

#LSEreligionLecture: "The West has two approaches available: 'religious rights' or 'religious toleration' " – John Milbank

In February, John Milbank gave a lecture at LSE entitled *The End of Religious Freedom and the Return of Religious Influence* as part of LSE's Religion and the Public sphere lecture series. Here, **Jacob Phillips** reviews the event.



After the General Election, spare a thought for those theologians who learned their craft in the shadow of **John Milbank**. Milbank's name is inseparable from a set of ideas loosely termed 'post-liberal' and/or 'post-secular'. Postliberal thinking is originally a reaction against liberal theology; the attempt to approach Scripture, doctrines, and so on, as flexible and malleable realities; holding them to account with the norms of liberal, post-Enlightenment society. By such reckoning, difficult teachings – like things irremediably patriarchal – are side-lined on the basis that society knows better now.

However such attempts, however natural they appear today, presuppose that the dominant norms to which religion is being held account are essentially right; offering a neutral quasi-scientific truth. But for the postliberal project this neutral sphere is simply not what it purports to be, despite the protestations of those subscribed to 'pure (secular) reason'. Many factors have led thinkers in this direction: Thomas Kuhn showing that even scientific truth is in itself reliant on all manner of circumstantial particularities, linguistic anthropology revealing that no language is neutrally referential, and multiculturalism serving as a constant reminder of the depth of difference involved in cultural particularity.

The postliberal becomes postsecular when joined to the return of religion to the public sphere. Milbank cites the 1979 Iranian Revolution as the turning point from whence religion morphed from a benign, private matter into an unpredictable actor in international geo-politics and domestic affairs. He charts 'multiple lines of public contestation' surrounding religion, including new protections putting anti-religious sentiment on a par with racism and sexism, or the privilege accorded to ruling religious groups in certain countries, and – in Western Europe particularly – the increasingly vociferous secular backlash against both of these realities.

Milbank diagnoses all this by asking why there is a return of religious influence ('or at least religious controversy') going hand-in-hand, paradoxically, with a decline in religious freedom. He highlights, firstly, the decline in great political projects like republicanism and socialism. He says this 'emptying of politics' leaves us with the vacuum of a brute neo-liberalism with no *telos* of a better world, so religion provides the narrative for which we yearn. Secondly, he mentions globalisation, with its anonymity and alienation making the deep sense of community provided by religion all-the-more seductive. As regards the decline in religious liberty, Milbank highlights the 'ethical de-Christianisation' of society after the 1960s, with teachings on birth, sexuality, and life, seemingly at variance with individual freedom.

For Milbank, all the factors just listed are 'vastly exacerbated' by the large-scale expansion 'into the West of largely sunni Islam'. On the one hand, Islam is, he claims, 'nomadic and imperial', and so has a natural affinity with the open-borders of a globalised world. Moreover, it is 'imperious to the discourse about rights', whilst being intrinsically unable to remain 'publicly invisible' unlike the forms of Protestantism which dominated the politics of Northern Europe and the USA until relatively recently.

Islam pours fuel on the flames of religion in the public arena, but things get even more troubling when the liberal hegemony responds to it. On the one hand, Milbank sees liberalism contradicting itself spectacularly, making 'one giant exception' for Muslims to have their own 'sub-polity under Sharia law in European society', on the basis of rights discourse. Milbank's polemics reached a high point here, claiming liberalism is indifferent to Islam's 'eventual European triumph, even though that would obliterate liberalism also – finally to consume the most dangerously exotic and so most enticing, most forbidden (because non-liberal) commodity'. On the other hand, he highlights the bizarre spectacle of liberalism schizophrenically disavowing public religiosity in the name of protecting individual rights, perhaps most obscenely with policeman enforcing the semi-nude bathing of North African women on French beaches.

The question is now, of course: what is to be done? Milbank argues that the West has two approaches available: an assertion of 'religious rights' on the one hand, or a commitment to 'religious toleration' on the other. The problem with the former, he tells us, is that we end up in exactly the sort of neutral 'view from nowhere' discourse which postliberal/postsecular thinking seeks to disavow. Indeed, the deeply confused responses to Islam by the West are the fault of precisely this: an attempt to found society on a 'vacuum', a negative space filled only with individual rights and lacking in any sense of positive vision.

So Milbank advocates an approach of 'religious toleration': 'putting up with other' as unavoidable sufferance and in forbearance, exactly as (he claims) the Christian tradition insists its followers should behave. In short, the answer to religion's multiple contestations in the public sphere is not de-religionisation, but a deeper and more honest acceptance of our own historically Christian identity, along with a fostering of the resources within that tradition for constructively living together with genuine limits.

Milbank has achieved a level of notoriety and influence with which very few theologians can compete, not least with the 'Red Tory' and 'Blue Labour' movements. When you take the postliberal line and question the solidity of the neutral sphere, the centre ground goes with it, the very nodal point of mediocrity which has long-since dominated British party politics. Against this background, the old 'left and 'right' divides seemed no longer to hold sway, and Milbank's happy borrowing of *both* Coleridgean high-toryism and late 19th Century socialism struck a chord with those who felt the old red and blue loyalties could no longer command the same single-minded devotion in a postliberal age.

But spare a thought for us theologians, who have on the one hand witnessed in 2017 a return of two-party politics along capitalist/socialist lines long after Milbank heralded the dawn of something new. Things are of course more complex, with the spectre of populism and the angst over British membership of the EU which cannot be limited to either left or right. Here, us theologians deserve yet more consideration, for the very person who told us the centre ground is dead not only ended

up a **vociferous opponent** of Brexit on the side of the establishment, but seems continually perplexed himself about populism, which is surely related to the very death of liberalism he always predicted. Bearing this in mind, then, the promising vision that his mandate of religious 'toleration' over 'rights' offers is something we'd be wise to take heed of, even if when push comes to shove it seems Milbank is actually more liberal than he'd like us to believe.

Listen/watch the lecture [here](#)

About the author



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Note: This piece gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Religion and the Public Sphere blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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