



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

The Gifford Lectures

Religion unbound: Ideals and powers from Cicero to King

A series of six lectures by

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Business School Auditorium
29 Buccleuch Place
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Ben Shahn

Religion unbound: Ideals and powers from Cicero to King

“Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?”

Martin Luther King Jr

The religious defenders of tyranny and oppression bind religion to injustice. The remedy, Adam Lord Gifford thought, is not to secularize politics but to emancipate religion from arbitrary power. Religion is not going away. It will always have political effects. The effects are good if the religion is good and bad if the religion is bad. An ideal of ethical religion animated the abolitionists whom Gifford admired and many activists since. ‘Religion Unbound’ will trace the ideal’s history and explain how its defenders have defined and criticized religion.

Public intellectuals often posit a Great Separation of religion from politics in modernity. They differ over how the Separation was achieved, whether its effects were good, bad, or mixed, and whether it was permanent or temporary. References to a recent ‘return of religion’ assume that a Great Separation in fact took place, that we know what it was, and that it set the terms in which politics was conducted where and while it lasted. Yet religiously motivated reformers and revolutionaries have been with us all along. How would our outlook need to change if we included Milton, Wilberforce, Mott, Emerson, Gandhi, and King in the story?

Lecture 1: **Monday 1 May 2017**

Religion since Cicero

The term *religion* has roots in ancient Rome. It can be used neutrally to designate acts, attitudes, dispositions, practices, obligations, roles, and institutions related in some way to divine worship, devotion, or piety. Cicero spoke of religion in that way, but also distinguished between true religion (a moral virtue) and its counterfeits. Lucretius gave *religion* a negative connotation, by defining it as something inherently dangerous, irrational, or oppressive. Hume split the difference by saying that true religion is a virtue but too rare and lacking in practical implications to be of political value. When we discuss religion's relation to politics, we have many prior usages at our disposal and much room for maneuver. The ideal of ethical religion which heralded in modern freedom movements has received insufficient attention.

Lecture 2: **Tuesday 2 May 2017**

Early modern critics of tyranny and oppression

Religion had no exact semantic analogue outside Latin Christendom when the modern era began. Missionaries, explorers, admirals, traders, soldiers, slavers, and settlers carried a value-laden discourse of religion with them overseas, and used it to classify the peoples they conquered and converted there. Las Casas and other Dominicans turned the same terminology against imperial tyranny and oppression in the Indies. In Florence, Savonarola called for political arrangements consistent with freedom and true religion. As demands for reform spread, lives, liberties, and regimes on several continents hung in the balance.

Lecture 3: **Thursday 4 May 2017**

Why religion, faith, and freedom proved hard to reconcile

Aquinas took religion to be a moral virtue, acquired by repeated acts of pious reverence and directed toward proper this-worldly and supernatural ends. He defined faith as a theological virtue, a divine gift that serves to orient one's intellect rightly to God's revelation. Early moderns who distinguished religion from faith in this way fell into conflict. Concluding that the received ideals of religion, faith, and freedom could not be reconciled, Locke proposed a separation of church from magistrate, Deists separated true religion from faith, and Hobbes redefined freedom.

Lecture 4: **Monday 8 May 2017**

Abolitionism, political religion, and secularism

If the Enlightenment had actually separated religion from politics, subsequent struggles over slavery would have had less to do with religion than they did. It was not until the early 1850s that a movement called 'secularism' emerged. Under the influence of Comte, some of its first defenders proposed a 'religion of humanity' to perform the public functions long performed by Christianity. Other secularists agreed that Christianity should be removed from politics, but did not expect a substitute for it to be agreed upon, and proposed either privatizing or eliminating religion.

Lecture 5: **Tuesday 9 May 2017**

Slavishness, democracy, and the death of God

Emerson was concerned with how great transformations occur, what it is to stand for an ideal, and what democratic ideals demand of us. Modern Christians, he said, behave as if God were dead. Emerson used rhetorical and ethical categories to explain this. Nietzsche accepted much of that explanation, but regarded modern democracy as a secularized residue of Christian slavishness. If he was right, self-reliance is irreligious, and the urgent political question is not how to overcome domination, but who gets to dominate whom.

Lecture 6: **Thursday 11 May 2017**

Religion and the politics of explanation

Like Livy, King used a distinction between ethical and unethical religion to explain social ills. Malcolm X and James Baldwin retained the distinction but rejected King's pacifist Christianity. Reductive ideology critique and value-free social science abandon the distinction, but for conflicting reasons. Some scholars advise against using the term *religion* at all. What shall we make of these approaches? Cornel West borrows from each pragmatically. The experience of catastrophe disrupts both the politics of lowered stakes and the academic pretense of neutrality. If some events are horrendous and some are glorious, something in our midst must be worthy of reverent protection, celebration, and sacrifice. If we find that the word *religion* blocks the discussion, we can restate our concerns in other words. The task of cultivating resistance to tyranny, solidarity with the oppressed, and self-reliant piety will remain. And the history of religion-talk will be good to know.



Noah Stout

Since 1975 **Jeffrey Stout** has taught at Princeton University, where he holds a professorship in Religion. He is affiliated with the departments of Philosophy and Politics, the Center for Human Values, and the Center for the Study of Religion. Two of his works – *Ethics after Babel* and *Democracy and Tradition* – received the Award for Book Excellence from the American Academy of Religion, a scholarly society for which he served as president in 2007. His honors include election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2008), Princeton University’s Graduate Mentoring Award (2009), and Princeton’s Presidential Award for Distinguished Teaching (2010).

Stout is a secular philosopher with a background in democratic activism. He is best known for his analyses of religious involvement in politics, his criticisms of secularism and traditionalism, and his selective reworking of ideas from American pragmatism. His most recent articles are concerned with conceptions of religion and critiques of arbitrary power in the writings of Hegel, Emerson, and Lincoln. Stout’s essays on religion and film have appeared in *Film Comment* and *The Hidden God* (Museum of Modern Art).

The Gifford Lectures

The Gifford Lectures were established in 1887 under the will of Adam Lord Gifford, a Senator of the College of Justice. They are held at each of the four ancient Scottish universities, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and St Andrews. For well over a hundred years, the Lectures have enabled a most notable field of scholars to contribute to the advancement of philosophical and theological thought.

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Further information

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