

## *Three Questions on Modern Atheism: An Interview with John Milbank*

by  
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**The Other Journal** (TOJ): With our current issue addressing modern atheism it might seem appropriate to begin by addressing the growing voice of a supposedly ‘new atheism’ as represented by Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, Dennett, Onfray, etc... Yet I am hesitant to do so only because there seems to be nothing ‘new’ taking place here except for a greater display of amnesia concerning, among other things, their intellectual history, which includes also so many of their religious interlocutors. Moreover, what often passes for the religion/atheist discussion seems now to be little more than a sensationalized intramural duel amongst versions of Nietzsche’s Last Man, as both sides desperately try to assert their similarly moribund bourgeois ideals over against one another.

However, this particular cast of contemporary atheist and religious interlocutors has benefited, despite the poverty and pettiness of its discourse, from a massive popularization afforded by the media machine and its penchant for spectacles. Indeed there is a larger and more pervasive late-capitalist culture industry at work here that effectively raises this spectacle to a ‘reality,’ dominating the collective imagination of what it means to be ‘religious’ or ‘scientific’ or ‘atheist,’ and this apparatus may be more precisely the ‘new’ element involved here. Could you begin, then, by discussing the underlying logic of the culture industry, to which both sides of the popular debate seem fundamentally tied, that finds it necessary to produce, stage, and amplify this discussion/spectacle in certain terms?

**John Milbank** (JM): I think that you’ve put this question really well and at a level of sophistication that is usually lacking. Definitely, it’s as if the crude media dualistic presentation of issues has now further penetrated the book market and captured a part of supposedly ‘serious’ discourse. For a long time now, the media has presented religion in terms of ‘traditionalists’—superstitious lunatic fundamentalists—versus ‘liberal modernisers’. The new shift is the implication that religion is fundamentally lunacy and that its natural enemy is science. Liberal religious people are a bit confused and/or the only way to be validly a religious liberal is to be vaguely ‘spiritual’. I find it really hard to know what is going on here and can only offer extremely tentative reflections.

It’s important to note that the new atheism began in the 1990’s, well before 9/11. Dawkins and Dennett and Churchland had already got going. Is this a purely Anglo-Saxon phenomenon? Not entirely—also in French thought one sees a gradual drift from poststructuralism (which retrospectively seems but a negative humanism after all) to new modes of ‘speculative materialism’. However, it’s mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries that one gets the crude anti-religion polemic. One might suggest that that’s because the entire modernity-science-capitalism thing is at its most virulent here. Perhaps the French just give a softer though far more sophisticated version of this.

What needs to be focused on is the double impression given by the media: 1. Religion is reviving and 2. Clever people know that religion is over. In Britain—which is of course far more modern

than the USA—it's fascinating that left versus right is increasingly seen as secular versus religious (though there are elements of this in the States). This is despite having had conspicuously religious 'left' political leaders in recent times. One sees this over the current embryology bill debate in Parliament. The press present this as left versus right, science versus religion, etc... They speak as if 'science' answered moral questions. It's quite extraordinary. But in reality while more left Members of Parliament support experimentation on embryos, the fact that by no means all of them do is so to speak hushed up. Increasingly the media do not want complex stories and increasingly they make us live by this dualistic approach.

Yes, the spectacle now shows the spectacle of 'science' as an absolute destiny. It is the human glory to undo itself through science. British police shows like *Waking the Dead* now screen very long takes of the dissection of human bodies by glamorous women. The message is that science is beautiful and glossy; that finding scientific truth is the one moral impulse and otherwise human life is a tragic mess.

What's this about? Well I suppose fundamentally the collapse of all secular ideologies in the late 20th Century. One is left just with the truth of science as the reality of the modern. Science is the freedom to know and is Faustian. Beyond this is the right to choose one's lifestyle. But of course one can't interfere with the freedom or happiness of others nor the power of the State. The really crucial thing here which the left has missed is that sexual freedoms have increased exponentially while all other freedoms have declined.

Today in Great Britain you scarcely have the right to demonstrate and a higher proportion of the population is in prison than are in China. The boy at the shop counter with no customers is not allowed to read a book to improve himself all day, but who cares what he gets up to with sex and drink after the shop closes? Of course there's also a double think about sex—its all OK, male sexuality is nearly always exploitative, etc... But in general it would seem that, as Adorno and Horkheimer predicted, sexualization is intended to keep us all quiet: neurotic, hysterical, frustrated and unhappy but still 'looking'. With sex divided from procreation, science and sexual freedom come together.

So by supporting the total disjuncture of sex and procreation, the left is really supporting a new mode of fascism. 'Women' are lined up with science and choice in order to produce a new kind of ideal human subjectivity—male and autonomous and yet pliant in 'female' manner. The newly envisaged female body is the final site of the coming together of scientific objectivity and absolute freedom of choice. Perhaps one could even speak here of a new racism of the human race as such—it's to be made the object of an endless 'objective' improvement and expression of a will to freedom/will to power. Of course this also means that the specific phenomenology of the female body is destroyed. It's denied that this body is inherently linked both to the male body (as also vice-versa) and to another body that is itself and yet becomes not itself—the baby. Having denied the link of babies to men and also to women save as objects of their ('male') choice, babies thereby become pure consumer objects and all human personhood is abandoned.

After the collapse of secular ideologies then, one is left with 'just science'. But also, of course, 'the return of religion', since these now represent the only alternative ideologies—virulent in the case of Islam where religion is still overwhelmingly practiced.

Post 9/11 has allowed the media to present the religion versus science story in ever cruder terms. Of course it's highly significant that Christopher Hitchens also supported the Bush foreign policy. This is because, at bottom, neo-liberalism and scientism line up with each other. But Hitchens never really explains how his imperialism of reason relates to the messianic aspect of American imperialism. He and others don't explore the point at which fundamentalism and scientism can be in a hidden alliance because the very emptiness of a formalist approach to economics and politics can allow an extreme religiosity to supply the concrete content. Racist and nationalist fascism can no longer so easily do this because races have got mixed up and national identities are also confused—so one is getting regionalism as much as nationalism. Religions supply diffused globalized identities so that religious extremism fits well with an era of globalization. Yet so also does 'naturalism'—the idea that all we have in common is one material planet and our physical nature.

Hence the age of religious and philosophical 'agnosticism' is over—as Quentin Meillassoux says. Now we have rival dogmatisms about the infinite—materialist and fundamentalist.

We need instead more apophatic (though not agnostic) approaches to the infinite; more recognition that many embrace a complex mix of belief and unbelief (as Charles Taylor says) and more subtle mixes of faith and reason as Ratzinger advocates.

But we could only have a media recognizing this complexity if we were not dominated by capitalism in the mode of the spectacle.

**TOJ:** In considering modern atheism on a broader scale, in terms of the historical development of its cultural logic, what would you consider as its defining cultural form, if there is such a thing that has remained continuously present throughout its modern history? Moreover, what key modern shifts in the way power was constructed, distributed and organized, especially through changing socio-economic formations, might have provided the material conditions for its emergence and particular shape?

**JM:** I think that we've scarcely begun to pose this all-important question. How is it that atheism arose so recently (end of 18th Century) and yet so quickly established itself? Clearly it was to begin with an elite phenomenon, so it is from the start and up to now socially connected to the idea of a new, rival elite. This means that it has to be considered a bourgeois phenomenon or else one of decadent aristocracy—which is another modern socialising mode.

I think that Charles Taylor provides important clues by saying that the atheist self is the 'buffered self'—no external spiritual forces can get to it—and also that it is a self entirely in charge of its own morality and self-disciplining. Thus, as he argues, if Latin Christianity, because of its over-disciplinary mode and its 'festive' deficit ushered in this sort of self, finally it dispenses with the religious bit altogether. This self is definitely the self that is totally autonomous and so likes to reduce all to predictable calculation. Spiritual security and worldly freedom and comfort are preferred over the aristocratic heroism of a quest for meaning. In Great Britain, even up to say Thatcher or even up to Blair, the establishment was finally religious. But Blair (ironically) ushered in a new political class that saw politics like a business to be exploited and this is

essentially an atheist class. Maybe the explicit personal religiosity of New Labour in some way worked ideologically to mask this.

To my mind then, modernity is liberalism, liberalism is capitalism ('political economy') and capitalism is atheism and nihilism. Not to see this (or rather not to fully see this) is the critical deficit of Marxism. Again, Taylor is right: all critical resistance to modernity is 'romantic' in character: it 1. allows that more freedom and material happiness is a partial good; 2. yearns also for elements of lost organic values and 3. realises that the anti-body, anti-festivity, anti-sex and doctrine of hell-linked disciplinary and over-organised character of Latin Christendom is ironically responsible for the Enlightenment mentality.

I'm starting to think that this triple romanticism is more fundamental than left/right characterization, which after all is a kind of accidental result of the French Revolution. Both left and right, as André de Muralt argues are nominalist: either one favours a strong single centre of money or power or both (right) or the rights of the many singly or when totted up (left). Both positions are also in the end atheist.

We need instead a new kind of 'romantic' politics that is specifically religious, and often Christian, in thinking that one can only get distributive equality on the basis of agreed values and an elite transmission and guarding of those values. A more Carlylean and Ruskinian politics then—basically left yet with elements that are not really right so much as pre-modern and traditionalist. Strictly speaking the pre-modern predates right versus left. In Great Britain Phillip Blond is developing a crucially important new mode of 'Red Toryism'—which might in my view equally be seen as a kind of 'traditionalist socialism'. This is starting to be noticed in very significant public places and in effect marks the political translation of the paradox of 'Radical Orthodoxy' and the beginning of its entry upon the political stage.

The hard thing now for critical thinkers to do is to think outside 'leftism'. They have to see that if neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism have totally triumphed this is because the left in traditional mode is incapable of carrying out an adequate critique. In the end this is because it's atheistic – one needs to be religious to recognize objective values and meanings as not just epiphenomenal. Today in Great Britain the left is more or less now defining itself as scientistic which actually permits an underwriting of a new mode of fascism and 'racism' as said above.

'Left Christians' now have much more to stress the Christian bit if they are truly going to be able to make a critical intervention.

Atheism is bourgeois oppression. Atheism is the opium of the people—it claims to discover an ontology which precludes all hope. This is what someone like Žižek now openly says. We need now to celebrate instead the faithful legacy of peasants, learned, honourable and paternalist aristocrats, Christian warrior kings like Alfred the Great, yeomen farmers and scholars. Péguy is the man for the hour. William Cobbett also. Chesterton and Belloc likewise.

**TOJ:** How might we understand the key intellectual shifts that both made possible and legitimated such changes in the organization of power that contributed to the rise of modern atheism? Moreover, in light of the common readings of atheism as essentially negative—as a

sober desacralizing, disenchanting, and demythologizing movement—how should we understand the intellectual shifts of modern atheism in relation to Christian theology? Did atheism's intellectual development come by way of a thorough rejection of theology, as common readings claim, or more primarily as the construction of an alternative theology?

**JM:** Again, this is to ask absolutely the right question. Many authors like Michael Buckley have now shown that atheism was not 'subtractive'. In the face of a decadent late-Baroque theology it had positively to invent a self-sufficient naturalism. Or else new modes of theism were invented. Often indeed atheism has operated as a religion – of nature, of man, of race, of class destiny. Now it's becoming the religion of science as such—democracy is supposed to produce an obedient seconding of the verdicts of science which are seen as answering all problems, even ethical ones.

Charles Taylor has now extended 'anti-subtraction' theory into the social realm. The very idea of social and political order without religion is bizarre by all traditional lights. The invention of secular order is an extraordinary achievement, if highly questionable – because instead of faith it requires rational foundations which one can't really have. So practical atheism is more dogmatic than religion.

I'd add to Taylor a bigger stress on the dubiousness of liberalism which is mainly political economy. As Pierre Manent argues, it 'empties the soul' – delivers negative freedom at the price of a loss of character.

We're now at a crossroads. Politics is shadow play. In reality economic and cultural liberalism go together and increase together. The left has won the cultural war and the right the economic one. But of course they are really both on the same side.

The point is to resist this. And that means of course, re-think Christendom. But now in more festive, pro-body, yet more interpersonal, less fearing terms and ones celebrating much more excellence and virtue in every realm including those of craft, farming and trade. And having a greater will to the democratization of excellence.

(The 'other religions' thing doesn't matter. The world as a whole is rapidly Christianizing and even in Islamic countries Muslims are finding their own intriguing Islamic way to Christ in ever increasing numbers; this is readily verifiable).