

## The Second Plane, By Martin Amis

**Down with mobocracy and misology**

Reviewed by Cal McCrystal  
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A great many writers down the ages have tried to define what is meant by religion. None of their would-be definitions seems to work, especially in the present age. According to the surgeon-philosopher Kenneth Walker's *Diagnosis of Man*, religious sentiment contains "an element of wonder and veneration", whereas life without it is "a stale phenomenon". Walker was published in 1943, so it seems reasonable to assume that he was measuring religious sentiment against ideological – ie, fascist and Marxist – sentiment and perhaps not finding great intellectual and emotional gaps between them.

Martin Amis addresses this from a somewhat different perspective. Islam, he writes, proved responsive to European influence as exercised by Hitler and Stalin: anti-Semitic, anti-liberal, anti-individualist, anti-democratic, and "most crucially, anti-rational" – they, too, being "cults of death". However, since death for Islamists brings a heavenly immortality, life has only one inducement: death. That, in turn, means Walker is wrong on one point: far from life without wonder and veneration being "stale", life with it is simply a bore. Islamism, says Amis, desires "a world of perfect terror and perfect boredom", and nothing else: "a world with no games, no arts, and no women, a world where the sole entertainment is the public execution".

So utterly alien to us is what Amis calls the "institutionalised irrationalism" or "misology" (hatred of reason) of the suicide-mass murder of 9/11 that it has, on the one hand, baulked our intelligence, and, on the other, hindered us from more than "a murmur of dissonant evasion" before we could change channels and return to the puerility of our own lives.

Most of us agree that mobocratic politics has to be challenged, just as totalitarianism must be rejected. But religion, especially the fundamentalist variety, is somehow tolerated in all its grotesquerie. Yet, if we could stop ignoring it, appeasing it, surrendering to it, we can provide our own definition: a morbid tendency yielding, at best, a musty odour which no amount of incense and physical or mental prostration can mitigate or justify.

The Amis essays, trenchant, deeply informed and informative, begin and end with the horrific events of September 11, 2001. The 14 chapters include two short stories in which the author's imagination conjures up and relays to us remarkably convincingly the intimate preparations and thinking behind the 9/11 attacks.

In many ways, Amis is doing our thinking for us. I suspect that in our (growing) dissatisfaction with the debris of ancient codes we have, unthinkingly, detached ourselves from the wreckage of a newly virulent and avowedly lethal archaism. The strifes of apriorism undoubtedly drove Muslim, Jew and Christian alike towards obscurantism. It's a difficult condition from which to heave oneself out. Amis reattaches us before we doze off again in what he calls "this, the Age of Vanished Normalcy", forcing us to focus long and hard at the "maximum malevolence" of suicide bombing and other atrocities of "pathological mass movements", such as the whipping and jailing of women guilty of having been gang-raped. "The connection between manifest failure and the suppression of women is unignorable," he writes.

Amis has little time for the American adventure in Iraq. Nor does he have any time for Iran's Ahmadinejad and his nuclear programme. "Indeed, the more you look into it, the more you wonder why we are having an illegitimate fiasco in Iraq when we could be having a legitimate fiasco in Iran."

This rather flippant note very occasionally mars the book. Elsewhere he mentions that many Israeli patriots wish that the Jewish state had been established in Bavaria rather than in Palestine. "Who would worry about a few leather-shorted scoutmasters from the BLO?" But there are few such low points in this well-sustained and important volume.



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