker of the world's beauty, the God who, in Christ at Gethsemane, entered human sufferings to undo them. "The novel [Gilead], then, by bringing the glory and sadness of the world into our eyes until they're full to overflowing also brings[s] God there," writes Andrew Brown.

### **Light in Devotion**

As Ames himself states, one element of sense perception to which he pays special attention is his experience of light. But whenever he considers the physical perception of light, Ames is led irresistibly to more metaphorical meditations. He writes on the next page, "There's a shimmer on a child's hair, in the sunlight.... The twinkling of an eye. That is the most wonderful expression. I've thought from time to time it was the best thing in life, that little incandescence you see in people when the charm of something strikes them, or the humor of it. 'The light of the eyes rejoiceth the heart.' That's a fact" (60).

Ames' favorite word is "incandescence," which he uses to describe the human soul. "Whatever people say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the 'I,' whose predicate can be 'love,' 'fear,' or 'want,' and whose object can be 'someone,' or 'nothing,' and it won't really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around 'I,' like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief, guilt, joy" (51). On the novel's penultimate page, Ames refers to the Christian notion of the world's eventual re-creation as "the great and general incandescence" (282), which gives us an idea of what he means when he applies the term to the soul. Ames associates incandescence with something wonderful. It alludes to God's presence, which is the reward of Revelation 21's new earth: "Then a new heaven and a new earth appeared to me.... 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man,' said a booming voice from the throne. He will live among them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be their God." God, according to Ames, is present in all of creation, but especially in the human soul, which is formed in His likeness. "The moon is lovely in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame is lovely in the morning light. The human soul, the individual light within the great general light of life, appears to me to be a metaphor for light within light" (136).

Robinson also borrows Calvin's notion of incandescence. In *John Calvin: Steward* "This incandescent divinity—the glory of God that 'shines forth' from human nature—is placed at the very center of individual experience and presence by [Calvin]. And this sanctity is a quality that is shared by all human beings, not only saints and Christians" (xv). We may see why perception is so important to Robinson's epistemology since God's splendor is like light, both in Calvin and in Scripture—"God is light" is a motif in the gospel and writings of John in particular— Knowing God's existence and presence is like seeing. "A true perception of others and a true perception of oneself are two great poles of Calvin's thought, of his ethics and aesthetics. Because perception is the sensed and active capacity for encountering the divine, it is at the heart of his theology."

Ames is also sensitive to the presence of light in his old church building, and light is associated with the presence of God there as well. "As usual, the light in the room was lovely this morning. It is an old, run-down chapel that could need a fresh coat of paint. But in the terrible days, I would walk over before daybreak just to sit and watch the light enter into that chamber.... I had great peace those mornings, praying over really horrible things - the Depression, the wars" (80). Jack Boughton has come to Ames in a last-ditch attempt to discover religion on one of those early contemplative mornings in the sanctuary. His unnerving presence and half-serious interrogation force Ames to defend his beliefs, and Ames believes Jack is taking advantage of him:

But I was sitting there in my church, with the sweet and irrefragable daylight pouring in through the windows. And I felt, as I have often felt, that my failing the truth could have no bearing on the Truth itself, which could never conceivably be in any sense dependent on me or on anyone. And my heart rose up within me – that's exactly what it felt like – and I said... "When this old sanctuary is full of silence and prayer, every book Karl Barth ever will write

would not be a feather in the scales against it from the point of view of profundity.” (197)

God's presence is as certain to Ames as "irrefragable daylight." Furthermore, because of Ames' Calvinist metaphysics, which acknowledges God revealed in all creation, the presence of God is experienced in the daylight itself, light being an aspect of creation in which God is particularly sensitive due to its metaphorical resonances. As far as Ames is concerned, this apprehension of God is the end of the debate.

### **Significance of Water in baptism**

Water attracts John Ames' attention in the same way that light does, and it has a symbolic importance as well. He references Feuerbach, a 19th-century atheist, who said of baptism, "Water is the purest, clearest of liquids... [It] has a significance in itself, as water; it is on account of its natural quality that it is consecrated and selected as the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. So far there lies at the foundation of Baptism a beautiful, profound, natural significance” (27). God is present in Ames' administering of the sacrament, but the divine presence is also present in the baptized human being. “There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time” (26). But it is the inherent significance of water itself that Ames picks up from Feuerbach, rather than his atheism, to the point that Ames senses divinity in human relationship with water, regardless of whether it takes place in his church structure or not.

As a result of Ames' reflections on Feuerbach, he recalls one particularly dramatic episode of human connection with water. “There was a young couple strolling along half a block ahead of me. The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running” (32). He writes that “it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing.” Reflecting on his own account of the incident, he recognizes that he is trying to express a beauty, a presence there that defies language's limitations. “People talk that way when they want to call attention to a thing existing in excess of itself, so to speak, a sort of purity or lavishness, at any rate something ordinary in kind but exceptional in degree.” There are numerous water episodes in the book, both inside and outside of church—Ames brother Edward putting a glass of water on his head during a hot summer game of catch, Ames grandpa splashing a young Ames and little Robert Boughton down at the river, Ames baptism his future bride Lila—and Ames' attention to water in them is always tied to his experience of the divine in humanity, just as incandescence is always related to the picture of God in the soul. Water identifies humans as sacred since it is ordinary in nature, but special, even divine in degree.



**In the ego, there is a reflection of God.**

Ames' understanding of God's presence in other people. In all of existence, but especially in the human soul, his sensations of beauty, sadness, light, and water identify God's self-revelation. But it is not just what Ames sees that convinces him of God's presence and existence. Perception is an indication of divinity in and of itself. Robinson writes in her preface to John Calvin: Steward of God's Covenant, "Perception is at the center of [Calvin's] theology both because it is the felt and active potential for experiencing the sacred, and also because it is the image, the great gift, 'a remarkable instance of the Divine goodness which can never be sufficiently proclaimed'" (xv). This, according to Calvin, is the most important path to knowing God. He discusses it on the first proper page of the *Institutes*, long before he discusses our natural knowledge of God. "No man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone" (37).

To discover God, all Ames has to do is search within himself. One specific encounter causes him to ponder his capabilities, an occurrence that instills in him a sense of faith. Ames and his father walk to Kansas on foot in search of his grandfather's tomb, a pistol-wielding mystic abolitionist preacher in the days when Kansas was bleeding. They march through dusty, drought-stricken communities, hungry and thirsty, until they reach the grave, which is barely marked. They clean up the run-down cemetery, and his father prays. They are graced with a type of everyday miracle while the prayer Ames is saying, a gorgeous sunset with the sun and moon aligned that sets the area alight.

What a sweet strength I felt, in him, and in myself, and all around us.... I have rarely felt joy like that, and assurance. It was like one of those dreams where you're filled with some extravagant feeling you might never have in life, it doesn't matter what it is, even guilt or dread, and you learn from it what an amazing instrument you are, so to speak, what a power you have to experience beyond anything you might ever actually need. (55-56)

The certainty, or faith, that this experience inspires in Ames comes from strong sentiments of strength and joy, as well as his sensory sense of the sunset, which drive Ames to contemplate his own faculties, "in myself," as he puts it. Ames discovers signs of divinity in himself, his father, and everything around him in creation.

**Mysticism is a topic that has sparked a lot of debate.**

Robinson writes of her own childhood religious experiences, which are very like Ames', in her autobiographical essay *Psalm Eight*:

I felt God as a presence before I had a name for him, and long before I knew words like "faith" or "belief".... I thought everyone else must be aware of it.... All the old writers on the subject remark that in every age and nation people have had the idea of a god of some sort.... It might have been that I

was a mystic by vocation and, despite Presbyterianism, suffered atrophy of my gift in a life where I found little use for it. For all I know I am a mystic now, and simply too close to the phenomenon to have a clear view of it. (Death 228-229)

She appears to be willing to accept mysticism only in a limited sense, as long as the vision of God is mystical by definition. She stresses universality: “I thought everyone... All the old writers...every age and nation.” She is picking up on Calvin’s idea of the *sensus divinitatis*, a faculty for perceiving God universally endowed to humanity. “That there exists in the human mind,” he writes, “and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself...has endued all men with some sense of his Godhead” (43). Robinson is not, as a mystic might, gazing beyond the world; rather, she is looking at the world, as she states later in *Psalm Eight*. “Everything is intrinsically mysterious as a physical object, say, or as a phenomenon of culture.... I’ve always been almost offended by the idea of mysticism, because it seems as if it diminishes what we know by every means that gives us access to it – it diminishes the simple spectacle of what we are and where we are, the complex spectacle I should probably have said” (227-228).

In *Gilead*, John Ames' grandpa is a type of mystic. While still a young man in Maine, he experiences a vision of Jesus in shackles in the night and decides to join the abolitionist movement in Kansas. “When I spoke to my father about the vision he had described to me,” Ames says, “my father just nodded and said, ‘It was the times.’ He himself never claimed any such experience” (56). After describing about the sunset/moonrise he and his father observed over his grandfather's Kansas grave, Ames tells about his grandfather's vision. This is the closest Ames gets to a supernatural vision, but it is actually just a profound sensation of ordinary beauty on the great vistas of the Great Plains, based on a personal encounter with Robinson. Calvin thinks the import of such everyday miracles is usually missed, as he writes in the *Institutes*: “And then in regard to supernatural events, though these are occurring every day, how few are there who ascribe them to the ruling providence of God—how many who imagine that they are casual results produced by the blind evolutions of the wheel of chance?” (59)

Overall, Robinson appears to have little interest in mysticism as a unique type of experience reserved for a select group of mystics. “The kind of consciousness that I was sort of instructed in...borders on mysticism so closely that it’s hard to know whether you qualify or not, or whether mysticism is artificially isolated when it is treated as a separate thing from experience,” she told Missy Daniel in *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. Provocatively, she continued, “Obviously, mysticism can be a form of madness, but then consciousness can be a form of madness”. And it is just plain old human awareness that she is interested in.

## Conclusion

Understanding Robinson's Calvinist metaphysics, or her understanding of the relationship between the mind and the cosmos, is the foundation of *Gilead's* theological epistemology. God's presence may be found in all of reality, but particularly in the miracles of the human soul. Human people were created with the *sensus divinitatis* to see God in their daily lives. This metaphysic underpins John Ames' acute perceptual experience, in which the sun-drenched Iowa grassland appears to be transfigured with God's splendor. But why are some people able to see God while others are unable to? The solution is found in sin and grace's noetic activities. Original sin distorts the *sensus* indiscriminately and makes us hesitant to trust its faltering deliverances. Jack Boughton, lonely and damaged, represents the noetic repercussions of original sin, concealing his face to avoid recognizing the splendor. Grace, God's undeserved kindness that restores the senses, is what enables anybody to believe at all. Grace is what allows Ames to see, and grace is what encourages us to keep fighting for Jack.

For the rest of us, the vast majority of mankind who are neither mystics nor rationalists, Robinson succeeds in articulating a coherent, experience-based religious epistemology. She does not perch religion dangerously on a pile of natural theological or historical reasons. She also does not make religious experience the exclusive domain of a select few endowed with extraordinary perceptual abilities. She regards the human ability to see God as generally endowed, globally wounded, and universally in need of grace, as Calvin does.

But, as Reverend Ames claims, does *Gilead's* religious epistemology render most attacks on Christian belief meaningless? It is difficult to know what Robinson means by such a remark. She clearly does not believe atheistic arguments are incomprehensible; Ames answers to numerous in the text in his own unique style. Many, maybe most, atheistic arguments are useless, in my opinion, since they presume a naturalistic metaphysics that contradicts the believer's experience of the universe. "Feuerbach does not imagine the possibility of an existence beyond this one, by which I mean a reality that embraces this one but surpasses it," writes Ames (162-163). On this model of belief, there is no *de jure* argument against Christianity that is independent of a *de facto* argument, to use Alvin Plantinga's language (Warranted 159-160). On Robinson's view, you can not establish Christian religion is irrational unless you can show her metaphysics or theology is likely false. To do so, you would need a powerful argument, something along the lines of overwhelming affirmative proof against God's existence.

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