



# BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

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**Vartan Gregorian**

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## Vartan Gregorian

**BILL MOYERS:** *[on camera]* Good evening. I'm Bill Moyers. Five years ago, the world knew only half of what we know today. Lest you feel smug about living in such an informed age, just remember that five years from now, there will be twice as much to know as we do at this minute. Someone has calculated that the available knowledge in the world doubles — doubles — every five years. Impressive? Yes. But it's also intimidating. We're increasing our store of knowledge much, much faster than we're learning how to retrieve and use it. When I was in college there were eight to ten thousand new books published every year in the United States. Now there are something like 75,000. And in the world at large, 850,000. Who can even know any longer exactly what there is to know? What's the danger of intellectual gridlock when the mind is jammed with so much traffic? And what does this mean for education? My guest this evening has been thinking about such questions. He's had to. He sits atop 44 million books, periodicals and manuscripts. Join me for a conversation with Vartan Gregorian.

*[voice-over]* Vartan Gregorian has traveled a long way from his Armenian childhood in Tabriz, Iran. His journey took him first to Beirut, Lebanon, and then to Stanford University in California, where he received his Ph.D. in history. Although he would write a seminal book on the history of Afghanistan and contribute to Middle Eastern journals, it is as an educator, a teacher and administrator that Gregorian has gained recognition. First at the University of Texas, and then at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was provost.

But his talents as an evangelist for education attained mythic proportions when he took the helm of the ailing New York Public Library, one of the five largest libraries in the world, and one of the most accessible, with a million and a half visitors a year. In seven years, Gregorian has raised millions of dollars to restore the original architectural wonders of the main research branch, to computerize the catalogue room, and to accelerate the task of preserving this enormous reservoir of knowledge. Gregorian accomplished all this in part by bringing the city's cultural and political luminaries into the act. And most of all by creating an aura of excitement at the library itself, hosting celebrated events for its members, reminding adults and children alike of the resource in their midst. In the spring of 1989, Gregorian will once again return to academia, when he becomes president of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. We talked at the library he has revived.

*[interviewing]* When I walk in here, I am struck by how calm and serene the library is, compared to the gridlock, turmoil and conflict of the street outside. Does the world of the stacks have much in common with the world of the street out there?

**VARTAN GREGORIAN:** Absolutely. The contents of the books have everything to do with the street out there. People inside have everything to do with the street out there. But this institution, in a sense, transcends all, because it's an oasis in the middle of Manhattan, in the middle of New York City. And it gives you a sense of cosmic relation to the totality of humanity. But at the same time it gives a sense of isolation, a sense of both pride and a sense of insignificance, when you consider yourself as a fragment. Here it is, you're dealing with the totality of human endeavor, human aspiration, human agony, human ecstasy, human bravura, human failures, all before you.

**MOYERS:** In one sense, it is, as you said somewhere else, the most tolerant historical institution we have, because the good and the evil are here. The failures and the successes, God and the Devil are here. And it doesn't make any judgments. The library makes no value judgments in that.

**GREGORIAN:** We're the mirror of humanity, we're the mirror of our society. We're also the memory of society. And as a result, in many ways we're tolerant because memory includes both tragedy and happiness. So the library provides, as history does — and libraries are part and parcel of the embodiment of history — provides the kind of comparative methods, comparisons that makes one tolerant, by seeing so many examples. By comparing, and knowing about right and wrong, one does come to appreciate shades in history, nuances in history, possibilities, limitations. The library in history reminds us of our limitations. Knowledge, in abstraction, always propels us towards possibilities. There's a great tussle between the two.

**MOYERS:** Let me tell you something that is also intimidating. I read in the Bell Labs report recently that in one day's edition of the *New York Times*, there is now more information than a single man or woman had to process in the whole of his or her life in the 16th century. Now that's intimidating.

**GREGORIAN:** It's very intimidating, because one of the things you may know, or have read also, partly in those reports, all available information we are told doubles every five years.

**MOYERS:** Every five years?

**GREGORIAN:** Every five years. All available information.

**MOYERS:** What does that mean for education and retrieval?

**GREGORIAN:** It means that we're able to retrieve only five percent, less than five percent of the available supply of information. Unfortunately, the information explosion is not equivalent, or does not equal the explosion of knowledge. So we're facing a major problem: how to structure information into knowledge. Because otherwise what is going to happen—there are great possibilities of manipulating our society by inundating us with undigested information. So instead of 1984, Orwell saying deny information, now one other way of paralyzing people is by inundating with trivia, as well as a major way of paralyzing our choices, by giving so much that we cannot possibly digest it.

**MOYERS:** There's another possibility, is there not, and that is that each of us is forced further and further into a fragment of this whole, so that we begin to feel utterly isolated from the unity, from the whole of it?

**GREGORIAN:** Absolutely. That's one of the reasons why early in the 1930s, Ortega y Gasset already warned by describing the phenomenon as the barbarism of specialism. Because he was worried that we may be providing one dimensional people, who will be insensitive to the totality of human experience and totality of human endeavor and human predicament.

**MOYERS:** And the danger seems to me — and I think you may have suggested this on another occasion — is that the undigested, this volume of undigested facts leads to mental gridlock.

**GREGORIAN:** Yes. That's what I referred to in the past, because if it is mental gridlock, if you don't have any traffic policeman—I think, an education should not allow our mind to have that gridlock. Because it's not only gridlock which is dangerous, but also partial information that creates the fiction that you have a free choice. Of course, it's a free country. If you want to read about Chemistry, there are 800,000 articles. Come in and read them. But if you don't know where to start, you don't know what the base is, you will not only bring gridlock into your mind, but also you may bring the permanent delusion that you have free choice. And that's another danger.

**MOYERS:** Explain that.

**GREGORIAN:** Well, you know what is truly free, because you know about options. I always tell my students, when they say, "List multiple choice, A, B, C, D, E." And they put "Other." I think civilization consists, among other things, by being able to respond to "other," to feel other choices, so you have to know about the range of choices available to you. Limitations of those choices. And the ability to reject all and seek a new solution. And unfortunately, what I'm saying is sometimes this ready-made information supply may suggest that whatever is not in the computer, in the data base, does not exist. For example, in this—

**MOYERS:** You have no choice then?

**GREGORIAN:** You have no choice.

**MOYERS:** You have no choice of what has not been programmed into what is now the chief supply of your knowledge?

**GREGORIAN:** Unless in school you've been told that there is archival material, there are manuscript materials. That life did not begin with the computer alone. There are two or three thousand years of manuscript literature and others that may add another insight to knowledge. So therefore education has to teach us not only what we can know, but what are the limitations of our knowledge, what we don't know. This goes way back to the Socratic notion: true knowledge is to know what you know, but also to know what you don't know.

**MOYERS:** Well, you've been a teacher, Socrates was a teacher. What does all of this mean for the role of teaching today?

**GREGORIAN:** I think teaching has two fundamental challenges now. It has to show connections. It has to show a base about the knowledge, the base of knowledge, but it also has to show

connections. I read several months ago T.S. Eliot's, 1920 commentary on the *Inferno*, Dante's *Inferno*. And there he describes hell as being some place where nothing connects with nothing.

The teaching profession, the universities, have to provide connections also, connections between subjects, connections between disciplines. In order to recreate that totality, knowledge. Because what is happening to us now as a nation, and throughout the world maybe, ideology used to provide that coherence, whatever ideology you adhere to. Conservatism, if there was such a body, to be called total conservatism. Liberalism, even though there are nine different categories of liberals and others. Socialists, even though there are many. Marxists, there are many variations of it. Anarchism, and so forth. Ideology provided a coherent world view. Nationalism used to provide that; tribalism did; philosophical views did; religion did.

But what is happening, as most of these things collapse around us, there's a great burden on the educational establishment, to provide some kind of intellectual coherence, some kind of connection with our past, with our current present, with the future. And that's why it's tougher now, not only for the student, but also for the teacher. Especially when all of us have become specialists. That's why I'm going to shock you by telling you, education's sole function is now, possibly— what we're doing is providing an introduction to learning.

We can no longer claim — in my opinion, at least; I may be a minority of one — we can no longer claim that in four years, as we did in the 17th century, 16th century, in four years we can produce an educated, cultured person. Plus give this individual all the possible elements of professionalism, and know-how, and a career, and also a vocation; all of this in four years, when we know so much more has come out since the Renaissance on, 17th century on. That life has become more complex. There were no major environmental problems. There were no mass destructive possibilities in the past. There was not this complete alienation and fragmentation of individuals. There was not this historical stress. There was not the holocaust as an example of the inhumanity of man to man.

So, therefore, we're kidding ourselves, in my opinion, if we think that providing 50 great moments in music by Milton Cross, or Hirsch's Literacy— if you know Cervantes, who he was, but you don't know when he lived, and so forth— that we're producing cultured people. We have to tell our students life is complex. It's awesome times we live in, exciting times at the same time. We are going to provide you with a compass, with a rule, with geiger detectors, with everything, and we're going to give you a critical mind to be able to search throughout your entire life, in order to be an educated and cultured person.

**MOYERS:** Learning to think critically.

**GREGORIAN:** Think critically, come up with digested results. Everybody wants ready-made answers, made by others, so one can follow without undergoing, as the 1799 critic Sheridan in his play, *The Critic* said, "to undergo the fatigue of judging for themselves." We're abdicating our right to think, our right to explore, and we cannot rely on credentialing alone. The school, the university, are only means to allow us to rediscover our possibilities, and our potentials.

**MOYERS:** So what does it mean to you to be intellectually adventuresome today?

**GREGORIAN:** Oh, God! It's the most awesome thing today, because we have no excuse — for the first time in history — we have no excuse as a human being to use lack of resources as an excuse.

**MOYERS:** They're all here? You can plug it in?

**GREGORIAN:** If we don't have it here, I can get it from the British library, I can get it from the Moscow library. I can get it from everywhere.

**MOYERS:** And I can sit in my apartment and plug in — if I could learn to use the word processor, the computer— and retrieve it from you right here?

**GREGORIAN:** Yes. So it's not the availability of resources any more. It's what kind of role models we have now, and what kind of teachers we have, what kind of institutions we have.

**MOYERS:** What do you mean, what kind of teachers?

**GREGORIAN:** The teacher, high school teacher, used to be the most exalted profession in the 19th century. Now, unfortunately, we have entered a phase in our society, where you're valued, education is valued, by what it will give you, rather than what it will make out of you. The result is, therefore, we have a debate between means and ends. And teachers, therefore— because they don't have that which society considers important in terms of valuing someone, in terms of one's wealth, one's status— the teaching profession is looked down upon in this country. High school

and other professions. As a matter of fact, the entire public sector is looked down upon. That you must be — and I'm exaggerating maybe now, but I know about this city — that you must be either an idealist to go into the public sector, or incompetent, or else you did not have the stomach to fight in the free enterprise, entrepreneurial region. Well, you know this from the television world—

**MOYERS:** What's the old saw? "Those that can, do; those that can't, teach." And I've always considered that such an insulting—

**GREGORIAN:** It is insulting. But teaching, the teaching profession— you were asking about what does the teacher have to do— on the university level, the prestige is still there. But one of the things that we have to do as teachers is, we have to bring some kind of coherence through interdisciplinary themes. One of the things I want to do, for example, is to have five professors teach one single course.

**MOYERS:** One course?

**GREGORIAN:** One course.

**MOYERS:** All semester, or just visiting—

**GREGORIAN:** One year.

**MOYERS:** For the whole year?

**GREGORIAN:** The whole year.

**MOYERS:** Well, give me an example.

**GREGORIAN:** Introduction to the cosmos.

**MOYERS:** Carl Sagan did that.

**GREGORIAN:** Carl Sagan did it as one man, his own. But I want a mathematician, an astrophysicist, a biologist, a geologist, a historian, a philosopher — or theologian or anthropologist, you can pick your choice — to teach what are the theories about the universe. Are we alone in the universe? What happens if they discover human beings on Mars? Are they after the image of God, or are we after the image of God? Has Christ risen for them, or for us only? What are the theological ramifications of not being unique in the universe? These are awesome questions.

**MOYERS:** And so these five professors would sit in this same class every week, together?

**GREGORIAN:** Together.

**MOYERS:** And converse with these students about the cosmos.

**GREGORIAN:** First teach, converse, but also spend three months in the summer — see how idealistic I am — to prepare the course. Because that way, it will be a true introduction to learning. Another one I thought will be, for example— we always say passion, agape, eros, but why not pick major texts from Africa, from Asia, from Europe, Americas, and study the concept of eros, agape.

**MOYERS:** Sexual love and filial love.

**GREGORIAN:** Yes. Filial love. Study how people have dealt with it. Or five world religions. We always say comparative religion. That's not enough. Why not say we are going to deal with the issue of mortality/immortality. The issue of free will. The issue of obedience to God and disobedience to God. The issue of our possibilities of sinning and our possibilities of redemption. In five different world religions. So that that way, one provides a nonparochial view of the human predicament in the universe. But imagine if a student— if I had five courses, or four courses, during the first year a student will know 20 professors intimately, intellectually.

Suppose we taught the history of World War II. Not how American diplomatic historians see it, but European diplomatic, Soviet diplomatic and Asian diplomatic. Suppose they argue about their methodology, archival sources, and this and so forth. Students will not be brainwashed or influenced. Students have to be exposed to varieties, possibilities, but also not to say everything is relativistic, but rather there is common endeavor to honestly seek the truth in order to learn from history. So I believe I can convince them, because we need to bring coherence, integration of knowledge. What is missing in our education is the integration of knowledge. And somewhere, somehow, we have to provide that.

**MOYERS:** Aristotle thought that citizens should be taught, be educated, to suit their constitution. And by that, he meant the shared moral commitments of a society. The question that's been haunting me of late is do we any longer in America have shared moral commitment?

**GREGORIAN:** I think there is a yearning to have a world view. There is a yearning to know about the length of one's commitments. But we are put in a position that you have to love every

good cause. Recently at one or two commencements, I stressed the fact that total commitment to every good cause is equal to total apathy. Because you cannot act upon all of that. So you have to structure your commitments. First commitment, second commitment, third commitment, fourth commitment, and so forth, to give hierarchical commitments. And that's very hard. Because it makes you think — again back to the self — to think: what are your value systems, what are your obligations as a human being, what are your obligations as an American? I'm not for loophole opportunists who think if there's a loophole, therefore it's legal. But somebody has to think, citizens have to think what is important for this country's future, for our people's future.

We've said, "Take care of yourself, because the universe is too complex, life is too complex to be taken care of. So why don't you retreat in yourself, take care of only yourself." That's a kind of moral isolationism that we cannot afford as a nation. So therefore I am for teaching, and— I have no other tools.

**MOYERS:** As a teacher, what did you think of our recent election, insofar as it was an instrument of public education?

**GREGORIAN:** I think it was a complete failure, because I thought more than ever this campaign should have dealt with future America. By future America, I'm not dealing with generalities. Having just come from Spain and Paris, having read their papers, seeing the whole Europe is discussing their future in the 21st century—

**MOYERS:** In 1992, Europe becomes a single economic—

**GREGORIAN:** Economic and political unit. And they're talking about how to reconcile nationalism and European integrity. They're debating how to cope with American technological supremacy by bypassing America.

**MOYERS:** Bypassing?

**GREGORIAN:** Bypassing in a sense. Becoming a rival; a major economic, political rival. Bring the First World — to be the intellectual leader of the Western civilization again — bring home the trophy back to Europe. They're talking about how to go from the Atlantic to the Urals by incorporating European Russia, eventually, in their orbit; economic orbit and so forth. Especially since the Soviet economy is such a disaster. They're talking about how to cope with Japan and the awakening of an entire Asian manpower now coupled with technological opportunities.

I did not hear a single American presidential candidate discuss the future of America in terms of its economic future, geopolitical position, in terms of what will happen in 1992. What kind of dealings we'll have with Europe. How is America going to be competitive? Technologically, scientifically. I would like our elected officials not to apologize for being intelligent, not to appeal to the lowest common denominator of people, to say, "You are Americans. This country has two centuries of greatness. And that in each one of you— we're appealing to your sense of idealism, your sense of devotion to this country, your sense of patriotism, your sense of not equating that what is legal must be absolutely moral as well, it's not necessarily. That if all of us take as much as possible and give as little as possible to this country, to its people, to its institutions, somebody's going to pay historically in the long run."

We cannot consider America's collection of individuals pursuing their narrow self-interests — and I hate to paraphrase Kennedy — we have also to ask what we can do for our country in terms of each of us to contribute to its greatness. Because after all, this country has allowed people like me, millions of people like me, to become what we are. And I have a moral obligation, historical obligation, social obligation, to do my share to allow other generations to benefit from what I have received. So I became a teacher because I benefited from my teachers.

**MOYERS:** You became a teacher because you had good teachers?

**GREGORIAN:** Yes. And everyone who has gone to college — and I'm sure in your case also

**MOYERS:** Oh, absolutely.

**GREGORIAN:** We all have been affected by one teacher. Nobody knows what core curriculum this is, what course, what major — they may have remembered the major — but you always remember the teacher who said, "Bill, you're a unique moment in history. You're a unique being. The universe is grateful to see somebody like you. And what are you going to do to deserve that uniqueness?"

**MOYERS:** Yes.

**GREGORIAN:** That's an awesome thing when a teacher tells you. And here you're in Tabriz,

Iran, you're nobody practically, and somebody says not only "You're somebody," but you can be what you want to be. But even if you fail, it's all right, because the process of becoming is testing the mantle of our humanity, our worth and so forth.

It's not merely acquiring, but the joy of fighting for. And teachers like that have been able to influence all of our lives. As a matter of fact, education — in one of your programs you mentioned— in the platonic sense means you already have something in you. Education means drawing out of you what is already in there. Not merely instilling something, but drawing out of there. And teachers who have done that have affected all our lives.

**MOYERS:** From the New York Public Library, this has been a conversation with Vartan Gregorian. I'm Bill Moyers.

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