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# 'A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT' – AND A STREAM OF CALVINISM, TOO?

FREDERICK HALE, SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA

## A Post-Reformed Society?

The extent to which the Reformed tradition has influenced American culture – and by extension that of many other countries – has been repeatedly questioned in recent decades. Critics representing many points of the theological and denominational compass have contended that Congregational, Presbyterian, and other historians of Puritanism long overestimated its subsequent sway while failing to give most other Christian streams in the great confluence of North American religious life their due. In any case, rampant secularism allegedly eroded what little remained of this once powerful legacy by the middle of the twentieth century. More specifically, Calvinism, some grudgingly concede, saw its final noteworthy cultural expressions in the age of Woodrow Wilson before giving up the public ghost, yielding to various forms of so-called 'fundamentalism', neo-orthodoxy, liberalism, Pentecostalism, revivalism, and other more subjective manifestations of Christianity, as well as the behaviourist school of psychology, individual narcissism, and cultural nihilism in our ostensibly post-Protestant age. To the argument that no-one bothered to inform the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church, some of the more conservative Presbyterian denominations, and other bearers of the Calvinist tradition that they had been eclipsed, pundits could reply that those groups had effectively been marginalised and no longer wielded the authority they once did.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The scholarly literature pertaining to the influence of the Reformed tradition on American culture and the debate over the decline of this influence is extensive. For a representative sample of older and more recent considerations, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: 1939); Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA, 1953); William A. Clebsch, *From Sacred to Profane America: The Role of Religion in American History* (New York, 1968); Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*, rev. ed. (New York, 1984); Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, 1965); Daniel Callahan (ed.), *The Secular City Debate* (New York, 1966); Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York, 1970); Martin E. Marty, *The Pro & Con Book of Religious America: A Bicentennial Argument* (Waco, TX, 1975); George Marsden (ed.),

### A Film with Calvinist Underpinnings

Undeniably, there is at least a kernel of truth in all these assertions. What is striking, however, is the endurance of culturally embedded Calvinism in American life as the supposedly post-Calvinist world sprints towards the end of this millennium. Even in the medium of popular film it continues to send ripples across the silver screen. One recent manifestation of this staying power is the internationally acclaimed motion picture *A River Runs Through It*, which the perennially venerated actor Robert Redford directed in 1992. This relatively low-budget production surpassed many sceptics' initial expectations and quickly gained transatlantic popularity while receiving generally laudatory reviews. Critics variously hailed it as an elegy to the symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature, a cinematic hymn to family unity in the face of tribulation, and, given Redford's prominent profile as a conservationist, a masterpiece of propaganda for ecological movements. Generally overlooked in evaluations of the film, however, though not entirely in reviews of the book which inspired it, was the unmistakable – and on the surface quite ironic – hand of Calvinism in shaping this masterpiece. At first blush, this appears to be limited to the spiritual tenor of the Reverend John Maclean, a Presbyterian minister and father of two sons whose early lives form the dyad of lifestyles and personalities which structure the film. Yet in a muted form which the Genevan Reformer might not readily have recognised, its influence runs much deeper to mould the ideational core of *A River Runs Through It*.

In the present article I shall take steps towards redressing this *lacuna* in the pertinent scholarship by describing Norman Maclean's perspective on his spiritual upbringing, particularly his memory of paternal influence on this formation, analysing certain biblical allusions and themes in both the screenplay and visual aspects of the film, and tracing how the journeys of the Maclean brothers on widely divergent paths are employed to underscore certain theological presuppositions in *A River Runs Through It*.

By Hollywood standards, this film is reasonably faithful to the text on which it was based, namely the memoiristic title novella in

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*Evangelicalism and Modern America* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1984); Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder (eds.), *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1983); James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1984); Milton J. Coalter, et al. (eds.), *The Presbyterian Predicament: Six Perspectives* (Louisville, KY, 1990).

Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*,<sup>2</sup> which he wrote immediately after retiring from a lengthy if not particularly distinguished professorship in English at the renowned University of Chicago in 1973. It should be said at the outset that Maclean (1902-90) would have shuddered at the thought of being classified as a Calvinist. As a young adult he left behind the preponderance of his familial religious tradition and never returned to it or became a practising adherent of it or any other formal expression of the Christian faith. Maclean took his spiritual cues in large part from dozens of summers in the wilds of Montana, to which he returned annually after receiving his professorship, and from nineteenth-century English romantic poetry, not least that of Wordsworth, on whom he became an internationally known authority. Nevertheless, the stamp of his boyhood religious life was virtually indelible and continued to shine through his adult impiety and scepticism. Against this background, Maclean's secondary interest in theology in the absence of a commitment to any orthodox doctrinal system is readily comprehensible. The Calvinism of *A River Runs Through It* is thus refracted in the first instance through the prism of his partially post-Calvinist mind as he recalled his formative years in the high country of western Montana. Complicating matters further, the well-known screenwriter Richard Friedenberg took certain liberties with Maclean's novella which in places embellish the religious element of the text but in others sacrifice nuances in it. That having been said, it is striking how unmistakably the Calvinist legacy emerges in the film.

Maclean's memory of his father as both minister and parent underlies the creative effort, of course, and various sources shed light on the paternal relationship. In *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*, one finds diverse anecdotes about the elder Maclean, tales which his son supplemented with the same disregard for systematisation and chronological sequence in a lengthy interview which he granted for a special issue of *The TriQuarterly* in 1984.<sup>3</sup> What emerges from these accounts is a sketchy portrait which highlights both the cleric's stern demeanour and his harmony with nature, a combination which the retrospective son perceived as rare but nonetheless entirely plausible. The Reverend John Maclean was a well-read Scottish Canadian who served Presbyterian churches in several towns in the United States. The opening line of the novella,

<sup>2</sup> Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> William Kittredge and Annick Smith, 'The Two Worlds of Norman Maclean: Interviews in Montana and Chicago', *TriQuarterly* 66 (1984), pp. 412-32.

repeated in Redford's sonorous first-person voice-over narrative in the film, sets the tone: 'In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.'<sup>4</sup> Indeed, much of what Maclean recalled about his father in that text is innocuous, benevolent and uplifting. He and his brother Paul, three years his junior, were regularly required to study the Westminster Shorter Catechism on Sunday afternoons, an otherwise pleasurable time sandwiched between their father's morning services at the church and his evening preaching to the members of the Christian Endeavour Society. Inevitably he quizzed them about its contents, rarely going beyond the first question, 'What is the chief end of man?', to which they were pleased to respond, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.'<sup>5</sup>

In harmony with this conviction, Maclean introduced his sons at an early age both to angling and its cultural matrix, though warning them that the seventeenth-century Royalist and biographer Izaak Walton, now remembered chiefly for his *The Compleat Angler*, was 'not a respectable writer. He was an Episcopalian and a bait fisherman.'<sup>6</sup> This symbiotic linkage of spirituality and the outdoors life, Professor Maclean believed, was the enduring and ultimately most nourishing and restorative element of his family's religious heritage, and it provides narrative and ideational underpinnings for the film. All in all, he insists, the result was virtually a model of Christian charity. On the wall of the Sunday school room were the words 'God is Love,' a phrase which as a child he assumed was an encapsulation of his family's domestic tranquillity – notwithstanding his occasional fisticuffs with Paul, about which he wrote freely.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, the picture of Maclean senior which emerges from the candid interview his son granted in 1984 is decidedly less appealing and more austere. The retired professor admitted at that time that his childhood environment was not a cornucopia of affection: 'My family, which was British and Scotch [*sic*] and reserved in the expression of its emotions, especially in any emotions about loving, didn't talk about how much we loved each other. It would have been unthinkable.' His father appears to have governed this lack of display: 'My father did not allow me to start elementary school but taught me himself. . . . He was a very stern teacher, very harsh.' Professor Maclean recalled incidents in which his father would command him to compose essays, then tear them up and insist without explanation that his lachrymose son rewrite them at half their original length. Such

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<sup>4</sup> Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

pedagogy apparently was not embittering or ineffective, however; Maclean insisted that 'most everything crucial that happened to me since has been influenced by his teaching'.<sup>8</sup>

### **Foundational Christian Motifs**

Interweaving quotations from Maclean's book and striking visual imagery, Redford establishes certain Christian, though not explicitly Calvinist, motifs at the outset of the film. The first image on the screen is of water flowing over the rocky bottom of a shallow stream, presaging what on a larger scale would become a recurrent theme in *A River Runs Through It*. The significance of this is not immediately apparent but emerges unmistakably from the text a few minutes later. In the meantime, waves of evocative biblical motifs roll by as sequels to this initial allusion to creation. A succession of sepia photographs appear on the screen depicting the Maclean family and a nascent frontier town in Montana during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one of which features a white frame chapel looming above the horizon. Redford voices Maclean's memory that in the Missoula of his boyhood 'Indians still appeared out of the wilderness to walk the honkytonks and brothels of Front Street.' This symbolic representation of the penetration of Christendom into the wilderness will not be lost on any viewer with even a rudimentary cognisance of the 'New Israel' theme which had been a hallmark in the Reformed tradition in North America since the arrival of Puritans in New England in the early 1630s. Whatever subtlety all of this has dissipates when the first scene after the credits depicts Maclean preaching austerely from his pulpit while his wife and sons sit in the congregation. 'The poor without Christ are of all men the most miserable, but the poor with Christ are princes and kings of the earth,' he proclaims. Echoes of the theocratic motif which from time to time has burdened the Reformed tradition, not least in the legacy of English and American Puritanism, resound in this homiletical snippet.

No less significantly, the biblical emphasis bridges what the elder Maclean preaches from the pulpit and the message he proclaims outdoors. Wearing his clerical collar, this bespectacled parson strolls with his young sons along the banks of the Big Blackfoot River where, in Norman Maclean's words again voiced by Redford, 'he felt his soul restored and his imagination stirred.' The cleric informs his progeny that water is the primary element in creation and declares that it contributed to the formation of minerals. When Maclean surveys the river bed and pronounces that 'Beneath the rocks are the words of

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<sup>8</sup> Kittredge and Smith, 'The Two Worlds of Norman Maclean', pp. 413-14.

God,' he and his sons hear the sound of water running, another instance of this recurrent, vital theme. Norman remembers that 'If Paul and I listened very carefully, all our lives we might hear those words.' His final line in the film would recall this memory.

The allusions to Hebrew Scripture then yield briefly to Christian doctrine in an explicitly denominational guise. Norman Maclean's memory of his father's Calvinist theological underpinnings come to the fore: 'As a Presbyterian, my father believed that man by nature was a damned mess, and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty. To him, all good things, trout as well as eternal salvation, come by grace, and grace comes by art, and art does not come easy.' A pivotal manifestation of this conviction is in angling, specifically in accord with the elder Maclean's passion for fly fishing: 'So my brother and I learned to cast Presbyterian-style, on a metronome.'

If John Maclean is a stern fisher of men as well as of fish, as a parent he is no less austere. Norman's words underscore the severity of this Calvinist man of God as he relates how he received much of his primary education. While his friends learnt to read and write elsewhere in Missoula, 'Each weekday while my father worked on his Sunday sermon, I attended the school of Reverend Maclean.' His paternal teacher did not spoil him with kindness. As in the book, Norman relates how his unsmiling father would criticise versions of his essays repeatedly before soberly pronouncing his judgement: 'Good. Now throw it away.'

Afternoons offered more liberty in a way analogous to natural theology complementing revealed doctrine. 'There was a balance to my father's system,' Maclean relates. 'Every afternoon I was set free, untutored and untouched, till supper, to learn on my own the natural side of God's order.' As Redford pronounces these words, visual images of Edenic mountain beauty dominate the screen. A large river coursing through the centre of the landscape is featured.

Against this pristine backdrop, however, fallen human nature becomes apparent, and Paul and Norman Maclean set out on their dichotomous journeys through life. There are raucous scenes of debauchery in Missoula. Crude men spout vulgar language, and the Maclean brothers view the exterior of a house of prostitution. This Sodom and Gomorrah of frontier Montana remains undestroyed, and the Macleans participate in its violence by engaging in fisticuffs with older boys. 'I knew I was tough, because I had been bloodied in battle,' says Norman, who subsequently boxed during his undergraduate years at Dartmouth College. The roots of his brother's penchant for mischievous behaviour are more enigmatic: 'Paul was

different. His toughness came from some secret place inside him. He simply knew he was tougher than anyone alive.'

### Two Divergent Paths

Much of the rest of *A River Runs Through It* is a development of this fundamental bifurcation as Redford traces the two routes which these apparently unequally blessed brothers follow on different though occasionally intersecting paths through life, one to a gratifying academic career, the other to a vocation as a journalist whose alcoholism and compulsive gambling eventually make him a victim of murder. In Friedenberg's adaptation of Maclean's book this duality is not presented as a Manichaean polarity; the sins of both brothers are apparent. Nevertheless, from the outset Paul is portrayed as having much more volatile and unrelentingly self-destructive traits in his personality. Concomitantly, he seems unable to accept assistance from others or allow the healing of either humankind or nature to arrest his downward spiral into his personal abyss.

Rebelliousness against both God and humankind appears early in Paul's worldly sojourn. As a young child, he is depicted refusing to eat his oatmeal, an act of defiance which angers his father who, however, in his role as a vicar of God, eventually forgives and pronounces the word 'grace' at the table, on which the uneaten bowl of porridge still stands. This symbolic incident, apparently contrived by Friedenberg, foreshadows numerous instances of flouting authority. Moreover, underscoring the fundamental difference between the two young brothers, when they discuss possibilities for their careers, Norman states that he will become either a minister or a boxer, while Paul declares his desire to be either a fly fisherman or a boxer. He dismisses laughingly his older brother's query about entering divine service.

The contrast between both lads' participation in religious life and their private behaviour as teenagers is also highlighted early in the film. In a brief scene, their father leads the congregation, which as always includes his faithful wife as well as his sons, in singing 'Be Thou My Vision'. Immediately thereafter, we see Paul and Norman climbing out of a second-storey window of the manse to join a group of their peers in a night of drinking and vulgar discourse which ends when they steal a boat and destroy it in an incredibly mindless attempt – made at Paul's behest – to ride in it over a waterfall.

In a series of scenes interrupted by Norman's narrative of his successful sojourn at Dartmouth College and return to Missoula in 1926 after earning his baccalaureate degree, Paul's moral descent becomes increasingly apparent. He imbibes illegally possessed liquor frequently during Prohibition and becomes heavily indebted while

playing in an extended poker game in a neighbouring village. In one of his unsuccessful attempts at fraternal salvation, Norman dutifully responds to a call to a gaol where Paul and his Native American paramour are incarcerated in a state of inebriation after Paul has assaulted another drinker who has insulted her. The young journalist's downward spiral is akin to the fate of the protagonist in a classical Greek tragedy; viewers gradually realise that owing to a flaw in his character he is on a collision course with disaster. When Paul finally reaches that fateful juncture and dies a violent death, there is little if any element of surprise, and Norman accepts his brother's death with seeming equanimity.

### **The Font of Salvation in an Edenic State?**

What is emphasised just as clearly in *A River Runs Through It*, however, is the title motif of the film. After each instance of self-destructive conduct, the Maclean boys are temporarily rescued and restored to a Edenic state by their keen interest in fishing the Big Blackfoot River, usually accompanied by their father, whose part in nurturing this therapeutic exercise viewers are not allowed to forget. In the water all are joyful and successful anglers, and the superiority of Maclean senior is again accented. When his contending sons compare the size of the trout they have caught, he lays his own, even longer, catch next to theirs before walking away, coyly flashing one of his rare smiles.

Norman Maclean, to be sure, is no paragon of piety in *A River Runs Through It*. His sins are not limited to excessive pugilism. On the one hand, his nickname 'Preach' suggests that in the eyes of his friends he bears the stamp of organised religion. Yet like his brother, he imbibes illegal alcohol freely in 'speakeasies', is addicted to nicotine, and emits profane expletives unnecessarily. Whatever salvation he finds in life is not through works, as he perhaps comprehends in the end after realising that his brother's self-destruction could have been his own had there not been some elements of restraint in his more reserved personality.

Gradually Norman overcomes his own minor rebelliousness and, while never evincing a commitment to Christian orthodoxy, is able to appreciate more fully his father's insights into divine grace and human resistance thereto. This is made explicit in the final sermon which he hears the elder Maclean preach, wisdom in which he homiletically expresses his ongoing grief. 'Each one of us here today', he tells his congregation in Missoula, 'will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question: We are willing to help, Lord, but what, if anything, is needed?' He confesses that 'we can seldom help those who are closest to us. Either we do not know

what part of ourselves to give, or more often than not the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is those we live with and should know who elude us.' Yet he does not despair, admonishing his flock instead to be vehicles of charity: 'But we can still love them. We can love completely without complete understanding.'

In the closing scene, the elderly Norman Maclean is fishing in a much more tranquil river than that depicted earlier. It is the evening of both the day and his life. Much of the Calvinist legacy of this non-theist has apparently disappeared from his consciousness, but his understanding of God's grace is now manifested in a pantheistic faith in which something akin to a Hellenistic cyclical understanding of the world's meaning has replaced the Judaeo-Christian concept of God acting lineally in history. No longer does a transcendent deity bestow his favour upon the world from on high; Maclean believes that grace, by whatever name it is to be called, such as a renewal or reinvigoration of humanity, is inherent in the natural order. 'Eventually all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops,' he professes. This is, of course, a fundamental departure from what his Calvinist father would have said. Yet the senior Maclean's influence still makes ripples in his son's perception of the relationship of humanity, God, and the cosmos. Echoing a theme from the opening minutes of the film, Norman concludes that 'under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs'. His final line is appropriately cryptic as he ponders the mystery of life in the light of his faith – apparently living in creative tension with his intellectual doubt – which is derived from nature, not a theological treatise: 'I am haunted by waters.' His beloved Wordsworth, that brooding 'Nature's Priest' of English Romanticism, could have written similar words.

### **Biblical Water Imagery**

The central title metaphor which the creators of *A River Runs Through It* employ with such great effect gives this film much of its depth. The image of God acting in or through water, especially moving water, is among the most persistent in the Bible, occurring initially in Genesis 1 and making its final appearance in Revelation 22. The Spirit of God hovers over the waters at the beginning of creation. The Psalmist compares the panting of his soul after God to the panting of the hart after the water brooks in Psalm 42. Justice flows down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream in Amos 5. Healing waters flow from the temple in Ezekiel 47. The metaphor courses through the New Testament as well, particularly in the Johannine literature. Jesus offers living water in John 4 and 7. An angel shows the author of Revelation

'the river of the water of life'. For nearly two millennia Christian writers have interpreted these biblical metaphors as symbols of, *inter alia*, faith, hope, the gospel and, not least – particularly in the words of Calvin – grace. In *A River Runs Through It*, as we have argued, the Big Blackfoot flows constantly as an unfailing sign of divine forgiveness and the potential renewal of fallen men and women.

### **Unequal Fraternal Blessings**

The other underlying major theme, that of two brothers seemingly destined to follow widely divergent paths to worldly blessing or destruction, also echoes a recurrent biblical motif, though one whose place is limited to Hebrew Scripture. The most apparent fraternal pair are obviously Cain and Abel, but others add complementary dimensions to the larger theme. Isaac becomes a patriarch while Ishmael, though also blessed, remains outside the covenant and is sent into the wilderness. In the next generation the skilled hunter Esau despises his birthright, which his twin brother Jacob acquires as part of his role in the line of patriarchs.

Within a Calvinist context, of course, the routes which the Maclean brothers follow through life strongly hint at the central doctrine of election, although this is not explicitly mentioned in *A River Runs Through It*. Nothing in the fragments of John Maclean's sermons which he delivers in the film is a reflection of this teaching, but it unmistakably underlies the behaviour of his sons, despite their similar upbringing. The handsome and talented Paul, as indicated earlier, shows signs of rebellion against his godly father while a young child and subsequently of being bound for at least worldly perdition, and neither the stern nor the gentle efforts of his concerned parents can save him from the ruin which he seems intent on bringing upon himself. His father's frequent acts of restoring him to the Big Blackfoot River, the metaphoric locus of grace, have only short-lived effect.

The imagery reaches its zenith late in the film, after Paul has wandered far on the path of self-destruction. On the last fishing expedition which he takes with his brother and father, a large fish seizes his fly and pulls him into the swift current. Truly in his element, Paul is temporarily immersed in the river in what might be an allusion to a natural baptism in the living water. Indeed, after he surfaces with his catch and submits to being photographed by Norman, his brother recalls that at this intensely joyous instant Paul seemed 'suspended above the earth, free from all its laws, like a work of art'. Having witnessed so much of his brother's recurrent debauchery, however, Norman understands 'just as surely and just as clearly, that

life is not a work of art, and that the moment could not last'. Something defying natural explanation continues to condemn Paul.

Norman, by contrast, seems inexplicably chosen for a vastly more elevated life, notwithstanding his obvious foibles, some of which mirror those of his profligate brother. The divergence resists logical explanation, thus mirroring Calvin's insistence that the doctrine of election could rest only on biblical revelation and that 'to seek any other knowledge of predestination than what the Word of God discloses is not less insane than if one should purpose to walk in a pathless waste, or to see in darkness'.<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

The present article begins with the question of the enduring vitality of Calvinism in American culture, specifically as represented in *A River Runs Through It*. Our consideration of that powerful film suggests that a meaningful answer to this question in its twentieth-century historical context must take into account such factors as the ongoing evolution of the Calvinist legacy in a pluralistic modern society, one in which a humanist such as Norman Maclean had been subjected to countless other theological and secular schools of thought during a half-century of academic life before he wrote the memoiristic piece on which the film is based. By his own account, as an adult Maclean was not an outwardly religious man in any conventional sense. Nevertheless, in this film – certainly more so than in the novella of the same title – muted Calvinist and other Christian doctrines are unmistakable, such as the implicit doctrine of election. Among the other emphases, one finds divine sovereignty, the transcendence and immanence of God, original sin, grace, salvation, forgiveness, natural revelation, and the centrality of charity in Christian discipleship. The failure of most reviewers to consider them can perhaps most reasonably be attributed to a lack of theological sophistication on their part. To the theologically attuned Christian viewer, however, the divergent destinies of Paul and Norman Maclean, particularly the unstoppable decline of the former into debauchery and ultimately death, under the preaching of their conservative Presbyterian father, and the evocative symbolism of the grace-filled and ever-flowing river offering the waters of life, can leave little doubt about the spiritual depth of this work of cinematic art.

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<sup>9</sup> *Institutes* 4:21:2.