



Marxist Professor Refutes Atheists' Arguments

Anno Domini 2009 has shown no sign of any abatement in the so-called "God Debate." In recent years, several prominent atheists have published their compendiums of anti-religious boilerplate only to find themselves confronted by a rather lively defense of the God whom they were trying to bury.



In fact, it may be that those atheists who imagined their arguments would swell the ranks of the disbelieving are wishing they had never stirred up the controversy in the first place.

In the midst of the "God Debate," orthodox Christians have occasionally found themselves with unlikely allies, but few might seem, on the surface, as unlikely as avowed-socialist Terry Eagleton. Eagleton, professor of English Literature at the University of Lancaster and professor of Cultural Theory at the National University of Ireland, Galway, presented the Terry Foundation Lectures on Religion in the Light of Science and Philosophy at Yale University in April 2008. His book *Reason, Faith, and Revolution — Reflections on the God Debate* is the published form of these lectures. Eagleton's Terry Foundation lectures present a powerful addition to the "God Debate" that deserve consideration by all parties to the ongoing discussion.

Throughout the lectures, Eagleton takes aim primarily at Richard Dawkins (author of *The God Delusion*) and Christopher Hitchens (author of *God Is Not Great*), often conflating the two men into a single entity: "Ditchkins." However, Eagleton makes it crystal-clear that, unlike many who have thus far replied to "Ditchkins," he also has very little use for most modern Christians, especially of the American Televangelist variety; for example, he declares in a particularly strident passage: "Far from refusing to conform to the powers of this world, Christianity has become the nauseating cant of lying politicians, corrupt bankers, and fanatical neocons, as well as an immensely profitable industry in its own right." He also has little use for the Roman Catholic Church as he came to know it in his native Ireland: "The Irish have been shamefully abused and exploited by the Roman Catholic church in ways too familiar to recount." Although Eagleton speaks glowingly of Jesus and occasionally of theologians such as Ss. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, one would be hard pressed to identify any denomination or even movement within Christendom (except, perhaps for the Marxist-influenced liberation theology) that he



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would view as upholding his understanding of faithful Christian teaching and practice.

Nevertheless, Eagleton upholds the compelling power of the New Testament message: “The New Testament is a brutal destroyer of human illusions. If you follow Jesus and don’t end up dead, it appears you have some explaining to do. The stark signifier of the human condition is one who spoke up for love and justice and was done to death for his pains. The traumatic truth of human history is a mutilated body. Those who do not see this dreadful image of a tortured innocent as the truth of history are likely to adopt some bright-eyed superstition such as the dream of untrammelled human progress, for which we shall see, Ditchkins is a full-blooded apologist. There are rationalist myths as well as religious ones. Indeed, many secular myths are deguttled versions of sacred ones.” The fideism of “Ditchkins” is a theme that spirals throughout *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*; Eagleton rightly observes that the atheist apologists are as doctrinaire as any fundamentalist — with the important distinction that the atheists have nothing but their own reasoning on which to stand, while so-called fundamentalists have the privilege of appealing to a larger historical consensus, and a received Text which has stood the test of generations.

Throughout *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, Eagleton makes it abundantly clear that he continues to carry a torch for Marxism, apparently being committed to a demonstration that the last bastion of ‘orthodox’ socialism is to be found on university campuses. Sometimes the references to Marx appear almost completely gratuitous to the particular point he is exploring at a given time, as if some timer in the author’s head were repeatedly counting down and requiring an encomium to Eagleton’s guiding light every time the buzzer sounds. Eagleton’s *idée fixe* seems to be the glory of Marxism, and this undermines the benefit of his work and distracts from his overall argument. One must repeatedly wait until the author gets past his latest socialist paroxysm and wait for the book to resume — a tiresome endeavor for those inclined to agree with Voegelin’s assessment that Marx was engaged in an “intellectual swindle.”

A curious element of Eagleton’s Marxist faith is its pessimism regarding human nature; whereas normally Marxists bow before the altar of “Progress,” upholding the inevitable march toward a glorious future, Eagleton ostensibly disavows such notions of Progress and excoriates “Ditchkins” for such triumphalism, while himself espousing a view that he calls “tragic humanism”: “The distinction between Ditchkins and those like myself comes down in the end to one between liberal humanism and tragic humanism. There are those who like Ditchkins who hold that if we can only shake off a poisonous legacy of myth and superstition, we can be free. This in my own view is itself a myth, though a generous-spirited one. Tragic humanism shares liberal humanism’s vision of the free flourishing of humanity; but it holds that this is possible only by confronting the very worst. The only affirmation of humanity worth having in the end is one which, like the disillusioned post-Restoration Milton, seriously wonders whether humanity is worth saving in the first place, and can see what Jonathan Swift’s king of Brobdingnag has in mind when he describes the human species as an odious race of vermin. Tragic humanism, whether in its socialist, Christian, or psychoanalytic varieties, holds that only by a process of self-dispossession and radical remaking can humanity come into its own.”

Why should conservatives and Christians give serious consideration to Eagleton’s book? Because it is a demonstration that the arguments set forth in modern atheist apologetics are so vacuous that they may be refuted from a wide variety of philosophical perspectives; one need not be a theist, let alone an orthodox Christian, to recognize the shallowness of “Ditchkins” arguments. Whatever the faults of Eagleton’s reasoning in other areas, his gleeful, often satirical, piercing of the chinks in the armor of



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modern atheist apologetics is beneficial to any reader interested in the “God Debate.”

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