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Thinking Otherwise about God, Marx, and Eagleton

A Response to Terry Eagleton



Grace Ogihara

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TERRY EAGLETON HAS BEEN A LITERARY LUMINARY IN THE U.K. AND THE U.S. SINCE THE MID-1960S, BEST KNOWN FOR HIS INFLUENTIAL WORK IN MARXIST LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORY AND CRITICISM, BUT ALSO AS A NOVELIST, MEMOIRIST, AND PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL. He is the enviably prolific writer of more than 40 books and countless articles, on topics ranging from Shakespeare, the 18th century British novel, and American versus British culture, to, more recently, “the meaning of life” (as he titled his 2007 book, in a display of both hubris and *chutzpah*), and, most relevant here, religion and “the God debate.”¹ He is a frequent reviewer (and provocateur) for *The Guardian* and the *London Review of Books* as well as an academic with a long, illustrious, and often controversial career at Oxford, Cambridge, the University of Manchester, and now, as Distinguished Professor at both Lancaster University in the U.K. and the University of Notre Dame in the U.S. His work is distinguished by its breadth as well as its wit, accessibility, and *élan* (not, alas, common features of academic writing).

I first read some of Eagleton’s work when I was in graduate school, and I began to use his best-selling *Literary Theory: An Introduction*² in the new “Contemporary Literary Theory and Criticism” course I created shortly after I began teaching at Santa Clara University in 1987. My students, often initially baffled by the complexities of the primary texts we read, have appreciated Eagleton’s lucid and engaging primer on theories ranging from New Criticism and structuralism to psychoanalysis, as well as his openness about his own Marxist perspective. Since I have read other work by Eagleton over the years, I was delighted to learn that he would be speaking at Santa Clara this past fall, but was a bit surprised that his talk would be on “Why Is God for Christians Good for Nothing?” rather than on Marxist literary or cultural studies.

Eagleton has been a committed Marxist theorist and activist from his earliest days at Cambridge—leafleting factories and publishing his first book, *The New Left Church*, when he was only 23—to the present, having recently published the boldly titled *Why Marx Was Right*.³ But Eagleton has surprised many of his long-time readers by

For Eagleton, both Christianity and Marxist thought provide, at their roots, radical visions of not only personal but also social and political transformation (akin to what we Jews call tikkun olam: healing or repairing the world) to achieve a world of peace, justice, and compassion in which all humans can thrive.

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his turn to questions of religion, in books such as *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* and his just-published *Culture and the Death of God*.⁴ Yet, through reading some of his recent work, talking to him over lunch on campus, and listening to his lecture, I understand more fully why and how his Marxist views and his deepening interest in religion (specifically, Christianity) are intertwined.

For Eagleton, Christianity and Marx's ideas are not incompatible. We all know that Marx argued that religion was "the opium of the people," since, in his view, it provided illusory solace in a heartless world rather than inspiring political action to change that world. But for Eagleton, both Marxist thought and Christianity provide, at their roots, radical visions of not only personal but also social and political transformation (akin to what we Jews call *tikkun olam*: healing or repairing the world) to achieve a world of peace, justice, and compassion in which all humans can thrive.

Eagleton asserts in a 2009 interview that "a socialist revolution is quite as spiritual as the fight for the kingdom of God is material."⁵ This sounds a lot like the premises of liberation theology, itself a synthesis of Catholic and Marxist ideas,⁶ and like some strains of liberal and progressive Protestantism (e.g., in the social justice work of Martin Luther King, Jr., William Sloane Coffin, and Karen Armstrong) as well as reform Judaism.⁷ In a recent interview, Eagleton notes that the connection between his leftist politics and religion has perhaps "been the theme of my intellectual career," since his early days at Cambridge "as a left-wing Catholic in the heady days of the Vatican Council."⁸ However, he also acknowledges

that over the years religion has moved from the background to the foreground of his work. For Eagleton, religion should be a lived social and political (rather than merely individual) practice informed by faith, love, and hope, rather than merely a matter of doctrine or dogma.⁹

The nature of religion and, indeed of God, was the primary subject of Eagleton's lively and thought-provoking lecture here at Santa Clara. Before addressing the lecture series' central question "what good is God?" Eagleton began with the broader theological and ontological question: "what *is* God?" Eagleton asserted that God is not "a being at all, in the sense of a determinate entity within the universe ... He's neither within the universe nor outside it, and he isn't an object, phenomenon, principle ..."¹⁰ Eagleton went on to make the controversial claim that "all good theologians then can surely agree with Dawkins ... [and other New Atheists] that God doesn't exist."¹¹ Yet Eagleton, contra Dawkins, believes that God "is the reason why there are any existent entities at all, rather than just nothing."¹² Eagleton also argued that we can't really say that God is good, since "the word *good* ... can be used of God only analogously or metaphorically."¹³ As Eagleton puts it, "God isn't a moral being, though he's the source of morality in others, which is to say he's the source of an ecstatic overflowing abundance of life."¹⁴ Eagleton argues that morality (like religion) should not be primarily concerned with "duty, obligation ... self-repression, and all those other rather grim-faced puritanical notions, but [rather] with human fulfillment, what human beings desire—how are they to know it, and how are they together to fulfill it?"¹⁵ Eagleton's emphasis on

humans working *together* to achieve an “ecstatic overflowing abundance of life” in which no one’s fulfillment is at the expense of another’s suggests some of the ways in which he links socialist and Christian ideas of community, compassion, and justice—values shared by many of us who are not Christian and by many who do not consider themselves religious.

For many theologians and philosophers, trying to conceive of God, the divine, or the sacred without relying on anthropomorphic or all-too-worldly conceptual frameworks has proven difficult if not impossible. Hence the frequent recourse, in discussions of God or the sacred, to terms like “ineffable” or “transcendent.” But in the Judeo-Christian tradition, anthropomorphic language and imagery for God persist, as Eagleton’s own talk demonstrated.

In the Q & A period following Eagleton’s lecture, I posed this question: “Since you believe that God is not an existent, let alone an anthropomorphic one, why do you use the word ‘He’ rather than ‘It,’ or, even perhaps ‘She’?” Eagleton replied, “No reason at all, not, of course, because God is a woman any more than he/she is a man, because gender is part of our condition, not part of his/hers, its/theirs ... God defeats our pronouns and adjectives and so on. You’re absolutely right, yes.”¹⁶ Eagleton acknowledged in his response that one of the mistakes in saying “he” when referring to God is that doing so “instantly associates God with our mundane notions of power ... [ones we] need to transfigure.”¹⁷ My question reflected my years of teaching and doing research on feminist theory but was also theological and philosophical: Can we “think otherwise” about God (or “god-ness”) outside of traditional ideas and practices of power and of patriarchy? Can we conceive of God/god/the sacred in nonpaternalistic and even nonanthropomorphic ways?


William Wordsworth, in his 1798 poem “Tintern Abbey,” which I love and often teach, comes close to describing what I (and perhaps Eagleton) have in mind when trying to “think otherwise” about God or the sacred and about humans’ relationships to each other and to the nonhuman cosmos:

... I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
 A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things.

Poets, through metaphor, often come close to expressing the inexpressible. In this poem written upon his return visit to the ruins of a once-great abbey, Wordsworth suggests a nontheistic sense of the sacred as a sublime life-force that connects all human beings with each other and



J.M.W. Turner, “Tintern Abbey: The Transept,” watercolor, England, 1795. Used with permission.
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with the miraculous natural world. In this poem, Wordsworth also presents a simple ethics, one in which the “best portion of a good man’s [and woman’s] life” is “his [or her] little, nameless, unremembered, acts/ Of kindness and of love.”¹⁸ Although many people of faith regard God, their religion, and/or sacred texts as the only possible sources of morality, I believe we can theorize and practice a nontheocentric ethics based on loving-kindness (a prominent principle in Buddhism but one also running through many strands of Christianity, Judaism, and other religions as well as philosophical traditions) and on respect for persons and for the earth. One does not have to be a Marxist or a Christian or “religious” at all (although one can be, like Eagleton, all three) to believe in, imagine, and feel the interconnectedness of human beings with, and responsibilities toward, each other, the earth, and “something” (however one imagines or tries to describe that “something”) larger than ourselves. 

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NOTES

- 1 Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life* (New York and Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2007) and *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 2 *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, U.K.: Basil Blackwell, 1983; Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1983). As an indication of the text’s continuing popularity, a second edition was published by both Blackwell Publishers and the University of Minnesota in 1996 and then a 25th “anniversary edition” in 2008.
- 3 Terry Eagleton, *The New Left Church* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) and *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). However, Eagleton is no apologist for communist regimes or such mass murderers as Stalin, who have not followed genuine Marxian principles and have committed horrors. Yet, for Eagleton, Marx’s thought, as a critique of capitalism and as suggesting though not prescribing alternatives to it, can still be of value, especially as we confront crises in global capitalism and rising inequality.
- 4 Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). This seemingly dramatic change in Eagleton’s emphases perhaps should not be so surprising from an author who wrote *Literary Theory* in 1983—a book profoundly influenced by postmodernism—and then books called *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) and *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), both of which criticize the very ideas he had helped introduce to readers.
- 5 Nathan Schneider, “Religion for Radicals: An Interview with Terry Eagleton,” *The Immanent Frame* (September 17, 2009), <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/09/17/religion-for-radicals-an-interview-with-terry-eagleton/>.
- 6 In fact, one of Eagleton’s colleagues at Notre Dame, the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, O.P., is widely considered the founder of liberation theology. See, e.g., Gutierrez’s *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 1973). Liberation theology has clearly been an influence on Pope Francis, too.
- 7 See, for example, the magazine *Tikkun*, founded by Rabbi Michael Lerner.
- 8 Alexander Barker and Alex Niven, “An Interview with Terry Eagleton,” *The Oxonian Review* 19.4 (June 4, 2012), <http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/an-interview-with-terry-eagleton/>.
- 9 Schneider interview. Eagleton argues that New Atheists like Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens (a long-time friend of Eagleton’s), like “the great majority of believers, have been conned rather falsely into a positivist or dogmatic theology, into believing that religion consists in signing on for a set of propositions.”
- 10 Terry Eagleton, “Why Is God for Christians Good for Nothing?,” lecture, 2013–2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? series, October 7, 2013, Santa Clara University. A video of the full lecture is available online at: <http://scu.edu/ic/publications/videos.cfm>
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798,” *Lyrical Ballads* (London: J. & A. Arch, 1798).