

MARILYNNE ROBINSON LECTURE

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Public Square Lecture Series: Chicago Theological Seminary Lecture by Marilynne Robinson

CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY – November 7, 2018 – I assume that I am speaking to an audience who are, generally, liberal and religiously diverse. I will be talking about a term that is central to the Christian mythos, that is, sin. I know that in an audience like this one I need not say the words myth, mythic, mythos are not synonyms for untruth, for the merely imaginary, but refer instead to the kinds of conceptual structures that form and are formed by societies and their arts, languages, histories, power structures and moral systems. Myths are what human beings have recourse to when they wish to deal in absolute or transcendent truth. They are a metaphysical language addressed to the thoroughly vindicated intuition that being is vast and complex, that its energies and mysteries are far beyond the reach of ordinary thought.

Science, in an earlier stage in its development, proposed a radical positivism that relegated myth to anthropology. By these lights it was a crude etiological account of reality that flourished in ancient and primitive cultures and persisted as error among the ignorant or the nostalgic in otherwise modern, enlightened cultures. But science has transformed itself radically in the last one hundred years. Well into the 20th century the Milky Way was believed to be the entire universe. Theories of cosmic origins were considered “mythical,” reasonably enough, since myth anticipated science by thirty centuries at least in asserting them.

My point is that, on the basis of immature science, myth as a phenomenon was stigmatized as an ignorant or primitive misreading of reality, as reality was understood at the time—finite, concrete and knowable. Science saw itself as a threat to religion even when it was not an outright adversary, simply because it believed itself to be a systematic correction of entrenched error. Many religious people sought refuge in hostility to science and rejection of it, and many still do. Many religious people, in deference to science and

to the philosophic and other consequences that seemed to follow inevitably from it, attempted a rescue of the faith by hewing away at those aspects of it that might be called mythic. And to this day they are uncomfortable with, embarrassed by, those tenets that do not accommodate the worldview of antique positivism. Neither does contemporary physics accommodate it, as it happens. But stigma is mightier than information, so among progressive Christians their faith is still an incomplete utterance, restricted by a critique still taken by them to be authoritative, and crippled by a fear that they might sound ignorant or retrograde.

I am of the “invisible church” school of belief. God knows his own, who might be anyone anywhere. So I am reluctant to speak critically of any religious group. However, I think the view is widely shared that Christianity is in crisis, and that it is at the center of crises that have impact far beyond its institutions, far beyond the reach of its acknowledged influence, and that its influence at present is by no means reliably good.

Pondering this sad fact, I have concluded that the concept “sin” must be looked at again, as a matter of urgency. To the extent that it lives on in the culture, it is grossly trivialized, whether because it is associated almost exclusively with sexual anxieties or because Christianity in the west has made it expungable, by ardent faith or by the ministrations of a church. The very great emphasis on the crucifixion we see and hear everywhere leads to the belief that the incarnation, the resurrection and judgment, and the church as well, are merely a setting for the pouring out of divine blood that releases believers from the consequences of their bad behavior, more particularly of their sins as Moses and Jesus named and described them. So, presumably, Jesus died in order to nullify the effects of his life, his teaching, his example. On the side of the controversy that calls itself conservative, the Christian mythos, a vast, complex and vital conceptual system, has been reduced to this one point, the forgiveness of sins. This idea is so predominant that, paradoxically, perhaps, in its terms it really does not matter what sin is, in general or in particular cases, so long as the sinner is utterly persuaded that Jesus died to spare him, and, for these purposes, him alone, from what would otherwise be called divine justice. Little notice is given to harm done to other people, the waves of injury that spread outward from the harmful act, long after pardon has been sought and claimed for it. Might there be an error here?

As for the progressive side of the controversy—I know, of course, that my preference for the word liberal can cause a ripple of disturbance, since the word has been banned for no reason I have discovered and has not been replaced—so, on this effectively nameless side of the controversy, there has been the usual default, an embarrassment with the word sin, because the use of it by its trivializers, has associated it with doctrines that are often petty, often cruel.

But look at the world. Look at our part of it. We are in effect living out a parable. The consequences of greed and hatred, from the imperiling of the sea and the atmosphere to the homicidal turn against institutions like schools and synagogues, against the defenseless, should tell us an obvious thing, that sin does damage. It is not a smirch on an individual soul, to be purged away or simply discounted. It is an assault on being. It is a cumulative threat to Creation, and a mighty force abroad in this world now. Any war is or becomes a holy war in the minds of those who engage in it. There are always sectarians who think their own predominance is identical with the greater good, whatever this might mean in terms of hostility and coerciveness toward others—we are seeing these things everywhere now. Measured by the unique and deadly harm that is done to Creation by human conflict, it is necessary to acknowledge that confident piety can predispose the pious to sin. I do not wish to imply that religion is the source of these evils, rather to draw attention to the fact that religion, Judaeo-Christianity in this case, has correctives against violent and corrupt human tendencies. Notable among these correctives is the grave concept I wish to rescue from trivialization and, worse, from a kind of Christianity that neutralizes it by claiming to be able to excuse adherents and allies from guilt in the worst of sins and which thereby, so to speak, releases the devils it was meant to contain.

I think the evidence is everywhere around us that our civilization has gotten Christianity wrong. I speak as a Christian, about and to that large percentage of the population who consider themselves Christian, if only culturally, only by derivation or by passive accommodation to social custom, only by contradistinction to people who are, in some way, of another mind. One hears continuously that Christians are an embattled minority. This is a grand evasion of the responsibilities that come with being a majority whose integrity and whose adherence to the values of their faith—or whose inversion, perversion or plain contempt for these values—are a threat to the well-being of the whole civilization, the very planet.

There is a toxic Christianity abroad in the land whose tenets seem to include the belief that, because they have the forgiveness of Christ, they are freed of any obligation to forgive, and that they actually demonstrate their faithfulness to Christ in their obduracy. Here I assume for the sake of argument that they have carefully considered whether any real transgression has occurred, sufficient to justify their transgressing against a famous prohibition, “Judge not,” or whether they have simply hung a cross on an ordinary quarrel to justify the disproportionate passions brought to bear these days on simple differences.

Yes, I run the risk of committing the same sin. Granting that tact is appropriate in religious controversy, clearly a great deal depends on our conscientious scrutiny of a force so powerful in society and history, powerful for what it teaches, what it rationalizes, and also for those silences which have so notoriously been its reaction to the unspeakable.

Many people have stepped away from religion, from Christianity, into an agnosticism that, it must be said, seems less volatile, more temperate, because it does not imply, as much modern and historic Christianity does, that sin can be expunged by belief, this in an economy of salvation that often implies a certain contempt for the world and for those not taken to enjoy the great amnesty they call redemption. However widespread this structure of belief may be, and however buttressed by tradition, is it in fact Christian in its doctrines or in their consequences?

The forgiveness of sins—where do we find our definition of sin? In the teaching of Moses, the prophets, Jesus and the apostles. When Jesus is asked by a man what he must do to win eternal life, Jesus replies, “You know the Commandments.” Philosophers and sages can tell us what we should or should not be or do, but a categorically different frame of meaning is required to yield the concept ‘sin.’ To say an idea exists is to say it has been abused, and this is so true of “sin” that it is by now almost impossible to mention it without seeming to invoke every association that has ever clung to it. It is nevertheless, intrinsically, a very powerful word. Aristotle can tell us about honor and excellence, attainable virtues in aristocratic societies, at least. The Bible gives us righteousness, always set against sin, never aloof from it. More than this, the biblical narrative tells us that sin is, so to speak, our stake in the universe. We have, and have exercised, the extraordinary power to make the world not what it was meant to be, to turn work into toil, to murder our brother. Sin is an assault on being, not a smirch on our soul but a wound, a scar, on being. We have gravely trivialized the word and the idea, which is no doubt a comfort to those who plan to persist in it, believing, as their faith compels them to believe, that they are personally immune to the indictments that await humankind at large. Looking back at history and forward to the ferocious possibilities we have created for ourselves, the cosmic significance uniquely implied in the word “sin” appears as a sound intuition and a fair warning.

When, after Adam and Eve disobey, the world undergoes its invidious change, the archetypal crime is committed—a man kills his brother. Now the killing of human beings by human beings is a world industry. Great economies thrive on it, brilliant sciences minister to it, depredations flourish in it, and Christian fabulists see in it scenes of their future vindication. There are no grounds now for doubting that we have a role in the fate of creation. I believe I am on theologically solid ground in suggesting that our assaults on the miracle of being are a direct and uncannily powerful justification of the metaphysical

implications of the word “sin.” It is very much more than any nameable, numerable lapse from virtue.

The objection might be made that ordinary people have no knowledge of the hyper-militarization of the planet and no role in it. But war and its industries are breaking through their customary restraints and boundaries into civilian life, largely because so many putative Christians want to own and even stockpile battlefield weapons. The war industries are marketing toward the general population, very successfully. And, on occasion, an owner of these weapons bypasses every rationalization that can be made for war and goes straight to its worst horrors. Is sin implicated here? If the word has any meaning at all, the answer is yes. So is sin abroad in the land, that old adversary liberal Christians like me prefer not to speak of?

The moralists/moralizers among us, those who have had an effective monopoly of the word, have been minding everyone else’s business, as usual. Presumably the divine attention is focused on who marries whom, and whether the war to be worried about is the supposed war on Christmas. Meanwhile, they are disproportionately inclined to stockpile those weapons. Their objections to whatever offends them have the scale of true denunciation, the terrifying seriousness that, history has shown us again and again, can focus hatred on people—foreigners, dissenters, there’s always somebody—for existing, for going about their lives. There is an inverse ratio between the niggling intrusiveness of objection and the anger manifested in it. Consult the history of any authoritarianism. Sin is opportunistic, and it makes no sense, so it can catch reasonable people by surprise.

These “moralists” pass radical negative judgment on the population at large, to excite themselves with the very uncharitable notion that people in general are lacking in values and morality. They put themselves beyond debate, being in their minds the norm against which everything is judged. And they are disproportionately liable to own guns. They have imagined themselves into a hostile, anti-religious country and world, created a malign fantasy on which they depend for their identity, their sense of righteousness. They are invested in fear and contempt, to hold their imaginary world together, and to explain to themselves their need for battlefield weapons. I note that every situation in which these weapons have been used, and, more importantly, virtually every situation in which their use can be imagined, is a surprise attack on defenseless people. This is cowardly and dishonorable, contemptible beyond words. I know that the great majority of arsenal owners will assure me that they are harmless and rational. And perhaps they are, today. So might all these attackers have said, and seemed, the day before the attack.

My remarks will seem less polarizing when I have expressed my views on Christian progressivism, and on progressivism in general. Liberal means generous, progressive means tending in an established direction. It means nearly nothing, in other words. It may refer to the somewhat liberal version of the same tendency I have deplored above, to orient oneself by the attitudes of the group with whom one identifies. So I will stay with liberal, which names a beautiful ethic. It reminds me that once America was a generous country. To speak of a better angel might summon one.

In any case, the consensus group who identify themselves over against the consensus group who are called conservative share with their supposed opposites a low opinion of America as a phenomenon. Example: When violence manifests itself in our collective life, a progressive type will say, America is a violent country. Then, apparently, everyone can relax. Our history of slavery. Violence is in our DNA. We have to expect this kind of thing.

What are we to conclude from this? Is there an argument to be made for a kind of American exceptionalism that singles us out among the nations in the fact of our having a history of violence? If we are to speak about DNA, white America is an important part of the vast Anglo-European diaspora. Does anyone read European history? It is astonishingly violent. Is no one aware of the dominant role of Britain, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, even Denmark, in the slave trade, which, with its associated markets and

industries, created the wealth that reared those pseudo-gothic monuments we so admire? By far the largest share of captive Africans went to Brazil and the British Caribbean, on British ships. The slave trade led to an immense development of commerce and of colonialism, which, need I say, was an abyss of violence. Our Trail of Tears reenacted the British clearances, which drove peasant populations off the land and into starvation, or to Australia, or to Georgia. I suspect a man named Andrew Jackson might have known something about the clearances, the forcible expulsion of millions of undesirables, from his own family history and that of any number of early British settlers here. My point is simply that it is false and futile to suggest that we among the nations are prone to violence, that we are alone with the crimes of slavery and dispossession. We have no grounds, and no right, to expect less of ourselves than of any other nation. The history of the human species is terrifying, all in all. But there is no future in accepting the notion that Ah, yes, we will be violent. It's just who we are. Does this notion lie behind the ineffectiveness of resistance to a novel and radical interpretation of the Second Amendment? Is it the interpretive context for the overturning of laws that let us feel safe in our schools, our churches and synagogues, our grocery stores, for so many generations?

I happen just now to have read a column on the National Rifle Association by Nicholas Kristof, an epitome of progressivism if one lives. The column supplies a useful history to the effect that until quite recently, America had restrictive gun laws. Then, in the late 1970's, the NRA launched a very successful campaign to make the Second Amendment mean what it had never meant before, persuaded a part of the public that they should be fearful for their personal safety, and made the country an enormous market for lethal weapons. Kristof offers graphics that show the difference between various kinds of gun deaths in America and in comparable countries whose laws are like ours were before the NRA stepped in. He doesn't show the differences in deaths in America before and after the NRA stepped in, though their intrusion was recent enough to make meaningful comparisons possible. He is concerned not to be polarizing, obviously. With the kind of gentle condescension that makes progressivism set so many teeth on edge, he says that an unemployed white man may need to carry a gun to feel manly. Women and people of color have done so well lately as to put his manhood in doubt, he says. This insight is not really responsive to the fact that it is perfectly legal to have twenty guns, and not entirely uncommon, and that attackers are rarely armed with one gun. There is a difference in any sane mind between protecting the family and staging Armageddon. Kristof concludes, progressively, that we must be careful not to demonize gun owners. It appears to me that guns *do* them. People get involved in domestic fights and kill their families. People suffer a loss and commit suicide. A child finds a gun in a dresser drawer. Lives take terrible turns simply because there is a gun in the house, as Kristof notes. A gun makes the worst possible and easy. Often the gun owner should be counted among the victims, along with those he injures or kills. It would have been a kindness to him as well as them to keep guns off the shelves. Then there are the mass murderers. They have to have planned their crimes in light of the power of their weapons. One man could not walk into a building with the thought of killing everyone in it if he did not have a combat weapon or two. The weapon in effect creates the crime—in fact, and, before that, in imagination.

Hilarious solutions to this violence problem are suggested—treat it as a mental health problem, they say. Look for ominous signs and intervene on that basis. The signs would be what? Posting on an alt-right website? But there are free speech issues, and to treat this as a symptom of homicidal tendencies would be politically impossible, and should be. Should loners or people who are socially awkward be treated as potentially homicidal? Should people who are mentally ill be treated as potentially homicidal? Or unemployed white men? If stockpiling of weapons were considered symptomatic, all the NRA's work would be for naught, so that is out of the question. If any such system were to go into effect, terrible stigma would attach to people who have committed no crime, and, left to themselves, might never have committed one. It seems every civil right, and the great principle that one is innocent till proven guilty, must be sacrificed in order to keep combat weapons widely accessible. This is completely absurd.

There is another remedy on offer, of course. We should place armed guards in every setting that might

attract an attacker. We know to our grief that the list of potential targets is very long, including every place where we once—not long ago—lived out a peaceful civic life. The NRA persuaded many of us that we should live in fear. Now we have excellent reason to fear. The last, best hope of earth is on its way to becoming a circular firing squad.

Is sin active in all this? I feel a fair degree of confidence in saying yes, it is very active, among stockholders, politicians and many others. It has transformed American society very rapidly and very much for the worse. Money, political self-interest—we know the explanations we give ourselves for this scourge. But the roots of the problem go much deeper. I am not about to say, America is violent, violence is in our DNA, except to point out that this canard in effect normalizes the terrible and strange assaults that have become commonplace in the years since that novel reading of the Second Amendment removed the historical protections of the public, the laws that, historically, restricted access to weapons. There is a deep cynicism in saying, of the population entrusted to us for their safety, as our safety is entrusted to them, They're just violent. Our violent history. Slavery. And what community is most bedeviled by easy access to guns? Has anyone else noticed an affinity between gun cultists and white nationalism? Does this interpretation of the problem—it's in our DNA—mean that abusive relationships must be expected to continue? That the corruption of the character of slaveowners described by Jefferson persists and must be accepted with resignation? In any case, there is an odd nationalism or nativism in the notion that, despite all the immigration that took place after 1865, and despite the fact that our DNA is very significantly African in origin, our inheritance is taken to be dominated by a small class of Anglo-American planters. Biological metaphors for human communities have a very bad history. Perhaps in this case the implications are not considered. But this is an important problem among the well-intentioned, a very general failure of intellectual responsibility, even when the effects are not so passively enabling as this one.

Surely, surely my interpretation is wrong. I am, however, impressed by the fact that no effective response has been made to this disaster. There are always those who profit from disaster. Buzzards love battlefields. And we have turned over our civil and political life to the buzzards. How to deal with the problem of gun violence? Arm everybody!

Democracy depends on a general confidence in the wisdom of the public. Case in point: sizable majorities, of gun owners, too, oppose unrestricted access to weapons and always have. If our politics felt any obligation to the will of the people, we would not be in this mess. So democracy has not failed us. We have failed democracy. America has lapsed back into a situation that dominated national life before the Civil War—control by a highly motivated minority. It might be said now as then that the minority, in those days the slave interest, does not actually like the rest of us, does not accept our majority status as conferring legitimate power, resents our appeals to morality, and reacts to the assertion of views contrary to theirs as an attack, not on themselves only, but on religion. Then as now, this minority is loudly Christian. Now as then, they believe they own morality because they are so very Christian. This kind of thinking has recurred throughout Christian history, and, as it did, it has meant there would be only minimal change from the ways of the precursor cultures of the pagan world. History is violent. The violent bear it away.

Or, people who cherish the idea of a good community do whatever they possibly can to make sure that the pull of old transgression, that primordial homicide, does not corrupt and destroy the peace that is—how have we forgotten this!—the one condition necessary to individual freedom. The Constitution calls it “domestic tranquility.”

But this is my fear, that we have lost interest in the good community, and in individual freedom, as well. Once, in France, I was walking into a parking garage with French and American friends. An American man, a university professor, said, “We couldn't have something like this”—a parking garage. “It would be

full of dead bodies.” He was boasting. When I remarked that such garages were an all too important feature of the American urban landscape, he dismissed this as defensiveness. This was in the late 1970’s, and already in those days the bearded young Jane Austen specialist—a synecdoche—was inclined to speak as if in leaving Dartmouth, say, he had stepped out of a hail of bullets, a gangster movie, more or less. The French were very credulous. Why would anyone invent such things?

Why, indeed? I’m afraid this is a real question. I heard an American writer say he had no French because public universities in America don’t offer foreign languages. On the Village People spectrum that shapes American self-marketing there, he was the prole/barbarian/football player. I don’t believe he is published here. A well known American writer, at a dinner in France—fish, rice and salad—told the hostess that if Americans saw such food they would not know what it was. The host told me, kindly, that I must not live on McDo’s.

I have devoted a paragraph to utterly trivial memories, which seem not to compare in terms of gravity with the proliferation of weapons. But moments like these have raised one question in my mind again and again—why lie? And a second question—why lie in the course of disparaging the country? The underlying question about America is typically whether a multiracial, multiethnic democracy can survive. The French writer Chateaubriand, whose father was a slave trader, raised the question in the 18th century, while he was sheltering in America to escape the horrors of the revolution in homogeneous France. His answer was no, it cannot. Why the impulse to talk about our democracy as if it had indeed failed? I will concede any number of American faults and vices, including a tendency to produce an intellectual class who will lie to flatter Europeans. These are the same people who say that violence is in our DNA, that we must expect it—an exceptionalism based on much bad academic history, the prose version of the kind of sensationalism practiced over French dinner tables. I just read what is considered a reputable history of the United States. It says many reprehensible things, for instance that there was no legal basis for the English slave trade, begun by Elizabeth I, until it was established in law in Massachusetts in 1641. The English just had no conception of such a thing. Actually, relevant law can be traced back through British legal history and beyond to the Code of Justinian. This is fact, not interpretation. Slavery is ancient. And, despite the song they sing, Britons certainly were slaves, as these laws demonstrate. The Massachusetts Liberties of 1641, very enlightened for the time, became the basis of the Bill of Rights. It acknowledges slavery, which pervaded British colonies, in restricting the practice of it. To say it created its legal basis is bizarre. Roger Taney knew better. Jefferson Davis knew better. The point of the historian’s discussion was to focus guilt for slavery on America. And in the matter of slavery, guilt attached to anyone in any way involved in it. But Britain was the great slave trader, Liverpool the center of the Atlantic trade in human beings, the overwhelming majority of whom were transported to the British West Indies, the hellish sugar colonies. There is plenty of damning truth to be found, and no need at all for damning misinformation. I mention this bit of historiography only because it is typical. It is one minor example of a general failure to represent history truthfully. Knowing what will find approval spares a writer the trouble of doing actual research.

Attaching special or unique guilt to America in the matter of slavery is somehow treated as a moral act, truer than truth. What harm does it do? For one thing, it leads to a vast understatement of the assault made on Africa by the major powers of Europe, from the sixteenth century to the late 19th century, from long before there was a country called America until long after the end of our Civil War. Yes, we were entangled in slavery from our founding, and yes, so was virtually every colony founded by the English and Europeans. Does it do African-Americans any good to be told that they live in a uniquely hostile environment, this country to which they have given so much? And that it will be hostile forever, because its DNA is somehow not their DNA? Biological metaphors and misused science have been favored by Fascists through the whole of the modern period. They are always determinist, as DNA is in this metaphor, though science has moved on from this view of it. I hear this kind of language from progressives, but any racist could find comfort in it, obviously. It damps down hopes that would be honorable and honest,

that America can sometime see a new era of justice. It reinforces those equations that are murderous in their consequences—America is violent, America is racist. Have I forgotten my original subject, sin? Not for a moment. There is the famous arc of history, and there is another arc that bends toward atavism and retrogression. If one arc is driven by aspiration toward the good, the other is driven, very largely, by intellectual laziness, fatuousness, opportunism, group-think.

This whole important discussion about race has evolved in a way that makes it difficult to say what is true if anything is true, and should be said and also celebrated. Thank God for the African-American influence in this country! Their contributions to its language, its politics, its arts, its religious thought and culture, its music, are inestimable. And we know from experience that there will always be more brilliance, pouring out into the whole world. Ah, but we don't deserve it. But "it," their gifts and contributions, certainly do deserve profound acknowledgment, putting this imaginary "we" aside, which never includes them, but which is instead a tribute to the potent DNA of those old planters. The fact that this acknowledgment is rarely given is a great theft, a great and destructive sin of omission.

I have created a kind of equivalency, between those on one hand who feel they are exempt from the consequences of sin and therefore need not worry about what the Bible might say about neglect and mistreatment of the poor, the foreigner and the imprisoned, and on the other hand those who are dismissive of people in general, and depart from the truth in the course of embracing and instantiating the idea of a general cultural failure. If we are to survive as a democracy or as a species, we must wake up to the fact that the tolerances of both democracy and the planet have limits, that truth, notably the truth that we can abuse civilization and creation fatally, has to discipline our thinking and our actions. Default in these matters is so grave that there is no word for it but sin.

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