There is no doubt that, in the United States’ culture generally, the name “John Calvin” is negatively viewed. It is a type of shorthand for a withered, dour, and unbending attitude. Though few actually know anything about Calvin, and even fewer yet have ever read what he wrote, they know that, culturally, he has been rejected. He represents (to their minds) all that Americans (in theory) find repulsive: a shrilly dogmatic, fanatically intolerant, world-hating, sexually repressed, no-fun-at-all individual who seeks more than anything else to remake everyone into his own image, which is simply the shrunken image of an arbitrary God whodamns good people forever just for the hell of it. Every evil deed is punished beyond reason, every good deed is ignored, and freedom is burnt to a crisp just like all those whom Calvin and God consign to the flames.

This may seem like hyperbole, but how else does one explain the consistent use of Calvin’s name for the host of things people in the United States find intolerable? For a people who seem to agree with Henry Ford that “history is bunk,”¹ it’s a name that, though not quick on anyone’s lips, finds preprogrammed reception in people when they do hear it. Just to run through some examples I have given in other places, consider the following: in the late 1980s, in an article on the Boston Red Sox baseball team, the Boston Globe ran the headline, concerning the chances of the Red Sox to win their division, “Is It Calvinism or

¹ This is what many believe Ford to have said, and it is heard often enough to be a commonplace in the United States. What Ford actually said is more interesting, especially for this essay and the way it will examine the notion of how traditions are created, handed down, and challenged. In an interview published in the Chicago Tribune (May 25, 1916), Ford declared, “History is more or less bunk. It’s tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only present that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history we made today.”
Realism”; in a book on the drug Prozac, the author refers to those who feel guilty about taking drugs, especially for mental illness, as “pharmacological Calvinists”; a scientist decides that those who take a fatalistic view toward life are “sociobiological Calvinists”; a show that highlights homespun humor talks about its sponsor, “Mournful Oatmeal, the breakfast cereal of Calvinists”; an ethicist, looking to blame someone for Americans’ obsession with the body and its possible perfection, saddles Calvin with responsibility for such a situation, though usually he is seen as one who hates the human body.2 Apparently, one does not have to be logically consistent when using Calvin as a scapegoat.

It is no extraordinary thing, therefore, to see Calvin, his name, and all who are assumed to be his progeny (theologically) excoriated in public discourse; actually, that is not quite right. In public discourse, Calvin and those associated with him are used as a rhetorical means to excoriate a position, belief, or attitude that is seen as antithetical to human happiness, well-being, and achievement. What is extraordinary is the emergence of Marilynne Robinson as a defender of John Calvin and the traditions he begat. Here we have a writer, held high in the esteem of critics, literary circles, and the broader American public, who has emerged as, in fact, more than defender: she is a staunch advocate of Calvin. What is more, she has been in a unique position to move from the literate and critical non-fiction essay to the novel, wherein much of her best insights are embodied, echoing a sort of reverse process in comparison to nineteenth-century America, wherein those who sought to overthrow the “Calvinist” culture of America quickly moved from essays and letters to the developing genre of fiction, wherein Calvinism was painted in gruesomely despicable terms.

For the purposes of this essay, I will examine, first, the notion of “ideograph” as a way to think about how the name of Calvin and his tradition have been used (and I will very briefly point to a few twentieth- and twenty-first-century examples from the world of fiction to illustrate the continuing negative uses). Of course, any serious talk about tradition involves thinking about what it is one expects from historical study. I will then move to an examination of Marilynne Robinson’s

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2 These examples, and others, can be found in Thomas J. Davis, ‘Images of Intolerance: John Calvin in Nineteenth-Century History Textbooks,’ *Church History* 65 (1996), 234, and idem, ‘Rhetorical War and Reflex: Calvin and Calvinism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction and Twentieth Century Criticism,’ *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (1998), 443–444.