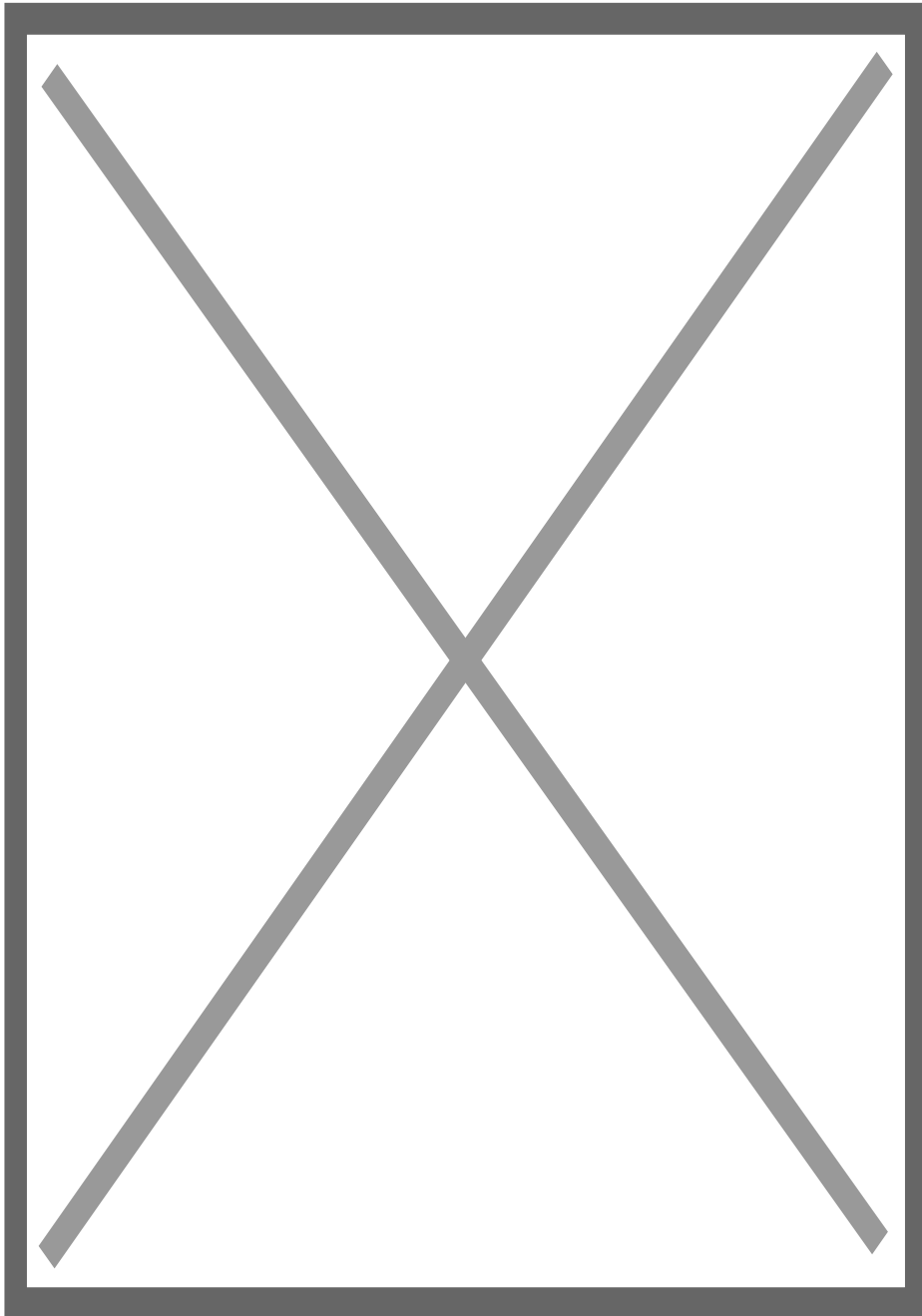


The reverent, subversive *Gilead*

Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer-winning novel speaks unflinchingly of God, grace, sacred luminosity, and humility. This reads a lot differently now than it did 20 years ago.

by [Ibrahim N. Abusharif](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue
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It's been 20 years since Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. When I first read the novel, I recall how quickly I was pulled into the story by the quiet shock and elegance of its form: a dying old

minister writing a letter to his young son.

The story's scaffolding seems risky, with religious epistolary prose vulnerable to slipping into moralizing cliché and theological grandstanding. *Gilead* gingerly avoided those snares.

Writing about faith, with faith, in mainstream literature is sometimes like letting loose a narrative that is estranged from the dominant epistemologies and moods of modern literary discourse. Daring authors are willing to walk against the prevailing wind of secularity that privileges skepticism and dismisses the supernal—as if a faith-driven narrative were an aesthetic risk rather than an intellectual perch of social critique.

Since the original publication of *Gilead*, however, a lot has changed. The profile of religion in the public sphere has taken a turn toward the open and accepted politicization of religion in American public life, which has all but legitimized specular religiosity. Consider evangelical supporters of Donald Trump, the laying of hands on the president in the Oval Office, his holding of the Bible (upside down) in a photo op near a DC church, the rise of patriotic righteousness (such as Christian nationalism), and the choir of religious exhibitionists and maudlin thespians appointed to high positions of government authority, trundling along the public stage with piety conceits. The pageantry did not start with Trump, of course, but the intersections of religious pomp and digital media have made the show of righteousness a strategic political value, to a degree of unprecedented acceptability—something I have spent years researching.

As Toni Morrison teaches us, shifting contexts and new social norms shape how art reaches us—which metaphors strike the heart differently, which meanings float to the surface like truths long submerged. In other words, the very same text published in an era different than ours can speak anew, its transformative authority alerted by the reshaped norms in which it is received.

Today, that world is increasingly pockmarked by a paradox: the shameless yet effective usage of religion by the irreligious, where public-facing faith is stripped of humility and wielded as strategic. One common and timeless vulnerability of all religion is the susceptibility of the faithful to embrace ostentation and self-righteousness, both qualities now distributed effectively through social media and made alluring.

Against this backdrop, *Gilead* reads now as confrontational against this new wave of performative religiosity. Neither mawkish nor moralizing, the novel is now subversive (whatever Robinson intended two decades ago). It speaks without flinching of God, grace, sacred luminosity, and, most of all, humility—without theater or apologia for its quiet reverence and counter-sermonizing modesty.

Told through the unassuming yet introspective voice of John Ames, a Congregationalist pastor in the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa, the novel unfolds as an honest family history replete with highs and lows and farewells—farewells not just to a son but to a generation facing a rift between primordial sincerity and the bluster of choreographed piety.

In the story, Ames has lived and loved long enough to recount the lives that shaped him: an abolitionist grandfather, an atheistic brother, a late-in-life marriage marked by both fragility and grace, and the quiet ache of the pastoral calling. Threaded throughout is his gift for imbuing the ordinary—from a child's first steps to a burial—with otherworldly resonance. What makes *Gilead* appealing to a wide readership is its meditative theology of the everyday and its sacred rendering of flawed personal history—textures of experience that many people of faith, across traditions, will recognize.

This is a man not making peace with aging but rather awakening to awe. “Each morning I’m like Adam waking up in Eden,” writes Ames, “amazed at the cleverness of my hands and at the brilliance pouring into my mind through my eyes—old hands, old eyes, old mind, a very diminished Adam altogether, and still it is just

remarkable.” He adds that his body is like Balaam’s ass, who sees the angel Balaam cannot yet perceive.

It is here, in its theology of noticing, that *Gilead* reaches beyond its Christian roots and opens itself to readers of many faiths. While Muslim authors might feel discouraged to pursue literature with esoteric nuances because of the hard gaze of Islamophobia, English-speaking Muslim authors may take Robinson as an exemplar. As such, they may put forth a narrative with parallels to the Qur’anic concept of *baʿṣ*—a spectacular insight, nestled up to a person’s soul or spiritual perception, that allows them to see beyond appearances. Ames seems quite adept at this.

The allied concept of *futūḥ* also comes to mind here—those moments of sudden, radiant understanding or luminous openings in which the ordinary, even the smallest artifacts of life, show us the grid of divine purpose and presence eclipsing everything, a grid that is always there but usually veiled. Rooted in the metaphysics of unveiling, *futūḥ* invites us to rethink pedagogy not merely as the transmission of knowledge but as a practice of cultivating presence, interior readiness, and the possibility of grace. It reminds us that learning, at its deepest, sometimes happens not by instruction but by humiliation followed by illumination.

Instead of sermonizing about these gnostic openings, why not let them loose through the power and flexibility of fiction? The art form has the capacity to set free the vocabulary of Muslim Sufi tradition, in which knowledge transcends the processes of accumulated data. Instead it is an unveiled truth, not a linear conclusion drawn from syllogisms, logic, and argument but a divine opening, a gift of an epistemic and personal revelatory event that pierces the limits of ordinary explanation and underscores the smallness of proof.

Like Ames, a Muslim reader may recognize the tension between outward aging and inward awakening. Religious traditions see the diminishment of the body not merely as the decline of the soma but as an invitation—the mature capacity to reflect, to prepare, to see more clearly. Ames’s morning astonishment, his recognition that the world never ceases being Edenic even as one inches toward death, speaks to a sacred sensibility in which the infinite and transcendent are comfortably adjacent to the finite and the perishable.

Ames writes of light pouring into his mind through his eyes, which resonates with the Sufi notion that divine light, or *nūr*, is what truly illuminates perception of the supernal. The novel connects with the diverse vocabulary of spiritual subtlety of the sacred sciences, an effect that continues to attract me to it.

Gilead reconstructs something many readers have forgotten: the dignity of belief, the labor of faith, the beauty of unassuming lives shaped by interior reverence. In doing so, it opens a rare interfaith space—in which a fictional Protestant preacher’s reflections can resonate deeply with a Muslim sage, a Jewish philosopher, a Catholic mystic, or anyone who understands that paying attention itself can be a form of prayer.

After two decades, *Gilead* has not aged. It offers neither doctrine nor defense but an invitation for a second look. The story reminds us that grace may come not in grand interventions but in an old man’s astonishment at his own fingers.

But now the terrain has clearly shifted when it comes to claims of faith in the American public, swarmed by a kind of religious theater that is visually saturated and epistemically hollow. The Trump years have delivered a relentless stream of religious images as integral to the power structures of government, with images constructed for the camera deployed as blunt-force political symbols.

Gilead comes across today as a quiet jihad against religious branding and theological bravado. John Ames does not pontificate. He observes, notices, wonders. His faith is intimate and lived, with no anticipation of applause or vote. There are no exaggerated moments in *Gilead*. No strategic testimonials. No Pollyanna conversion narratives. No claims of divine endorsement for political conquest.

The sacred narrative of many faiths insist that belief is often the difficult, steeper path, but one grounded in awe. *Gilead* gains new meaning because it resists the transformation of religion into spectacle; it is a rebuke through not confrontation but contrast. And Robinson offers a comfort in belief—a quiet assurance that to be a believer in the unseen, even in an age where the unseen is rendered as fairy tale, is not delusion but ultimate freedom.