

**Response to  
“Predestination and Grace in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and *Home*”  
by Paulette Kidder**

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One of the most difficult tasks facing the respondent to a conference paper emerges when the paper in question is so clear, well-reasoned, well-written, and convincing that one can’t find a handhold for any kind of substantial disagreement. I am encountering this problem with Paulette Kidder’s paper on Marilynne Robinson’s novels *Gilead* and *Home*, novels that I have read with great admiration, and her bringing of elements of Voegelin’s thought to bear on them. Still, this fact doesn’t leave me with nothing to say. First of all, I can point out what, to me, are the major successes of the paper—that is, I can praise its finest features.

Saying this, however, reminds me of a comment by the poet Theodore Roethke: “The two duties are to lament or praise.” So I ask myself: after reading Paulette’s paper, did I find myself lamenting anything? And the answer is, yes, I did—but it didn’t have to do with the quality of the paper, only with the fact that I wished it had addressed, *in addition*, one further aspect of one of its key themes. But before I lament, I will praise.

I want to briefly single out six features of the paper that are especially praiseworthy.

First: her initial, five-page summary of the two novels is exemplary—clear and concise, accurate and telling. (One tiny point: in the fourth paragraph the character of Glory is mentioned without our yet knowing who she is in the novel.)

Second: after this summary, just enough of Marilynne Robinson’s background and religious interests are described—in particular her against-the-mainstream appreciation of midwestern American Congregationalist Christianity and Calvinist theology—to help us focus on the major issues that drive the novels and their characters. Prof. Kidder rightly emphasizes

that the central trajectory of the novels concerns the spiritual practices of the characters, respectively, of John Ames and Glory Boughton, and that the climaxes of the novels concern their respective arrival at a profound love and forgiveness of the “prodigal son” character, Jack.

Third: the paper’s judicious use of elements from Voegelin’s first published book, especially Voegelin’s reading of Jonathan Edwards, are accurately and usefully applied to the thematic concern in both novels with the issue of predestination.

Fourth: a brief but telling link is made between Voegelin’s analyses of James and Edwards in his first book and the development of his later, mature theory of consciousness.

Fifth: there is Professor Kidder’s expert summary of how the topic of predestination functions in the novels, how it is the basis of questions and tensions within and between characters, and how for them it opens onto questions about love, forgiveness, grace, redemption, and finally onto the existential importance of “the mystical affirmation of love and hope.”

And sixth: the paper rightly explains how important the subtextual theme is, in both novels, of American racism, and of the relation of the theme of love, hope, and transformative redemption to this bleak and challenging dimension of our nation’s history and future.

So what’s to lament? What I lament is that the paper is not even *more* ambitious, in its bringing Voegelin’s work to bear on the novels’ theme of predestination, specifically through taking up and applying Voegelin’s critique of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination in his *History of Political Ideas, Volume IV*. The chapter that ends that volume, titled “The Great Confusion I: Luther and Calvin,” concludes with a long section titled “Calvin and Predestination.” Here Voegelin explains carefully why “Calvin’s doctrine of predestination is a fallacious construction” and why the question of “predestinarian necessity” has no legitimate place at all in a theological analysis of the experience of faith. The main point is this. Predestination pertains to God’s timeless knowledge of everything about everything—and thus His “foreknowledge” (speaking

from our perspective) and thus His willing of the salvation and non-salvation of souls. But God and everything to do with God is known analogically and speculatively; and thus, propositions regarding God must always be taken *symbolically*, and never used as if they affect the structure of reality as humanly experienced. The issue of predestination is, in fact, irrelevant to the struggles of contingent human beings exercising free will as they grapple with the ongoing challenges of spiritual life. To wonder, then, whether or not one should struggle to change one's life for the better and alter one's bad habits because one might be predestined for damnation is foolish, not because it's a waste of time, but because it presumes a basic *category error*.

Existentially speaking, there is no predestination; the possibility of salvation *always* exists.

Bringing in this analysis of Voegelin's would have suited the paper beautifully, because its truth is reflected in comments of both Reverend Ames and his wife Lila. When Jack, deeply concerned with predestination and worried about his existential possibilities and spiritual status, forces the topic of predestination on Ames, the latter replies that such matters entail "a mystery we cannot hope to penetrate" that he won't "force some theory on"—thus affirming his implicit understanding that it is, indeed, a matter belonging not to the existential realm of faith but to the non-existential realm of divine transcendence. And in both novels, Lila concludes this same, crucial conversation about predestination with the statement: "A person can change. Everything can change"—affirming that the realm of human life is that of contingency and the ongoing exercise of freedom, with regard to which the doctrine of predestination is rationally irrelevant. Thus the novels' characters inadvertently teach us that, in fact, there is no real conflict—despite what Calvinist-imbued theology might misconceive—between genuine rational theology regarding predestination and our "mystical awareness of God's [universal love and] mercy."