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## **BILL MOYERS ON FAITH & REASON**

**Bill Moyers and Martin Amis and Margaret Atwood . July 28, 2006**

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- [Find out more about Margaret Atwood and matters discussed](#) in the interview
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**BILL MOYERS:** Hello. I'm Bill Moyers. Writers from around the world were in New York recently to open some doors of perception on faith and reason. They were here at the invitation of the PEN literary and human rights organization — PEN stands for poets, essayists, and novelists. Among their concerns is the threat to freedom of speech and conscience from religious extremism — and that's a subject close to the hearts of the two noted novelists you'll meet in this broadcast, Margaret Atwood and Martin Amis.

Both are agnostic — for them, ultimate reality is unknown and probably unknowable. Notice I said "probably." Because as you will hear, when it comes to the mysteries of the universe, these two skeptics have left slightly ajar their own doors of perception.

Margaret Atwood told me her job as a writer is to describe the world around her — including, she said, "what is obscure or hidden"...the experience of people left out of the picture. Her latest novel, THE PENELOPIAD, turns Homer's epic of The Odyssey on it's head, so that we see it through the eyes of Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, and a chorus of twelve maids hanged when her husband returns from the Trojan War.

Margaret Atwood has over 12 novels to her credit and 15 books of poetry. THE HANDMAID'S TALE arrived like an earthquake in the dialogue between faith and reason. In it, she describes a woman's fight to escape God-quoting oppressors who have turned America into a theocracy where women are stripped of their rights and torture is justified in the name of national security. Harold Pinter adapted THE HANDMAID'S TALE for the silver screen.

**MOVIE:** "You're going to be Handmaid's, you're going to serve God, and your country."

**BILL MOYERS:** As Margaret Atwood moved among the writers here for the PEN conference on faith and reason, naturally, the subject of fundamentalism and theocracy came up often.

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**BILL MOYERS:** When you look back on it, was The Handmaid's Tale true?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Was it true? Well, I had a man in an audience once who during question period said to me, "Well, this story must be autobiographical." And I said, "How could it be autobiographical? It's set in the future."

**BILL MOYERS:** I took it as a prophetic possibility-

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** I don't do prophecy.

**BILL MOYERS:** I know you don't.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** But it's a blueprint of the kind of thing that human beings do when they're put under a certain sort of pressure. And I made it a rule for the writing of this book that I would not put anything into it that human societies have not already done.

**BILL MOYERS:** People have said when they read The Handmaid's Tale it could never happen here. But the fact of the matter is it had happened here. Under the Puritans-

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Oh, yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** --the witch-

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** It happened-

**BILL MOYERS:** --the Salem -- witches trial, for example.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Well, the Salem witchcraft trial is in my opinion one of the foundation events of American history. And it was an event where you can call it a clash between mythology and politics if you like. Because it depended very much on a belief in the invisible world. Cotton Mather, who was a very prominent divine at the time, wrote a book called *THE WONDERS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD*, which was all about the behavior of witches.

And the devil. And this is what people believed. They weren't being hypocrites when they did these things. They were actually scared of witchcraft and the devil. And they believed that the devil could work his way into their community through witches, so it was serious business. But it was also a hysteria. The surprise to me has been all of the stuff I learned long ago. I thought, "Nobody's going to be interested in this again. You know what good is knowing 17th century theology ever going to be to me? Or anybody else. Surely nobody's interested." And now suddenly it's all come back. Because things do go around in cycles.

**BILL MOYERS:** Seventeenth century theology? How would you sum it up?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** The argument about predestination.

**BILL MOYERS:** Being the elect or the not elected.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Being the elect or the non elect. There is a heresy called the antinomian heresy. And somebody says that Tony Blair's a member, but never mind that. Under antinomianism you're convinced that you are one of the elect, alright that you are one of the elect, that you are destined to be elect from birth. That you're going to be saved no matter what, and therefore you can do anything, because you're already marked as one of the elect. So that of course just let's you do all the most atrocious things you might be inclined to do, while still believing that you are justified.

I think it's the kind of event that replays itself throughout history when cultures come under stress. When societies come under stress these kinds of things happen. People start looking around for essentially human sacrifices. They start looking around for somebody they can blame. And they feel if only they can demolish that person, then everything's going to be okay. And it's of course never true, but there are these periods in history. If things aren't going well, it must be the Communists. Let's have Joe McCarthy. You know things aren't going well. It must be them liberals. Whoever it may be.

**BILL MOYERS:** Well, what *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* illustrates so vividly is that society can give up its ideals. Its freedom. Its values. In an almost frighteningly normal way.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** In an almost frighteningly rapid way. Conditions change. There's too much turmoil or fear of some kind than people can handle. And that's the point at which they will trade their liberties for somebody who comes along and says, "I'm a strong leader. I'll take care of it. The trains will run on time."

**BILL MOYERS:** If you wanted to take over the United States government today and set up your government, how would you do it?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Well, that is more or less how. And *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* is the answer to the question. If you were going to change the United States from a democracy into a totalitarianism, how would you go about doing it? Well, you wouldn't say, "Let's all be communists." You wouldn't get any takers for that. You might say a rather twisted sort of thing that would say, "In order to preserve our freedoms we have to give them up for now." You might say something like that. Which is kind of, I think, what's been floating in the breeze this last little while. In order to preserve freedom we have to demolish freedom. Something like that. But you're more likely to say, "This is the true religion. Follow our flag." That kind of thing.

**BILL MOYERS:** I keep in my notebook something you said once. You wrote, "What is needed for really good tyranny is an unquestionable idea or authority. Political disagreement is political disagreement. But political disagreement with a theocracy is heresy."

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** That's exactly right. If your government says, "Not only am I your government, but I represent the true religion," if you disagree with it you're not just of another faction. You're evil.

**BILL MOYERS:** But you don't imagine that could happen here?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Want to bet? Want to lay some bets as to that?

**BILL MOYERS:** I would never bet against Margaret Atwood.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** You'd have to have quite a lot of uproar first. But it's amazing how quickly people rolled over for the Patriot Act. You know they were scared enough so that

they just said, "Oh, okay. If that's how we solve it, fine. Just don't tell me. You know I don't want to know. Don't tell me."

**BILL MOYERS:** Did you anticipate that you would be so vilified for suggesting in *The Handmaid's Tale* that theocracy could happen in America?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Well, what has amazed me is the theocracy that I've put in *HANDMAID'S TALE* never calls itself Christian. And in fact it never says anything about Christianity whatsoever. Its slogans, et cetera, et cetera, are all from the Old Testament. So what has amazed me was the rapidity with which a number of Christians put up their hands and said, "This is an insult to us." What did it mean? It meant they hadn't read the book. You know they hadn't read the book.

Because in the book the regime does what all such regimes immediately do. It eliminates the opposition. The Bolsheviks got rid of their nearest ideological neighbors, the Mensheviks, as soon as they had the power. They killed the lot. You know? Too close to them. They got rid of any other socialists. They wanted to be the only true church brand of socialists. So any theocracy in this country would immediately eliminate all other competing religions if they could. So the Quakers in my book have gone underground.

**BILL MOYERS:** Right.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** And the regime is wiping out little pockets of resistant Baptists here and there. And stringing up nuns, et cetera. Which is exactly how they would operate, because that's what happens under those kinds of arrangements. You want to be the power, the only power. Anybody who could be a rival power, you'd get rid of them. So I am one of those people who does believe in the America of Thoreau, for instance.

**BILL MOYERS:** Of--

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Thoreau the conscientious objector. Thoreau the man who stood upon his principles. Who refused, for instance, to pay taxes to a government that was waging a war he considered to be unjust. Went to jail for it. That is the sort of essence of the kind of American that we evolved-- looked up to for many years.

**BILL MOYERS:** It's also Henry David Thoreau who said, "To affect the quality of the day is the highest of the arts."

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Well, there you are. Yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** Is that what keeps you writing?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** What keeps me writing? I don't know what keeps me writing. It's one of those things I don't know.

**BILL MOYERS:** But I know you were kidnapped by literature when you were young. And you've never wanted to be ransomed?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** That's true. Yes, that's absolutely true. Sometimes people play these silly games. They say, "What would you have been if you hadn't been a writer?" And I say, "A ballet dancer," which is palpably absurd, because I get dizzy. So the answer is really nothing else. I can't imagine anything else I would rather be.

**BILL MOYERS:** In church on Sunday, we sang a 200 and some odd year old hymn, Franz Josef Haydn. With some contemporary words. And the words go, "God, you spin the whirling planets, fill the seas and spread the plain. Mold the mountains, fashion blossoms, call for the sunshine, wind, and rain."

Now the scientists wouldn't have put it that way. The scientists would have said there is an explanation for why the planets whirl, for why the rain falls, for why the seas rise, for why the mountains form. But knowledge isn't enough for us. It's not enough to know why-- how these things happen. We need the poetry don't we. Are we hard wired to seek that kind of meaning in life that only poetry, religion, and writing can give us?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Okay, probably so, because we are a symbol making creature. We seem to need, create, and exist within structures of symbolism of one kind or another. We seem always to have done that as human beings. We usually date humanness from the point at which we discover some form of art. Art is always symbolic, okay.

So, we've even found Neanderthal graves. There is an argument about this that some people say, "Okay. This was a like us burial." That is, people put flowers in it. They put implements. It wasn't a burial that indicated that people thought, people who did this thought- the soul was going somewhere else. And that is part of the symbolic structure in which the visible world is only part of reality.

It's very interesting to talk to people about dreams and experiences they may have had. And

if you tell me your dream, that is an experience you have had that is part of the invisible world. I can't see you having that dream. I can't prove that you had it. I've only got your say so. And I can't then tell you, "No, you didn't have that dream. No, that wasn't real. You didn't have that dream." It's an experience that you had. It says nothing about whether there is a material reality attached to that. They can have a profound influence on you that can alter how you're seeing life.

**BILL MOYERS:** Are you suggesting that in the same way that the dream is a reality that we cannot measure, cannot prove except that our experience of it confirms it for us, that religious language, the language of the Bible is also symbolic of the reality that we do not comprehend--

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Some of it is.

**BILL MOYERS:** Some of it.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Yeah. It's a very mixed bag as you know.

**BILL MOYERS:** The Bible?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Yeah. Because the Bible is what it is. That is it's self-contradictory. It's very mixed literary modes. It changes as you go through the Bible. The point of view changes. The way God is perceived changes. It has been very schismatic. That is, people will take a bit of the Bible, build a religion on that, more or less ignore the rest or say the rest doesn't matter. And there all kinds of groups like that, that have differentiated themselves once the Catholic church split. At the time of the reformation there were an infinite number of a large number of other splits. So, little groups have pulled off and developed their own theology really, based on certain passages in the Bible.

**BILL MOYERS:** So, when you--

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** So you can say the Christians, but you can't make a generalization about that group called the Christians except that they all seem to have something to do with this figure called Jesus of Nazareth. And they seem to have something to do with New Testament, but which parts of it is the question. There are some so called Christians who do nothing but think about the Book of Revelations with great delight contemplating the future spectacle of everybody frying to death except them.

**BILL MOYERS:** The Rapture.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Yeah. Well, in the Rapture, it never happens to be you who doesn't get Raptured.

**BILL MOYERS:** What does the Rapture say about religion and the imagination?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Well, as far as I'm concerned, it's a heretical belief. The Rapture idea which seems to consist mostly of fun on a cloud while other people suffer-- that I think is just opening the door to some of the worst impulses in human nature, which is-

**BILL MOYERS:** How do you explain it?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** --revenge and gloating. Well we have a great capacity as human beings for being self righteous and judgmental about other people, despite the admonition, "Judge not lest ye be judged." We do judge. And some people take it to an extreme.

**BILL MOYERS:** If you were asked to design a new human being as an improvement on the current model, would you eliminate the hunger for God?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Well, that's a very good question. I think the answer is could you eliminate such a thing? It has been tried. It has been tried. It wasn't much of an improvement as I recall.

**BILL MOYERS:** Where?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Well Soviet socialists in-

**BILL MOYERS:** Oh sure.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** --yeah, replaced the Christian Western structure with its own which is in fact another version of it. It didn't seem to be that much of an improvement. So I don't think it's a question of God or not God, or religion or not religion. It's what people do with their belief system. How they use that belief system. Whether they use it to really improve things, rather people. Or whether they use it to tyrannize over other people.

**BILL MOYERS:** So I come back to the question, if you could design a new human being, improving on the present model, would you eliminate the hunger for God?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** I could not eliminate the hunger for God without eliminating language. I might, however, eliminate the desire to use God as a weapon. In other words, if I could I would confine the hunger for God to the personal realm so that it would not become something that people use to bash other people with.

**BILL MOYERS:** Does that mean you take your stand on the side of faith?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** No, no having been raised a strict agnostic.

**BILL MOYERS:** A strict agnostic?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Strict agnostic.

**BILL MOYERS:** Not an atheist?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** No, atheism-

**BILL MOYERS:** What's the difference?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** -- is a religion.

**BILL MOYERS:** Atheism is a religion?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Absolutely.

**BILL MOYERS:** You mean it's dogmatic?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Absolutely dogmatic.

**BILL MOYERS:** How so?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Well it makes an absolute stand about something that cannot be proven.

**BILL MOYERS:** There is no God.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** You can't prove that.

**BILL MOYERS:** So you become-- what' a strict agnostic?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** A strict agnostic says, you cannot pronounce, as knowledge, anything you cannot demonstrate. In other words if you're going to call it knowledge you have to be able to run an experiment on it that's repeatable. You can't run an experiment on whether God exists or not, therefore you can't say anything about it as knowledge. You can have a belief if you want to, or if that is what grabs you, if you were called in that direction, if you have a subjective experience of that kind, that would be your belief system. You just can't call it knowledge.

**BILL MOYERS:** When you were growing up, reading the Bible regularly, what did the word God mean to you?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Well no. It's a very nebulous word. God in the Bible even changes the way he appears, changes the way he interacts with human beings. Appears in a number of different forms, burning bush, chariot of fire, back parts as seen by Moses, walking in the Garden with Adam, Ancient of Days, later on-- Still Small Voice, voice saying, "Samuel-- " you know sometimes He's heard, sometimes you get-you never actually see an old man with a beard floating in the clouds. Not in the Bible. Nobody says anything about that.

Dove descending, you know spirit descending, never an old man with a beard in the clouds. So where did we get that? Well we probably got it from Zeus -- the old Greek god-- that picture, that portrayal of God as an old man with a beard in the clouds is a lot like the Greek and Roman sculptures of Zeus. It was given or Jupiter who was given a beard to show his seniority, okay. So Blake used to say that there was God which was the real God and then there was other person called Nobodaddy-

**BILL MOYERS:** Noba?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Nobodaddy which is the false picture of God that human beings create for themselves, okay. So the false picture of God seems to be the one that a lot of people believe in. Instead of believing in the living spirit, they believe in a tyrannical, angry person who's going to squash you basically. So they believe in a series of rules and restrictions imposed by Nobodaddy because they have a desire for rules and restrictions.

**BILL MOYERS:** Did you read Jack Miles-

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** I love Jack Miles.

**BILL MOYERS:** --his biography of God won the Pulitzer Prize. And he says in there, God that this God is a God of radical unpredictability and terrifying moral ambivalence, the God of the Old Testament.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** That's right. Well what everybody of course has been fascinated with forever is the Book of Job. Why did God behave that way? His answer in a few words is, "I'm God and you're not." Another interesting question to me is why didn't Jesus write down the Book of Jesus? Why didn't Jesus write down the equivalent of the Ten Commandments? Why didn't Jesus write a book? Here's the Jesus figure contained in a book, but Jesus Himself doesn't write, how come?

**BILL MOYERS:** Yes, go ahead.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** I think because once you write something down it becomes a permanent fixture and it becomes dogma, which is in fact what has happened with a lot of things that have been written down.

**BILL MOYERS:** What's the difference between dogma and a story?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** I think that the story, if you wanted to call it that, or let's call it the oral tradition, they have to be transmitted by one person to another person or group of people. So it is the breath, which is the spirit, the spirit moving from one person to another. And as we know in the oral tradition, every time the spirit moves it takes a different shape. Myths for instance in the oral tradition exist in different forms and different places. So possibly He wanted to keep His spirit, the spirit of what He was saying possibly He wanted to keep it fluid rather than causing it to be fixed and permanent and therefore unchanging.

**BILL MOYERS:** But before that we have God writing down the Ten Commandments for Moses. That's quite a change.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Exactly. Well that is the usual contrast that is made between the letter and the spirit, the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. But it is not a contrast that you can see being acted out in a lot of religious groups. They much prefer the letter.

**BILL MOYERS:** I heard you once say that human nature hasn't changed in thousands of years.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** How do we know?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Oh. Because we've read the myths. And the myths lay out pretty clearly what's on the human smorgasbord. What we want. What we fear. What we would like to have. What we would very much not like to have. Heaven and Hell, for instance. Heaven, what we want. Hell, what we very much don't want. Okay?

So we've always wanted to fly. In the myths, the gods fly. We don't. We've now arranged it so that we can fly. Not quite in the same way. But everything that we do and every piece of technology we make is an extension of either a fear or a desire. And those human fears and human desires really have not changed. And they're reflected in the myths that have been with us for a long time.

**BILL MOYERS:** Are they true?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** What is true? True means more than one thing. True means proved. You know, it has to be proven. It could mean that. And, in a very materialistic society, that's all it means. Which is why people keep searching for the remains of Noah's Ark. You know that it's not going to be true unless you can find the actual piece of wood. Ok, that's one kind of true.

Another kind of a true: is it true about human nature? Is it true about who we are? Is it true about how we behave? People are of divided opinion about why myths continue, and why they're important, and what they are. Some people say they're maps of prehistory. Some people say they're maps of the human mind and psyche. And some people say that they're language dependant events.

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you mean by that?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** It's one of the characteristics of human beings, is they have very elaborate languages. And these languages all have grammars. And the grammars all contain past tenses and future tenses. Now dogs have languages, too. But we don't think that any dog has ever said to any other dog, "Where do dogs come from?" You know? What is the origin of dogs? And what about before that? What about before there were any dogs?

But because we have the kinds of languages we do, we go back in time as far as we can get

in our imaginations. We want a beginning of the story. And we go as far ahead in the future as we can. We want an end to the story. And that's not going to be just us getting born and us dying. We want to be able to place ourselves within a larger story. Here's where we came from. Here's where we're going in some version or another. And when you die, this is what happens. And some of those stories are happier than other of those stories. But there's always more. There's always and then. And then what happened?

**BILL MOYERS:** And then and then and then.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** And then and then and then. Once we have that kind of language, we're going to have to postulate either a God entity or an unknown. Even, for instance, a physicist, will say: Okay, instead of "Let there be light", there was the Big Bang, which must have been actually quite brilliant visually. And then you say to them, "But what about before that? What happened before that?" And they will say, "Well there was a singularity." And you will say-

**BILL MOYERS:** A singularity?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** Yes. You will say, "What is a singularity?" And they will say, "We don't know." So at some point in the story, there's going to be "We don't know." Okay, so think of it as a stage like this. And in the wings, there is "We don't know."

Let me put it another way. A book came out called THE LIFE OF PI, by a guy called Yann Martel. And it begins by saying, "I'm going to tell you a story that's going to make you believe in God." Then he goes off on this completely seaman's yarn about getting lost in a life boat with a tiger and so on and so forth. And many strange and wonderful things happen to him until he pitches up on the shore of North America -- South America, sorry. Where upon, according to him, the tiger jumps off the boat and runs off into the woods. And he's found starving on the shore, and he's put in the hospital. And then these three Japanese insurance inspectors turn up to find out what happened to the boat that blew up at the beginning of the story.

Then he tells them this whole story. And they confer it among themselves and they say, "We think that maybe your story isn't true. And that there was no tiger." And you know he says, "Well that may be so, but tell me this, which story do you like better? The story with the tiger or the story without the tiger." And the other men confer amongst themselves and they say, "Well actually we like the story with the tiger better." And our narrator starts to cry and he says, "thank you."

So we like the story with the tiger better. We like the story with God in it better then we like the story without God in it. Because it's more like us, it's more understandable, it's more human.

**BILL MOYERS:** More human with God?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** More human with God.

**BILL MOYERS:** How so?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** More human with God because the story without God is about atoms. It's not about somebody we can talk with in theory, or that has any interest in us. So that the universe without an intelligence in it has got nothing to say to us. Whereas the universe, with an intelligence in it, has got something to say to us because it's a mirror of who we are. How about that?

**BILL MOYERS:** Does a strict agnostic believe that we have a soul?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** A strict agnostic could believe that but could not state it as a matter of knowledge.

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you think we mean by the word?

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** The soul?

**BILL MOYERS:** Yes.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** It's another one of the things that we know what we mean. We know what we mean, or we think we believe we know what we mean. But it's not something you can measure or prove, so it has to exist in the belief system. I prefer to believe that we have a soul because I like the story with the tiger better then the story without the tiger. And I like the story with the soul better then the story without the soul, it's a better story.

**BILL MOYERS:** Margaret Atwood thank you very much.

**MARGARET ATWOOD:** And thank you.

**BILL MOYERS:** Over and again at this gathering of writers the question arose as to whether it is even possible to have a discussion, a dialogue, about faith and reason with dogmatic believers who claim to know God's mind. There was one moment in particular that seemed to crystallize the issue - and not surprisingly, it was one of the most influential, innovative, and controversial voices in British letters that spoke what was on the mind of many here:

**MARTIN AMIS:** "We-we've got to stop thinking in terms of reasons, because we're not dealing with reason."

**BILL MOYERS:** That's Martin Amis, prolific author of more than 20 books of fiction, criticism, and autobiography. Winner of the Somerset Maugham award for *THE RACHEL PAPERS*. Shortlisted for the Booker Prize for *TIME'S ARROW*.

But for some time now Martin Amis has been unable to shake from his mind the images of 9/11. One week after the World Trade Center went down, he wrote in *THE GUARDIAN*, of the "fantastic vehemence" unleashed against America. The "apotheosis" of the post-modern era, he said, has lifted the "temperature of planetary fear...towards the feverish." The suicide bombers who committed those atrocities became the focus of Amis's imagination. And on the eve of PEN's gathering of writers, *THE NEW YORKER* published his fictional account of the last days of Muhammed Atta, who led the 9/11 attacks, in what Amis calls "the cosmic war against God's enemies."

**BILL MOYERS:** Martin Amis, why did you want to get inside the mind of a dead killer?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Well, Normal Mailer said soon after September the 11th that there's the temptation to wade straight in, not immediately after, because we were all so stunned and speechless. But after a few months, you know, you want to weigh into the subject. But as Mailer said, you have to resist the initial temptation, because I find this as more or less universal, that a writer needs two or three years to process an event, especially one of that size. Because what needs to happen is the unconscious, sitting around, thinking about it will get you a certain distance but it's a sort of glandular process in the end. You have to let your body absorb it. You have to think about it silently. Not in words but let it soak into your body.

**BILL MOYERS:** Did you do reading into Atta's diaries or Atta's past?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Well, we know this anomalous fact that he and the "muscle Saudis," so called, went to Portland, Maine the day before, on September the 10th. And they took a very early shuttle flight from Portland to Logan. And he sauntered across the airport with less than an hour to go. And that gave me a sort of clue that there was a great deal of nihilistic insouciance involved — a cool killer. The great motivator, the physics of the group was based on religious belief and the idea of paradise, et cetera, and the idea of destroying the infidel. But I just intuited that there would have been a great deal of competition in this sort of nihilistic mode.

**BILL MOYERS:** How do you explain this streak of cruelty in this man? You write about the fact that he condoned punishing adulterers with the whip, burying alive people who committed sodomy. You say he even hated music, that he never laughed, that he found nothing funny. I mean, what manner of man was he?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Well, these are all a way of saying that his personality is in accordance with strict Sharia doctrine.

**BILL MOYERS:** The law of Islam.

**MARTIN AMIS:** The law of Islam. There's no getting away from the fact it's a tremendously severe religion. Islam is nothing without its severity. It also is totalist, like Jewish fundamentalism and medieval Christianity. There's not one thing you can do without an instruction. For instance, it was, again, Khomeini, the ayatollah, who dictated which direction you are to sit in the bathroom when you defecate. Islam follows you into the bedroom, into the kitchen, into the bathroom, and after death, into eternity. There's no crack of life.

**BILL MOYERS:** What you make me think in reading the piece, is that when you're up against people who love death more than they love life, you're up against a very dangerous and-

**MARTIN AMIS:** Powerful.

**BILL MOYERS:** --powerful phenomenon.

**MARTIN AMIS:** It wasn't really ideology. It was the joy of killing. It's a secret no longer well kept that killing is an absolute joyous experience. Especially to the powerless. It's an expansion, that all your failures are suddenly given meaning. And if you've got a religious rationale for it, so much the better. But don't underestimate what an intense pleasure it is

for people who feel themselves oppressed, feel that modernity has moved on and away from them, feel the temptations of modernity very strongly. And Satan, in the Koran, is a tempter. The last words of the Koran are "the insidious whisper in the hearts of men." And when Khomeini calls America the Great Satan, that's what he means. Tempter.

And the father of Islamist philosophy, Sayyid Qutb, had a very fascinating time in America in the late '40s, and you read his account of it. And tormented by temptation and sexual interest and which he, of course, doesn't acknowledge for a moment. He's pretending to be disgusted by it. But it stares you in the face that America is driving him crazy. And it's that where we have to face this sort of ridiculous notion that the meaning of the West for them, what we've brought into being with all these skyscrapers and clubs and restaurants and all that is just there to tantalize Muslims.

**BILL MOYERS:** And you write in your piece that Atta was obsessed with the power of America. The power of America. Every time it turns over in its bed, it creates tremors.

**MARTIN AMIS:** Yeah. And I think he's actually rather realistic about that. He says, and I think it's true, that the power is always an immensely blunt instrument. And there's never been a power as great as America in the history of the world.

**BILL MOYERS:** So why does fundamentalism appeal to people like Mohammad Atta and the other 18? He was not an ignorant man. He was not an illiterate man. Educated in Egyptian schools. Good engineering education, I think.

**MARTIN AMIS:** Yes. An architect and spoke perfect German, perfect English. All analysis shows that suicide bombers consistently are better educated than the norm. And true of Hamas as well, and Hezbollah. These are cultured men.

**BILL MOYERS:** So how does this idea take root in the cultured mind, a mind that is informed by history?

**MARTIN AMIS:** The idea of jihad is just, by so many magnitudes, the most compelling idea of that generation.

**BILL MOYERS:** You mean jihad, holy war?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Holy war.

**BILL MOYERS:** Against the West.

**MARTIN AMIS:** Against the West. And it's always--

**BILL MOYERS:** Why is this so intoxicating?

**MARTIN AMIS:** It's always been irresistible. The combination of rectitude and violence. No one's been able to resist that.

**BILL MOYERS:** How do you account for that embrace of death?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Khomeini said that the life that you and I sense around us, the thing which is called world is the scum of existence. It is completely worthless. The sentient life that we live is filth.

**BILL MOYERS:** This is the ayatollah of Iran.

**MARTIN AMIS:** Yeah.

**BILL MOYERS:** After the Shah was away.

**MARTIN AMIS:** Yes. The leader of the Islamic revolution and a huge figure in all of this.

**BILL MOYERS:** Yes.

**MARTIN AMIS:** For them, death is not death and life is not life either. And the suicide bomber, I think we should call them suicide mass murderers myself. The suicide bomber is the martyr, is the only Islamic soul who can expect completely expeditious entry into paradise. Everyone else has to molder in the grave for centuries and then get kicked awake by furious angels and interrogated on the day of judgment. The suicide mass murderer doesn't do that. He doesn't have to do it.

It's a monstrous distortion of the Koran and a monstrous sort of theological moral deformity that they've made central to their new ideologies. And you'd find all sorts of people saying that using their bodies is what people do because they don't have F-16s and tanks and so on. Well, would you like them to have F-16s and tanks is one question. But the other one is that it's not what people do. They talk about it as if it's an eternal ruse de guerre. That this is what people have always done. It's not what people have always done. It's an innovation,

and it's an Islamist innovation.

**BILL MOYERS:** Islamist. Help us to understand the distinction you make between Islam and Islamism.

**MARTIN AMIS:** Well, Islam is the great religion that has been the donor of countless benefits to mankind, that led the world in civilization throughout the Middle Ages, gave us algebra and all kinds of intellectual breakthroughs of all kinds, plus an example of tolerance that nowhere else in the world could offer at that time. A level of tolerance and respect for justice. That is Islam.

Islamism started after the First World War when the last empire was lost, the Ottoman sided with Germany in First World War. And then, you know, if you can stand way back from it all. You can imagine Islam very much reduced. It's coming towards modernity. And instead of advancing down that road, it turned round and the great leap backwards began. That's Islamism. But when Islamism got going instead of saying, "Okay, to come into modernity, we need to put slightly less emphasis on Islam." And the great leap backwards said, "No, we would need total emphasis on Islam."

**BILL MOYERS:** Fundamentalism?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Yeah.

**BILL MOYERS:** That's what it is.

**MARTIN AMIS:** Radical fundamentalism, Islamism. That's what it means.

**BILL MOYERS:** And you say it's a modern phenomenon?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Yes. Islamism should be thought of as a wave. And it's the latest wave. And it has made stupendous gains over the last five years and ten, 15 years. And this is its central twist is the reward of suicide bombing. The other great theme is when Islam was expanding, and it had an absolutely fantastic 500 years of nation after nation coming under Islam. And they could always point to that. And it has been called the argument for manifest success, where you have God's blessing because look at this extraordinary victory story that you're living through.

So if what you believe in is the argument for manifest success, you're suddenly confronted by the argument for manifest failure. "And then what? Why has God apparently favored the infidels?" And this is a conundrum wrapped in an enigma for the Islamic soul.

**BILL MOYERS:** I told you when I reached out to you and asked you to join me that I kept on my bulletin board at my office an essay you wrote one week after 9/11. You wrote, "Weirdly, the world suddenly feels bipolar. All over again, the West confronts a way of thinking that is essentially and unappeasably opposed to its existence." So they're never going to rest until we are eliminated?

**MARTIN AMIS:** That's the program. They say it's a cosmic war and an eternal war. They're going to war forever against us. Norman Mailer again has another phrase, "A tolerable level of terrorism." And that's sort of jumped out at me rather. And I can quite imagine in 15 years' time, Western politicians in some countries praising themselves for reducing terrorism to a tolerable level. But eradicating I don't think is a possibility.

**BILL MOYERS:** In the end, the Soviet Union was brought down by its own inner contradictions.

**MARTIN AMIS:** Right.

**BILL MOYERS:** Is there any possibility that fundamentalist Islam is full of contradictions, too, in this world, and that it could be its own enemy in time?

**MARTIN AMIS:** I think it will atomize. And also there will be sectarian strife within it. Also, I think that it is so fantastically poisonous that in its most millennial form, Islamism, not Islam, Islamism is so poisonous that it will burn itself out. Imagining the kind of full victory of Islamism with blood flowing bridle deep in the city squares. You have to look to Nazi Germany or Stalinist Kampuchea to see anything quite so ferocious and death-fueled and, as you know, Nazism lasted for 12 years and Pol Pot lasted for 3 1/2. It tends to burn itself out.

**BILL MOYERS:** Are your fellow citizens stiffening their resolve? I was just reading about how Britain's highest court has rejected a plea by a Muslim high school student who wanted to wear a head scarf and a long dress to school instead of the ordinary school uniform so prominent in your country. And it hasn't been too long since the French said no to the head scarf. Is old Europe waking up?

**MARTIN AMIS:** I'm not sure what I feel about this. About whether the trappings of a religion are what you should be directing your codes at. In France, they've always been

much firmer than that, but the French model has clearly failed in their absorption of the Islamic population. In England, it's a little better. America is the great model for what you do about immigrants. And it's been all over the world, people look to the successful way of doing it.

**BILL MOYERS:** How so?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Well, that's what America consists of is immigrants.

**BILL MOYERS:** You end that essay on a haunting note: "Thinking of the victims, the perpetrators and the near future, I felt species grief, then species shame, then species fear." Grief, shame, fear. You felt all of those?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Yes, shame, fear, because I am of the species of the man who perpetrated that. And perpetrated God knows what all over the world. But since then, that was written in 2001, there's been a kind of moral crash worldwide, like the great depression, the spiritual equivalent of the great depression. And any groping toward the species consciousness has been set back to a dire extent.

**BILL MOYERS:** And by species consciousness, you mean the ability to see the world from the experience of other people and to share that?

**MARTIN AMIS:** And, you know, the old thing of we're all brothers and sisters. We all have a common ancestor.

**BILL MOYERS:** So what are you feeling more powerfully right now? Grief, shame or fear?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Alienation is what I'm feeling. I can't believe that it's my species out there that's doing these things. I don't recognize it. This great experiment in violence in Iraq. I don't recognize it. It looks like another planet to me. But now that America, the fall of Baghdad, that's going to be a fire that will burn for generations. "They came into the third holiest city. They oversaw the looting of our national heritage, the home of the caliphate." I have very little doubt about this, but I'm sure it's an enormous recruiting slogan.

**BILL MOYERS:** What brought you to this PEN festival of writers on faith and reason? Because you're not a believer?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Right. No. I wouldn't call myself an atheist any more. I think that's it's a sort of crabbed word. And agnostic is the only respectable position, simply because our ignorance of the universe is so vast that it would be premature. We're about eight Einsteins away from getting any kind of handle on the universe. So there's not going to be any kind of anthropomorphic entity at all.

But why is the universe so incredibly complicated? Why is it so over our heads? That worries me and sort of makes me delay my vote on the existence of some intelligence. Not a being, but an intelligence. And I don't mean intelligent design. I just mean why is it so vast, as Updike said, why not this attractive spattering of stars in the background be perfectly enough, you know? Why all these multiple universes, these parallel universes? These extraordinary quasars and black holes. What do we need all that for? So many questions remain, that I wouldn't call myself an atheist any more.

**BILL MOYERS:** Do you imagine what the answer might be?

**MARTIN AMIS:** To?

**BILL MOYERS:** To those questions you asked. Why is it so complex?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Yes, I do. And I will ask those questions. I remember talking to Saul Bellow about this in his last years. And he did believe in a God equivalent of some kind. And he did say that I just can't stop thinking that I will see my brothers and my sister and my parents when I die. And he wrote in his last novel RAVELSTEIN, he said, "We all believe that. We just talk tough." And I was talking about this with my mother, who's 75. And I said, "I don't believe that, do you?" And she said, "No, I don't believe that."

I think in Europe, we have outgrown it. We've waited it out, and it's gone.

**BILL MOYERS:** That's part of the issue, isn't it? How can a Europe vacated of faith tolerate a dynamic minority that is all faith?

**MARTIN AMIS:** Yeah. Well, this is what we're going to find out.

**BILL MOYERS:** Martin Amis, thank you very much for joining me.

**MARTIN AMIS:** Pleasure. Thank you.

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