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**Seeing The Holy**

by [Tom Montgomery Fate](http://sojo.net/biography/tom-montgomery-fate) | [June 2006](http://sojo.net/magazine/2006/06)

Author Marilynne Robinson explores the sacredness of the everyday world.

Marilynne Robinson’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Gilead* explores the beauty of small-town life and the complexity of religious experience within an American family over three generations. The book is a series of letters written by John Ames, a 76-year-old Congregational minister in Gilead, Iowa, to his 7-year-old son. There is urgency: Ames has a heart affliction and death is near. His remarkable letters carry the history of the Ames family (his father and grandfather were also Congregational ministers) with such emotional acuity that readers won’t readily notice how deftly Robinson weaves in the larger history—slavery and the abolitionist movement, three catastrophic wars, the evolution of American Protestantism, the Depression, and more. In the end it is Ames’ quiet, miraculous voice that haunts readers, a voice so full of the “sad wonder” that predominates his life that readers can’t help but rediscover lost, essential pieces of their own lives in his.

Although Robinson is a scholar who teaches in the prestigious Iowa Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa, she is as at home in the public square as in the ivory tower. She often teaches in the basement of her Iowa City church. I attended a class one Sunday night and listened to an enthralling talk about Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. That night I heard a resonant and challenging theme I have found in much of Robinson’s work—a theme that is perhaps best revealed in one of Ames’ final letters to his son: “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?” Robinson suggests that for both the minister and the artist/writer, the essential part of faith is the creative courage it takes see the holy in the everyday world, and then to respond.

I recently spoke with Robinson at her home in Iowa City about *Gilead* and the role of religion in her life and work.

**Tom Montgomery Fate:** Your last two books, Gilead and The Death of Adam, have had strong religious themes. Where did your interest in religion come from?

**Marilynne Robinson:** I really don’t know. I’ve always had an interest in theology. Perhaps I simply wanted to understand my life in the way that seemed satisfying and necessary to me. If I had lived 15 or 20 years later, I may have considered theology as a field. But at the time the obstacles to women in that area were very real. So instead, I’ve maintained my interest through study and reading.

**Fate:** Do you have any thoughts about the seeming connections or disconnections between “religious” and “literary” writing?

**Robinson:** The reverential language of theology and literature were almost interchangeable for a very long time. Look at the biblical references in Shakespeare, Milton, and Spencer. Faulkner and Samuel Beckett are saturated with biblical imagery and language. I’m not sure that religiosity has been increasingly factored out of literature, and if it has, I’m not sure why. Some writers such as Reynolds Price and John Updike seem to be treated with a particular respect because they handle religious topics so well.

**Fate:** Do you see connections between the creative process of religious faith and the creative process of writing?

**Robinson:** My tendency is to think that writers are predisposed toward a religious kind of understanding. This is because writing enforces rigorous thought and perception, and both of those open on to religious modes of thought very naturally. For me, a religious mindset creates a habit of scrupulous inquiry relative to virtually everything—including human experience itself. And if you assume that your experience is the way God addresses you, then there is no such thing as trivial experience. I think this kind of theological approach allows you to write at a very high level.

But there are also, of course, “closed” religious traditions in which the conclusions are so built into the assumptions that you don’t dare explore them. A kind of blind loyalty to certain fixed beliefs prevents you from having a religious trust in the sacredness of experience itself. This kind of theology tends to depress the writing, because it can’t depart from the assumptions the writer brings to it.

**Fate:** If a “closed” theology is more rigid and literalist as you suggest, how would you describe an “open” theology?

**Robinson:** I’m increasingly aware that I am the inheritor of a particular theological tradition, which comes from John Calvin. Calvinism is based on the idea that experience itself has a revelatory quality, and that the mind is the locus of revelation, since it is the mind of the perceiver. Experience can draw one forward in terms of comprehension, in terms of what one is given to know. It’s the idea that God is living, and in continuous conversation with you. You’re always instructed anew in ways that will disturb what you experienced before. An open theology then is one where you feel you’re being led through the experience of life in order to have a profounder understanding.

People are always talking about a personal God. Part of the usefulness of that metaphor is that it indicates what we know about God is what we know about one another, which is that we learn by continuous encounter and new knowledge.

**Fate:** You describe religious understanding as requiring scrupulous and rigorous inquiry. How do you respond to those who say that it needn’t be that complicated, that such an intensely intellectual approach displaces the possibility of “spirituality,” of a less intellectual revelation?

**Robinson:** I don’t accept the division between those components of consciousness. One of the things I like to do is to read contemporary physics—popularized versions. It’s so wonderful to see these hyper-rational people go spiraling off into what sounds exactly like mysticism. The ongoing attempts to understand why the universe is accelerating, for example, bears close analogy to religious thought. One soon discovers that the way in which we have defined rationality or intellectualism is very narrow.

**Fate:** John Ames, the narrator of Gilead, loves language. He often refers to the etymological roots of words. I’m curious how you understand the difference between the roots of “religion” (i.e. “to bind together again”) and spirituality (i.e. “wind or breath”). Modern culture seems much more taken with spirituality than religion. How do you understand the difference between the two?

**Robinson:** Biblically, the creation of religion came about with the descent of the Spirit. But I think modern religion has come to represent the customary rigidities that settle down over human practice. This has always happened, historically. When I see favorable change occur—that is, when religion lives up to its best rather than worst definition—I consider it to be the reinhabiting of religion by the Spirit of God.

Spirituality sometimes becomes the invention of a life that makes us emotionally comfortable, and thus doesn’t address the very real demands of a religion. Serious engagement with any religion requires the adherent to acknowledge its demands and difficulty.

One popular definition of religion has been as an opiate, that its purpose was to make people comfortable in the world. Some still accept this as the true definition and have tried to re-create it, to use religion to make themselves comfortable. But any of the major religions, seriously understood, clearly makes you uncomfortable in the world.

**Fate:** Toward the end John Ames suggests to his friend’s son, Jack, that religion is perhaps not as restrictive as he thinks. “Doctrine is not belief, it’s only one way of talking about belief,” he says. Is doctrine a central component that distinguishes religion from spirituality?

**Robinson:** As I mentioned, I think the difficulty of religion is what distinguishes it from spirituality. In terms of doctrine, religion is always based on a profounder intuition than language does justice to. That’s why there’s so much theology written. If you focus on the literal prescriptions of creeds and other doctrine, then you’re missing the larger impulse that moves people to write creeds. So Ames is distinguishing between the traces that religion leaves on text, and the thing itself.

**Fate:** I’m left wondering why he loves that little town so deeply. His brother and later his father both try to convince him to leave Gilead. He’s a large-minded person in a tiny town. He stays put, which is an admirable quality. Yet one wonders if his gifts are not also somewhat wasted. Why does he stay?

**Robinson:** He was loyal to the life his family had lived in that town—even if the rest of his family no longer was. And there isn’t any necessary relation between the scope of one’s mind and where they live. Ames is highly educated. He knows what books to read, he knows what’s going on in the world, and thus is intellectually sophisticated. A life lived well is never wasted no matter what the scale of that life is. He lives toward God. And there is no way of measuring that.

**Fate:** In your book of essays, The Death of Adam, you have a chapter on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who seems to be more in the tradition of Ames’ grandfather—a prophet who boldly confronts injustice, including through violence. Both seem to equate faith with raw courage. How does that kind of activism compare with Ames, the grandson, a quiet intellectual who retreats to his study for much of his life, reading and writing in a kind of lonely gratitude? I’m wondering how you, as a Pulitzer Prize-winning scholar/writer, view the role of the writer, who seems more isolated and removed than the activist in bringing about social change.

**Robinson:** I don’t see that separation. The grandfather is modeled on John Todd from Tabor, Iowa, who came west with his friends from Oberlin College. Characteristically, these abolitionists were scholars. Many of them knew Hebrew and Greek. And this background is part of what enabled them to start colleges all over the Midwest. There is no reason for there to be a separation between the scholar and the activist. In fact, I think we might have a higher grade of activist if more of them were scholars.

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