



Book Review

Mathew Guest: *Neoliberal Religion: Faith and Power in the Twenty-first Century*. London: Bloomsbury, 2022, 203 pp.

Mathew Guest's book *Neoliberal Religion: Faith and Power in the Twenty-first Century* is a concise treatise of the impact of neoliberal culture on religion. It 'started out as a book about evangelical Protestantism' (p. 7) but ended up as an analysis of a 'tendency to merge religious with capitalistic thinking' (p. 7). While examining neoliberal culture, Guest also comments widely on the state of the sociology of religion in the twenty-first century. Among other issues the book discusses politics, economy, secularism, and – obviously – religion. Mathew Guest is Professor in the Sociology of Religion at Durham University in the UK.

The book is organized into nine chapters. Guest starts the introduction with the claim 'that social change has overtaken sociology of religion as conventionally practised' (p. 7). Guest suggests that in considering neoliberal culture, we gain insights into several important changes, but he does not claim that neoliberalism is the only development of which to take note. Having briefly presented neoliberalism, its history, and main characteristics, Guest moves on to debate 'neoliberal culture'. The building blocks of neoliberal culture are: (1) individualism as consumer freedom and choice;

(2) competition as effective resource allocation; and (3) commodification in turning things into sellable commodities. Together, these can be understood as marketization (pp. 12–13.) Importantly, Guest views the impact of neoliberal culture as a tendency, a development that gradually changes how things are seen and treated, rather than an absolute change.

Chapter 2 places religious diversity at the centre of the debate. While religion is part of the human world and has always engaged with other societal sectors or institutions (as understood in modernization and secularization theory), it is due to neoliberalism that the market ceases to be a metaphor and increasingly – but again not exclusively – the case. Having discussed some other theoretical perspectives, Guest moves on to an examination of marketization, and how religious organizations and entrepreneurs have internalized market norms. Guest's knowledge of and insights into evangelical Christianity comes to the fore as he points to the numerous ways in which evangelicals have repositioned themselves within consumer society through the creation of museums and theme parks, media outlets, new styles of leadership and management, marketing, organizational innovations, and so on (pp. 32–33). What unites these various efforts is that they often break the modern religious/secular distinction, draw on contemporary business culture,

and put the religious consumer in the driver's seat.

The third chapter focuses on religion and populism. It takes up the rise of various conservative political movements with a religious twist, including Christian nationalism in the USA, the Islamic populism of Erdoğan's Turkey, and the European far right with its Islamophobic tendencies. All are understood as conservative responses to the growing liberalism commonly associated with globalization. While the presentations are all interesting in themselves, the neoliberal aspect is not very central in the debate. Some occasional references to neoliberalism make the point – for example, 'to be adversarial, combative and ruthless is justified as it grants a competitive edge' (p. 64) – but do not lead to a systematic analysis of how neoliberalism makes populism tick.

Religion in the post-truth era continues the topic in the fourth chapter. The debate starts with Donald Trump's assumption of the presidency of the United States and continues by examining how new populists aim to destabilize existing knowledge structures, authorities, and expertise and create mistrust of (selected aspects of) science. They question the existing authorities, at times with the most bizarre claims. Huge exaggeration and the assumption of victimhood are common populist tactics that aim to widen the limits of the possible. Guest then argues that 'the conditions of neoliberalism have enabled religions expressions of "rejected knowledge" to

gain global traction and public support as never before' (p. 78). While I agree that new forms of media have certainly been used to many actors' advantage, and outward-oriented religious movements certainly attempt to use the available means to promote their cause, the examples look more like an external adaptation than a deep-rooted cultural change.

Chapter 5 examines the securitization of religion and views the UK's Prevent Strategy especially as an empirical example. Guest discusses how religious radicals oppose themselves to the capitalistic West, and how various monitoring and anti-radicalization policies change the state's relationship with religious actors who are considered problematic. He also notes the harmful consequences of securitization for religious minorities, as they are increasingly viewed negatively by the public. The role of neoliberal culture is less obvious beside the global view and could have been extended by examining how public administration itself has changed over the years, as neoliberalism has affected the means and tools through which administration engages with citizens and civil society. Here, a discussion of New Public Management would have been helpful to support Guest's claims.

The sixth chapter examines the entrepreneurial self, providing numerous examples of how neoliberal culture has penetrated religious action and thought. The section starts with Guest attending 'a convention of the "Global Leadership Summit"

(GLS)' (p. 109), which sounds grand but is a franchised DVD-mediated lecture of the Vineyard Movement that focuses on social awareness and the entrepreneurial spirit. The entrepreneurial approach cultivates religiosity by focusing on oneself and bearing responsibility for one's actions. Self-development and personal growth are both the means and ends that are nurtured through endless participation in and consumption of suitable mentorship programmes, community events, courses, and so on. For example, Guest makes historical links with the Human Potential Movement, thereby illustrating historical predecessors of contemporary forms of thought. I found this the volume's strongest chapter, as Guest uses his extensive knowledge of evangelicals.

Chapter 7 deals with power and religion. Having discussed some classics, including Weber, Guest returns to the evangelicals to discuss gender and the role of aesthetics, including clothing, among conservatives. He then, rightly in my opinion, raises the seemingly unlikely combination of individualism, religious piety, and conservatism. The performative role of clothing is placed at the fore, as in Islamic fashion, which is simultaneously mainstream fashion and distances itself from it. This is followed by debates on race, racialization, and various injustices. While Guest's discussions shed light on several features of consumerism and the commodification of piety, the neo-

liberal perspective could have been more fully developed beside the by now obvious understanding that religious conservatism can also be a personal choice and thus follows much the same path as other individualistic choices.

The eighth chapter focuses on secularism and the nonreligious. After a brief introduction of the current debate on the nonreligious, Guest moves on to present an overview of nones in Britain, discussing various political variants of secularism. The chapter's final part discusses political sociology, multiculturalism, and other issues that have pondered the role of religion in public (and private) life in recent decades. The debate about neoliberalism is mainly related to growing individualism and its apparent contradiction by religious clothing bans.

The final chapter examines the ethics of the sociology of religion. Guest starts his conclusion by restating his efforts to renew the focus of the sociology of religion by examining the book's topics. Having noted the well-known downsides of neoliberalism of income distribution, the accumulation of wealth, relentless individualism, and so on, Guest seeks to find some key ethical concerns for the sociology of religion in our times. He takes up value neutrality in sociology and anthropology, reminding us of their dark side in supporting suppressive measures on minorities and others. So what is the moral responsibility of researchers on neoliberalism and the impact of neoliberal culture?

Should religion be treated as a special case, or is upholding a self-reflexive view of one's own position enough (pp. 172–173)? Guest provides no clear answer to these questions, but legitimately – in my opinion – argues that we should certainly be aware of the complex position of religion in today's world and engage in more proactive debate on contemporary ethnical issues.

Mathew Guest's book is an accessible contribution to the growing literature on religion and neoliberalism. It does this particularly well in presentations of evangelical Christianity and the entrepreneurial self. The other chapters are somewhat lacking in their analysis of the impact of neoliberalism on political structures, and the argumentation is not fully developed in this respect. Altogether, the book will help popularize research perspectives on neoliberal culture and provide new methods of analysis. The book will be suitable as an introductory reading on contemporary religion in the sociology of religion, and how capitalism changes religious practices.

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