

Morrison had attracted the attention of educated persons through his translations of Chinese classics into English, and he was eventually invited to serve as a translator for the East India Company. Bivocational ministry gave the newly married Morrison financial solvency and enabled him to further hone his language skills. But he felt keenly the political awkwardness of his position, attempting to reach the Chinese while an employee of the hated company. Work for the company was also time consuming and hampered his progress in missionary work. Nonetheless, in stages, Morrison was able to report success. With assistance, he translated the Bible into Chinese, along with other Christian works and linguistic aids. In partnership with another Bogue-educated minister he started a seminary for training additional missionaries, thus providing a self-perpetuating ministry led by Chinese pastors, a couple of whom became believers through his own witness and testimony. It was an impressive quarter-century of work, but Daily's monograph ends, appropriately, in a minor key. Morrison was deserted by the Society and died a discouraged man. The circumstances of his final years led his widow to defend his reputation and accomplishments in an adoring biography that remained the source for most book-length treatments of the missionary.

Daily's work is at times ponderous; key points are pressed for whole paragraphs where a line or two would have been sufficient. Nonetheless, his prose is easy to follow and his argument, that a missionary's accomplishments need to be appreciated in the context of the institution and individual(s) who trained him, is clear, and on the whole, persuasive. He shows little empathy for Eliza Morrison's account of her husband's person and work. On the whole, he is more successful in describing a school of training than in illuminating a man's life. Nonetheless, it is this emphasis on education that makes this study one of unique importance for those attentive to the history of Chinese-English relations, missions, and Bible translation.

CHAD VAN DIXHOORN

Chancellor's Professor of Historical Theology
Associate Professor of Church History
Reformed Theological Seminary
Washington, DC

Marilynne Robinson. *The Givenness of Things: Essays*. London: Little, Brown, 2015. Pp. 293.

What is the best way to make a seminary professor happy, particularly one who teaches in a Reformed academy? It is to allow him to see the fruit of

the ministry of a graduate years into the former student's work in the local parish. The fruit varies: the gospel applied to poverty relief, souls and bodies being saved from darkness, healing in broken families, young people fired up by the Bible, and—why not?—a successful novelist whose stories and characters reflect the worldview of creation-fall-redemption without being tracts or sermons in disguise. In one of the essays in her collection *The Givenness of Things*, Marilynne Robinson describes herself as a beneficiary from seminary graduates. She doesn't quite put it this way. She praises the virtues of the Calvinist tradition of preaching, which are, or ought to be, at the center of any good seminary curriculum. She unashamedly describes attending her church and the Sunday experience of listening to this "extraordinary moment when someone attempts to speak in good faith, about something that matters, to people who attempt to listen in good faith" (p. 146). When properly delivered the good sermon gives meaning to all of life.

At the seminary where I teach we don't quite explain preaching this way to our homiletics students. But maybe we should. Robinson goes on to describe the heart of a good sermon as wisdom, *sapientia Dei*, which guides the faithful into such sobering truths as the brevity and the beauty of this life. As we begin to sense our utter frailty, let's say listening to a sermon on Isaiah 40 ("all flesh is as grass"), we then can better grasp how unlikely it is that we have been called to live in eternity with God. She goes on to decry the American call to "relevance" in preaching, or anywhere, not because whatever trend or innovation of the moment is bound to become obsolete, which it will, but for the simple reason that it lacks wisdom. And wisdom tells us in many different ways how, despite our myriad weaknesses, we are significant and why we should behave that way. Why are we significant? Simply because we are loved, subjects of the grace of God.

Nothing revolutionary here—or is there? We so want to put religion in a box—to explain it away, to make it "relevant" or defend it from the evidences—that we end up losing the complete wonder of God's forgiveness. And in so doing we disconnect from mystery, a reality significantly absent from Western culture. We need better apologetics, the kind that can only be nurtured through fine sermons.

They are rare, but they do exist. In every generation there are Christian apologists who do more than defend the faith. They persuade. Defenders are adept with proofs, evidences, arguments that appeal to our reasoning ability. When they are good, we listen and say, "You are right, I give up." Persuaders are adept with the unexpected, with human depth, with imagination. When they are good, we listen and say, "You are right, I'm in love." Defenses come from argument. Persuasion comes from wisdom. We need

both defenders and persuaders, but there is a dearth of good persuaders.

They do exist. In ancient times we can think of Saint Augustine, particularly his *Confessions*, a book as powerful today as it was when first written (A.D. 397–400). He invites you into his soul and divulges his most intimate secrets, many of them dark. But he prays out loud throughout, and you are drawn in, you begin praying with him. Scripture quotes are so abundant you don't quite know when it is Augustine or the Bible speaking. In our own time we might think of Francis Spufford, especially his *Unapologetic* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013). The full title gives something of the flavor of what follows: *Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*. It's not a therapy book, but a presentation of the gospel from places we are not expecting. Os Guinness is yet another, with his resourceful study of the art of persuasion itself: *Fool's Talk* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

These persuasive approaches do not side-step biblical orthodoxy. Many books do that these days, waffling on the book of Genesis or the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement. Instead, the good persuader embraces the historic Christian position hook, line, and sinker, as Americans like to say—in other words, without reservation. Robinson is just such an apologist. I am reasonably certain she would not enjoy the title. But that is what she is. It happens that a substantial part of her oeuvre is fiction. She is a superb novelist, having given us *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), and *Lila* (2014), a trilogy about the fictional town of Gilead, in the Midwest of the United States. And there is a good deal of nonfiction as well, on subjects ranging from welfare to modern thought to the joys of reading. She has won all kinds of literary awards, and has a host of admirers, including President Obama, a personal friend.

I mention this because to begin with, Robinson is a marvelous wordsmith. Much of our prose is linear, repeating the sequence of subject-verb-object, subject-verb-object. Some prose is overly labored, dense, crowded. Robinson's is elegant, fluid, artistic. Her words serve the content, not the other way round. That is, she is certain of her ideas and thus only needs the right words to set them forth. To pick just one example from many: in one of her discussions of the grandeur of mankind, she counters the positivist view that we are but chemicals. In most ways, these pseudo-scientists argue, the brain is nothing but a piece of meat. Robinson answers simply enough at first. Calling the brain meat is absurd. But then she goes on: "More to the point, what is meat? Complex life. And what is that? The universe's greatest mystery. It is meat that sings and flies and fledges, meat that makes civilizations and pulls them down ..." (p. 230). You won't find such prose in most ordinary defenses of the Christian faith.

And just as important, Robinson knows people. Her exquisite novel *Lila* describes a homeless woman who falls in love with a minister, himself a lonely widower who preaches about life, death, and suffering in ways she had not dared bring to the surface. Through him and through many trials she finds a home. In a way, all of the essays in the present collection are a defense of finding our home. Being human, despite the circumstances—or, rather, often, because of them—means we have significance way beyond the visible, way beyond our circumstances. Her arsenal includes literature from a good many places. She cites Pico della Mirandola, who advocated *On the Dignity of Man* in the fifteenth century, based on his capacity for happiness, a quality which makes other creatures envious, including animals and stars (p. 302). She loves the Lollards and other pre-Reformers. She has a special fondness for John Calvin, with whom she constantly interacts. She persistently quotes from his *Institutes*, protesting that we would love Calvin more if we read him rather than Max Weber. In her remarkable essay “Fear,” she reminds the readers that those who stand in Calvin’s tradition were so courageous they would sacrifice their lives and fortunes for loyalty to God’s will in the face of persecutors who arguably possessed the ultimate weapon: the fear of heresy. In what must be understood as a jibe against certain contemporary politicians in America, she suggests, “If someone had asked a citizen of Lyon, on his way to help exterminate the Calvinists, to explain what he and his friends were doing, he would no doubt have said that he was taking back his city, taking back his culture, taking back his country, fighting for the soul of France” (p. 127).

Robinson’s first love, after Scripture, and after Calvin, is no doubt Shakespeare. The subject of her doctoral dissertation, she knows his works intimately and is able to draw on them for many of the principles she is busy supporting. Her justification for grace comes from various places in Shakespeare. She cites Prospero’s words to his wretched brother, Antonio, in *The Tempest*, Act V: “For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother / Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive / Thy rankest faults—all of them.” If you know this drama, you will remember Antonio has schemed to commandeer Prospero’s title and cause his death and the death of his child. The perfect pretext for revenge? But no, Prospero extends his mercy, though never obscuring his crimes. Similarly, if “simple human forgiveness” entitled Laertes and Hamlet to pass into eternity “as if the madness of earth had never contrived to make them enemies,” how much more the grace of God toward every repentant pagan and infidel? (pp. 44–48).

Robinson loves both the Renaissance and the Reformation. The glory of the Renaissance was Humanism—not in the modern, pejorative godless,

man-centered sense, but what was meant by the term in the fifteenth century, the devoted attention to humane letters and their timeless value. The glory of the Reformation was its concern to make the deepest matters of theology accessible and understandable to the simplest creature. “The bookishness of the Reformation,” she says, “might be said to have generalized itself to become an expectation of legibility in the whole of Creation” (p. 23). And in the bargain, the church tradition that reserved biblical interpretation to the specialists was demolished. Both the Renaissance and the Reformation were, in their different ways, a defense of the human being, every one of them, against oppressive hierarchies.

These essays are a wealth of learned meditations on a large variety of subjects from astrophysics to slavery. They contain surprisingly creative presentations of the classic Christian doctrines, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the sovereignty of God. But if there is any center, any theme that surfaces over and over, it is indeed the dignity of the human being. That nobility found in the human creature cannot have been contrived. Instead it had to be revealed:

Where would we be if the Hebrew God had not said and insisted that human beings share his image and are sanctified by it? Do we have any other secure basis for belief in universal human dignity? There is no evidence at all that this is anything we know intuitively. (p. 170)

Understandably, then, Robinson loves Psalm 8, where the question of man’s identity is raised in the context of the starry heavens and their magnificence. Robinson has gazed into the heavens more than most, so her conclusions are the more impressive. And she realizes full well that our human majesty, called to rule the earth, has become perverted by the fall. Greatness cuts both ways. We are capable not only of creating but of unspeakable destruction. And yet, at the end of the day, or perhaps the end of history, the truth remains that “God is a given, the God of the psalmist and of Jesus” (p. 256). This givenness, the overall title of these essays, is the only assurance that we have dignity.

To train ministers who can preach wisdom to such an articulate Christian makes the career of this particular seminary professor entirely worthwhile.

WILLIAM EDGAR

Professor of Apologetics
John Boyer Chair of Evangelism and Culture
Westminster Theological Seminary
Philadelphia, PA