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The Bible, Religion, and Power in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

A Close Reading from the Perspective of Biblical Scholarship

Abstract

This article offers a close reading of Atwood's famous novel from the perspective of biblical scholarship. Anyone who reads *The Handmaid's Tale* will readily notice how strongly *biblical texts* inform the narrative and the fictional world of Gilead. This relationship begins with Genesis 30:1–3, which appears as an epigraph. Religion in *all its complexity* is a cornerstone of the novel. The article looks at its threefold use of religion: as a *biblically based foundation of the ideology and power structures* of Gilead, as an *anthropological foil for the leitmotif of seeing and being seen* in Offred's story, and as a *point of departure and reference for the main character's personal reflections.* The article limits itself to observations based on the novel as first published in 1985.

Keywords

The Handmaid's Tale, Religion, Margaret Atwood, Bible, Old Testament, Power and Reproduction

Biography

Friedhelm Hartenstein was Professor of Old Testament at the University of Hamburg from 2002 to 2010 and has been Professor of Old Testament at the LMU Munich since 2010. His research encompasses prophecy and Psalms, the history of religion in Ancient Israel (with a focus on iconography), the theology of the Old Testament / Hebrew Bible, and hermeneutics.

Margaret Atwood's global hit *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985. In her introduction from 2017, Attwood describes reading much science-fiction literature, including dystopias, in her high-school days during the 1950s.[1] One thinks immediately of George Orwell's classic *1984*, first published in

1 Atwood 2017, xiii.

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1949, with which *The Handmaid's Tale* has much in common, not least important elements of the plot but also, and especially, the mood. No one who has entered Winston Smith's London will forget the opening sequence: the run-down entrance of an apartment block where the stale smell of rotten cabbage covers everything while from a poster on the wall the oversized face of "Big Brother" watches. Offred's world in *The Handmaid's Tale* opens in a similarly immersive way – in a former gymnasium where the reader is immediately drawn in by the density of described details. The reader sees and feels texture, such as the wooden floor with its painted lines and circles. Sour sweat and the fading scent of bubble gum and perfume reverberate from the girls who once watched basketball here. The sports facility, which has been turned into a dormitory, testifies through its very materiality to the overthrow and transformation of a culture. It highlights the new order to which the residents of the Rachel and Leah Center (known as the Red Center) must conform. In that space, in which memories and expectations erase each other, only the *now* matters. With this opening – on a par with that of *1984* – Atwood has fulfilled Philip K. Dick's instructions for "How to build a universe that doesn't fall apart two days later".[2] Atwood herself acknowledged, "If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted the toads in it to be real."[3]

Unlike Orwell, Atwood chose a subjective narrative perspective: the book offers only the view of the main character, Offred. It meanders between episodes from the present and the associations, memories, and reflections that arise from them. Thus, the structure of *The Handmaid's Tale* does not follow a rigorous narrative form, which is explained on two levels. Offred often reflects on her narration and herself within it. At one point, for example, she wishes her story had "more shape" and apologizes to imagined readers for the report being so fragmentary and unfinished.[4] But additionally, Atwood included "Historical Notes", supposedly written about 200 years after the events of the book.[5] The statement is by a historian from the future who, together with a colleague, has edited Offred's report. These scholars came across a metal box that had belonged to the former U.S. army and contained tape cassettes from the last third of the 20th century, which with the help of

2 Dick 1995.

3 Atwood 2017, xiv.

4 Atwood 1998, 267–268.

5 Atwood 1998, 299–311.

technology could still be played.[6] Since the recordings were not numbered, the editors had to put them in a plausible order themselves. Atwood's novel thus suggests that its division into 15 parts (and 46 chapters) may well differ from the original sequence.

Offred's tale is a message in a bottle from a hermetic totalitarian state on the soil of the former United States. Unlike Orwell's British vision of ING-SOC, a Stalinist-informed secular dictatorship, Gilead features a Christian fundamentalist society based on U.S. cultural elements (biblicism, Puritanism, Mormonism, militarism, and others). The dystopian idea of a misogynist oppressive state that demonizes all liberalism has an eerie topicality nearly 40 years after the novel's first publication.

When I was asked to write a contribution for this issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, I hesitated. I had not yet read the novel and was only peripherally aware of its adaptations into the genres of feature film and television series. I was approached specifically, however, as a professor of Old Testament, and anyone who reads *The Handmaid's Tale* will quickly notice how strongly biblical texts inform the narrative and the world of Gilead. This relationship begins with the epigraph, Genesis 30:1–3. Religion in all its complexity is a cornerstone of the novel.[7]

In the following, I present my observations from a close reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*,[8] which focus on the often subtle, implicit, and ambiguous references to religion in the narrative. This method requires that I make use of more direct quotations from the novel than readers might expect. Atwood's text is multi-layered and literarily complex, and – informed by the exegetical approach of my profession – I am convinced that its strength comes mainly from being closely heard. Therefore, I am somewhat reserved in my commentary and interpretation (for a summarizing interpretive evaluation see the final section of the article). I emphasize the threefold use of religion in the novel: as a biblically based foundation of the ideology and power structures of Gilead, as an anthropological foil for the leitmotif of seeing and being seen in Offred's story, and as a point of departure and reference for the main character's personal reflections.

6 Atwood 1998, 301.

7 See Atwood 2017, xvii, for the statement that the novel is not simply "anti-religion"; see also Pezzoli-Olgiati 2021, for "religion and gender" in the narrative.

8 The novel was first published in 1985; for this article I cite a reprint from 1998. I have excluded from my deliberations the follow-up volume Atwood 2019 and the feature film and TV series based on the novel.

Power and Reproduction

When we first meet Offred, she is in her room in the Commander's house. Slowly and thoroughly, the reader is shown how, in this room and in the house in which it is located, she is subjected to restrictions and rules that affect her entire way of life. She is completely reduced to herself – individual freedom is extremely limited. Her sole purpose is her function as a tool of biopolitics,[9] as a vessel of reproduction.

In the course of the narrative, the framework for that role becomes increasingly clear, albeit only through titbits of information that readers must piece together. At some point, a long-planned coup d'état has taken place, wiping out the president of the United States and the entire Congress. A new and militarized elite has taken power. A massive collapse in male and female fertility resulted from man-made environmental problems, which included nuclear radiation and subsequent pathological mutations. From the point of view of the new rulers, however, the liberal and permissive society since the 1960s, in which women had self-determination over their sexuality and their bodies, contributed to the reduction in fertility. "The main problem was with the men", the Commander explains to Offred, "There was nothing for them anymore."[10] The revolution of Gilead thus joins other dictatorships, such as the ayatollahs in Iran and the Taliban in Afghanistan, in which women's rights, including educational opportunities, are restricted and, in the end, eliminated. Gilead is thus by no means a particular phenomenon, but rather an anti-modern project that recurs on a global scale in various forms.

For its justification, Gilead invokes – in accordance with the roots of the United States – the Christian scripture of the Old and New Testaments. It does so in line with fundamentalist interpretation,[11] as practiced, for example, by specific Mormon communities and by various groups of Evangelicals in the 20th century. Media control and media power play a role in Gilead too,

9 See Foucault 2006.

10 Atwood 1998, 210.

11 Note the definition in Oeming, 1998, 150–151: "If one does not dismiss the necessary differentiations, it is possible to identify fundamentalism within the context of biblical hermeneutics as a mindset which takes the Bible as word-by-word inspiration of God that reports only reliable facts and whose doctrines have eternal validity. Doubt or open negation of the biblical truth must be fought (in extreme cases even with violence)." (transl. by the author).

as in any dictatorship. Hints in the report and in the "Historical Notes" suggest that the high-ranking Commander in whose house Offred has to serve is a certain Frederick R. Waterford (the name *Of-Fred* is derived from the assignment to him, as also in *Ofglen*, *Ofwarren*, for example). Looking back, the historians identify Waterford as a strategic planner of the Gilead regime who applied his professional knowledge from market research to this end.[12] The perfidious regime experienced by the Handmaids may owe its origins to him. Among other things, he is said to have designed the new dress code:[13] the Handmaids wear distinctive red dresses that completely cover their bodies and white hoods reminiscent of the Pilgrim Fathers. Wide wings to the right and left of the face make direct eye contact with other people virtually impossible. Also, all mirrors in the spaces in which the Handmaids live (in the Red Center as well as in the households) have been disabled or removed. Their self-image is thus physically as well as psychologically reduced to their biopolitically prescribed functionality.

Biblical Statements as the Law

In Gilead, selected biblical statements are regarded as immutable law.[14] They are taken literally, without any discussion of deviating interpretations. They are detached from the historical references (in terms of both origin and reception) that since the Enlightenment, Bible criticism has employed to relativize the text. Named as God's eternal will, the passages from Scripture are identified with "the reason of state". Biblicist practices that previously shaped only parts of lived religion in the United States are consistently used as a superstructure for totalitarian rule: "The regime uses Biblical symbols, as any authoritarian regime taking over America doubtless would: they wouldn't be Communists or Muslims."[15] In the drills performed in the Red Center under the command of the Aunts, the law of Gilead is violently inculcated: corporal punishment is allowed by "Scriptural precedent", such as slave-related legislation.[16] As in the Bible, men are never officially sterile,

12 See also Atwood 1998, 185 (in Offred's report).

13 Atwood 1998, 306.

14 I have identified the biblical references discussed in the following paragraphs myself, as Atwood's novel does usually not mention them explicitly. Some allusions are indirect and vague and are given here without full certainty.

15 Atwood 2017, xvii.

16 Atwood 1998, 16.

only women.[17] Statements to the contrary are strictly punished. Offenses such as adultery are punishable by death (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22).[18] At least two eyewitnesses are required for a conviction (Deut. 17:6; 19:15; John 8:17 and more). This "two-witness rule" had long been in place, for example among Jehovah's Witnesses and is a literal performance of biblical legal rules.[19] The subordination of women in assemblies, already practiced previously in conservative Christianity, is justified with reference to the apostle Paul. Thus, women's hair must be demurely covered (1 Cor. 11:6).[20] In particular, the infamous (Deutero-Pauline) passage 1 Timothy 2:9–15 is read out, 'liturgically', by a male leader at an assembly specifically designed for the indoctrination of women.

> The Commander continues with the service: […] "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety."[21]

Here the biblical text is quoted verbatim and is a key passage for Gilead's ideology. In many other instances, however, the Commanders, as heads of their households, do not recite the biblical text unaltered. They manipulate its communication – which is always only oral – for instance by omissions or by paraphrasing rather freely, which Offred frequently registers and corrects in her mind. This form of communicating 'biblical truths' – one-sided and selective and twisting the text – is a means of oppression and a demonstration of the political and social domination of men over women in the totalitarian system.[22] This reality is especially evident when the Bible is ceremonially read aloud in the domestic setting.

17 Atwood 1998, 61.
18 Atwood 1998, 61.
19 Atwood 1998, 61.
20 Atwood 1998, 62.
21 Atwood 1998, 221. The passage cited by the Commander is 1 Tim. 2:12–15.
22 See, for example, Atwood 1998, 45; 64; 90; 92; 117.

The Ceremony of Bible Reading: “Power of the Word” and “Knowledge of All the Rules”

At fixed intervals, the members of a household come together for a Bible reading, another exercise that echoes Evangelical practice. The household includes – as in the Bible – not only the family in the narrower sense but also the servants: the green-clad household helpers (called “Marthas”, see Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–12:8), the red-clad Handmaid, and the male chauffeur. The hierarchical order of the household is staged as a “tableau”,[23] an ancient form of amateur theatre that was also used in Passion plays. First, all female members of the household group around the “leather chair”, the empty throne of the head of the household.[24] The Commander knocks before entering the living room, the refuge of his wife, who is dressed in blue. He is always the last to arrive: “He looks us over as if taking inventory. One kneeling woman in red, one seated woman in blue, two in green, standing, a solitary man, thin-faced, in the background.”[25] The master of the house then takes a black Bible from a casket next to his armchair, to which he alone has the key.

All servants, but especially the Handmaids, are forbidden to read. Books and magazines are destroyed or systematically withdrawn. Offred is, however, a transitional figure, living in the early period of Gilead, when the women who serve as Handmaids had a different life before the dictatorship. In this respect, she – and others like her – still have memories of the time before the upheaval, memories that include religion. She can therefore compare the new conditions with those that had existed previously, although the lack of access to media prevents her from doing so systematically. Even within these limits, she retains a critical consciousness:

> The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn’t steal it. It’s an incendiary device: who knows what we’d make of it, if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read. Our heads turn towards him, we are expectant, here comes our bedtime story.[26]

23 Atwood 1998, 87.

24 Atwood 1998, 87.

25 Atwood 1998, 86–87.

26 Atwood 1998, 87.

The Commander in his black habit reminiscent of SS uniforms and official gowns performs his 'liturgical' duty with subtle signals of absolute power: "he has the word"[27] and "knows all the rules".[28] The description of the ceremony and the metaphors used for it, found in chapter 15, are among the most striking passages of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Here I am concerned with the use of power that is evident in the staging of the Bible reading:

> We lean towards him a little, iron filings to his magnet. He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once. The Commander, as if reluctantly, begins to read. He isn't very good at it. Maybe he's merely bored. It's the usual story, the usual stories: God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*. Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the center. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her*. And so on and so forth. We have it read to us every breakfast.[29]

The fundamentalist use of the Bible demonstrated here is aimed at the irrevocable subordination of women to men. To that end, the blessing to go forth and multiply from primeval history (Gen. 1:28) is linked to the story of Jacob's two wives, Rachel and Leah, and their handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah (Gen. 30). From this specific combination Gilead's rulers have derived the regime of power and reproduction that uses the Handmaids.

Surrogate Motherhood – A Biblical Model for the System of Handmaids

The motif of childlessness is central to the stories about the patriarchs and their wives found in the Book of Genesis.[30] In the large narrative arc of Genesis 12–36, together with the motif of forced flight from the land, it serves to demonstrate to ancient readers how the divine promises with which God

27 Atwood 1998, 88.

28 Atwood 1998, 154.

29 Atwood 1998, 88.

30 For these narratives see, for example, the monographs van Seters 1975; Fischer 1994; Köckert 2017, and the commentaries Seebass 1997, 1999; Willi-Plein 2011.

called Abraham out of his homeland (Gen. 12:1–3) became deeply disquieting. They challenge trust and patience.

Childlessness takes centre stage for the first time in Genesis 16,[31] a text that Atwood seems likely to have used, while Genesis 30 serves as a backdrop for the system of Handmaids in Gilead, although this is evident only in allusions (see below). In Genesis 16, Sarai, Abraham's wife, attributes her barrenness to God. To remedy the situation, she asks Abraham to father a son with her personal maid, the Egyptian Hagar, "perhaps to be built up by her"[32] (the same turn of phrase is used of and by Rachel in reference to her maid Bilhah in Gen. 30:3). In Genesis 16:4 Abraham wordlessly follows his wife's suggestion. From the sanctioned union with the maid, a pregnancy indeed follows. But Hagar rebels: she knows that as the future mother of a child of the patriarch, she has enhanced status, and she lets her mistress feel it. Sarai finds the situation unbearable and asks Abraham to intervene. He explicitly allows her to do with her maidservant as she pleases (Gen. 16:6). The very harsh treatment by Sarai that follows leads to the maid's escaping with the child in her womb.

In the second half of the story (Gen. 16:7–13), Hagar continues to show her agency. She flees to a spring of water in the desert, where she is addressed by a messenger of God. He perceives the maid as a person in her own right, not just as a cog in the plans of others. She is addressed by him first with her proper name and then in terms of her status, "Hagar, maidservant of Sarai", and she is asked where she has come from and where she is going. The messenger tells her to return to her old position under Sarai but at the same time informs her of a promise for her future son, to whom *she*[33] – not Abraham or Sarai – is to give the name *Ishmael*, meaning "God hears", and who will become a forefather of the Arabs. Hagar recognizes that she has been noticed and appreciated and responds to God, "You are the God who sees me" (Gen. 16:13).

I have noted additional biblical material, particularly from Genesis, that is relevant to surrogacy in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Genesis 16 (and the later parallel narrative Gen. 21:8–21, which deliberately weakens Hagar's inde-

31 For Gen. 16 see especially the interpretation by Willi-Plein 2011, 66–72.

32 Translations of biblical passages are mine throughout the article.

33 For the custom of name-giving by the mothers in Ancient Israel, see Kessler 2009; Bridge 2014. Interestingly, a later redactor (the Priestly Writer, cf. Seebass 1997, 91) altered the promised name-giving by Hagar in Gen. 16 to that by the patriarch Abraham (Gen. 16:15–16).

pendence[34]) and also Genesis 30, describe a social institution, attested also for the Ancient Near East,[35] that enables slaves to serve as surrogates for infertile wives.[36] It is not very likely that the authors of the relevant biblical stories were still familiar with the custom of surrogate motherhood from their own experience. Additionally, surrogacy is neither legally required nor recommended as worthy of imitation anywhere in the Bible. The legal texts of the Torah do not even mention it. And where it is included in narratives, especially Genesis 16 and Genesis 30, the human conflicts that can arise are emphasized. Indeed, the obvious sympathy that Genesis 16 shows for the figure of the maidservant is a specific feature of the biblical tradition. Ancient Near Eastern evidence (e.g. from the Codex Hammurapi, § 146, from an Egyptian text on inheritance regulation from the 12th century BC, and from an Assyrian marriage contract of the 7th century BC) is, by contrast, primarily interested in the associated legal issues.[37]

Similarly at variance from practice in the Ancient Near East is the biblical response to the escape of a slave.[38] According to Deuteronomy 23:16, a runaway slave is not to be returned to the master. Ancient Near Eastern laws envisaged the death penalty for slaves in this situation, while in Israel, according to Deuteronomy 23:17, the slave should be accepted into one's own community and not oppressed. In Gilead, however, the escape of a Handmaid is an offense punishable by severe corporal punishment (such as the beating given to Moira following her first escape) and even death.[39]

Finally, in Genesis 30 children born of a slave woman are recognised by the main wife and can be incorporated into the family: "no conflicts"[40] arise. By contrast, in the case of Sarai, Abraham, and Hagar in Genesis 16 a status conflict arises and is indeed central to the narrative plot. Atwood's inclusion of both Genesis 30 and Genesis 16 in her novel can be seen in the subtle way she describes the change in Offred's feelings towards the Commander and his wife. With that shift comes a sense of power. To explore this point, I now look more closely at the system of surrogate motherhood in Gilead.

34 For the parallel story Gen. 21:8–21 as a revision of Gen. 16, see, for example, Fischer 1994, 299–333; Heinsohn, 2010.

35 See the Ancient Near Eastern documents discussed in van Seters 1968.

36 See the overview in Fischer 1994, 97–101.

37 See, in addition to van Seters 1968, van Seters 1975, 68–71.

38 See Fischer 1994, 102–103.

39 Atwood 1998, 275–276.

40 Fischer 1994, 100.

Genesis 16 and the Relationship of Wife and Handmaid

Offred's voice, which in *The Handmaid's Tale* is lively and multi-layered, changes in the course of the narrative: the Handmaid becomes more sensitive over time to the situation of Serena Joy, the Commander's wife. At first Offred primarily perceives Serena Joy – perhaps with reference to Genesis 18:12 ("now that I am old, shall I still experience pleasure?") – in terms of age and infertility: "Even at her age, she still feels the urge to wreathe herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can't use them any more, you're withered."[41] This response is consistent with Offred's initial impression of the Commander: "Now the Commander is coming out. […] His hair is grey."[42] This too might be an echo of Genesis 18:12 ("and my lord is old").

After the Commander invites her into his study against all the rules, resulting in the secret arrangement of further meetings,[43] Offred feels increasingly more for both the Commander and Serena Joy. This is evident, for example, in the description of the Handmaid's mating, which is also ritually organized. The delicate act, which in Gilead takes place fully clothed, is staged as neutrally as possible. The man is in uniform, the wife sits directly behind the Handmaid and grasps her hands so that the conception is considered the wife's own – the maid is supposed to appear as "one flesh"[44] with her (a reference to Gen. 2:23): "Kissing is forbidden between us. This makes it bearable. One detaches oneself. One describes. […] Which of us is it worse for, her [Serena Joy] or me?" [45] The process changes its emotional signature over time. The distance falls after Offred has become the Commander's forbidden "outside woman":[46]

> I felt I was an intruder, in a territory that ought to have been hers. Now that I was seeing the Commander on the sly […], our functions [the wife's and hers] were no longer as separate as they should have been in theory. I was taking something away from her, although she didn't know it. […] Why should I care, I told myself. She's nothing to me, she dislikes me, she'd

41 Atwood 1998, 80–81.
42 Atwood 1998, 57.
43 Atwood 1998, 154.
44 Atwood 1998, 94.
45 Atwood 1998, 95.
46 Atwood 1998, 163.

> have me out of the house in a minute [...]. She was a malicious and vengeful woman, I knew that. Nevertheless I couldn't shake it, that small compunction towards her. Also: I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn't know it. And I enjoyed that. Why pretend? I enjoyed it a lot.[47]

In Gilead the assignment of the Handmaid to her mistress, presupposed biblically above all in Genesis 16,[48] is strongly emphasized, and the mistress of the house even has sole power to sanction all female personnel.[49] But Serena Joy makes a clandestine arrangement with Offred to remedy the Commander's suspected sterility by having the Handmaid have intercourse with the chauffeur, Nick. The relationship between Handmaid and mistress has shifted – they are two women sharing a destiny in Gilead's system: "I think: she's biting her lip, she's suffering. She wants it all right, that baby. I see the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape, in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend. Myself, my obverse."[50]

Perhaps the remark "Myself, my obverse", somewhat similar to the expression "one flesh" we saw used for the wife and her Handmaid, is a further allusion to the paradise narrative, where Adam greets his wife, brought to him by God, who made her "as his [Adam's] counterpart" (Gen. 2:18), as "flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23).[51] Creative biblical allusions such as these shape *The Handmaid's Tale* in many places. Genesis 2–3 also offers itself as a fruitful comparative text for an important leitmotif of the novel: the deliberate mentions of seeing and being seen.

The Regime of Seeing

The rulers of Gilead seek a panoptic system, enabling total surveillance.[52] It is based on the internalization of the possibility of comprehensive monitoring. No one is to be trusted, each and every one watches the other. This aim is

47 Atwood 1998, 161–162.

48 Gen. 16 uses the Hebrew terms *šipḥā*, "personal maid" (?), and *g^ebīrā*, "mistress"; for the exegetical discussion whether these are technical terms see, positively, Willi-Plein 2011, 68–69, and, relativizing, Fischer 1994, 91–97.

49 Atwood 1998, 162.

50 Atwood 1998, 259.

51 For the equal status of the first couple in these verses, see Kessler 2006.

52 See the classic study Foucault 2008.

realized – unlike in Orwell's *1984* – almost without technical means. In Gilead the recurring official symbol for this monitoring is the ever-watchful winged eye – obviously taken from the Trinitarian symbol of the triangle with rays and the eye of God, which has been common since the 17th century.[53] The customary farewell formula between the Handmaids, who are only allowed to shop in pairs, is "Under His Eye".[54] *Whose* eye this is remains deliberately indeterminate. It is a male gaze (of the state/God) from which nothing is to escape. To this end, social life is visually defined in detail, by the dress code, for example, and by rituals. In the Red Center, the Handmaids, fertile and therefore potentially dangerous women, are inculcated with invisibility: "Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen – to be *seen* – is to be – her voice trembled – penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable."[55] Another mention of invisibility relates to the lower ranks of the society. About Nick, the chauffeur, Offred remarks, "both of us are supposed to be invisible, both of us are functionaries."[56] With the rules of seeing located beyond speech, *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasizes an anthropological fact: societies organize themselves fundamentally through a regime of gazes. People are permeated by the knowledge of their being seen by others, which determines their self-perception. This way of being is also about the dialectic of veiling and nakedness. It is about bodies as socially determined and thus about the cultural organization of gender and sexuality.

One of the most influential texts in world literature in this respect is the biblical Paradise narrative, Genesis 2:4b–3:24. Traditionally, in the wake of Paul and Augustine, it has been interpreted as the narrative of "the fall of man". Thus, it is imprinted on the Western Christian consciousness as a linkage of seduction, (female) transgression, sin, shame, and death. However, current exegetical research on Genesis 2–3 – notwithstanding the burden of reception history – has established another probable reading of the text.

The narrative of the creation of the human couple in the Garden of Eden, of the attainment of their 'autonomy' by eating the fruit, and of their expulsion from communion with God is not a tale of guilt and punishment (a word for sin does not even appear in it).[57] And the gender relationship is described not

53 For this iconography see Kaute 1968, 224.

54 Atwood 1998, 45.

55 Atwood 1998, 28.

56 Atwood 1998, 232. For social invisibility see Honneth 2003.

57 See, for example, the comprehensive interpretation of Gertz 2018, 80–149.

simply as naturally given, but as a (reversible?) consequence of the drama of becoming human. The curses in Genesis 3:14–19 therefore have an after-the-fact character with regard to the realization of nakedness in Genesis 3:7 and its consequences. The immediate making of preliminary clothes by the pair and the protective clothing given to them later by God for the world beyond Eden suggest the foundations of culture.[58] All people now know of the gaze of others (and of God) directed at them individually, and they act accordingly.

The permanent awareness of visibility is rightly recognized by Hans Blumenberg as the heart of the myth of Genesis 2–3.[59] The paradise narrative conveys an etiology of humanity based on awareness of mutual seeing and the resultant adaptation of bodies through veiling (or unveiling). At the beginning of cultural practice was dress. Offred's narrative exhibits a strong awareness of the anthropological significance of seeing and being seen, both as a form of the exercise of power and as genuine mutual recognition and thus subversion of suppression. We might say that in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the unobstructed gaze and its reciprocation is both a fact and a desire. It is more fundamental than the gender-related gaze, from which, naturally, it cannot be separated.

Nudity, Clothing, and Power

The internalization of male control over women's bodies, as willed by the rulers of Gilead, is articulated by Offred when she undresses for a bath without being able to see herself: "My nakedness is strange to me already. […] I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely."[60] The domestic ceremony of reading the Bible is described particularly vividly in terms of visual control and its reversal, between the Commander and the women grouped around him. While he seems to constantly change his "disguises" and thus proves himself to be a kind of everyman, the women's gazes fix on him: "Is there no end to his disguises, of benevolence? We watch him: every inch, every flicker. To be a man, watched by women. It must be entirely strange."[61] In what follows,

58 See Hartenstein 2019.

59 Blumenberg 2006, 777–783.

60 Atwood 1998, 63.

61 Atwood 1998, 87.

this image is continued as a mutual trying on of roles, a donning of each other's status. The Commander remains superior to the women in power, but he lacks any empathy. He is blind to them. They, however, see and observe him closely in his sensory darkness. He – in Offred's interpretation – feels his way "into them" (also sexual metaphor) on

> this journey into a darkness that is composed of women, a woman, who can see in darkness while he himself strains blindly forward. She watches him from within. We're all watching him. It's the one thing we can really do, and it's not for nothing.[62]

The Commander finally appears in the realistically sad and intimate scene with Offred in the hotel room. He is completely stripped of any claim to power and revealed in all his paucity. The inner mendacity of the Gilead system culminates in the club for the amusement of the officers:

> Will this be worse, to have him denuded, of all his cloth power? He's down to the shirt; then, under it, sadly, a little belly. Wisps of hair. [...] "Maybe I should turn the lights out," says the Commander [...]. I see him for a moment before he does this. Without his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something being dried.[63]

Really Being Seen

The change in Offred's relationships with all persons with whom she comes in closer contact is evident at key points in the narrative in terms of the reversal or subversion of the regime of gazes prevailing in Gilead:

The Commander again: after the secret agreement, he looks at Offred during the ceremonial mating, which makes her uncomfortable because what "should have been no more to me than a bee is to a flower" now seems unseemly.[64] At the same time, his looking gives her awareness of a power of an "equivocal kind" that she has achieved over him: "Once in a while I think I can see myself, though blurrily, as he may see me."[65]

62 Atwood 1998, 88.
63 Atwood 1998, 254–255.
64 Atwood 1998, 161.
65 Atwood 1998, 210.

Serena Joy: a similar change takes place in Offred's relationship with the wife, who also makes a forbidden arrangement, in this instance to get a child. During their negotiations, which as such already undermine the regime of Gilead, mistress and maid look at each other: "I look up at her. She looks down. It's the first time we have looked into each other's eyes in a long time. Since we met. The moment stretches out between us, bleak and level. She's trying to see whether or not I'm up to reality."[66]

Ofglen: of central importance is the moment of truth between Offred and her shopping partner, Ofglen. The relationship between the two Handmaids has been subject to the regime of mutual control for a long time. Neither knew whether she could trust the other. But then, in the reflection in the store window of the Soul Scrolls factory, they exchange glances that reveal themselves to each other:

> Now I shift my gaze. What I see is not the machines, but Ofglen, reflected in the glass of the window. She's looking straight at me. We can see into each other's eyes. This is the first time I've ever seen Ofglen's eyes, directly, steadily, not aslant. Her face is oval, pink, plump but not fat, her eyes roundish. She holds my stare in the glass, level, unwavering. Now it's hard to look away. There's a shock in this seeing; it's like seeing somebody naked, for the first time.[67]

It takes the additional confirmation, in words, that they think alike about the empty lie of the mechanized prayer printers to transform their relationship: suspicion becomes trust. They are no longer alone.

Nick: Offred projects much of her pre-Gilead love for Luke onto the chauffeur, with whom she ends up having a relationship she wants. Her desire to see him undisguised is real and a utopian wish for humanity.[68]

Offred herself: when in the hotel of the forbidden club to which the Commander has taken her, where mirrors are allowed, Offred looks at herself for the only time recorded in the whole report. Her self-image is sober and clear: "Now, in this ample mirror under the white light, I take a look at myself. It's a good look, slow and level. I'm a wreck."[69] The tension between

66 Atwood 1998, 204–205.

67 Atwood 1998, 167.

68 Atwood 1998, 269.

69 Atwood 1998, 253.

ubiquitous surveillance and the genuine seeing and knowing between people that blossoms in the cracks of Gilead's walls finally leads us to Offred's personal religion, which seems significant not only individually but also collectively.

Reflection on Writing and Faith

Offred's tale contains reflective passages that consider the peculiarity of a story that cannot be written down, since there is nothing to write with, but must be told. That the Handmaid wants to contextualize her experiences is first and foremost an act of self-care: it helps her survive. "What I need is perspective", she says, because only through the "illusion of depth, created by a frame" can one gain orientation. Otherwise, one stands before a two-dimensional wall, and everything is only "a huge foreground".[70]

Storytelling, Believing, and Truth

Offred is aware that the drive to tell her tale can be deceptive. Reality, especially that which is only remembered, is fleeting. And it is at the same time so complex[71] that all attempts to put it into words subsequently are "reconstruction": "When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove."[72] Offred, intriguingly, says comparable things about her faith, most noticeably when she plays through different versions of what might have happened to Luke, the father of her daughter, after their joint attempt to escape in the early days of Gilead: "The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything."[73] It is precisely this fragile way of dealing with uncertainty "In Hope"[74] that characterizes her religious faith.

70 Atwood 1998, 143.
71 Atwood 1998, 134.
72 Atwood 1998, 134.
73 Atwood 1998, 106.
74 Atwood 1998, 106; 195.

It is fed by elements from before Gilead (with a reference, for example, to "presbyterian"[75]). Occasionally, we learn of mystical immersion or a romantic devotion to nature.[76] Despite critical distance to and partly ironic remarks about the ideological use of Christian symbols, especially in the Red Center, Offred holds onto a faith whose truth is as uncertain and open as the promise of truth in retelling events. One of the material mediums she uses is the little cushion on the window seat, on which is embroidered in uppercase letters the word FAITH: "It's the only thing they've given me to read."[77]

Necessary Imaginations

"Tonight I will say my prayers." These words begin a haunting section of *The Handmaid's Tale* devoted primarily to processing Luke's memory:[78] "I pray where I am, sitting by the window, looking out through the curtain at the empty garden. I don't even close my eyes. Out there or inside my head, it's an equal darkness. Or light."[79] Offred's prayer is loosely based on the structure of the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4), adapting its content to her concerns and commenting on the traditional formulations, sometimes ironically, sometimes despairingly. The act of addressing "God" seems to her to be as necessary as it is questionable: "I feel very unreal, talking to You like this. I feel as if I'm talking to a wall. I wish You'd answer. I feel so alone. […] Oh God. It's no joke. Oh God oh God. How can I keep on living?"[80] Analogously, she addresses an imagined "you" in her storytelling as an act of necessary imagination: "A story is like a letter. Dear *You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name."[81] Address is part of a concrete practice of praying and testifies to a history, both of which are means of survival, without requiring metaphysical or realist assumptions about the existence of the addressee. Simply the spoken double address of a "you" (God and listeners/readers) makes the *you* in each instance possibly real: "By telling you [the reader] anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because

75 Atwood 1998, 54.
76 Atwood 1998, 97; 110–111; 153–154.
77 Atwood 1998, 57.
78 Atwood 1998, 194–195.
79 Atwood 1998, 194.
80 Atwood 1998, 195.
81 Atwood 1998, 40.

I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are."[82] In this respect, her real name plays a special role for Offred, and is also decisive for her personal religion.

The Real Name

Offred refers to her former name several times. In a way, it is her most precious memory, the unmistakable proof of her former identity:

> My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure that I'll come back to dig up, one day.[83]

The name "has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past."[84] In this it resembles the name of God in Hebrew mysticism, with similar connotations of presence and withdrawal:[85] "I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark."[86] To not forget this name is therefore imperative, even if Offred once considers forgetting it as a way out of her despair ("I must forget about my secret name and all ways back. My name is Offred now, and here is where I live."[87]). The only person in Gilead to whom she entrusts her real name is Nick; she tells him because of her desire to belong to him completely.[88] The analogy with the Hebrew name for God in the Bible, the tetragrammaton YHWH, which in Jewish tradition is subject to pronunciation taboos and held highly sacred, is made fully explicit in Offred's nightly "Our Father": "My God, Who Art in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is within. I wish you would tell

82 Atwood 1998, 268 (with the concept of creation through God's word in Gen. 1:3 possibly in the background).

83 Atwood 1998, 84.

84 Atwood 1998, 84.

85 For the central role of the name(s) of God in Jewish mysticism, see Maier 1995, 19–23; see also Schäfer 2009, 396 (general index under "names, divine").

86 Atwood 1998, 84.

87 Atwood 1998, 143.

88 Atwood 1998, 270.

me Your Name, the real one I mean. But *You* will do as well as anything."[89] Memories and expectations are condensed within the preservation of a real name, not only in the cause of survival but also in hope of genuine sympathy with her fate, even if it should occur only within a future remembrance. Atwood has emphasized the ethical importance of commemorating all the victims of history whose distinctiveness has been erased with their names: "Why do we never learn the real name of the central character, I have often been asked. Because, I reply, so many people throughout history have had their names changed or have simply disappeared from view."[90]

Concluding Remarks

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* contains statements and reflections on religion as a social reality on all levels of the novel (Offred's account, the narrative framework about the scholars in the future, and the meta-level of the author, who provides information about her book in the Introduction from 2017). Religion is not criticized or evaluated *per se*, but – like the whole fictional world of the novel – is introduced in its actual human complexity. On the one hand, it is ideologically abused by the rulers in Gilead, as in many totalitarian regimes, where it serves as merely a tool of power and oppression not so very different from corporeal punishment and guns. On the other hand, it cannot be regulated in total. There is always the possibility of a subversive inner rebellion driven by religious insights, as is evident when it comes to the different ways in which biblical texts are reflected in Offred's report. In this respect, the novel can be considered neither anti-Christian nor anti-religion. Rather, it juxtaposes the misuse of religious symbolism by rulers and the possibility for individual religious practice to serve as an outlet for the oppressed. Both realities use set pieces and elements of biblical and Christian (especially Protestant and Evangelical) traditions.

Religion thus appears as a social fact in the sense identified by Emile Durkheim. Specifically modern is, however, the extent to which *The Handmaid's Tale* introduces moments of autonomy and enlightenment that are 'historically' indebted to the origins of the main character, Offred, so to the period before Gilead. She and others like her have memories that enable them to

89 Atwood 1998, 194.

90 Atwood 2017, xv.

look at the new conditions in Gilead in an ideologically critical way. Despite all the loss of individual freedom for the Handmaids, Atwood's novel makes clear that the belief that at least in the future people will feel compassion and listen to the Handmaid's story can be a means of survival.

Offred inspires great sympathy in readers precisely because she is a human being like us, with weaknesses and a limited vision, but also with amazing strength and common sense. Especially in light of its reflections on working on one's own biographical memory (under the keyword "reconstruction"), the novel thematizes that every attempt to communicate injustice and oppression to later generations represents an act of hope beyond the existing conditions. The double "you" of the imagined addressees (human listeners of the future and the always silent "God") is evidence of the promise contained in writing or recording such events and fates.[91] This hope is fully expressed in the reflections on one's true name: our names signify who we were and are. All names and stories deserve to be remembered, because their complete erasure would signify the end of the political affect par excellence: outcry in the face of injustice.

Finally, through many subtle references to biblical texts such as Genesis 2–3, *The Handmaid's Tale* expresses a realistic awareness of a culture's tradition, which always remains ambivalent – like all human products and symbols. But precisely in this ambivalence, as the leitmotif of seeing and being seen in the novel makes clear, lies the faint possibility of liberation. Violent oppression does not necessarily have the last word. The great global success of Atwood's creation could itself be considered evidence in support of this proposition.

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91 This seems true even though in the "Historical Notes" (Atwood 1998, 299–311) the scholars of the future lack any sensibility for the human tragedy in Offred's record – another ironic angle in Atwood's plot construction.

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