

The Handmaid's Tale

Connecting Literature, Film, Politics, and Religion

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have a control over the ending.

Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale

In 1985, Canadian author Margaret Atwood published a dystopian novel written in fragments. It contains a scary vision, a disturbing compilation of every thinkable evil humankind may be capable of. Offred, the main character and narrator, explains the world she lives in: Gilead, a theonomic state with a totalitarian structure that is ruled by a male military elite. Atwood's novel points out how religious and political fanaticism fuel social inequality, censorship, and the limitation of individual rights. *The Handmaid's Tale* challenges conventions and expectations and enthrals the reader who reconnects all the pieces of this shocking story. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been adapted for TV, film, radio, stage, and opera. There is also a graphic novel. Furthermore, it has inspired women fighting for their rights against conservative forces in many countries around the world. Eventually, in 2019, Atwood published a second novel, *The Testaments*, in which new female perspectives on Gilead and its decline are elaborated.

The Handmaid's Tale has become a frame for articulating and discussing controversial aspects of contemporary society such as gender relationships, power and political structures, ecology and catastrophe, reproduction and family, love and loyalty, domination and subversion, and the role of science. Religion plays a crucial yet still ambivalent role: it offers the main legitimation for the oppressive power of the cruel theocracy and at the same time it is a source of hope and motivation for subverting the whole system. The

Bible is also used in controversial ways, as a means of subjugation and as a text that enables resistance.

The editors of JRFM invite contributions for the May 2024 issue that address the multifaceted and controversial roles of religion in *The Handmaid's Tale* in and beyond the novel of 1985. Consideration of the various ramifications of this narrative in different media and decades and of its impact on politics and social debates are welcome, as is in-depth analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* that focusses on the role and significance of religion, references to the history of religions, and ethical and philosophical aspects as well as its social criticism.

Different approaches can be taken and a variety of questions asked, such as:

- How is religion represented and which aspects of religion are addressed in Margaret Atwood's novels from 1985 and 2019? What is the religious background of Gilead? Whose interests does it serve?
- Can we identify a change in how religion is represented in the novel's adaptations for different media, including audio-visual versions, the graphic novel, and performed iterations? Why?
- What is the hermeneutical dimension of the Bible in *The Handmaid's Tale*?
- Which contemporary dimensions of religion and society are challenged by the narrative universe of *The Handmaid's Tale*?
- What could be the role of dystopian narrative in staging religion today?

We hope for an innovative scholarly discussion across a broad spectrum of case studies that includes the different adaptations and further works inspired by Margaret Atwood's novel. Scholars of literature, cinema and media studies, theology, and the study of religion, as well as of sociology or political sciences and other disciplines are invited to contribute to this issue.

The issue also includes an open section for articles on other topics in keeping with the profile of JRFM. The deadline for all submissions is 30 June 2023. Contributions of 5,000 to 7,000 words (including notes) should be submitted for double-blind peer review through the journal homepage at www.jrfm.eu.

We kindly ask authors to register and to consider the instructions for submitting contributions, especially the style guide. Publication is scheduled for May 2024. For questions regarding this call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact the editors of the issue, Natalie Fritz (natalie.fritz@kath.ch) and Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati (pezzoli@lmu.de).