The Vexing Paradoxes of Christian Life Denial: A Response to *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel*

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Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel: A Philosophical Account of Her Christian Vision by Ryan S. Kemp and Jordan Rodgers joins the ranks of a growing number of monographs exploring the fiction of the internationally acclaimed North American novelist, and it might well be the first book-length study to include the 2020 novel *Jack* in its discussion.[2] The volume contributes thoughtfully to explaining the stunning popularity of Robinson's explicitly Christian novels not only among religious readers, but also among secular atheists.

In our complicated contemporary world, not even faithful and mature adherents of serious religious traditions can help but be disturbed by sinister religious energies as they play out in political as well as cultural, social, and private life everywhere on the globe. One has only to think of the troubling role played by the Russian Orthodox Church in the aggression against Ukraine, or of the religious fanaticism fueling the Israeli-Palestinian war. Closer to home, in countries such as the United States or Hungary, where I live, Christianity is increasingly hijacked and used in culture wars to forward the interests of influential political elites. To be sure, these forms of moralizing, psychologically immature, and theologically reductive versions of Christianity, which Friedrich Nietzsche rightfully critiqued as "life denying," easily lend themselves to such abuse, not to speak of the trauma they often inflict on their followers. Clearly uncomfortable with a great deal of what passes for Christianity today, Kemp and Rodgers propose Robinson's life-affirming, joyous Christian vision as a refreshing antidote. "A vision of the world," they say, "that genuinely seeks to clarify the stakes of affirming life and embody that affirmation, rather than simply advance our culture wars to their next stage of escalation, is bound to speak to us."[3]

Nietzsche regarded the world weariness, even the nihilism, he attributed to Christianity as the source of the modern age's disenchantment and of all its persistent tribulations. According to the authors, even though Robinson never mentions Nietzsche, she joins him in "feeling acutely the psychological and ultimately existential threat posed by hatred, resentment, and life-denial" destined to devastate the modern world. However, her novels also challenge Nietzsche's critique of Christianity by calling attention to resources *within the Christian tradition* that can counter these life-denying forces.

Taking these insights as their starting point, Kemp and Rodgers discuss Robinson's five novels in the context of the Nietzschean accusation of life denial. As an important prelude to discussing Nietzsche, they also address the claims of his renowned predecessor, the 19th century atheist philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach—with good reason, since Feuerbach is perhaps the most important theological conversation partner of John

Ames in *Gilead*. As a matter of fact, there seems to be a parallel between Ames's treatment of Feuerbach, and the authors' treatment of Nietzsche: rather than adversaries to combat, they view them as cherished conversational partners and potential allies for life-affirming Christians in imagining a better and more humane world. As Reverend Ames in *Gilead* famously says, "[N]othing true can be said about God from a posture of defense."[4] *Worldly Gospel* is not only the first monograph to include an illuminating analysis of Ames's theologically creative engagement with Feuerbach, but, more ambitiously, it offers a practical demonstration of the Robinsonian non-defensive apologetic model, glimpes of which we can catch from Ames's theological thinking as well as from Robinson's essays.[5] Hence, the term "worldly gospel" not only challenges the stark dichotomy between the present world and the next, but also transcends the believer-nonbeliever ("us and them") dichotomy, even within theological discourse.

After their eminently readable and lucid exposition of Feuerbach's and Nietzsche's criticisms of Christianity, Kemp and Rodgers proceed to conduct an in-depth analysis of each of the five novels. They adeptly balance attention to detail with framing their analysis in terms of the overarching purpose of demonstrating how Christian faith, far from being an obstacle to love of life, can actively deepen it. They argue that in comparison with the life-denying tendencies of the first novel *Housekeeping*, which focuses on irreversible loss, Robinson's second novel, *Gilead*, marks a major turn in outlook. In *Gilead*, the narrator-protagonist joins Feuerbach's celebration of the joy of life while disagreeing with his notions about the joy-killing consequences of religion.

This is where Kemp and Rodgers introduce their most seminal insight. They argue that the kind of religious perception exemplified by Ames does not diminish, but rather enhances the most intense experiences of joy in human life. It is a religious framework that enables us to respond adequately to their inexhaustibility, by giving language to something that is ultimately beyond language. More precisely, religion at its best provides a unique kind of language enacted through performative embodiment, a term I have coined inspired by the authors' formulation, "performative refutation." They apply this concept to atheists like Feuerbach and Ames' elder brother Edward, who, despite his disbelief, turns to ritual and the recital of sacred text as a way to channel his ecstatic impulse to praise.

How does joy call Feuerbach's philosophy into question? According to Feuerbach, religion is the product of the imagination: We take what is best in humanity and project it onto a perfect divine being outside ourselves. A direct and conclusive philosophical refutation of this theory does not seem to be possible. No one can prove what lies beyond our conceptual grasp. In Ames's and Robinson's phenomenological perspective, however, there is a given, which is "felt experience."[6] It is Ames's life and practice which reverses, and thus indirectly disproves, the direction of the projection, rather than his cautious attempt at refuting Feuerbach's conclusion. What is at stake, Kemp and Rodgers suggest, is not the existence of God *per se*, but the effect the exclusion of the sacred makes on the quality of our experience: "at the level of felt experience joy includes precisely what Feuerbach denies: that one has made contact

with something that exceeds all possible attempts to understand it." If, according to Feuerbach, "all things are made to human measure, then joy is a direct challenge."[7] Indeed, to deprive moments of intensive joy of a religious interpretive framework is to undermine the intensity and to narrow the scale of the experience. "If joy gives rise to the impulse to praise precisely because it hints at the supersensible, then a way of thinking that begins by rejecting the transcendent is bound to either stifle the impulse to praise or, worse, choke it off completely."[8] In the very least, to reject the transcendent—and so the robust language of transcendence—renders a person inarticulate about her most profound experiences.

The authors' point about the horizon-broadening effect of a religious framework is particularly well applied in their analysis of Ames' second wife, Lila—a former drifter, cleaning woman, and prostitute—and her integration into the Christian community. While with most conversion stories, we expect a narrative about how troubled individuals adopt a simplified worldview that helps them "reduce the complexity of life down to a livable formula,"[9] Kemp and Rodgers explain that "with Lila, we see a life that expands once it embraces a religious vocabulary. The sacredness of an individual soul, baptism, resurrection, eternity: these are ideas that open up the world as solemn wonder."[10]

Dozens of articles and book chapters have been written about Marilynne Robinson as "theologian of the ordinary," but few have been as successful as Kemp and Rodgers in giving a nuanced and convincing account of the exact nature of the link between the ordinary and the sacred. As we have seen, Ames links moments of intensive joy to the sacred and the sacred to religion.[11] How? Reminiscent of Simone Weil, the authors identify attention by which ordinary things are transfigured into sacraments because it is through steadfast and patient attention that the inexhaustibility and mystery of ordinary reality unfolds. From here it is only a small step to argue that it is the liturgical and sacramental life of the church that is particularly suited to train our attention to find joy in the ordinary. The perception of holiness or sacredness in special days or sacramental events prepares us to rejoice in every ordinary thing as special, a proper object of wonder and awe. Ames appears to interpret even the commandments sacramentally, what's more, aesthetically, which, again, is a seminal insight of the authors. We are expected to honor our parents because they are beautiful, and this loving attention to them should be extended to other people: "Honoring specific things is training in honoring all things."[12] This is why we need "a religious life [which] is uniquely structured to put a person in the way of" joy.[13]

This theoretical stance is affirmed practically in the Reverend's life. However, it is also tested by the arrival of his godson, Jack—the "black sheep" in the family of Ames's best friend, Presbyterian minister Robert Boughton—apparently the only person in his life whom he has not yet succeeded in including in his life-affirming vision. Jack, once a moral failure, a thief, and a drunkard, now endeavors to live an honorable life. However, due to his mixed-race marriage, he remains ostracized by society. The encounter between the Reverend and his godson is heavy with meaning. To replace rejection with acceptance is only possible once Ames is granted the vision to see divine beauty and holiness where he

had previously only seen moral corruption and meanness. Kemp and Rodgers, quite consistently, apply their previous insight to this situation, suggesting that the challenge now facing Ames is to extend the sacramental perception of his own child, Robbie, to Jack, whose human beauty he has yet to recognize. Once more foregrounding the key role of attention, the authors suggest that Robbie helps Ames "by focusing Ames's attention in such a way that he is all but forced to recognize his son's existence and thereby the beautiful mystery of all human beings."[14]

Through their analysis of the novels *Jack* and *Home*, Kemp and Rodgers take an even closer look at the challenge the depths of human sin and despair pose for those who maintain a fundamental trust in the goodness and beauty of life, sustained by a loving God. They have already shown how in the novel *Gilead* a comprehensive sacramental attitude has finally brought the Reverend Ames to honor the dignity and mystery of Jack Boughton. The discussion of the novel *Jack*, however, brings to the surface an important philosophical dilemma related to the sacramental perception of every human being as beautiful and sacred. In the case of Della, Jack's wife, the authors must deal with an intriguing charge voiced by some critics who claim that Della's "blind loyalty" to Jack is life denying because it stems from pity and fails to consider Jack's individual qualities. Instead, it seems to look through them, "grounding commitment in some nebulous feature …. in some imagined but usually religious phantom."[15] Della is in love with some mysterious entity called "Jack's soul," but there does not seem to be any "relation between that soul and the actual person Jack."[16]

For all the strengths of their book, I will contend that Kemp and Rodgers need to provide a stronger response to this alleged dilemma. The above objection evokes the authors' earlier analysis of the "tireless tenderness" of old Boughton, whose "high minded universal response" disregards the particularities of Jack's character and his offences.[17] What's more, even though the authors tend to use Ames' character as a standard to measure other characters' success in life affirmation,[18] the dilemma they themselves posit does cast some doubt even on Ames's attitude of universal wonder and awe. Indeed, can we imagine how Ames' son, reading his father's letter as an adult, would react to being told that he is not very remarkable, and is only admired for his existence in general? Thus, one first wonders whether the best way for Kemp and Rodgers to begin refuting the charge is to establish a kinship between Ames and Della.

Fortunately, however, they have not yet exhausted their exploration of the theological, and indeed mystical, foundation of Ames's—and by extension, Della's—sense of wonder and awe. In the chapter on *Jack*, they draw a masterful parallel between aesthetic insight and the Christian vision of soul or, indeed, a vision of any piece of created reality. Just as a great painting, composed of details important and unique in themselves, transcends these individual elements, Jesus (as envisioned by Della) "sees all the details of a person—the scars, the small tragedies, the hidden graces—and in these 'precious things' makes contact with something that utterly transcends them: the beauty of a soul."[19]

Still not satisfied with their own answer, the authors relentlessly pursue their original question, *Why Jack?*, out of all people. What they

ultimately come up with is a theological and spiritual mystery. The Christian tradition knows about a form of love that appreciates the uniqueness of each person while maintaining its universal scope, a love only God or Christ and some exceptional saints are capable of. In the presence of such love, we feel we are appreciated in our uniqueness even though we are also aware that the appreciation is equally extended to others. However, one still wonders if this is an adequate philosophical resolution to the dilemma. First, these remarks seem more to say—confidently—that there *is* a solution than to *advance our insight* about what this solution is. Moreover, when the authors speak of the "something" that utterly transcends the particulars, which is "the beauty of a soul," it's still not Jack's soul but *a* soul. Are we not back to where we began? Whereas in the first-person narrative of *Gilead*, we see a fallible old man struggling with and finally overcoming his unwillingness to extend this love to someone who seems to him to lack loveable qualities, in the case of Della, we see a saint whose "motivational opacity" not even the authors' insightful analysis can entirely dispel.

In spite of this doubt, I believe one of the book's primary achievements to be the authors' nuanced and thoughtful unpacking of important passages, scenes, and conversations, which helps to elucidate the Boughton family dynamic, the mysteries of Jack's psyche, and the underlying motivations of the characters. Indeed, they adopt Della's method of interpreting the complexities of Shakespeare's characters, whose "curious behavior … hints at the existence of a text-behind-the-text that gives the reader necessary, but missing, background information." Commenting on Della's approach, Kemp and Rodgers note that in Hamlet "the reader has to look closely for clues that indicate there is a larger story to tell,"[20] and they are quite successful in finding and interpreting such clues in Robinson's novels.

But there are also blind spots. In *Worldly Gospel*, a few of these occur in the interpretation of *Housekeeping*. According to the authors, the two sisters who experience a series of traumatic losses—such as the early disappearance of their father, the death of their grandfather in a train accident, and the suicide of their mother, to name the worst of these—choose two very different ways of coping, but both are escapist. Lucille's path is ignorance "through participation in the settled world of middle-class convention,"[21] whereas Ruth, the authors argue, escapes from pain through a retreat into her own dreamworld. Though in this way she imaginatively resurrects her mother, the price is exile from the world of the living. As the authors put it, "In turning away from the physical, her body and its crudities, [Ruth] has become attuned to an interior music, the imminent presence of her mother, that she now plays on loop. She has made herself into a ghost (been 'unhoused') to live with ghosts."[22] The first life strategy is an escape *from*, the second *into* the past, and as such, life denying.

This interpretation is acceptable *as far as it goes*: from a psychological perspective, the authors analyze Ruth's coping mechanism accurately. However, overlooking the expansion of Ruth's personal suffering into a universal tragic vision of loss, the authors come close to what George Steiner called Christianity's antitragic bias. If, as they have repeatedly claimed, a Christian imaginative framework can significantly

broaden one's horizon rather than shrink it, are we to settle with a therapeutic approach in the case of Ruth's biblically inspired fantasies? If religious language does not diminish but enhances experiences of joy, can it not do the same for the experience of loss, even if it results in a dark and dangerous exposure to "the force behind the movement of time," to "a mourning that cannot be comforted."[23] Does not Ruth respond as profoundly to the inexhaustibility of the tragic as Ames and Lila to the inexhaustibility of joy?

Rather than "protecting herself from harm by removing herself from the world,"[24] as the authors put it, Ruth's exile from society is triggered, I would argue, by an insight into the "world's true workings."[25] Having chosen to live in the universal tragic moment, Ruth wishes to be "unhoused" (an unmistakable reference to the tempest scene in *King Lear*) not to escape from harm, as Kemp and Rodgers claim, but to identify with all sufferers everywhere. This is holy madness displayed by people like Simone Weil, who "lacked the normal layers of protection" and was obsessed with the sufferings of all people everywhere to the point of voluntary starvation.[26] Ruth's spiritual experience is kenotic, dominated by the awareness of the tragic depth of life as opposed to the smooth surface.[27] In the philosophical-theological framework of *Wordly Gospel*, this attitude inevitably appears as life denying, but as Kathleen Sands has insightfully noted, tragedies are not worldviews; they shatter worldviews. The brokenness experienced in the tragic moment is such that no coherent view of it is possible.[28]

The only thing that seems to mitigate Ruth's relentless focus on the tragic moment is her rich eschatological fantasies about a future where all the broken fragments will be "knit up finally," where "time and error and accident [will be] undone, and the world [will become] comprehensible and whole."[29] However, is there enough difference between Ruth's and Glory's imaginings which allows the authors to interpret Jack's sister's decision to renounce the world and live the life of a lonely housekeeper redemptive, as opposed to Ruth's self-imposed exile, which is interpreted on the whole as an escapist strategy to minimize loss?[30]

The other character the authors perhaps fail to do justice to, and for related reasons, is Ames's grandfather. Grandfather Ames had a vision of a slave-Jesus in chains, joined the abolitionist movement and enlisted in the Civil War. In his old age, he stole money from his own family to give it to the poor. Finally, impatient with domestic comfort as well as upset by the conflict with his pacifist son, he ran away from home and died destitute in Texas. He makes us uneasy, just like fools, crazy Hebrew prophets, irregular saints like Simone Weil, and kings gone mad. To emphasize, as the authors do, the narrowness of his vision or the ways he harmed his own family[31] is acceptable *as far as it goes*. However, if this is all we can say, we miss the underlying deeper paradox. Why does narrator Ames respect his grandfather so much? Why does he appear as a saint in his grandson's eyes? Isn't it the case that the grandfather is a chink in the well-oiled wheels of middle-class life, a constant, uncomfortable reminder that somewhere Jesus is always in chains, awaiting liberation, even if it means getting our hands dirty? Isn't he the one ready to give up his comfort zone and sacrifice himself for social justice, displaying just the kind of passionate willingness which, according to

several commentators, is lamentably missing in most of the other characters?[32] This example of extreme prophetism suggests that the problem of Christian life denial is perhaps more complex and paradoxical than Kemp and Rodgers would allow.

The crazy "wordly asceticism"[33] of Ames's grandfather, whom Timothy Larsen places in the revivalist tradition by suggesting that the real-life analog to grandfather Ames may have been the radical evangelical abolitionist, Reverend John Todd,[34] leads me to a question the authors haven't addressed. Nietzsche is just one out of many great thinkers and artists who emerged from very strict and dogmatic Protestant families, and whose religious trauma left an indelible mark on their work. Just how a religion and a theology foregrounding the notion of free grace and forgiveness could produce such rigor is a puzzling question, and notwithstanding all objections, I still find Weber's theory of "wordly asceticism" quite illuminating in this respect. For the same reason, Robinson's wholesale dismissal of Weber seems puzzling and revealing at the same time,[35] as one cannot help wondering whether her beautiful imaginative construct of a sacramental Protestantism and a mystical minister isn't also an evasion of the vexing issue of the Protestant version of life denial. I would have welcomed a discussion about the Nietzschean accusation applied specifically to the Protestant tradition.

That said, *Worldly Gospel* is a valuable read, appealing not only to literary scholars, theologians, and philosophers, but to any reader interested in the life affirming potentials of Christianity and the work of one of America's and the world's best-loved authors.

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[1] This essay benefitted from the editorial suggestions of Regan Lance Reitsma.
[2] Ryan S. Kemp and Jordan Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel: A Philosophical Account of Her Christian Vision* (London: Bloomsbury Academic), 2023.
[3] Kemp and Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel*, 6.
[4] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (London: Virago Press, 2005), 202.
[5] To be more precise, though as an apologist, Robinson never retreats into a defensive position, this doesn't mean that she treats critics of religion as potential allies. Indeed, she can be quite combative in her approach. In this sense, our authors' approach here is refreshingly different.
[6] Kemp and Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel*, 91.
[7] Ibid., 91.
[8] Ibid., 92.
[9] Ibid., 3.
[10] Ibid., 202.
[11] Ibid., 93.
[12] Ibid., 94–95.
[13] Ibid., 83.
[14] Ibid., 106.
[15] Ibid., 148.
[16] Ibid., 153.
[17] Ibid., 120–21.

[18] Who wants to "write off Della to celebrate characters like Ames and Glory"? See Ibid., 154.
[19] Ibid., 157.
[20] Ibid., 161.
[21] Ibid., 53.
[22] Ibid., 73.
[23] Ibid., 192.
[24] Ibid., 174.
[25] Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 116.
[26] Adrian Poole, "Some Modern Saints? Simone Weil," Trinity College Cambridge, Sunday, October 13, 2013, online at http://trinitycollegechapel.com/media/filestore/sermons/PooleWeil131013.pdf.
[27] I have argued for this interpretation at length in my "The Return of Ruth: Loss and (Heavenly) Restoration in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and *Lila*," in *Religion & Literature* 55, no. 2–3 (Summer-Autumn, 2023), upcoming edition.
[28] Kathleen Sands, "Tragedy, Theology, and Feminism in the Time after Time," in *New Literary History* 35, no. 1, 2004, 43.
[29] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 92.
[30] Granted, the authors allow that Ruth's fantasies "perhaps contain the seeds of a more thoroughgoing embrace of life." Kemp and Rodgers, *Marilynne Robinson's Worldly Gospel*, 77.
[31] Ibid., 169.
[32] See also ibid., 149, 167.
[33] According to Weber, to worldly ascetics, the world appears as their responsibility. Max Weber, "Asceticism, Mysticism and Salvation," in *Economy and Society; An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), 542.
[34] Timothy Larsen, "The Theological World of the Reverend John Ames," in *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Keith L. Johnson (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 10–16.
[35] Apart from a brief discussion in *The Death of Adam*, she never presents a convincing case against Weber. Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 2005), 23–24; see also 180–181. According to David Little, a renowned Calvin scholar himself, "Robinson surrenders unfortunately to a one-sided and uninformed interpretation of Weber's writings, particularly his essay on the Protestant ethic" (94). "Christianity and Human Rights: A Personal Testament," in *Christianity and Human Rights: Influences and Issues*, ed. Frances S. Adeney and Arvind Sharma (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 94.