

GUEST ESSAY

'The Idea of the Beautiful Is a Signature of God': A Q&A With Marilynne Robinson

Sept. 28, 2025

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Marilynne Robinson, a winner of the Pulitzer Prize and recipient of a National Humanities Medal, is one of the world's great writers. Her novels, including the four that have come to be known as the Gilead quartet, and her nonfiction books, like "The Death of Adam" and "Reading Genesis," are suffused by her Christian faith. It is impossible to understand her apart from it. There's an ease with which she speaks about religion, combined with deep conviction. "I believe God knows what life has felt like to people, what they've dealt with and what they have lost and they are beautiful in God's eyes," she told me.

I spoke to Ms. Robinson about her novels and their theological arc; her book on Genesis; her views of the Bible; fear and suffering, beauty and enchantment; how she understands the human soul; and what she hopes her legacy will be. My editor, Aaron Retica, who was deeply affected at a tender age by Ms. Robinson's first

novel, “Housekeeping,” joined me for the interview and popped up with a few questions of his own. Our conversation, which has been lightly edited, is the fourth in a series of interviews I am doing that explores the world of faith.

1. Journeys

Peter Wehner: Readers might be interested in knowing a bit about your journey of faith and, in particular, why you don’t just admire Jesus but came to worship him. Can you explain why Jesus is such a compelling figure to you, to the point that he won the affections of your heart and your allegiance?

Marilynne Robinson: I have experienced the fact that people are religious. It’s not something that is an unnatural state for them or something they have to induce in themselves. Lots of people aren’t religious, of course, but I think if you look at the world anthropologically, you find the sense that there’s much more to reality than is tangibly present to people.

I grew up, as most people in my generation did, in a sort of an ambient Christianity of a certain moderate kind. I found an incredible congeniality between how I was predisposed to think and the religious terms that were given to me. I didn’t feel as if religion was an attainment of mine. I think the authority of Jesus comes from Jesus. The idea that we generate religion and we give the meaning to it — I think that tends to discourage the thought that God is an active presence in the world.

So I don’t think of myself as having a journey of faith. I have allowed myself the very broadly shared human intuition that it’s appropriate to think in terms of God. And then the beauty, the moral authority, of high Christian tradition is just very persuasive. The beauty of it all seems right. It seems as if it opens the universe in a way that very few kinds of thinking actually do.

Wehner: It sounds like for you it’s an intuition and an aesthetic that came together and manifested itself in the Christian faith. I’m not sure if those categories are the right ones, exactly.

Robinson: I'm not sure myself, but I do want to say that I have felt as if religion was simply a way open to me. It helped me think; it helped me perceive. It's not that I wanted to use it or to leverage anything against it, but simply because it felt true.

Wehner: I have a close friend. He's an atheist who says that when it comes to faith, he's colorblind. There are some ways, he acknowledges, that something is missing in his life without faith, without being able to see colors. Which leads me to these questions: How do you see the world differently, perhaps as a writer but especially as a human being, because of your faith? And if you didn't have faith, what do you think would be the most conspicuous thing absent in your life?

Robinson: I think one of the most important aspects of thinking religiously is the assumption is that everything matters. That's an enormously important thing for a writer to consider. But the way that Christianity is, it sees at the scale of the minute, and it sees at the scale of the cosmic. And the cosmic, the grandeur of it all does not diminish the grandeur of the very small, the very detailed, the very humble, to use a biblical word. I would feel the world was impoverished in my perception of it if I did not see how it's situated in this realm of meaning.

2. Fates

Wehner: Let me switch to "Gilead." It's an epistolary novel, and John Ames is the 76-year-old minister who is the protagonist of the story. The book is the letter of a father to his young son. It explores themes like forgiveness and mortality, the beauty and wonder of ordinary life, our connection to our past and what it means to live a generous life. What are some of the ways faith shaped John Ames, and what does John Ames reveal about the faith of Marilynne Robinson?

Robinson: When I wrote John Ames, I was drawing on the resources that I had. How does the world look with this understanding that it is sacred? I started writing "Gilead" on a notebook in an empty hotel with nothing to do, and the voice of John Ames emerged very strongly for me. And from that point on, I felt more as if I were

taking dictation than as if I was creating that character. I was not making decisions about “Would he do this?” or “Would he do that?” because it seemed to me I knew him and he would act consistently with his nature.

Aaron Retica: I’m wondering how you think about the fate of characters. You don’t know, as a reader, what’s going to happen to them, but the writer does. What is the relationship for you between the characters in your novels and fate?

Robinson: Writers agree about one thing, and that is that they lose control of their characters. With luck, if the thing takes life, suddenly you find that a character will not say the words that you write down for him or he does something you had not anticipated. This happens all the time, and when they start acting out their own characters in that way, then basically you’re riding their coattails. Many things are established — what they will not do being an important and lengthy list. There’s a way in which our minds can do things that we don’t have any language to acknowledge. One of them is to understand another human being we imagine is really not ourselves and not obedient to our intentions for them.

Wehner: Would you say that your theology was more implicit in your earliest novel, “Housekeeping,” and that your theology became more explicit later? If so, did that reflect a change in your approach, either to theology or novel writing? Or is the premise of the question wrong?

Robinson: Having chosen a minister as a character, I had this vocabulary and imagery that wouldn’t normally be available. In writing “Housekeeping,” it’s an adolescent girl’s perception of things, and she’s very interested in the idea of immortality or resurrection, you might say, not putting these in theological terms but in terms of what is memory and why do we seem to tremble with being overloaded with suggestion and all this sort of thing. Because of her losses, she wants to see the world as more replete — as if so much that she had lost were not, in fact, lost.

Wehner: So it’s the characters that dictated the theology of the novels. It’s an interesting insight, when you were talking about John Ames, that you felt almost like you were taking dictation. It seemed to come very naturally to you.

Robinson: Yeah, I was very surprised, because I had written “Housekeeping” and I assumed that I would write from a female perspective. And then suddenly I had this man’s voice in my head. Which was just fine.

3. Beginnings

Wehner: I’ll shift now to your most recent book, “Reading Genesis,” which invites these questions: Why does Genesis matter? What is its unique, groundbreaking contribution, especially given the time and culture in which it was written? And why, in your estimation, is the world better and wiser for having the Book of Genesis?

Robinson: It really is an amazingly singular piece of literature in many ways. The idea of one God is very untypical, very uncharacteristic of ancient thought in general. The idea that God explicitly calls creation good — you don’t find that anywhere else. The fact that it is good in relation to its human inhabitants. We don’t find a lot of demigods wandering around. It’s God and humankind. And these human beings are very, very human. They don’t have the overpowering qualities that people in the “Odyssey” or the “Iliad” have or any other narrative that would be comparable that I have found. Human beings, understood in their fallibility and their frailty, are absolutely central in the cosmos of this very ancient book, and that is such a phenomenal thing. There’s nothing to compare.

Wehner: You refer to the characters in Genesis as very human, which is true enough. But is your sense, either in Genesis or in the Hebrew Scriptures generally, that God is very human as well? And if so, how do you describe that? Is it human emotions or some other aspect that strikes you about the character of God?

Robinson: I think that right through Scriptures, God’s intention is to humanize humanity, to give you a heart of flesh rather than stone. The thing that God does that is so striking is stand apart. He wishes people would — for their own sake, for the sake of the other people, whom he also loves — he wishes they would not kill and not steal and so on. But God leaves them free. He tells them what he considers good and right. But they always have the freedom to transgress, if that’s what they

choose to do. And I think that can be understood as God's loyalty to the idea of their being human, being free, acting creatures. And it's in the way they are able to act on their own, even in departing from what God wills for them, they have one of the qualities of God: freedom. I think that's very profound.

Wehner: Let me widen the aperture from Genesis to the whole Bible. C.S. Lewis believed the Bible was sacred but not inerrant, divinely inspired but also thoroughly human. He said, "We might have expected, we may think we should have preferred, an unrefracted light giving us ultimate truth in systematic form, something we could have tabulated and memorized and relied on, like the multiplication table." But that's not what we were given. The God of the Bible can't be reduced to a series of syllogisms. I wonder if you could reflect on why you believe God chose to reveal himself primarily through a narrative, a series of stories, rather than a series of propositions, through an unfolding drama rather than the religious equivalent of the multiplication table. Why does the Bible include the despair of the Psalms and the lament of the prophets?

Robinson: The Bible is very realist. It takes on the problem of evil, which is certainly central to the whole experience of humankind. People act as if it ought to be a Valentine's Day card or something like that. But actually it's directed at the black heart of the mystery. The Bible is very straightforward about many things, but one of them, certainly, is that it has human authors. That's another thing that is simply not characteristic, the fact that God lets us understand that we can receive truth that is absolute, that is beautiful truth, through a human spokesman, even if that person is not right all the time, not aligned with what God would say all the time.

4. Theologies

Wehner: You're a novelist, not a theologian, yet your works are infused with theology, and it's a particular kind of theology, if I understand it right. It's not so much systematic theology. Instead, if I understand your view correctly, theology involves prioritizing the concept of *imago Dei*, evoking a sense of awe and wonder

and even mystery. It's theology almost as an aesthetic, something that is both beautiful and that reveals beauty. Could you expand a bit on how you understand theology?

Robinson: It has to be said that I have learned from theology. I have not been free of its influence, and I haven't wished to be free of its influence. Very early on, for example, in "Institutes of the Christian Religion," John Calvin says the only true knowledge of God is born of obedience. I think that's something you only learn the value of experientially. It's a theological statement, but it is something that is outside any of the limitations you might think a system would impose. I've read a fair amount of Karl Barth. I like the classic Protestant tradition. I find it illuminating in the sense that it sort of tells me what I might have expected to be told. I don't find it alien. It is an aesthetic. One of the things I think is very odd in our period is that the word "beautiful" seems to have passed out of the culture.

Wehner: Why do you think that is?

Robinson: I think we accepted a kind of functionalism as the aesthetic, and any attempt at beauty is some kind of furbelow. It's like we have made beauty into something falsified. Calvin says there is not a blade of grass that God created that was not meant to ravish us with its beauty. The idea of the beautiful is a signature of God, I think for Calvin and Jonathan Edwards and many other people. This distillation of the joy, the sensory joy, of being among things in the world.

I think the loss of beauty is a loss of an intellectual discipline, which science never lost because scientists always have the right to say a formula is beautiful. We in the outside world, we've abandoned the word and the concept. It's suggestive that the scientists use it.

Wehner: You helped me see something that I don't think I had seen as clearly before, which is you connected theology to beauty. I think that's in part because, for me, theology is often put in the category of intellectual, and so the idea that theology rightly understood would lead to an appreciation for and even an insight into beauty is one I hadn't really thought about before.

Robinson: It's interesting how any culture that has a religious impulse surrounds it with its version of beauty. The classic aesthetics of every culture is what it uses to express its idea of the holy. I feel as though we have suppressed many natural impulses because of who we are.

Wehner: It sounds like you're saying beauty is, in a sense, teleological. It's fundamental to who we are, which is why it has resonance with us.

Robinson: Yes, and it's also, I think, part of the celebration of creation and the fact that creation itself is magnificent, and we can reinterpret it into other forms of beauty. It's magnificent, you know?

Wehner: You've talked about the regard you have for Calvin in this interview and elsewhere and the tradition that Calvin influenced. I wanted to drill down a bit on one aspect of it, the doctrine of predestination, that is, in some respects, reassuring to you and reassuring to countless others. On the other hand, there's a negative side to Calvin's view — and it's not Calvin's view alone, of course — of predestination, which is reprobation, the belief that the eternal, sovereign decree of God is not to extend saving grace to some, with the result being, for the unchosen, eternal conscious torment.

You said something that strikes me as quite honest and that articulates my own view: "I have never heard of even one persuasive case made for the compatibility of eternal damnation with the justice and mercy of God." So how do you put all those pieces together — being an admirer of Calvin yet seemingly quite troubled by a core teaching of his in "Institutes"? It's certainly possible that you could embrace some aspects of Calvin's teachings while rejecting others. Or it may be that you put the topic of hell in the category of mystery. But I've wondered, because of how I understand your view of faith and your regard for Calvin, how those pieces fit together.

Robinson: As you mentioned, predestination is a feature of Christian thought for everyone but John Chrysostom and John Wesley. You find it in Thomas Aquinas. You find it in Augustine, in Luther and so on. So it's not particularly a problem with Calvin; it's a problem with Christian thought. And it is occasioned by the idea of

omniscience and omnipotence. It's impossible for them to imagine indeterminacy. If God knows everything ahead of time, it's very difficult to make the argument that everything is still in play in futurity.

I think it's because they have — talk about presumptuous! — a flawed conception of time, that they have this kind of locked-in causality. That means things can't be in flux, that they are predestined once the thing is set in place. Many rationalists and scientists have argued from the same set of assumptions. So much has been done to utterly complicate our conception of time and utterly complicate our conception of causality. That being true, I think someone writing a theology now would not be trapped into predestination in the way that the great classics are. If you look at Thomas Aquinas or Augustine or Calvin, they are great ethicists and great moralists. They are not telling people how they should act on the assumption that they can't act well anyway. That's certainly not what they assume in the major body of their theology. So I think it's a problem that can't be answered in the terms in which they pose it.

Wehner: Back to the concept of eternal conscious torment: I've read people who have said that any post-mortem punishment is temporary and remedial rather than eternal and retributive. I find it challenging to square the doctrine of eternal damnation with the character of God. It's one I think an awful lot of people struggle with.

Robinson: I think it has to be noted that hell is not dealt with at any great systematic length in the Bible itself. A lot of what people act as if they know about hell is a human invention of a very Gothic kind — in most cases, things that people have used to terrify one another. There are allusions to the idea of an afterlife and a punitive afterlife. But if that were the major subject of the religion, I think we would know more about it.

Wehner: I think the same thing applies to heaven.

Robinson: Yes, exactly.

Wehner: We know very little about it other than the concept of heaven is bliss and beauty and all things are made new again. So it's beautiful and inviting, but it's not very specific.

Robinson: And that's a subject that's very largely missing from Calvin's theology. He says excessive concern for the fate of one's soul is insipid. For him, the issue is here among us. That's very attractive to me.

5. Fears

Wehner: You wrote about fear in an essay a decade ago in *The New York Review of Books*. "Fear," you wrote, "is not a Christian habit of mind." Now, obviously there are legitimate reasons for people of the Christian faith and the non-Christian faith to fear — living in a war zone, a cancer diagnosis, the loss of a job, being the target of relentless bullying at school — but you seem to have something else in mind. I wonder if you could speak to why fear isn't a Christian habit of mind, why it seems so prevalent among Christians today and the cost of indulging in fear in politics and in culture.

Robinson: Well, very often Jesus or an angel or someone says, "Fear not," and in very parlous circumstances. If you believe that ultimately the good of the universe prevails — is definitive of it, finally — then you have that confidence in excess of any kind of human evaluation of your circumstance. The disciples locked themselves into the upper room; they were not acting as if they were unthreatened. But the great reassurance is present among them.

I think fear is hallucinogenic. If you allow yourself fear, the possibilities open and open and open because the fact is that in a certain sense, there is no safe place for a human being. It's just not in the cards. But if you are fearful in a way that lets you make enemies of people who are simply abiding in the world with you, if you close yourself off because you're so fearful of tornadoes or whatever coin may be dealt in one situation or another, I think, fear is a very unhealthy stimulant, and it rationalizes — it justifies all kinds of bad behavior.

Wehner: I have a friend who tells a story. He talked to a woman whose daughter was going to college, and he was told the daughter was facing a crisis of faith. He assumed the crisis of faith was theological and had to do with God. Here's what the daughter said she was struggling with: I'm around all of these Christians, and they seem the most fearful, the most angry, the most anxious of all the people I know, much more so than non-Christians. That phenomenon, fear and all of the negative emotions fear can catalyze, is one of the most damaging witnesses to the Christian faith today.

Robinson: I utterly agree.

Wehner: Even so, suffering is part of the human drama. I'd be interested in what you've learned about suffering — your own suffering or the suffering of others — in the context of the Christian faith. Specifically, what have you found most helpful to you or to others to contextualize suffering, to make sense of it to the degree one can?

Robinson: In certain ways I feel as if the only honest thing I can do is disqualify myself. I'm 82. I have lived a pretty nice life — I'm just speaking physiologically here — and I can't say that, from my own experience, I have felt the kind of pain that I have seen. I have deep admiration for people who have dealt with it. I think they know profound things that I don't know. And on the basis of that, I take the word of many testifying people that great insight does come from pain, properly understood, properly seen.

Wehner: In those conversations that you've had with individuals who have suffered and who themselves have faith, did you find that one of the helpful aspects of faith — and this is a very C.S. Lewis concept, from "The Last Battle," in which he writes that this life is the cover and the title page, that the entire story is yet to unfold and that ultimately all things are redeemed — so in a sense, it contextualizes suffering for people? Or in the lives of the people you've talked to, is that not particularly prevalent in their processing of pain and grief?

Robinson: What I notice in people I know who have the experience of pain is that they're very grateful for all mitigation. They're very grateful for the loyalty of friends. Enormous generosity can be shown in those kinds of circumstances — and that, again, is a profound lesson.

6. Enchantments

Wehner: I have the sense in listening to you speak and write about faith that enchantment is a key component for you. The Christian faith in the wrong hands can lead people toward brittleness and intolerance, to making harsh judgments of others and to dogmatic thinking. But I sense that your life is more enhanced because of your faith. It allows you to see others and see the world in a more captivating way, including helping you find joy and grandeur in the ordinary and the mundane. If that's the case, why is that the case? How does faith, properly understood, lead to enchantment?

Robinson: I don't really think of it as something added to reality. I think of it as reality clearly perceived. I think God enchanted things and it is for us to acknowledge the fact.

Wehner: You said one of your deepest religious beliefs is that we are among souls and that we have souls. When you refer to souls, what do you have in mind? And does your understanding of the human soul lead you to a Christian humanism, which could be understood as a profound respect for intrinsic human dignity, for intellectual inquiry and for the pursuit of truth?

Robinson: The idea of a soul is very important to me. I had the idea in childhood, and I have been loyal to it, and then by simple extrapolation, if I have a soul, so does everyone. I think the soul is the mystery of a human being. You think of God as looking on, seeing the man you're seeing, and loving him when you see nothing in him to love. And I believe that's true. I believe God knows what life has felt like to people, what they've dealt with and what they have lost and they are beautiful in God's eyes. And it doesn't mean anything if they're not beautiful in anyone else's

eyes. But the idea of what we can know about God is established in the fact that we know God does love people, anyone you see walking down the street, and I think that's very beautiful.

Wehner: As you describe God's love for us, the closest analogue to human beings would be the love of a parent for a child, to love them even if they're not always lovable.

Robinson: Like David and Absalom and so many examples, really.

7. Legacies

Retica: The Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard said that when he was writing, he was writing and that when he was reading, he was reading. For you, is it an interactive process, where you're moving in all these realms and everything's enriching everything else? Or is it sequential? Your reading life and your writing life — how do they interact?

Robinson: That's hard to say. When writing, I'm often surprised at what my brain wants to draw on. It's a very strange interaction between self and soul or consciousness and mind, where I'll be thinking about something at one level, and then something comes to me from another part of my brain, something I read somewhere once and totally had forgotten or something I had seen and totally forgotten, or so I thought. But it turns out that the intense interaction is between what you try to articulate and what you're actually capable of if you push yourself, if you say: How does that look? How did that sound? What were those words? I'm saying, in effect, that my literary brain is highly active in everything I write, but I don't have books in front of me. I have memory.

Wehner: You're in your early 80s. I wonder if you could put into words what you've tried to impart to the world through your writings and through your faith. To put it another way, what would you like the legacy of Marilynne Robinson to be?

Robinson: I think I would like people to enjoy the world more and perhaps to be more tactful, more tender in their dealings with people at large, even people in their millions. God does not deal in small numbers. I love that moment when he is with Abraham and they're looking at the stars and God says: These are people. It's very reassuring, the idea that we exist in our billions and God's interest and love deal at that scale. God rejoices in it.

Wehner: I will say that you have certainly achieved one part of what you hope your legacy is, which is helping people enjoy the world more. Is there anything else on your heart or mind you want to share with the wider world?

Robinson: Something I have always wished is that people would go back to the original text, the original source. I think if you could read the great theologians with fresh eyes, you would have an outpouring of good wisdom and beauty. I think the Bible itself awaits that kind of reading. So do many historical things. People get mischaracterized, and then it's like a scrim over the written word itself. You're conditioned not to see what is there on the page to be seen. I think we feel a kind of cultural thinness at this moment. We have too few resources. I think we would have them if we chose to accept them — realize how much high-quality, beautiful thought there is and that it's there to be used as a richness, a resource, if it were treated well.

Retica: You were talking before about how most people in most cultures have had belief at the center of their lives. But as a writer, you're dealing constantly, in one way or another, with much more skepticism about all of these things. I'm wondering how you felt interacting with that world. Did you feel you had to protect certain core aspects of yourself? Or did it enrich your understanding of your own idea of Christianity and the soul? I'm not saying all writers are atheists, obviously, but certainly a higher percentage of writers are atheists compared with the population at large.

Robinson: I've been doing what I've been doing for a very long time. I have never encountered any asperity, any rudeness. I have found that if I satisfy what I think are reasonable standards of intellectual rigor, I can get on in the world perfectly

well.

We were talking about fear before, and many people who are Christian, they will say: Weren't you afraid? Weren't you afraid to write a book like that? Weren't you afraid that you would be ridiculed by professors or something?

I did the thing I wanted to do. I never encountered any punitive response in the outside world. If you're polite and reasonable, you can very much go against the grain, and nobody is going to say boo.

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