

Political Theory Workshop **Is Secularism in Crisis?** **November 9, 2007**

Co-sponsored by the Political Science Department and the Centre for Ethics, University of Toronto

9:00-9:30 *Coffee*

9:30-9:35 Opening Remarks

9:35-10:50 Panel 1: Was Modernity Ever Secular?

Secularism was always at the heart of the Enlightenment idea of constant progress, and came to be seen by some observers as one of modernity's greatest projects. But in light of the criticisms raised of secularism in recent decades, what does the questionability of secularism suggest about modernity itself? Has modernity failed, or was modernity never really secular in the first place? What remains of the Enlightenment project of a politics without God? And what should we make today of concepts like toleration and accommodation?

Presenters: Ed Andrew, Rebecca Kingston
Commentator: Leonard Ferry

10:50-11:00 *Break*

11:00-12:30 Panel 2: 'Political, not Post-Metaphysical'?

When John Rawls declared that his theory of justice is 'political, not metaphysical' he was defending the idea of a secular liberalism providing neutral criteria for arbitrating between conflicting doctrines of the good. While the right/good distinction has been subject to much debate, critics of secularism dispute the idea that the principle of toleration really can, or should, be applied to philosophy itself. With the acceleration and intensification of globalisation, cross-cultural dialogue and migration, new political conflicts and disagreements have shaken secularism's claim to neutrality. Secularism has been charged with being Eurocentric, partisan, and limited understanding the world.

This panel seeks to engage in the meta-theoretical criticism of secularism and explore its implications. Should political theory reflect on its own presuppositions and canonical sources? What does the critique of secularism mean for public reason, and the limits of the reasonable? Is it possible to reconstruct fairness outside of a secular context? Or does fairness demand a consideration of the established notions of secularism?

Presenters: Ronald Beiner, Simone Chambers, Ron Kuipers
Commentator: James McKee

12:30-1:15 *Lunch Break*

1:15-2:25 **Panel 3: Religion, Ideology, and Identity Politics**

At the heart of the post-secular discourse are the religious and cultural identities at the front lines of today's global conflict. Religious identity has transformed into political identity and has turned into a source of political conflict for diverse and complex reasons. This panel asks what to make of this new essentialism of religious identities. What prospects does secularism still hold out in the context of such reified identities? Does the new essentialism represent only a crude form of identity politics, or is the construction of identities serving strategic interests, such as demonisation, resistance, or protection?

More broadly we ask why after a century marked by ideological political conflicts is religion taking centre stage? Is a religious political agenda the new counter-enlightenment movement? What does this mean for the way we ought to think about the nature of the political?

Presenters: [Melissa Williams](#), [Jakeet Singh](#)
Commentator: [Debra Thompson](#)

2:25-2:45 *Coffee Break*

2:45-4:15 **Panel 4: Post-Secular Politics and Democracy**

This final panel seeks to take a positive outlook on the crisis of secularism, and asks what good may come of such a crisis. If secularism is waning, perhaps its demise will unleash new political energies and resources for invigorating our democratic imagination. This final panel asks what promises a post-secular politics holds. What new resources does this crisis provide for political thinking? What could a post-secular politics look like and what would be desirable about it? What would it mean for the basic institutions of a liberal democracy? And how might it overcome the limitations that are coming to undermine the secular project?

Presenters: [Clifford Orwin](#), [Jim Farney](#)
Commentator: [Ryan Hurl](#)

4:15 **Concluding Remarks**

