

In the Role of the Father: the Barth-Feuerbach Debate in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*

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*There is a longstanding critique that a commitment to Christian faith is incompatible with a commitment to the finite world. Against this critique, I argue that Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* presents commitment to God as not only compatible, but necessary for genuine commitment to this world. She draws on the correspondence that took place between Feuerbach and 20th century Swiss theologian Karl Barth, and by embedding this philosophical-theological correspondence in the characters and plot of *Gilead*, Robinson illustrates that a commitment to God is necessary for a commitment to, and affirmation of, this world.*

JESUS COMMANDS HIS DISCIPLES to love God and their neighbors. But is it possible to love both? Martin Hägglund answers with an unequivocal no. In his recently published *This Life: Secular Faith, Spiritual Freedom*, he claims it is impossible to be devoted both to this world and an eternal reality. He maintains that an individual is devoted to an eternal reality if they believe in an afterlife or God. He argues that our devotion to this world is dependent on its essential finitude, the fact that it can be lost. But, he reasons, to believe in an afterlife is to believe in a world in which finitude is overcome. Hägglund also claims that belief in God requires making him your ultimate concern. He argues that the sincere believer must even be willing to sacrifice their whole world for God and concludes that devotion to God is not only irresponsible, but incompatible with devotion to this world.¹

Hägglund asks a question that many theologians and philosophers have long considered: is there a contradiction in any attempt to value and affirm both eternal and finite realities? His readings of C.S. Lewis, Augustine, and Luther, all of whom express guilt for grieving the death of their loved ones, seems to suggest that even within the Christian tradition, many have maintained that it is impossible to be devoted to both this world and an eternal reality (Hägglund 63).

Despite this broad interaction with the larger Christian tradition, Hägglund does not engage the influential writings of Marilynne Robinson, whose novel *Gilead* deals with exactly how one can be devoted to God and yet be

devoted to this world.² In *Gilead*, the issue of the value and affirmation of life comes to the fore when Ames hears a waltz on the radio that brings to mind a memory of his older brother, Edward. In this passage, he writes, “remembering my youth reminds me that I’ve never had enough of it.” He goes on to reflect, “whenever I think of Edward I think of playing catch in a hot street and that wonderful weariness of the arms,” (*Gilead* 115). Ames is dying of heart-failure while writing this. Thus, he continues, “I thought I might have a book ready at hand to clutch if I began to experience unusual pain, so that it would have a special recommendation from being found in my hands,” (*Gilead* 115). Karl Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* is among the books he considers. Barth, however, is not introduced by himself. Earlier in the novel, Ames recalls his brother leaving to study in Europe and returning an avid supporter of Ludwig Feuerbach, the German philosopher whose text, *The Essence of Christianity* was a touchstone for mid-19th-century atheism. By bringing together Ames’ theological influences and a memory of his brother Edward, Robinson gestures at how she addresses the question of Christianity’s relationship to this life: namely, through a dialogue between Barth and Feuerbach.

Of course, the correspondence between Barth and Feuerbach is not original to *Gilead*. Feuerbach was a serious and explicit dialogue partner for Barth throughout

2. See Christopher Leise, “‘That Little Incandescence’: Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 3 (2010): 348-67. Leise explores the theme of joy in *Gilead*, but in conversation with Calvin. He suggests reading *Gilead* as an attempt to reform the puritan tradition through developing a more beautiful this-worldly theology. I develop this conversation further by examining joy, but with particular attention to its relationship between Feuerbach and Barth.

1. See Hägglund, Martin. *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. First ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 2019. 149.

the latter's theological development; thus, in order to understand how Robinson develops their correspondence further, a few exegetical issues need to be addressed. First, what does Feuerbach claim in *The Essence of Christianity*? Second, how does Barth interpret and respond to him? And, third, how does Robinson draw on their correspondence to show that devotion to God is not only compatible, but necessary to the affirmation of life?

Ultimately, I argue that *Gilead* presents devotion to God as necessary for the affirmation of this life. Drawing from Feuerbach's *Essence*, Robinson argues that humans can genuinely affirm this world only if it is enjoyed and seen as beautiful. She then develops Barth's criticism that the human being is conditioned by death and evil. These conditions consequently lead to the inability to affirm this world. Thus, while beauty may be present in the world, it is our existence as conditioned by death that prevents us from fully affirming it. In response to this problem, she considers Barth's doctrine of reconciliation in order to show that Christianity can be conceived such that it can lead to an affirmation of this world. By embedding this philosophical-theological correspondence in the characters and plot of *Gilead*, Robinson illustrates—against both Feuerbach and Hagglund—that devotion to God is necessary for a devotion to, and affirmation of, this world.

1. Feuerbach and the Life-Denying Nature of Christianity

Feuerbach's critique of religion relies heavily on his philosophical anthropology. For Feuerbach, human beings are essentially self-conscious and infinite. Humans are self-conscious in that they can ask about their nature—they can ask what it means to be human (*Essence* 1). This, according to him, separates human beings from the brute or other kinds of animals. I can be conscious of myself not only as an individual, but as belonging to a specific kind of creature. "The inner life of man is the life which has relation to his species, to his general, as distinguished from his individual nature" (*Essence* 2). Human beings can inquire into themselves and investigate their very essence. This ability to question establishes a relationship between myself and a general human other, what Feuerbach calls the I-Thou relationship. In this relationship, humans discover an unrestrained or infinite nature.³ Feuerbach writes, "Consciousness, in the strict or proper sense, is identical

3. See Harvey, Van Austin. 1995. *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*. Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought, 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 37. Harvey discusses the philosophical context out of which the language of "infinite" consciousness arises. He notes that Feuerbach is in debt to Hegel for the original distinction between infinite and finite consciousness.

with consciousness of the infinite" (*Essence* 3). Feuerbach claims that the general other, the *thou*, or human nature, reveals the capability for human beings to act. I am the other, the relationship between the other, and so become aware that I can actualize the unrestricted freedom I see in the other, the *thou*. In this sense, human beings are both self-conscious and infinite.

While individuals may be free to actualize their infinite nature in any way they want, Feuerbach believes there are certain actions which humans are meant to do. He calls these actions perfections because they are meant to be pursued in and of themselves. Feuerbach describes how human beings are to direct their freedom:

Man exists to think, to love, to will. Now that which is the end, the ultimate aim, is also the true basis and principle of a being. But what is the end of Reason? Reason. Of love? Love. Of will? Freedom of the will. We think for the sake of thinking; love for the sake of loving; will for the sake of willing—i.e., that we may be free, true existence is thinking, loving, willing existence (*Essence* 3).

Here Feuerbach draws us further into his understanding of being human. Human beings are meant to think, will, and love. And as Feuerbach adds, "it is impossible to feel that one is loving, willing, thinking, being, without experience an infinite joy therein" (*Essence* 6). Thus, it is unrestricted capacity to actualize these perfections that brings both fulfillment and joy to humans. "A beautiful form is satisfied in itself; it has necessarily joy in itself—in self-contemplation." Indeed, when one actualizes their nature through loving, willing, and thinking, they become beautiful to themselves, able to enjoy their life.

He detests religion precisely because of his anthropology. Earlier, when discussing the infinite nature of human beings, he writes, "religion being identical with the distinctive characteristic of man, is then identical with self-consciousness... but religion, expressed generally, is consciousness of the infinite" (*Essence* 2). Here, Feuerbach is claiming that we mistakenly ascribe our awareness of infinite capacity to religion, to something beyond the human. Thus, by making this move of assuming infinite-consciousness elsewhere, humans alienate themselves from their nature. "Religion is a disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself" (*Essence* 33). In his view, a religious understanding of the world estranges the infinite quality of human consciousness by attributing it to another being with whom they are in relationship. This alienation of human perfection makes freedom and self-determination impossible. If religion

appears to self-destructive, then why do individuals do this? Feuerbach observes, “to free myself from the feeling of shame, from the state of dissatisfaction, I convert the limits of my individuality into the limits of human nature...” (*Essence* 7). Because individuals are conscious of the possibility of actualizing their perfect nature, they become conscious of their limits and then ascribe their limits on human nature in general. During this process, an individual establishes their relationship with the infinite, but by ascribing it to a wholly other higher being. Feuerbach concludes that religion is nothing more than human projection (*Essence* 33).

He thinks this is the case with Christianity. The concept of God is really a projection of the human capacity to reason. Just as reason evaluates and judges according to the rules of “law, necessity, and right,” so too does “God the Father” act only according to a rigid rationality (*Essence* 25). The capacity to will is then projected onto God by making him a moral being (*Essence* 47). The infinite capacity for God to perfectly reason and will create a disjunct between God and imperfect human beings. In other words, by standing before God an individual discovers their defects and flaws. This infinite distinction is resolved only by God’s love for them regardless of their “sinful” state; this is the gracious gift of God’s perfect reason and will (*Essence* 49).

Human beings are self-conscious and infinite, fulfilled only when they think, will, and love as ends in themselves. For these reasons, religion in general—Christianity in particular—estranges human beings from fulfillment, therefore denying them a beautiful and joy-filled life. Humans should, therefore, turn away from God and religion; instead they should confess and embody what Feuerbach believes follows: “that Man is the true God and Savior of Man” (*Essence* 277).

2. The Barth-Feuerbach Debate

Naturally, Feuerbach’s critiques of Christianity drew the attention of many theologians, of whom Karl Barth is, arguably, the most significant. He perceived that Feuerbach was not only an acute interpreter of 19th century Christian theology, but that his conclusions were a threat to Christianity (*Introductory Essay* 10-11). Indicated earlier, Feuerbach’s criteria for genuine affirmation of this world hinges on his major conclusion: human beings can be self-determined to actualize their perfections, but religion and Christianity alienate human nature and project these activities onto God. Ultimately, Barth sees this theory as inaccurate. Even though it aptly describes the human desire to worship the self, its failure to uphold a more realistic

anthropology seriously undermines the likelihood of Feuerbach’s account.

Barth argues this in his introductory essay first by acknowledging the constructive intent behind Feuerbach’s philosophy: He is concerned with the value of the material world. The material world and our material selves are beautiful. Both philosophers and theologians have lost sight of this insight. Kantian and Hegelian philosophers have lost sight of this because they make human essence as something non-material (*Introductory Essay* 12-13). On the other hand, German liberal protestant theologians like Schleiermacher fail to value this material world because they take the beautiful attributes of human nature and make them characteristics of God. Though they too made it a point to find a deep unity between the consciousness of God and of human beings, the way in which they do so requires the religious alienation which Feuerbach so despises. Despite this seeming critique of theology, Barth sees Feuerbach as advocating a theory of religion very similar to his 19th century contemporaries. Barth claims that Schleiermacher’s starting point for theology was the feeling of dependence on God. The implication of this claim is that God’s revelation is nothing other than a state of human consciousness, as opposed to a different being” (*Introductory Essay* 20). Thus, Feuerbach’s argument exposes the weakness of German liberal Protestantism. If God’s revelation is just an acknowledgement of a particular state of consciousness, then perhaps it is nothing more than that. It is simply a human conscious of themselves. “Theology has long since become Anthropology,” writes Feuerbach, and Barth agrees (*Introductory Essay* 21). Despite Feuerbach’s belief that Christianity estranges human beings, Barth suggests that it was German liberal protestant theology that gave him the conceptual framework to launch such a critique.

Yet, Barth is suspicious of the human freedom to access this beauty. Indeed, the only reason Feuerbach can claim an essential unity between God and human beings is because he fails to see the two conditions that create an unbridgeable chasm between them: death and evil. Feuerbach, like the philosophers and theologians of his time, believed in the infinite nature—the true freedom—of human beings. Barth does not chastise Feuerbach for this naive understanding; he rather calls him a true child of his century, “a non-knower of death,” (*Introductory Essay* 28). Of this “shallow” anthropology, Barth observes, “anyone who knew that men are evil from head to foot and anyone that reflected we must die, would recognize it to be the most illusory of illusions to suppose the essence of God is the essence of man” (*Introductory Essay* 28). Barth was

writing on the European continent between World War I and II, a land that was decimated by one war and would soon be again. The effects of these wars were all too real. Bodies were violently pulverized, families torn apart, and towns leveled to ash by bombs.⁴ This gave no sense to Barth that humans are infinite and free. Instead Barth describes the human condition as “solitary,” marked by the crushing weight that life inevitably ends in death and evil. If Feuerbach would have taken these aspects of existence seriously, they might have prevented him from seriously claiming that God is merely the divinization of the praiseworthy aspects of human beings.

But if this criticism refutes Feuerbach, then why listen to him? For Barth, Feuerbach is to be read for the ways that he unintentionally exposes the evil intent in Christians—even theologians. Feuerbach develops Schleiermacher’s and other’s theology a step further: if God’s revelation is just an acknowledgement of a particular state of consciousness, then perhaps it is nothing more than that—it is simply human consciousness. This is why Barth takes Feuerbach to be an acute interpreter of 19th century German theology. “Theology has long since become anthropology,” writes Feuerbach. And Barth agrees. Even further, Barth warns against using Feuerbach’s “shallow anthropology” as reason for its dismissal:

One had better look out if one picks up the only weapon that will take care of Feuerbach. No one may stake him with it unless he has himself been hit by it. This weapon is no mere argument which one exploits in apologetics, it should rather be a ground on which one can stand, and with fear and trembling allow to speak for itself. Whether or not we stand on this ground will be tested by our answer to this question: are we capable of admitting to Feuerbach that he is entirely right in his interpretation of religion insofar as it relates not only to religion as an experience of evil and mortal man, but also to the “high,” the “ponderable,” and even the “Christian” religion of this man? Are we willing to admit that even in our relation to God, we are and remain liars, and that we can lay claim only to His truth, His certainty, His salvation as grace and only as grace? (*Introductory Essay* 29).

Here Barth draws together his critique of and call to

4. See, for example, Glover, Jonathan. 2012. *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press. 47. Glover estimates that 86 million people were killed in wars between 1900 and 1989, 58 million were killed in World War I and II. His remarks paint a striking picture of what Barth means: “If these deaths had been spread out evenly over the period, war would have killed around 2,500 people every day, that is over 100 people an hour, round the clock, for ninety years.”

listen to Feuerbach. Every dimension of the human being is caught up in evil and death, even one’s faith. This is Feuerbach’s best insight. Feuerbach not only reveals the trajectory of 19th century German theology, but unveils the human propensity to idolize oneself, indeed, to proclaim “man as the true God and Savior of Man” (*Essence* 277). For Barth Feuerbach’s argument is proof itself for the evil within which human beings live. Only from within this confession can human beings be open to the true revelation of God.⁵

Where does this leave the possibility for individuals to affirm life? As Barth noted, Feuerbach was primarily interested in a constructive project—to affirm this material life. But, as Barth has indicated, a more realistic understanding of human nature requires not that we radically alter Feuerbach’s account of human perfections and their capacity to bring joy. Rather, it is to situate that account within the devastating effects of death and evil. Barth thus concludes that Feuerbach is not most insightful in his constructive philosophy, but in his criticism of religion. But if death and evil bar human beings from fulfilling their potential, then Barth is still left with a final question from Feuerbach: within the Christian framework, how is it that human beings tangibly overcome the devastating effects of death and evil so they can actualize their nature? I contend that this question, and its answer, are embedded within *Gilead*.

3. Feuerbach in Gilead

We can understand Ames’ view of Feuerbach as similar to that of Barth’s. He cherishes Feuerbach’s insight that we are supposed to enjoy this world and see it as beautiful.

5. See, for a discussion of Barth’s engagement with Feuerbach, John Glasse, “Barth on Feuerbach.” *Harvard Theological Review* 57, no. 02 (April 1964): 69-96; and Manfred H. Vogel, “The Barth-Feuerbach Confrontation.” *Harvard Theological Review* 59, no. 01 (January 1966): 27-52. Vogel and Glasse both argue that Barth has adequately refuted Feuerbach, even if he appeals to premises that are entirely different. According to Glasse, Barth’s appeal to the revelation of God as self-validating allows him to confront Feuerbach but bypass his critique of religion with a self-validating assertion that the revelation of Jesus Christ shatters all projections of God. According to Vogel, Barth’s appeal to revelation succeeds in “overcoming Feuerbach’s theological thesis,” but cannot technically overcome Feuerbach’s thesis because they share no common premises. In other words, Barth and Feuerbach talk past one another. Because they appeal to different premises, their interpretations of religious phenomenon like revelation are just different and incompatible. Still, these readings fail to address Feuerbach’s primary concern, the affirmation of this life. Vogel, Glasse, and Barth all fail to acknowledge how the revelation of God tangibly overcomes death and evil for individuals so they can affirm this world. I contend that in *Gilead* Robinson answers this question, and by drawing on Barth’s doctrines of election and reconciliation, provides a more robust account of how Barth adequately responds to Feuerbach.

Yet, he believes that the human experience of death and suffering foreclose this possibility when there is no help from God.

Ames first draws on Feuerbach in order to explain how sacraments teach us to see the beauty of this world. Indeed, the sacraments' function is to direct us to the beauty of this world. "There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but acknowledges it, and there is a power in that," writes Ames (*Gilead* 23). In explaining his point, he turns to Feuerbach: "Water has significance in itself, as water; it is on account of its natural quality that it is consecrated and selected as the vehicle of the Holy Spirit" (*Gilead* 24). For Feuerbach, water is good because it is water. Water has been chosen by human beings to represent the divine because it is already beautiful. Ames, of course, appropriates this claim into his deeply theological vision. Like Feuerbach, Ames insists on the goodness of water as water. It does not need a divine qualification to be beautiful. But it is God who chooses to reveal himself through the beautiful water as opposed to water being selected by human beings for religious purposes because it is beautiful. Ames thinks the world is beautiful, but he does not believe that such beauty and our ability to enjoy it are in a competitive relationship with God.

Even though Ames advocates reading him, he is still critical of Feuerbach's skepticism regarding religion. His whole reflection captures his view:

Feuerbach is a famous atheist, but he is about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody, and he loves the world. Of course, he thinks that religion could just stand out of the way and let joy exist pure and undisguised. This is his one error, and it is significant.

But he is marvelous on the subject of joy, and also on its religious expressions (*Gilead* 24).

Feuerbach's representation is twofold: he should be read because he advocates enjoying this world. However, his presentation of religion as a conceptual framework that alienates human beings is seriously flawed. This is different than Barth's recommendation. Rather than recommending Feuerbach as a philosopher who attunes us to the self-worshiping, and therefore, sinful nature of human beings, Ames advocates reading Feuerbach for his attention to, and celebration of, this world.

Modern theories that advance religious experience as an illusion are "insidious," Ames tells us (*Gilead* 145). They err in not recognizing the self-validating nature of encountering God. He views Feuerbach's theory with a particular aversion because it does nothing other than dismiss the believer. Ames writes, "I think the second of these [notions]

is the more insidious, because it is a religious experience above all that authenticates religion, for the purposes of the individual experience." This argument moves Ames and Barth toward agreement when considering the nature of God's revelation. Just as Barth claims that God reveals God's self, and that is God's grace, Ames also sees the revelation of God as self-validating, self-ensuring.

In fact, Ames is rather clear in challenging the projectionism Feuerbach levels at Christianity. "God is not to be imagined as a thing among things (idolatry—this is what Feuerbach failed to grasp)," writes Ames (*Gilead* 138). Any account that construes God simply as another object with attributes is, according to Ames, a less-than adequate account of the true nature of God as a being beyond objectification. This, of course, raises the question as to what it would mean to "believe in a God?" Ames tells us that this challenge can be resolved if one recognizes that it is impossible for language to articulate and exhaust the fullness of reality. Soapy, Ames' cat, may be in the human world even as the human world "exceeds" the world of the feline (*Gilead* 143). This embracing but exceeding way of thinking about the human and divine worlds lead Ames to further reflect on human beings having an inability to imagine the existence of two radically distinct realities:

I don't wish to suggest a reality is simply an enlarged or extrapolated version of this reality. If you think about how a thing we call a stone differs from a thing we call a dream—the degrees of unlikeness within the reality we know are very extreme, and what I wish to suggest is much more absolute unlikeness, with which we exist, though our human circumstance creates in us a radically limited and peculiar notion of what existence is. I gave a sermon on this once, the text being "Your thoughts are not our thoughts" (*Gilead* 143).

Ames tells us that the real issue is not so much that religion is the projection of human reality. On the contrary, the existence of God is reasonable because such degrees of difference exist within our reality, such as the difference between human and feline experience, or the difference between a rock and a dream. It is not the degrees of difference that lead to a limited imagination, but concrete human situations.

Ames' concrete situation is his weak heart and imminent death. "I told you last night that I might be gone sometime," begins his letter (*Gilead* 1). Ames exists in a world where the ability to affirm this life is made impossible by this looming matter.⁶ As Ames tells us, the real issue at the

6. See, for further discussion on how death affects Ames' experience of the world, Laura E. Tanner, "'Looking Back From the Grave': Sensory

heart of reality is the way “human circumstances create... a radically limited and peculiar notion of what that existence is,” (*Gilead* 143). This challenges Hägglund’s idea that death is what makes the world beautiful. He forgets that it can often make us care with a possessiveness that creates jealousy and hatred, that turns us away from enjoying the world, and experiencing it as beautiful. Ames’ fear of heart-failure not only cripples him with anxiety, but leaves him seeing the beauty of his family in a distorted fashion (*Gilead* 141). His fear of loss leads him to feel “the way he used to feel when the beauty of other lives was a misery and offense to him,” (*Gilead* 141). For Ames, he is unable to affirm his life because he is dying. It is not God that alienates Ames from himself and the world, it is death.

Ames doesn’t just struggle with death. He also struggles in resenting, and relating to, his best friend’s son, who also happens to be his godson, Jack Boughton. Jack has returned to *Gilead* after being away for a significant amount of time. For some, like Jack’s father, his return was reason to celebrate. But for Ames, Jack’s return was especially distressing. Though Ames was Jack’s godfather, and has many differences with him, their lives also mirror one another. When Jack was young, he fell in love with a poor white girl from his town. They had a child, but he abandoned both of them for college. Eventually his child dies, and Jack never returns. Jack’s presence reminds Ames of his own tragic past. When Ames’ was younger, he lost both his wife and child during childbirth (*Gilead* 156). Jack’s abandonment, seen against Ames’ misfortune, brings Ames to a resentment that makes it difficult to see Jack as anyone other than a failed father.

Ames sees in Feuerbach a great attentiveness to the joy of human experience, and the beauty of this world. And, as he indicates, Feuerbach should be listened to for those reasons. Nevertheless, Feuerbach’s account of God is seriously flawed: it dismisses the possibility of a reality that exceeds finite reality and dismisses the primary validation of God’s existence: our experience of him. Further, Feuerbach’s understanding of the human being inadequately addresses the life-denying conditions within which this world exists: death and evil. Ames is crippled both physically and psychologically by death. He is dying of heart-failure. He sees but resents the beauty in his family’s life. He is hate-filled and angered at his godson. Thus, if death creates this inability to affirm his world and those in it, then a new

Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*.” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer, 2007) 227-252. Tanner observes that death estranges Ames from the world. Indeed, even though it motivates a deep attention, he is still burdened by “the inevitable movement toward absence” 228.

question must be asked: How does God help Ames to affirm this world with world-denying realities like death?

4. Barth in *Gilead*

One must turn to Ames’ engagement with Barth to see how Robinson addresses this question. Ames’ use of Barth, however, cannot be understood apart from the questions raised by Feuerbach. As mentioned earlier, Ames’ desire to dance after hearing a waltz on the radio is halted by the possibility of a heart-attack if he exerts too much energy. After mentioning that he has no formal training in dance, Ames interjects his own idea, and reflects briefly on Edward. It is only after his mention of Edward—who is so closely identified with Feuerbach—that Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* is brought up (*Gilead* 114-115).⁷ The interjection of a joy-filled memory of Edward suggests that Barth’s mention is no mere indicator of theological influence, but the beginning of a conversation concerning beauty, death, God, and the affirmation of this world.

Jack initiates this conversation when he intrudes upon Ames, Lila, and Boughton sitting on the porch. Curious about predestination and everyone’s opinions, he asks for their thoughts on the matter. The conversation centers around the fate of human beings whose lives seem naturally and inevitably bent towards evil. Jack is upfront with his inquiry: are people “intentionally” and “irretrievably” damned (*Gilead* 150)? This question is clearly personal for both Ames and Jack. Though Ames’ history with the question is thoroughly ministerial, Jack’s history is no doubt a reference to his past actions that have labelled him a prodigal son, the actions which Ames now resents him for. Jack is someone who has never been in touch with his ‘good nature.’ So, he asks further if evil people are capable of change. With dismissiveness, Ames simply answers that one’s actions and nature are consistent (*Gilead* 152). For Ames, Jack’s question is nothing more than mere play and child-like prodding. But Lila, listening quite intently, believes Jack to be asking a genuine question. “If you can’t change, there don’t seem much purpose in it,” she remarks. To this, Ames recommends Barth whose doctrine of election seems to suggest that perhaps not even the worst

7. See Barth, Karl. 1933. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Translated by Edwyn Clement Hoskyns. A Galaxy Book, Gb261. London: Oxford University Press, H. Milford. 45-48. Barth claims that we are creatures living “in the night.” For Barth, the revelation of God on the cross is the simultaneous revelation of human limit and finitude; the crucifixion of the incarnate God suggests that human responses to death are ultimately life-denying. Ames’ appeal to this book within the context of reflections on joy and Edward indicates his adaptation of Barth’s pessimistic view of human beings without God.

human being will be damned.⁸ But does this not forget Jack's initial question and even ignore Lila's interjection? Even if Barth is correct, how people change under God's election has yet to be shown. It would be shortsighted to think that this conversation is just an implicit engagement with Barth. In this moment, Jack's initial question could be read as though Feuerbach was asking it: does God's election lead to the joy and the celebration of not just the next life, but this one? If election cannot be legitimately experienced, then Barth has not yet answered the Feuerbachian concern for joy and the celebration of *this* world.

If Barth is correct that everyone is reconciled in Jesus Christ, then everyone is reconciled to one another through him. This includes Ames and Jack. Ames, in particular, is drawn into this reconciliation when Lila brings down a collection of sermons, one of which focuses on the prodigal son. In the conclusion to this sermon, Ames draws out the practical meaning of the passage:

It says Jesus puts His hearer in the role of the father, of the one who forgives. Because if we are, so to speak, the debtor (and of course we are that, too), that suggests no graciousness in us. And grace is the great gift. So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that we can forgive, restore, and liberate, and therefore we can feel the will of God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves (*Gilead* 161).

But the prodigal son motif is not to be seen in this moment alone. Rebecca Painter has argued that the parable of the prodigal son provides a helpful narrative framework for understanding the roles that each character plays throughout the novel's plot.⁹ Further, Alison Jack has suggested that it is Barth's interpretation of the prodigal son that is most at use: because God's eternal will is, from the beginning, a reconciled relationship to humanity, it follows that "forgiveness is always ahead of

8. See Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics* II.2. 11-17. For Barth, the doctrine of election is not primarily an action, but a revelation of who God is. Thus, the idea of a double predestination, or that some are elected for damnation and others for salvation misconstrues the purpose of the doctrine. For predestination reveals God to be the God-for-us. It is not a matter of specifics, but a matter of who God is in relation to the whole of humanity. This opens up the possibility for universal reconciliation.

9. See Rebecca M. Painter. 2010. "Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction." *Christianity & Literature* 59 (2): 321-40. doi:10.1177/014833311005900216. 325-329. Painter makes this point about the prodigal motif through a comparison of God the Father with Jack and Ames. Their juxtaposition shows how both Ames and Jack fail to embody their role within their respective prodigal son stories.

rather than catching up with human experience."¹⁰ In this case, God's grace, and the possibility of it enacted in Ames for Jack, comes in the form of Lila and some old sermons. This passage, as Allison Jack notes, is only the beginning of reconciliation for Ames, and that he has yet to recognize how this sermon is calling him to account for his refusal to forgive Jack.¹¹ But there is also more here. This passage not only highlights the future reconciliation of Ames to Jack, but showcases the way that Robinson frames the issue of Barth's reading of the prodigal son as it relates to its effects on human nature. By claiming that God puts his "hearer in the role of the father," so that *they too* might forgive, Robinson suggests that it is only by the power of grace that we can overcome the conditions of death and evil that limit us from being who we are: creatures who are self-determined to love, or creatures who love infinitely.¹² In other words, Robinson reverses Feuerbach's thesis: Feuerbach claims that it is God who alienates us from ourselves and the world. For Robinson (and Ames), God gives the world back, but new and transformed—the superabundant gift is that we participate in making it new.

What does this reconciliation look like for Ames and Jack? Their reconciliation, the transformation of their relationship and of themselves takes place in the final moment of the novel. Jack has told his sister Glory that he is leaving on the eve of his father's death. His sister who once celebrated his return, now reduces him again to the prodigal son, not the one who has returned, but who will abandon the family. "This is it. This is your master-piece" reproaches Glory (*Gilead* 240). On the other hand, Ames' reconciliation initiated in Lila and his sermons helps him to see Jack beyond abandonment. Jack is not leaving, but returning home, returning to the "splendid treasure in his heart," his other family that he formed while he was away, the reason he returned to *Gilead* in the first place. God's grace gives Ames a fuller picture of Jack; it helps him to see beyond the "radically limited, and peculiar notion" of Jack's existence that Glory and her family see.

10. Jack, Alison. "Barth's Reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*: Exploring Christlikeness and Homecoming in the Novel." *Literature and Theology* 32, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 100-116. 110.

11. *Ibid.*, 110.

12. See Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics* IV.1. 40. In Barth's discussion concerning reconciliation and covenant, he claims that human beings can receive their freedom only through God's gracious act to covenant himself to them. To use Feuerbach's terms, human beings can only be self-determined by the initiating act of a gracious God.

And from this insight, Ames sees himself placed “in the role of the father,” with the vision to love Jack. Thus, in the morning when he sees Jack leaving for the bus, he asks to bless him. For Ames, love is an act by which we discover the infinite as embracing and exceeding the reality we participate in. He writes:

There is no justice in love, no proportion in it, and there need not be, because in any specific instance it is only a glimpse or parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality. It makes no sense at all because it is the eternal breaking in the temporal. So how could it subordinate itself to cause or consequence? (*Gilead* 238).

Throughout the novel, death creates jealousy and resentment in Ames. It prevented him from seeing his capacity to love and his ability to perceive his nature as participating in the infinite. But finally, he can forgive Jack with the grace that he discovers he is participating in. Love, as enabled by the grace of God, is the only liberating act for Ames. This love is displayed in his desire to bless Jack and give him *The Essence of Christianity*. His copy is dog-eared at page 20: “Only that which is apart from my own being is capable of being doubted by me, how then can I doubt of God, who is my being? To doubt of god is to doubt of myself” (*Gilead* 239). Here Ames employs Feuerbach for an understanding of the grace that is both ahead, and in, the world. For Feuerbach, human beings are infinite in and of themselves. For Ames, human nature is infinite insofar that it participates in God’s being. “We can feel the will of God enacted through us,” Ames’ early sermon reminds us (*Gilead* 161). His participation in God’s will liberates him to enjoy Jack and see the beauty in him. He sees Jack’s “elegance, and bravery.” Jack laughs as he accepts the old torn up book. Ames tells Jack he understands why he must go. He confesses not wanting to leave him and reminds him, “we all love you,” (*Gilead* 239-242).

This reconciliation not only repairs their relationship, it renews their sense of self and world. Ames blesses Jack, praying, “Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father,” (*Gilead* 241). Ames sees the richness of Jack’s life, his existence not as a prodigal, but as a loving and loved father, son, brother, and husband. God’s grace triumphs over those markers of identity and creates in Jack a new sense of self: beloved and one who loves. Likewise, Ames is also restored to himself. “I think I’ll put an end to all of this writing. I’ve read it over, and I’ve found some things of interest, mainly the way I have been drawn back into this world in the course of it,” (*Gilead* 238). What began his letter—the oncoming of his death, and the anxiety that burdened him—has been

overcome. He has, so to speak, returned to himself, becoming the minister and godfather he was always meant to be. His return to the world and to himself are apparent in the final moments of the book. “I blessed that boy of yours... So certain of your prayers are finally answered,” he whispers to the sick Boughton just moments before his death (*Gilead* 245). Then, Ames simply remarks, “I love this town. I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last wild gesture of love,” (*Gilead* 245). One should note the stark contrast between these concluding remarks and an earlier despairing reflection which describes him and *Gilead*: “I woke up this morning thinking this town might as well be standing on the absolute floor of hell for all the truth there is in it, and the fault is as much mine as it is anyone’s,” (*Gilead* 232).¹³ Instead, his concluding remarks reveal to us an Ames that has, by God’s grace, become unrestrained in his love for Jack and his town, a person and town characterized by their inability to be loved and enjoyed. By the novel’s end, Ames rediscovers himself as the preacher and godfather who loves the unlovable. It is none other than his life, in *Gilead* with Jack, that he comes to love and enjoy.

5. Conclusion

Ames’ world has become beautiful, not by the ever-increasing horizon of death, but by the grace of a God who loves it. Feuerbach and Hägglund are deeply concerned with the celebration and affirmation of this life. For Hägglund, devotion to God meant turning away from this world—it is simply impossible to devote oneself to the world and to God. Feuerbach goes a step further in criticizing religious faith. For him, the affirmation of this world is dependent upon our ability to enjoy it and see it as beautiful. Religion is insidious because it takes that anthropology and advances a belief that those attributes do not belong to human beings, but to God. In other words, Christianity is life denying because it is self-alienating.

But *Gilead* suggests otherwise. In contrast to both Hägglund and Feuerbach, the story of *Gilead* is the story of

13. See Milota, Megan. 2016. “Seeking Being in Marilynne Robinson’s ‘Gilead’ and ‘Home.’” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 61 (1): 33–51. Milota uses a Heideggerian framework in order to understand the distinct ways in which Ames and Jack inhabit their worlds. While Milota’s view of Ames as loyal believer and Jack as secular dweller is helpful for seeing the differences in how they understand and respond to the world, she nonetheless overlooks the changes their identities go through over the course of the novel. I suggest a more dynamic ‘dwelling’ is taking place. At times we see Ames as being unfaithful to the traditions he’s inherited; Jack’s gratitude towards Ames blessings also suggests that he is not dwelling purely in a secular orientation toward the world. That the novel’s conclusion leaves us with different views of who Ames and Jack are suggests that their respective ways of dwelling shifts as “Jesus puts his hearer(s) in the role of the Father.”

how one comes to genuinely affirm this world. By drawing on Barth's early criticism, and reinterpreting Feuerbach's anthropology through Barth's theology, Robinson shows that devotion to God is necessary for the affirmation of this life. Rather than being a world in which beauty is so easily accessible, this world is, as Ames' remarks, "a poor gray ember," (*Gilead* 245). While this may have provoked Ames to write an extended letter to his son, it certainly did not make him care for this world in a life-affirming way. He was anxious about death, and this made him jealous of beauty and resentful of Jack. Only by God's grace was his vision of this world expanded, and could he truly see the beauty of this world and Jack. If beauty and joy are the criteria for an affirmation of this life, then one only needs "a little willingness to see," but such insight is only possible if God can in turn "breathe on that poor grey ember of creation and turn it into radiance" (*Gilead* 245).

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