



Margaret E. Atwood
author
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Illustration: Rebecca Mock

The *Handmaid's Tale*—first published way back in 1985–86, before there was an internet, before there were cellphones, before there were even lattes—or, at least, before lattes were deployed as a stealth weapon from Europe to the extent that they are now—this novel, which by now ought to have become quaint and archaic, has become more believable over time, not less.

The iconic red-and-white outfit is now an internationally understandable meme, popping up in state legislators and cosplay conventions alike, and in such diverse locations as Texas, Scotland, and Sweden. Sweden, you say? Yes. Sweden.

Did I see multiple references to it—“*The Handmaid's Tale* Is Not a Blueprint,” “Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again”—in the giant Women’s March of last January? I did. Did I see a *Tyrannosaurus rex*

dressed as a Handmaid in the DragonCon parade? I did. Is there a YouTube hit by Funny or Die entitled “Finally, They’ve Made a Handmaid’s Tale for Men?” There is. Did I see a photo of a container of liquid soap in a red cape and a white bonnet, entitled The Handsoap’s Tale? I did. Has someone sent me a little knitted chicken in a Handmaid’s outfit? They have. Has the high-fashion designer Vera Wang done an entire fall line themed “Handmaids”? She has. It’s an homage: The bonnets are black, but nonetheless. For something to become so recognizable, it has to dovetail with the hopes and fears of the moment.

Many of these hopes and fears are rooted in conflicting belief systems, one of which was a primary source for *The Handmaid’s Tale*—so without further delay, a word from our sponsor: namely, Christian culture over the past 2,000 years. (Or should I say “Christian cultures,” plural? Since there have been a great many different Christian cultures—some of them extinct—and there still are a great many, some of them relatively new.)

These cultures are extremely varied. Looking at them from the point of view of a Martian—a point of view that comes naturally to me, since I sometimes think I have come from a different planet, so odd do I sometimes find the practices of *Homo sapiens*, our common species—you’d be forgiven for thinking that a Quaker is quite a different thing from a Russian Orthodox patriarch, and that an Ethiopian Copt is entirely distinct from a Pentecostal or an Irish Catholic or a Mormon or a Christian Scientist. And a green Christian Creation Cure person—from the organization called A Rocha, perhaps—or a social justice Christian, from Sojourners, for instance, or even a service-oriented Christian from the Salvation Army or the Mennonite international service committee, they have nothing in common with a member of the cross-burning Ku Klux Klan. “In my father’s house there are many mansions,” Jesus said, but did he really mean a bunch of white supremacists with bedsheets over their heads? And does loving your neighbor really include blowing up the churches of your fellow Christians? But I digress.

It is true—as their detractors say—that the Christian divergences from a single root source are extreme, and that Christians have historically gone to war with other Christians over doctrinal differences and have slaughtered a great many of their co-religionists. And they have

slaughtered and oppressed members of other religions, too. But that is not because they are Christians. It is because they are human beings. As Humpty Dumpty says in *Alice in Wonderland*, “The question is—who is to be master?” That is one of the things human beings often fight about, whether they are Christian or not.

Other religions have done the same, and even those systems professing atheism—in itself a dogma—have done a pretty good job of slaughtering. One need only recall the Terror during the French Revolution, or the fate of the Mensheviks at the hands of the Bolsheviks in the early USSR, or the killing fields of Cambodia under Pol Pot, to name just a few examples.



But you may be wondering why a visitor from Mars such as myself is interested in this subject at all. Cards on the table: I am a strict agnostic. Having grown up among the scientists—an inherently skeptical bunch of people, since science at its best is self-correcting and always questioning its previous conclusions—having been exposed early to the weirdnesses proposed in the name of science, I do not hold science to be a religion. It is not something to be worshipped. It is a tool for exploring and quantifying the physical world and can only speak about those things that can be measured—and thus “known.” Religion, on the other hand, deals in beliefs concerning the unseen, and thus with Faith. (For some religions, you can add Hope and Charity: In Christianity, those are the big three among the virtues.) The objects of religious beliefs cannot be measured, because they are not material. Medieval scholars used to amuse themselves by debating how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, but that question was always futile, since angels are said to be immaterial, but pins are not.

“There’s a reason the Bible has held folks’ attention for so many years. It’s not just the piety.”

As a teenager, I was curious about religions and went about attending the services of as many religions as I could find in the Toronto of those days. Each one of them was good at something, but the things they were good at were not the same. The Baptists were good singers; the Unitarians, not so much. The Anglicans were good at ritual—in this country they are called Episcopalians—and had a lot of sprinkles and tinkles. They put on the best funerals, as well as excellent boys' choir traditional choral numbers, especially at Christmas and Easter. The Spiritualist Church—yes, there was one—gave you messages from the dead, which were always a little disappointing, as they did not tell you how to corner the stock market, but instead went in for grandmotherly advice about such things as not eating too much salt and being careful going down stairs. The Salvation Army had the brass band, of course, but also a lot of charitable outreach. I'm in favor of them, as they run an excellent palliative-care hospital in my hometown. The Mormons (the more traditional ones) thoughtfully provide a Heavenly Mother or Mrs. God, something the mainline Christians have overlooked, or perhaps—over time, say the textual scholars—edited out.

That's just the Christians—I won't go into the various Jewish denominations, or the Buddhists, Hindus, and Sufis, which also have their finer moments. My conclusion? No one group has got it all. Should I, a quasi-Martian, join one of them? Most likely not. Not only would I be a disruptive factor, as I would ask too many questions, but—to paraphrase Groucho Marx—I wouldn't want to belong to a church that would have me for a member.

Religions, however, are so widespread and have been among us for so long that if you were an evolutionary biologist, you'd surely have to take the view that religions are an evolved adaptation—that those groups that had some form of religion in the Pleistocene stood a better chance of survival than those groups that did not. Think of the benefits such a belief system must have conferred! In those days, when what we now call “religion” was inseparable from what you did every day, a belief in invisible but helpful entities would have given you confidence. A group belief would have provided social cohesion. You would have had an origin story—once there's an evolved grammar with a past perfect tense, you more or less need one of those. People were molded from dirt, or baked like cookies, or came out of a giant clam, to name a few. And you would have had an afterlife, though some earlier forms of this were not reassuring. (The Mesopotamian one was very dusty; the

Greek one provided fields of asphodel for those who had behaved well, but the great hero Achilles told Odysseus that he would rather be the meanest slave on earth than king among the dead. The Egyptian one was complicated, and you risked being eaten by a supernatural crocodile, but you could improve your chances by having a coffin charm buried with you.) In some earlier afterlives, you might even have reincarnation—a motive for good behavior, since who would want to come back to earthly life as a cockroach? Well, maybe a cockroach, but surely not a slug. Though wait a minute: Slugs have much to be said for them, though perhaps this is not the time to say it.

But not to worry about the slugs: Christians don't do reincarnation. They do resurrection, which is quite a different thing, because it is not part of a cycle, but part of an endgame.

You can separate religions into cyclical ones, in which the end is a beginning that leads to another end and another beginning, and linear ones—a straight line, not a circle. Christianity is linear: Creation and the garden at one end, then a fall into time and history, and then, at the other end of the line, the Second Coming, the end of history, the New Jerusalem, and the forever and ever, The End. (Marxism, by the way, is a subset of Christianity, with the Classless Society taking the place of the New Jerusalem.)



So far, so clear. Now to be more specific: What about my own Christian culture? Because despite what I said about Martians and agnostics, I am of course deeply immersed in Christian culture, both through what the French call my “formation”—my upbringing—and through the present-day world of North America, in which religion has got into politics in a big way and cannot, therefore, be discounted.

For me, the mysteries of childhood included Santa Claus and so forth, and also the Easter Bunny—a puzzle, that one: The Easter Bunny was male, so where did all those eggs come from? Was there a Mrs. Bunny, or was this a larcenous rabbit that was filching those colorful eggs from unsuspecting though possibly psychedelic hens? Then there was Hallowe'en, my favorite; try as it might, the church was hard-pressed to make that Celtic festival of the dead very Christian at all, and what

Jesus has to say about Hallowe'en is nothing. Every one of these festivals is pagan in origin, but—as seems to be the rule with religions—Christianity borrowed each one and put a veneer of its own over top of it, as it did with sacred wells in Ireland. If you can't suppress it, transform it. So it has been with religions.

Being Canadian, I went to Christian schools when I went to schools at all. Canada did not have the separation of church and state that is enshrined in the American system. Instead it had—and still has—a Catholic school board and a Protestant one, and you say on your tax return which one you support. Thus we had Bible readings and hymns in school all the time, and we memorized psalms and other biblical passages. I think the Protestant stream is more secular now, but that's what it was like in the 1940s and 1950s when I was there. Added to that, I went to Sunday school—despite the qualms of my parents, who were afraid I would get brainwashed—which is why I can sing a lot of hymns, most of them troubling to the child mind. For example:

*Jesus bids us shine with a pure clear light
Like a little candle burning in the night—
In this world of darkness, so let us shine—
You in your small corner, and I in mine.*

Not too bad—the song says that at least we can cast some light, however dim—but why do you have to stay over there in your corner and me over here in mine? I used to wonder about that.

But even more worrying was this one:

*God sees the little sparrow fall, it meets his tender
view;
If God so loves the little birds, I know he loves me too.*

Hey, wait a minute—God sees the birds dying and does nothing? All he does is look? What is wrong with this picture? (I had not yet grown up and learned about the permissive will of God. That was to come later.)

It may amuse you to know that I won the prize for the best Sunday school temperance essay—about the evils of alcohol. It was earnestly

written and profusely illustrated, and I was quite proud of it. In a nutshell, here's why you shouldn't drink: Your capillaries will become enlarged, and then when you go out into the snow, your blood will cool off and you will freeze to death. I suppose the moral should have been "only get drunk in summer," but I hadn't thought of that yet. I also won the prize for Bible studies, which was—guess what—a Bible.

But we didn't study the really interesting parts of the Bible, such as the concubine cut into 12 pieces; or the tale of Jephthah's daughter, sacrificed to the Lord because her father was quite a lot like Agamemnon, who sacrifices Iphigenia; or the father in the Grimm's fairy tale about the miller who sells his daughter to the devil in exchange for good fortune; or the tale of the golden hemorrhoids; or the story of the prostitute sitting beside the road; or the tale of the huge pile of cut-off king's children's heads. I read those on my own and found them quite shocking. There's a reason the Bible has held folks' attention for so many years. It's not just the piety.



Thus quite thoroughly immersed in religious knowledge, by the end of high school I was well equipped—back in 1957—to enter a university course called English Language and Literature. This program took the student from Anglo-Saxon to T.S. Eliot, with everything in between. Part of this deep dive was a course called "The Bible as Literature," taught by the great Blake and Milton scholar Northrop Frye. Biblical symbolism, plotlines, types, and anti-types were at its core, and students came from far and near just to audit it. Long story short: It is not possible to get through English Language and Literature from the year 800 to the mid-20th century without learning a large amount about Christian culture. You really can't avoid it.

But there was one area we didn't study much during those years, and that was American literature and civilization through the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. A little Poe, a little Hawthorne, a little Melville—that was more or less it. So when I arrived at Harvard as a graduate student in 1961, I had to fill my gap since I would be expected to pass an exam in this field. Soon I was delving into the Puritan theocracy of New England, and Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*, and beliefs about witches, and accounts of how all that played out in the

Salem witchcraft trials of the late 17th century—a rigged game if there ever were one, since by the acceptable rules of evidence you were pretty much condemned as soon as you had been accused.

The man who taught this course was Perry Miller, who almost single-handedly brought the study of 17th-century Puritan New England into the academy. And this was a very important thing to do, since this theocracy is one of the foundation stones of the America we know today.

And this is why I dedicated *The Handmaid's Tale* to Perry Miller. He didn't live to see it, but he would have understood exactly what I meant. The other dedicatee is Mary Webster, otherwise known as "Half-Hanged Mary." She either was or was not an ancestor of mine—my grandmother was a Webster, from the same general bunch that included the first governor of Connecticut, John Webster, and Noah Webster the lexicographer, and Daniel Webster the fast-talking lawyer. When she was feeling naughty, my grandmother would claim Mary, but when she was feeling respectable she would disclaim her. Mary was accused of being a witch—luckily for her, a bit before Salem—and was taken to Boston, tried, and found not guilty. This was not good enough for her townsfolk in Hadley, Massachusetts, a mob of whom strung her up anyway. But the neck-breaking drop had not yet been invented, so they just hauled her up like a flag, and she dangled around up there all night, and when they came to cut down the body in the morning, lo and behold, she was still alive! I figured that if I were going to stick my neck out by writing a book like *The Handmaid's Tale*, it would be helpful to have an ancestor with a very tough neck. So there she is, right at the front of the book. I often wondered what Mary Webster thought about while she was being half-hanged for at least eight hours of darkness. (I did write a poem sequence about that later.)



Back to *The Handmaid's Tale* proper. I am often asked the religion question: *Is The Handmaid's Tale anti-Christian?* No, my anxious brethren—that is not the point.

The religion of Gilead is another subset of vaguely Christian culture, but only because it is the answer to the following question: If America

were to have a totalitarian dictatorship, what form would that totalitarian dictatorship take? It would not be an atheistic one, like Stalin's. It would not be Hindu or Islamic. It would harken back to one of America's foundation stones: It would be Puritanical and suppressive of women, and—like all totalitarianisms—it would be intent on extirpating all rivals, such as Catholics and Quakers (as the Puritans did, or tried to). It would also not be Christian much at all, except in the most cursory way, by which I mean:

The core of Christianity is surely the key teachings of its founder, namely: Love your neighbor as yourself; love your enemy—who ever said *that* before? The forgiveness of sins, the Spirit as opposed to the letter, and rebirth in the Spirit. Gilead observes none of these teachings. Instead, it uses religion as a hammer to wallop people into submission, as religion has been used so many times before, in many different contexts. Those intent on the letter as a method of enforcement and a tool for compliance have little use for private believers or for mystics such as Julian of Norwich and the poet William Blake. And worship of the dead letter, as opposed to the living Spirit, might well be viewed as just another form of golden-calf idolatry by Jesus of Nazareth, who never wrote down anything, except once, with a stick, on the ground—that “let's stone a woman to death” episode, as you may recall—and what he wrote on that occasion is not known to us.

The Gileadeans are also literalists, which can have some odd results when applied to a text so filled with metaphor, and they cherry-pick Scripture—nor are they alone in doing so. Northrop Frye used to say that the Bible is not a book you judge, it is a book that judges you—by which I took him to mean that since there are so many contrary opinions and teachings in it, the group of them you select will say a lot about who you are.



So those are some of the sources for *The Handmaid's Tale*. The other sources are taken from human history—for my main rule for this book was that I would put nothing into it that had not been done by human beings at some time, in some place. There is nothing in the book that is beyond our capabilities. We have done many more frightful things that

I did not put in, of course. The human imagination is a wonderful thing when its goals are positive and a terrible thing when applied to malignant ends. Weapons of mass destruction do not grow on trees. They exist because we invented them.

But not all of my Christian culture references are negative. For instance, in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, there's a semi-Christian cult that lives on flat rooftops in slums and has turned these rooftops into gardens, which have beehives on them. (That's already happening in some places, by the way.) The God's Gardeners are nonviolent and vegetarian, know a lot about mushrooms and foraging for edible weeds, and take a holistic view of creation; they are Creation Care and Creation Cure, writ large, and believe in interspecies fellowship and in God's interest in the whole of the animal and vegetable kingdoms. Some might say that all of this came out of my childhood worries about that Sunday school hymn with the little sparrow falling, and they could be right. Others might say—as the God's Gardeners themselves say—that this holistic view is justified by Scripture, and they would also be right.

I had a dear friend called Fanny Silberman—now dead—who was an Auschwitz survivor. She had more reason than most to take a dim view of humanity. Nevertheless, she used to say, “There's good and bad of everyone.” I'm with her. So if you need to have a religion, have a good one, and employ it positively. Are you what you say you believe, or are you what you actually do?

