



THOMAS CAHILL IN CONVERSATION WITH MARGARET ATWOOD

THINKING MEDIEVALLY

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PAUL LECLERC: Good evening, ladies and gentleman, I'm Paul LeClerc, the President of the New York Public Library. I'm delighted to welcome you this evening to the Celeste Bartos Auditorium in the South Court Building, one of the hidden buildings within the New York Public Library, and to welcome you to what is going to be one of the most extraordinary conversations that I think we'll have heard in a very long time. I have the privilege and challenge of introducing two supremely talented and accomplished guests at LIVE from the New York Public Library this evening, Thomas Cahill and Margaret Atwood. It's hard to know where to begin a description of two people who count award-winning writer, poet, journalist, and actor among their myriad accomplishments. But for a library whose core mission is to provide free access to the inspiration of the world's great resources of knowledge and information, both of tonight's participants share an important characteristic. Tom Cahill and Margaret Atwood have both written about the great and complex challenges and ideas of Western civilization in ways that connect with, inspire, and stimulate readers of all ages and of all backgrounds.

Thomas Cahill's great Hinges of History series has taken the engaging and moving stories of individuals at pivotal moments in the history of the Western world to explore and highlight the roots of our own

culture. His use of the very human experiences of periods and peoples from fifth-century Ireland to Ancient Greece has made best-sellers of historical works of real authentic depth. The first volume in the series, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, hit number two in the *New York Times* Best-Seller List, as you recall, and the Times has at different moments hailed his work as, and I quote, “charming and poetic,” “persuasive as well as entertaining,” and he was recently invited to address the U.S. Congress on the Judeo-Christian roots of moral responsibility in American politics. **(laughter)** Must have been very interesting. Maybe you could ask him about that. **(laughter)** There will be a question-and-answer period, and you’re invited to use microphones to ask your questions and I hope somebody does ask that one.

His latest work tackles an often poorly understood period of history, the High Middle Ages, which popular culture has tended to alternatively portray as, on the one hand, oppressive and superstitious, or on the other hand, as heroic and glamorous. *Mysteries of the Middle Ages* looks at some of the surprising and progressive realities of the scientific, artistic, and social rebirth of this period. And, as always, he uses his own cultural characters to draw out enduring messages for all of his readers.

Challenging and interpreting these historical insights into today’s world will be a woman whose own creative contribution to contemporary literature is second to none. Margaret Atwood has been widely acclaimed as one of *the* preeminent authors of our time, often using the intensely personal to yield insight into issues of universal concern. Her extraordinary combination of supreme intelligence and natural wit and lyricism make her books compulsively readable and highly popular as well as intellectually important and enduring, a point clearly illustrated by the 128 different titles, separate titles of her works, that are listed in the collections of this great Library. Listing Margaret Atwood’s international accolades and awards would take me far over my strict limit of time this evening, so suffice it to say that as well as being a multiyear nominee and winner of the Man Booker Prize, a French Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, and a recipient of the Norwegian Order of Literary Merit, she’s also been inducted into Canada’s Walk of Fame. Her most recent work has generated great excitement among fans and critics alike, being seen as an album of snapshots from her own past. It has already won high praise around the world, with the *Times Literary Supplement* of London describing each of its stories as, and I quote, “A fine testimony of her literary genius,” end quote.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sure you'll agree that tonight's discussion promises to be one of the richest and most exciting from LIVE at the New York Public Library. Following the discussion, as I said, there will be an opportunity to ask both of our writers and guests this evening questions. Staff will be present to give you a microphone with which you ask your question. And if that all weren't enough, both Tom Cahill and Margaret Atwood will be signing copies of their books outside the main doors of the auditorium this evening, when the discussion concludes. And finally, if you enjoy this evening, which I know you will, please sign up, give us your e-mail to join the mailing list of LIVE at the New York Public Library. In addition to getting tickets for great, great events, you are welcome, I'm told, to get two free tickets to Daniel Mendelsohn's event, "Mass Entertainment and Imperial Politics," here next week on December 5, as well as two free tickets to an event of your choice this coming spring. So without any more words from me, please join me in welcoming two of the great, great writers in the English-speaking world today. Ladies and gentlemen, Thomas Cahill and Margaret Atwood.

(applause)

MARGARET ATWOOD: Good evening. I am your interviewer for tonight, and this is the interviewee. These are our roles. I got marooned in—actually, I didn't get marooned in Ottawa yesterday. If I had, I wouldn't be here. I had to get away in the middle of the night. I was going to print these questions out, so they would look more professional, but as it is, it's my handwriting, and this may cause a few problems. Only two people have ever told me I had wonderful handwriting and one of them was a Japanese person who couldn't read English. **(laughter)** He said, "Your handwriting. It is so beautiful!" I said, "What do you mean by—you mean illegible."

Thomas. *Mysteries of the Middle Ages*. The Middle Ages have gone in and out of fashion. There was a long revival in the nineteenth century—ranging everywhere from Gothic horror—Monk Lewis's *The Monk*, to Scott's *Ivanhoe*, to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, to all of those nineteenth-century Oxford-like university buildings, to the pre-Raphaelites to the Arts and Crafts movement. Then the Modernists tossed it all out and jeered at it, much as the eighteenth century had done. Now it's back, with great interest via books about William the Conqueror, whether or not Chaucer was murdered, the Black Death, the Mongol invasions, and, as they say, "and more." Why are we so fascinated once again?

THOMAS CAHILL: I'm not really sure, but I think—

MARGARET ATWOOD: Thank you, next.

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: I think it has something to do with what we imagine to be the simplicity of the Middle Ages, which I don't think really is simple, but it seems—it seems like you have an easier thread through it, for one thing. And also, I think, from our perspective, it looks like a lot of fun. You know, they always seem to be singing and dancing and—

MARGARET ATWOOD: Murdering each other.

THOMAS CAHILL: True. That too. But they did it with great gusto. **(laughter)** So, you know, there's something like that in there. You know, one of the things I realized a long time ago, was that so many things that contemporary people are attracted to are really medieval under the skin. The Tolkien trilogy, I mean, is basically medieval, even though it's pretending to be something else. It's even true of *Star Wars*. *Star Wars* is basically medieval. So, why would those writers do that?

MARGARET ATWOOD: So what you mean by that is magic, monsters, horses—

THOMAS CAHILL: And yet it's not so far away, say, as Greek mythology is. We have some *roots* there that we don't have—that we don't seem to have anymore in Greek mythology. It's hard to—you don't meet very many people these days who actually pray to Zeus.

(laughter)

MARGARET ATWOOD: More and more. **(laughter)** It's coming back. Well, you meet a lot of Wiccans, but I guess you would say that Wiccans are basically medieval.

THOMAS CAHILL: I would, actually, yeah. I mean, you see an awful lot of that. I would say the writer that most attracted me in the first place to the Middle Ages was Sigrid Undset, who wrote—*Kristin Lavransdatter* was her most famous, but she has a bunch of other, or two other, medieval novels, one of them called, the one set partly in Iceland—no, sorry, not the *Master of Hestviken*.

MARGARET ATWOOD: The one with Gunnar in it.

THOMAS CAHILL: *Gunnar's Daughter*. Thank you. That was my daughter. *Gunnar's Daughter*. And you see Christianity actually coming in to these northern places, and you see this mixture of paganism and Christianity, and how they're beginning to come together. Well, it's just wonderful and fascinating. It's hard *not* to find it interesting, because—the other part of it, I think, is that the Middle Ages are the first articulation of the modern world. It's the first time that the two great sources that influence us, whether we know it or care or want them to—that is to say, the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman—it's the first time that they actually come together and gel so that you can say, "Well, in medieval civilization, you have a kind of Greco-Roman frame, and you have Judeo-Christian content, and they are partly warring and fighting with one another and partly getting along. But out of this comes things like the celebration of Christmas, which is both Christian and pagan, it's very obvious, and we're still doing it. So it's hard not to want to be a part of that, because I think it—even to someone who's unreflective, it has something to do with him or her.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Do you read those Brother Caedmon [sic, Cadfael] murder mysteries?

THOMAS CAHILL: You know, I tried one, I think.

MARGARET ATWOOD: You didn't like Brother Caedmon? How could you not like Brother Caedmon?

THOMAS CAHILL: I don't dislike him, I just—I could always see what was coming next. I like a mystery where I'm completely in the dark and stumped.

MARGARET ATWOOD: I think you just did too much botany. **(laughter)** They're botanical mysteries, for those who haven't followed it. Brother Caedmon *has* been on the Crusades and has been a man of the world, but he's retired and become a monk and now he's doing herbal mysteries, so if a dead body is found, he's the one that finds the leaf on it that means something.

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: Yeah, actually, I liked the television series better, with Derek Jacoby, I thought that was terrific.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Okay, we'll get off that line of discussion. We'll go on to question 1a and b. Question 1a requires a very short answer. If I'd had your book would I have slept through medieval history in college the way I did? The answer is no. No.

THOMAS CAHILL: All right, so do I have to say anything?

MARGARET ATWOOD: Yeah, you say no.

THOMAS CAHILL: No.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Thank you. Yes. I wish I'd had *your* book, but instead I had a man who lectured on mills—mills—

THOMAS CAHILL: Oh, like, mills like *The Mill on the Floss*? That kind of mill?

MARGARET ATWOOD: Mills that go around. Yes, those kinds of mills.

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, I think the problem with so much history writing is that the historian goes toward how *different* the people of the past are. You know, if you go back, say, to Ancient Mesopotamia—people in the Middle Ages did not think the earth was flat, but people in Ancient Mesopotamia actually did, they thought it was flat, and they thought that the sky was a kind of dome just

a little bit out of reach. Well, if you try to be an Ancient Mesopotamian by thinking that way, then you may be able to do it for a few minutes, but if you do it any longer than that, then you're going to get a terrible headache. It just doesn't work for us. But the Ancient Mesopotamians told jokes to one another. They wept. They had wonderful parties. They had terrible tragedies. They bled exactly the way we do. The human body hasn't changed. It's gotten a little bigger, but it really hasn't changed, so that we can *find* communion with them, I think, principally by coming into touch with their emotional lives, rather than their intellectual lives, which are so, so very different from ours. And if you do come in contact with their emotional lives, then trying to figure out why they thought the earth was flat becomes a little bit more interesting, I think.

And that's all I'm doing. I'm not doing anything original, there's nothing in any of my books that constitutes an original theory or an original discovery. Each of the books is based on the middle of the road, the broad middle of the road of current scholarship, whatever it might be. And if I say something a little wacky, I admit that it's my own idea rather than the broad middle-of-the-road consensus of academics. So I'm not really trying to write cutting-edge anything, I'm really just trying to pull the reader back into these periods, so that you could say, finally, "Now I think I get it. I think I understand what it would have been like to have been there, to have gone through it, to have *felt* it." So it is the feelings more than anything.

MARGARET ATWOOD: The feeling. Yes. So that would explain why I slept through the mills. Because there actually weren't any people in this man's lectures.

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: There was just grain.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Just mills. I think he was interested in the economics of it all, I guess that's why. So—and I was not very interested in that. So the other question, question 1b, is also very short.

THOMAS CAHILL: 1b, you have to stop doing this! **(laughter)**

MARGARET ATWOOD: It is, how much fun was this book to write? Because it reads as if you had a lot of fun.

THOMAS CAHILL: Yes, I did. I enjoy writing these books. I don't—I don't see, I don't understand that thing about, you know, "It's easy to write, all you have to do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein." I don't get that way of—if it's *that* hard, why don't you do something else? I *like* what I do. I get a kick out of it. Yes, it's—is it hard? Yes, it's hard.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Is it fun? Yes, it's fun.

THOMAS CAHILL: But, yes, it's fun. I think there's great satisfaction for some people in writing. And for very few. I mean, you shouldn't do it unless you absolutely *have* to. I do believe that. When people come up to have books signed afterwards, they'll tell me that they're thinking of becoming a writer, and I always say, "I hope there's something else you could be besides a writer."

MARGARET ATWOOD: Well, you want to stomp out the competition (**laughter**) before people get carried away.

THOMAS CAHILL: Also, the average writer in the United States makes something like five thousand dollars a year from his writing, so there are, you know, so you could, you know, wash dishes and probably make a little bit more than that.

MARGARET ATWOOD: This is a depressing thought. Now I would like, just to cheer us all up a little bit—

THOMAS CAHILL: Sorry.

MARGARET ATWOOD: I would like you to give people a bit of flavor of the text by reading this part that I've bookmarked, the beginning of Chapter 3, just a couple of pages of text, which is a nice introduction.

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, Chapter 3 is “Paris: University of Heavenly Things.” “The Middle Ages are a great jumble. As I’ve put my manuscript together I’ve sometimes felt I was not so much writing a book as sewing a gigantic quilt full of disparate and even clashing remnants—a large patch of Ancient Greece, swatches of late antique and early medieval Rome, oddly conjoined strips from maps both geographical and metaphysical. A not-so-blushing virgin. A blushless queen, and, as we shall soon see, a nun who prides herself on being her lover’s whore. What on earth do all these things have to do with one another? But to present the Middle Ages otherwise, as a seamless garment, would be to falsify their character and leave the reader grasping at a phantasm.

“A medievalist friend of mine once confided that he often daydreamed of living in medieval times”—there we are, back to the first question. “Of course, he added, he always imagined himself a lord of some sort, (**laughter**) sitting in his great hall, being served a side of succulent wild boar from his woodland domains. He never imagined himself the house churl who did the serving, or the estate serf who had done the hunting and the butchering. Though distinctions between high and low were *less* acute than they are in our world, they were sufficiently stark to steer any dreamer’s fancies *away* from the furrowed farms of Europe and toward its castellated hilltops. What appalls a modern dreamer about the Middle Ages is not so much the distance that lay between peasant and prince, as that there was seldom any way of shortening that distance. The peasant would *always* be a peasant, the prince always a prince.

“And yet, the rigid stratification of social roles was shaken by the rise of the merchant class, the medieval bourgeoisie. Francis of Assisi’s youthful plan to become a great prince was unrealistic because he took no steps to realize it, but had he taken his father’s route, he could have become a great merchant prince. As time went on, wealth vied with nobility for political and social power, and wealth won out often enough, especially as independent cities and towns, like Assisi, grew into alternative centers of power. But, withal, the traders’ route to self-improvement was a slippery one.

“However difficult it may be to characterize correctly the medieval class system, it’s even more difficult to grasp medieval thinking, which was broadly metaphorical and analogical, rather than *merely* logical and rational. The hagiographical stories that clustered around Francis’s life: that he preached even to birds, who stopped twittering to listen, tamed the ravening wolf of Gubbio, and received in his body the five wounds of the crucified Christ, were probably taken in a nonliteral spirit by many of the people who

first heard them. Interactions with birds spoke of Francis's instinctive resonance with the natural world; the chastened wolf of his ability to elicit good from even the worst of creatures; the stigmata, of his thoroughgoing identification with the sufferings of Christ. Did medieval people think these things had actually happened? They might well have considered such a question beyond answering, and would instead, like Frida Kahlo, have invoked the extraordinary beauty of truth.

“Though because we don't think the way they did, we often misunderstand them. In the historian William Manchester, for instance, we find only contempt for all things medieval.” And then I quote a little bit about how he saw all these people from the Middle Ages coming into the Renaissance period “hunched, pigeon-toed, like rickets victims, their vacant faces pocked with smallpox turned blindly toward the future they thought they knew—gullible, pitiful innocents who were about to be swept up in the most powerful, incomprehensible, irresistible vortex”—that is, the Renaissance—“since Alaric had led his Visigoths and Huns across the Alps,” etcetera. And I say, “Manchester's libel is peppered with his own unexamined anti-Catholicism, which leads him into one howler after another. He fulminates against an infallible Vatican, seeming not to know that the doctrine of Papal infallibility was virtually unknown in the Middle Ages, and that the Vatican did not become the primary papal residence until the Union of Italy in 1870. How he imagines that the Renaissance of the sixteenth century could have arisen from the starved and shrunken medieval culture he describes, I just don't know. As King Lear said, with exquisite medieval logic, ‘nothing will come of nothing.’”

(applause)

MARGARET ATWOOD: You've dated the High Middle Ages from 1100 until 1347. Could you explain those dates?

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, the Early Middle Ages, the part that is now still called largely the Dark Ages, and rightly so, it is the subject of *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, really. And it goes—you know, we could have a conference here with prominent historians, none of whom would agree on the dates. They would just—and we could spend the whole night on that, but I think the easiest way of looking at it is that the Middle Ages begin, more or less, with the conversion to Christianity of the Emperor Constantine, because things do begin to change then. You could make it a little bit later. You

could make it the Fall of Rome, which doesn't happen *all* that much later. And then once you have the Fall of Rome, you have the Dark Ages, because you have this period of intense illiteracy, when almost all the books were destroyed and lost, and that goes on and on and on. And, needless to say, when things like that happen and you have the barbarians coming—the barbarians weren't really invaders, they were . . . immigrants . . . looking for a better place to live, but they do destroy the civilization that was there because the civilization that was there was unwilling to absorb them rationally.

(laughter)

MARGARET ATWOOD: You think?

THOMAS CAHILL: Which it could have done, had it bothered to do so, but it didn't. And so there were these enormous disjunctions, and that gives us the whole first part of the Middle Ages, or Dark Ages, which finally begins to come to an end as people catch their breath and begin to build cities again. People *live* a little bit longer—they're not all dying by the age of fifteen or twenty, and so they begin to plot for the future, and then you have the beginning of cities again, and by the end of the eleventh century, you have commerce really getting off the ground and the beginnings of a middle class, so that the twelfth-century renaissance, the sort of renaissance before the Renaissance, before the Renaissance with a capital R, is based on the new prosperity, and the fact that people can now pay for artists to come and decorate their churches, and they can pay for beautiful clothes and they can do all sorts of things they couldn't have done in the earlier era, and it is, almost always, a kind of—it's *money* that sets off culture, I mean, you know, otherwise you have a culture of *poverty*, which is a very different kind of thing. So you do have this civilizing event taking place that starts with the fact that people have more money, and can pay for art and literature, and then, of course, that infects everything, so that that the High Middle Ages are the twelfth, thirteenth, and first half of the fourteenth century.

Then, it unfortunately kind of collapses because in 1347, halfway through the fourteenth century, the Black Plague arrives. Now, the Black Plague was even, in some ways, *more* devastating than the barbarian invasions had been, because in many parts of Europe a third to *half* of the populace died. There were towns where there was no one left to bury the dead. They were *all* dead, and the corpses just piled up. Well, something like that is going to *rend* any civilization and that's exactly what happens.

I've always thought that Bergman's *Seventh Seal* gets that period perfectly, you know, where you have the old middle—the High Middle Ages is really represented by the company of actors, particularly the visionary, the man who sees things that no one else sees. He is the wonderfully typical medieval figure. He's the sort of Saint Francis figure. And he sees that death is stalking the countryside, and is coming after people, and he gets his family out of there at just the right time. And then you see, in many scenes, people stealing from one another, stealing from corpses—a disintegration of society that, of course, occurs in something like that. The only character in that movie that I think is *not* quite right is the knight, who's just too Lutheran.

(laughter)

MARGARET ATWOOD: There are some pretty Lutheran figures in all of that. The flagellants come through in that movie, for instance.

THOMAS CAHILL: They're *accurate*, but I don't think that the knight, who worries about whether God exists and how he fits into the scheme of things, is a very Reformation figure. And he's Bergman, he's the kid who grew up in a Lutheran household and is still bothered by all of that, so he makes him into the knight, and it's an interesting way of doing it, but he doesn't quite fit, you know. You would be hard to find that *guy* in the mid-fourteenth century, I think. Someone quite that articulate about whether or not he believes in God. Everyone still believed in God. You don't find that until after the breakdown of Europe into warring religious patterns.

MARGARET ATWOOD: I read it more as he wants *proof*, he wants somebody to turn up who has seen either the Devil or God, and although he himself is playing chess with Death, he wants something over and beyond that. The playing-chess-with-Death was an old medieval theme, it's not only Bergman.

THOMAS CAHILL: No, and there are many things in that movie that are—you know, the Dance of Death over the hills—

MARGARET ATWOOD: I loved that.

THOMAS CAHILL: —that’s a medieval image. It’s just that I don’t—it’s hard to find a *real* nonbeliever in the Middle Ages.

MARGARET ATWOOD: You didn’t look hard enough.

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: There are plenty of them after that, but not then, you know.

MARGARET ATWOOD: My next question has to do with women. You have some great sections connecting such figures as Hildegard of Bingen, the original Nunzilla and a formidable creature. Do you know—have you ever seen the Nunzilla that you can get in the—do you know what Nunzilla is?

THOMAS CAHILL: No, but I thought you just made it up. I thought you were being very clever.

MARGARET ATWOOD: No, it’s a wind-up figure that’s about this big, and it’s a nun carrying a ruler, and you wind it up and it walks across the table and sparks come out of its mouth.

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: Does it hit you over the knuckles with the ruler?

MARGARET ATWOOD: Well, that’s what the ruler is for, yes. Well, anyway, she was the original Nunzilla and a formidable creature, but she is not alone. For instance, think of Saint Teresa and Saint Julian of Norwich. These formidable abbesses and Mothers Superior ran these institutions with wills of iron and got to see visions too, as well, and probably wouldn’t have run them—

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, Hildegard had a vision whenever she needed one.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Well, so did Julian of Norwich as far as I could tell. I mean, I think it was *necessary* to have this ability. But also you had to be very good with sums, you had to be very good with numbers, in order to run your institution. So you connected all of this with the rise of the cult of the Virgin Mary, who hadn't been a big deal earlier, and also with the courtly love convention, so let me start you off by asking a question I've always wanted answered: Where did nuns come from?

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: Um, I actually was trying very hard to answer that question all through that chapter myself. Where does the idea of celibacy come from? Or, "We will never have sex." I don't know whether that's what you're really talking about, but that's certainly part of it.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Where did the sort of, this very institutionalized thing, what was the background. Did it come from, for instance, the Vestal Virgins in Rome. Were there earlier sort of pre-Christian consecrated virginal people? There were certainly men who mutilated themselves in interesting ways for the benefit—

THOMAS CAHILL: Interesting to you.

MARGARET ATWOOD: —of pagan goddesses, but where did this nun thing come from?

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, I think you can push it back as far as Pythagoras, these communities in Ancient Greece were very much like monasteries and *I* think, though I can't prove it absolutely, that that all comes from the East, that it comes from, it comes from Hindu and Buddhist monasticism, and it comes over. Because there are so many things in Pythagoras that to me look like things that were going on in India and I think that we've just lost the connection. So I think if you really want to push it back, I think you end up with the Buddha, probably, but you had all through the Greek centuries, the later Greek centuries, not in Homer, but from, say, the time of Plato on, you have this rewarding of the bachelor, the man who doesn't procreate, and, of course, we know about the Vestal Virgins. They were not—I would hardly say they were rewarded, but they were a part of society, they were—they had a recognized role, and you have, running all through Greek philosophy this despising of the flesh. You know, you can't

miss it in Plato and then in someone like Plotinus, I mean, he just hits you over the head with it constantly, insofar as you could say that Plotinus hits anyone over the head with anything.

And so there's *that* on the one side and then you have the example of Jesus in the New Testament who seems to be celibate, of course he has a very short life, he's probably dead by the time he's thirty, so that example was combined with the Greco-Roman vocabulary. I mean, anything new is received into the old, and what the Greeks and Romans had was this vocabulary that enabled them to in some sense despise the flesh and that gave a vocabulary to intellectual Christianity, so that you have the fathers of the Church in the early centuries sounding very, very like Plato and worse.

And I think out of that comes this positioning of virginity and that all sounds pretty awful, but luckily the humanizing of it really takes place in the cult of the Virgin Mary. Yes, she's a virgin, but that's not how she appears in art. She appears as a mother. And in fact she's usually breast-feeding her child. In the early images, that's what she's doing. So you have this very big change. It's almost like a—you know, it goes into a different gear altogether because the chastity of people like Plato was in many ways sheer snobbery—"I'm better than you are. I don't need that." And the Greeks and the Romans were incredible snobs. There's no way around that. You have to notice that as you read this stuff. But there's nothing snobbish about a woman breastfeeding a child. It's the most ordinary work in ancient civilization or in modern civilization. What could be more ordinary, more daily, more quotidian, than a woman feeding a child? So it switches into something else and you get—though it remains that you have nuns, you begin to have nuns who are not just icons off by themselves. They start interacting with the populace.

They start doing things, like Hildegard of Bingen. Who supposedly, she was—this is a typical Medieval thing. She was a cloistered nun. That means she wasn't supposed to go anywhere or see anyone. She traveled everywhere. **(laughter)** She gave speeches to overflow audiences in one cathedral after another, up and down the Rhineland and over into France. She couldn't be stopped, you know, but she was a cloistered nun. She wrote one book after another. She has a treatise on the *fish* of the Rhineland. **(laughter)** You know, and you think—why did—what? And she has it all *right*, she has all the different kinds of fish and they're all, you know. And you say, well, how did—and either she went—she did an awful lot of fishing herself, or she talked to an awful lot of fishermen. You know, so she's *interacting*

with people all over the place, but she's a cloistered nun. So there's a real change going on. It doesn't completely explain virginity, because I'm not sure anything does (**laughter**), but it helps to give it some roundness, some perspective.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Do you think that the rise of powerful women figures, whether somebody like Hildegard or the Virgin Mary, etcetera, do you think this comes from the Celtic tradition rather than the Greeks and Romans and would you hold at all with Robert Graves and his writing about a pre-Classical Greek great mother figure, would you connect that, way back, to Isis and Osiris? How far laterally and how far back in time would you make those connections?

THOMAS CAHILL: I think Robert Graves is crazy but I think he's wonderfully crazy, I mean, I think everyone should—

MARGARET ATWOOD: Well, *crazy* people can be *right* about some things.

THOMAS CAHILL: Yeah, like Nietzsche. In some things. But I think everyone should read *The White Goddess*, but then you also have to put it in some kind of context. But I'm not sure that these female figures could have got off the ground if they had been confined to the Greco-Roman world. They don't get off the ground in the same way, for instance, in Greek Orthodoxy as they do in the Medieval Latin West and I think the reason for that has partly to do with Celtic *and* Germanic models. Women in Celtic and Germanic societies—pagan societies—had much—they were not equal to men, but, boy, they had a lot more clout than they ever did in the Greco-Roman world, so I do that think that that is part of the mix, because what you have is once Gregory the Great his fellow bishops admit the barbarians as they are, you know, they don't try to remake them from the ground up. They said, "No, no, no, you can keep your Christmas customs—your winter customs, whatever the hell you call them, and you can keep your—you know, you can have the same booze that you always—we don't mind. It's all right. You just have to—we're just going to Christianize this."

But they let all of that stuff in, and once you let that in, you get an enormous diversity. I mean, think of Europe. It is such a small place when you come right down to it, compared to other continents, but it's full of all these things that—you know, you go from one tiny French village to the next French village,

and they make a completely different cheese in the second village than they make in the first one, and they wouldn't think of eating the cheese from the first village, **(laughter)** and the people in the first village feel exactly the same way about the—I mean, that kind of stuff, where you get all of this amazing diversity really comes out of the admitting of the barbarians into Christianity.

MARGARET ATWOOD: So can you connect the rise of the Virgin Mary with the Easter Bunny—

THOMAS CAHILL: Yes!

MARGARET ATWOOD: —for ten points?

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, Easter is the name of the Saxon goddess of springtime. It has nothing to do with Christ, or the Resurrection, originally. And she came along about at the time when Jesus rose from the dead, you know, about that time of year. And she had—

MARGARET ATWOOD: Eggs.

THOMAS CAHILL: Rabbits and eggs. Yeah, you bet. Those were her—the things that came along with her. So that's why we have rabbits and eggs and that's why we call it Easter. A number of times in Italy, I've explained to friends of mine, they say, "What is this Easter?" **(laughter)** You know, because they call it The Day of the Resurrection, you know.

MARGARET ATWOOD: They don't call it the Day of the Eggs.

THOMAS CAHILL: No, and I say, "Well, Easter is the Saxon goddess of springtime." **(laughter)** They can't figure it out but there we are.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Well, the weirdest thing I heard from Italian rural superstitions and festivals is that apparently at Christmastime in some parts of Sicily, it's *not* Santa Claus who brings the presents—it's your dead grandparents. How much fun is that?

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: Ah, *la familia*. **(laughter)** You can never get away from it.

MARGARET ATWOOD: The person who told me this, I said, "Aren't the kids scared?" And they said, "No, they're not scared. It's the way of making the dead grandparents not scary."

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, in most of Italy, it's a witch who brings the presents. La Befana. And she's a very nice—I mean, she's ugly and old, and she's a very nice witch.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Well, basically your dead grandparents. Well, let's switch to non-nun types of women. And go to Eleanor of Aquitaine and the courtly love convention. So my question would be was courtly love a way of placing love above sex, thus complementing the sex *without* love that was the usual lot of medieval women, especially if aristocratic. In other words, they were put into arranged marriages in order to cement alliances. You weren't expected, particularly, to love your husband, but you could listen to the songs, courtships, flatteries, pleadings, whinings, and weepings of men in your court.

THOMAS CAHILL: Yes, and when no one was looking you could invite one of them into your bedroom, so it's not just about love. I mean, it's not love without sex.

MARGARET ATWOOD: But it was supposed to be love.

THOMAS CAHILL: Yeah.

MARGARET ATWOOD: You sound dubious.

THOMAS CAHILL: I am. Because I think that, well, this comes, I think the courtly love tradition basically comes out of two *completely* different things that somehow meld together. One is the image of the Virgin Mary, which suddenly we have a woman at the center of the civilization. Nothing like that had ever happened before. She's everywhere. And then you have all these castles in which you have the lord of the manor, the lady of the manor. And who were the women? Well, her maids in waiting and maybe a daughter or two, or something like that. Those are the women. How many men are there? Oh, fifty, a hundred.

MARGARET ATWOOD: And how old are they?

THOMAS CAHILL: They are the knights. And they're in their twenties. They're hanging around the castle. They're waiting for the next war, so that they can fight for the lord. Well, what do they do in the meanwhile? After they've played a thousand rounds of chess, after they've had these melees, and joustings and all that, what do they do? Well, what you end up—men, idle men, invent games always. And the game becomes—

MARGARET ATWOOD: Golf!

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: Only in a later and less vigorous civilization. **(laughter)** It becomes who is man enough to woo the lady of the manor?

MARGARET ATWOOD: Get the little white ball into the hole.

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, it's one way of looking at it.

(laughter)

MARGARET ATWOOD: He's never going to forgive me.

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: It's all right. So a lot of—I think a lot of what happens in the courtly love tradition starts with idleness. People, you know, guys, saying “Well, what do we do now?”

MARGARET ATWOOD: I'm very disappointed to hear that. I thought you were going to say because of the overweening beauty, grace—

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, that, too, of course.

MARGARET ATWOOD: —intelligence, charisma, and wardrobes of these women. They were irresistible. I thought you were going to say that.

THOMAS CAHILL: I wasn't. **(laughter)** But I do think that there—you have a rise at the same time. Again you have both men and women who have leisure for the first time. What are the women reading? They're reading Ovid, they're reading Catullus, they're thinking about how wonderful it would be to have an affair, instead of being stuck with this guy that their parents picked out for them, who's really a kind of a boor and you know, gets drunk every night and isn't interested in *them* and there's this guy that goes by on a horse every once in a while and . . . **(laughter)** you know. And that's what, this is—and so, by reading Ovid and Catullus they also learn that there are ways of doing this, there are ways of going about it, that there's a whole—and they begin to develop this whole *language* of courtly love.

So that at that time, for instance, you have things like napkins and a little bit later, forks coming into play. They had never done anything—there were no napkins, there were no forks, you know. Everybody had a knife and you sort of cut the thing open and then you ate it, you know, and you didn't need a napkin because you just sort of had it all over your face and there were dogs under the table. **(laughter)** So you start having this sense of refinement for the first time that had never existed before. You have,

for the very first time in human history, heterosexual dancing. Before that men had always danced with men and women with women. And this dancing mimics the whole *procedure* of courtly love—you know, “Madam, would you like to, may I,” you know, all of, you know, there’s a way of doing it, there’s a way of inviting her onto the floor, there’s a way of her first not being sure that she would like to, and that it all goes on like that, and it has one step after another after another after another. It all starts with things like *The Art of Loving* by—*The Art of Love* by Ovid, but then the medievals start writing their own little—you would have self-help books galore, all of a sudden, for the men and for the women, how to go about this, and so it becomes a whole new way.

MARGARET ATWOOD: How do they stand up today?

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, they’re extremely—

MARGARET ATWOOD: I mean, would they be of any *help*? (**laughter**) No.

THOMAS CAHILL: No, I don’t think so. I don’t think those ladies on *Sex and the City* would find them—

MARGARET ATWOOD: Well, but for other ladies?

THOMAS CAHILL: Even for other ladies, I think it’s kind of—for one thing, it’s extremely earnest. Whereas Ovid is funny, because Ovid is really making fun of all this stuff, these medieval how-to books are very earnest. They’re trying to tell you how to go about it. And there don’t seem to be any jokes in there—they really want you to—so it—you know what? The very tail-end of the tradition is Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes.” I mean, that’s when you get—you know, and that’s *completely* serious. There are no jokes in “The Eve of St. Agnes.”

MARGARET ATWOOD: No, not, no, voyeurism but no jokes.

THOMAS CAHILL: “Ah, bitter cold it was.”

MARGARET ATWOOD: No, stop right there. **(laughter)** Was Eleanor of Aquitaine, who's your central figure in this section, really as powerful, complex, and wonderful as Katharine Hepburn made her in *The Lion in Winter*?

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, Katharine Hepburn was the perfect person to play Eleanor of Aquitaine at that stage of her life, that's for sure. You know, and I think that's what Eleanor *was* like.

MARGARET ATWOOD: At the end.

THOMAS CAHILL: She had that hauteur. Knowing what she wanted, knowing what she thought, you know, she was not in the dark. She has a very long life. She only dies at the age of eighty-two, which is an incredible age for any medieval person, especially one who had given birth to ten children.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Yes.

THOMAS CAHILL: It's amazing what she saw. And she changes over the course of her life. I mean, she's a very interesting figure at the age of fifteen, I think. But, by the time she dies, she has learned so much about life and about what's possible and what's not possible. She becomes an extremely generous old woman, whereas as a young woman she was willful and wanted her own way—why not?

MARGARET ATWOOD: She was very tall.

THOMAS CAHILL: Yes. It's wonderful to see—I went to Fontevraud Abbey in the Loire Valley — she's there. There's a picture of her in here, but she's there, right next to Henry the Second, there, and at the feet of Henry the Second is Richard the Lion-Hearted, who wished to be buried at the feet of his father because he had betrayed him on an earlier occasion. So it's all laid out there. Well, you look at it and you say, it's obvious that these figures were made—Richard was made by somebody else, but that Eleanor and Henry were made by the same artist and Eleanor is taller than Henry, and Richard was six and a half feet tall, so *she* was the source of his great height. So she must have been *amazing* in her time, you know, to have stood up in a court, and she always got tremendous response from her own vassals. I mean, she was the Duchess of Aquitaine, Poitou, Gascony, and a bunch of other places. I mean, she

had—she ruled over more of France than the King of France did, over more of present-day France, and you can see how she got away with it, partly it was height.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Because she was tall, yeah, exactly. I think it would have been quite different if she'd been a little tiny person. We've just got room for *one* more question—I think so, wouldn't you say one? So I'll skip over the one where I say, "Was it too bad for American women that the Puritans kicked out the Virgin and the female saints and then founded America?"

THOMAS CAHILL: All right, we won't do that. **(laughter)**

MARGARET ATWOOD: So we won't do that. The answer is probably "yes."

THOMAS CAHILL: It's a complicated issue, to be dealt with in the next volume.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Yeah, well what happens to the Puritans is that everything becomes very *male*. Very male. Away go all of those female saints and the Virgin Mary, and no more girls. Away they go.

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, the more aggressive a society, the more bellicose, the more male it is almost certainly likely to be, I think.

MARGARET ATWOOD: And then they started off founding America. And it took people a long time after that to get to Smith College.

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: She's Canadian.

(laughter)

MARGARET ATWOOD: You think it didn't take—what do you mean by that?

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: They understood.

MARGARET ATWOOD: They understood. Okay. Yes, well, being Canadian, I came down to the States in the early Sixties and announced gleefully that I was going to be a writer and all my American women friends looked at me askance and they said, “Oh, how would you *dare* to do *that*?” And it really was like that. They were scared of doing anything so abrupt.

THOMAS CAHILL: Yeah, but you grew up in a *forest*, didn’t you?

MARGARET ATWOOD: Yeah, but. But so did a lot of Canadians.

THOMAS CAHILL: That explains it. **(laughter)**

MARGARET ATWOOD: So my last question is: You have some harsh, or else very frank, things to say about the United States Catholic Church and its cover-up of child abuse by priests and bishops. How has this cover-up damaged believing Catholics? How hurtful has it been to them?

THOMAS CAHILL: I think it has largely destroyed the Catholic Church in the United States. I mean, there may be people still attending churches, but if you go into most churches, it’s gray and bald heads.

MARGARET ATWOOD: Do you think it has destroyed *belief* or merely church attendance?

THOMAS CAHILL: Initially I don’t think it does destroy belief. But I think it does destroy the—

MARGARET ATWOOD: The fabric.

THOMAS CAHILL: The fabric of the society. What happens in the end? Where do those people *go* when they say, “I can’t do this anymore?” Well, some of them are going to go to other Christian

churches, some of them will stay home, some of them will—I mean, there are all sorts of reactions, but it is, nonetheless, a societal rending that the bishops are obviously incapable of addressing, I think. It is *they* that I blame, much more than I do the pedophiles. It is the cover-up that is worse than the pedophilia. The pedophilia is bad enough, but the cover-up is worse. And the bishops do not see what they have done. They are incapable of looking at themselves honestly, I'm afraid. I think they are a bad lot. They were appointed by John Paul the Second largely because they agreed with him on about ten or twelve issues that it's almost impossible for anyone to agree on—at least all of them, you know, birth control, it goes on and on and on.

MARGARET ATWOOD: So if you were Dante, you would put them in the Inferno.

THOMAS CAHILL: Yeah, I think that's where they're going. **(laughter)**

MARGARET ATWOOD: And with that we will now—

(applause)

THOMAS CAHILL: Before the first question, I wanted to read just a brief paragraph from Margaret Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, which is a wonderful collection of essays, and I think it's a good way of framing what's happened this evening. "There's an epigram tacked to my office bulletin board pinched from a magazine: 'Wanting to meet an author because you like his work is like wanting to meet a duck because you like pâté.' **(laughter)** That's a light enough comment upon the disappointment of encountering the famous or even the moderately well-known. They are always shorter and older and more ordinary than you expected, **(laughter)** but there's a more sinister way of looking at it as well. In order for the pâté to be made and then eaten, the duck must be first killed. And who is it that does the killing?"

(laughter/applause)

MARGARET ATWOOD: As your interviewer of the evening, I will now ask you to come forth with some questions that you would like to ask Thomas.

THOMAS CAHILL: There's a lady standing there who has a microphone, right? And there's somebody over—there's a guy over there. Okay.

MARGARET ATWOOD: And if—oh, there's one right there. Good.

Q: Perhaps this is a—I just want to say that nursing is not—it may be a *daily* experience, but it is quite out of the ordinary in every other way. It's a peak experience for most women who've tried it, and—

THOMAS CAHILL: Yeah, well, I didn't mean that it wasn't.

MARGARET ATWOOD: I think he meant by ordinary, he meant—

THOMAS CAHILL: Something you see everywhere.

Q: Common.

MARGARET ATWOOD: —an observable sight, not something up in the heavens.

Q: Yes. I think that the image of the mother nursing the child is an image of a peak experience, but anyway, I wanted to ask more about Eleanor of Aquitaine. How would you say that she exerted her authority other than through her height?

THOMAS CAHILL: Oh, well, I mean, she was duchess, she was queen of two different countries.

MARGARET ATWOOD: She was very smart.

THOMAS CAHILL: She exerted it by being *queen*. It's hard to ignore a queen.

MARGARET ATWOOD: But she was also very educated. Her funeral effigy has her holding a book. And at a time when almost nobody could read, and particularly almost no women, she was unusually well educated. So finish college, all you who haven't done so.

THOMAS CAHILL: There's a lady standing there.

Q: Thank you. First of all I must confess I haven't read your book, so if you've covered this in your book, I'll find it out. Humor is such a huge part of *our* culture. All of our television is humorous, our theaters are humorous. Unfortunately, that's not something that we read in the history books, though. So my question is twofold. What would a medieval person have found funny? What kind of humor did he have? And is our obsession with humor modern or do we somehow just—did it not survive in our history books from ancient civilizations?

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, there are very few things that age more quickly than jokes. And I think part of the problem is that—not that there weren't jokes, or there wasn't humor in earlier civilizations—there was. It's just that it's hard for *us* to find it funny. Even something as *relatively* recent as Shakespeare's comedies are hard to stage and have the rollicking effect that they once had. I mean, already that's, which is only what, five centuries ago, is already too old for us in many ways, unless you have a really brilliant director doing it. But, I find, you know, there's humor in the Book of Genesis. You know, when God and his two angels come and visit Abraham, and Sarah is listening at the door to the tent and God says, "I will come back in a year's time and you're going to have a child." They're both very old people. And, you know, Sarah, you know, standing there, she starts laughing. Basically, she says, "Yeah, sure." **(laughter)** It's right there. It's in the text of the Bible. Now, that's about, I don't know, about four millennia old, you know. It's *still* a good joke, actually, even though—

MARGARET ATWOOD: The joke's on her.

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: As it very often is for anybody. You know, you have a wonderful instance in, I don't know, sixth or seventh, about eighth century, I guess it would be, the John Scotus Eriugena sitting

with the Emperor, and they're drinking away, and the Emperor says, "Well, what's the difference between an Irishman"—John Scotus Eriugena was an Irishman—"What's the difference between an Irishman and an idiot?" And Scotus Eriugena says, "Just the table." (**laughter**) That's still funny!

MARGARET ATWOOD: I think it's impossible to find a culture devoid of jokes. You know, I think it's very built-in to human nature. Chimpanzees make jokes, believe it or not, and find things funny. So, I think a lot of it was the same kind of humor that you find all around you today, except the *wording* was different. So there would be a certain number of mother-in-law jokes, a certain number of toilet jokes, a certain—a lot of sex jokes, there are in every culture that we know anything about, and a lot of "slipping on a banana peel" jokes, you know, slapstick and silly things like that seem to be pretty universal.

THOMAS CAHILL: Yes, someone here in the front.

Q: I was just thinking in regard to humor—the buffoon and the clown were really recognized traditional figures that go all the way back to the Greeks and the Romans, you know. And there's certain kinds of—you know, certain days of the year when—the so-called Feast of Fools—where the upper class changed places with the lower class and had a lot of fun. Everything is turned upside-down so everybody can have a good time and let off steam. Very often—I shouldn't say *very* often—but certainly in Ireland there was a connection between the clown, the fool, and the poet, you know, so that was part of what was expected. In the twelfth century there were *marvelous* satires written wherein the poets took on the clergy, you know, and the clergy responded in kind. I mean, they were very clever and very funny and very extensive and certainly, I should also say, there was a—thinking of some of the differences, I mean the humor was probably crueler—it can be pretty cruel today—but the buffoon was a much more crude figure than you could get away with, you know, say, on Comedy Central.

THOMAS CAHILL: Except occasionally.

Q: Except occasionally. That's all I wanted to say.

THOMAS CAHILL: That was Dr. Maureen Waters, who's written a history of comedy, of humor.

Q: You mentioned how the Black Plague devastated Europe. Where do the Crusades fit into this picture, where if Europe is devastated, they're still trying to go into Asia and conquer Palestine, or did the Black Death end the Crusades?

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, there are five major Crusades. They all take place before the advent of the Black Death and there are—the word then, of course, enters the language—many languages—as it entered the language of our president a few years ago when he called what he was doing in Iraq a “crusade.” He didn’t do that again, but. Lots of things are called “crusades.” You know, there are lots of things later on that get to be called crusades. But the trying to win back the cities of the Holy Land from Islam took place over five Crusades, from the twelfth through the early thirteenth century, and then that’s basically the end of it. Only the first crusade was successful. The other four were all abysmal failures.

Somebody with the—where is the—how about—there are people here in the middle—and then I think we should get on our way because—

MARGARET ATWOOD: Because . . .

THOMAS CAHILL: Because we have a dinner waiting for us.

(laughter)

MARGARET ATWOOD: I was going to say because “art is long and life is short.”

THOMAS CAHILL: Yeah, well, that’s much better.

MARGARET ATWOOD: The same thing. **(laughter)**

Q: I was just curious how the last question about the Catholic Church related to the book, because I hadn’t read it—was there more context there, or—

THOMAS CAHILL: Well, if you—this is the sort of thing where I can't explain it unless you read the book. Because it's about the Catholic Middle Ages, so it ends with a critique of the *current* situation in Catholicism, which I think by that point is on the minds of every reader. And to *not* deal with it I think would be to *shirk* my responsibility but to actually go through it—*that's* a question that can only be answered by reading the book. How about one more?

MARGARET ATWOOD: Pages 314, 315, 316, and 317 will do it for you nicely.

(laughter)

Q: This question is off the subject and maybe you don't want to answer it. This has been such a *delightful* exchange between the two of you and I'm sitting here thinking, did you know each other before? And did you rehearse this? Or what is the status of your relationship **(laughter)** before you entered the door?

THOMAS CAHILL: That's my wife sitting over there.

(laughter)

MARGARET ATWOOD: We have inter-e-mailed before. We have inter-e-mailed and conversed upon the telephone, but we had never actually met before this evening. So that is the status of our relationship. I *am* shorter and older than he thought I was going to be.

(laughter)

THOMAS CAHILL: All right. Thank you very much!

(applause)