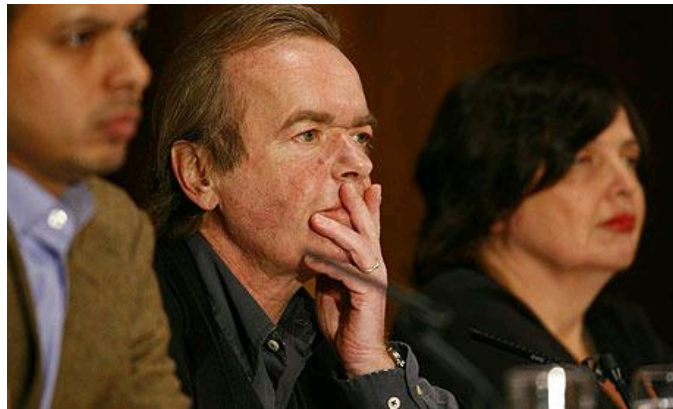


The Amis vs Islamism debate that wasn't

An opportunity to put questions to the author which he really needs to answer has been missed

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Speak no ... Ed Hussain, Martin Amis and Maureen Freely at last night's debate. Photograph: Christopher Thomond

How has the world changed since 9/11? How is a writer to respond? That was the question under discussion at a Manchester University debate last night. The line-up: Martin Amis, Ed Hussain, and me. There were 650 people in the audience - many from outside the university. So we were expecting a bit of trouble. Some reference, at least, to [the War Between the Gods](#) that has been raging in this paper since term began.

And before we go any further, let me say that what I have always admired about [Martin Amis](#) is the way he tests himself and his readers: pushing his ideas to the extreme, speaking the unspeakable, and in so doing capturing the spirit of the age. I was appalled and disturbed but not particularly shocked by the things [Terry Eagleton](#) and [Ronan Bennett](#) quoted him as saying. But they were pretty mild compared to off-the-record, after-dinner thought experiments I've heard from other, cagier members of the intelligentsia over the past six years. I did not think Martin knew just how crushing such comments can be to the millions of British Muslims who take the same view of suicide bombers as he does. But by putting his thoughts into the public domain he was taking responsibility for them, and [giving people a chance to respond to him](#).

Back to those questions, then. Here are my answers. September 11 poured rocket fuel on a group of neocons who were looking for an excuse to remodel the Middle East. If we now have an east-west divide, it is largely thanks to them. There were a million ways for a writer to respond to all this. But as someone who grew up in a secular country with a mostly Muslim population, I have felt obliged to challenge, with facts, the gross distortions of Islam and the Muslim world whenever and wherever I come across them. Not to win the argument, but to make people think again.

So did I? I was a fool, I think, even to try. We each said our piece last night, with Ed asking us all to understand the difference between Islamism and Islam, and Martin reminding us that suicide bombers were morally repulsive, that their perfidy had plunged us into moral crisis, and that anyone who was unwilling to admit to feeling morally superior to the Taliban was perhaps being dishonest. We chatted a bit about our and others' responses to 9/11, and then, with some trepidation, took questions from the floor.

But the only shouting match was about Palestine and Israel, and I was the target. The only real challenge was to Ed Hussain for remarks he made about the Muslim response to the 9/11. The questions to Martin were deferential in the extreme. Only at the very end of the Q and A did a young man ask him to comment on [The Controversy](#). He used this opportunity to repeat [what he said in the Guardian on Saturday](#): that he has never and will never advocate sanctions against British Muslims (as the misquoted thought experiment had led some to believe) and that he cherishes British multiculturalism and has said so often, in print. My response was that it was fine to conduct thought experiments, but once you started them, you had to

speaking up for fear of being branded suicide bomber sympathisers. So the debate didn't happen. This bodes ill.

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