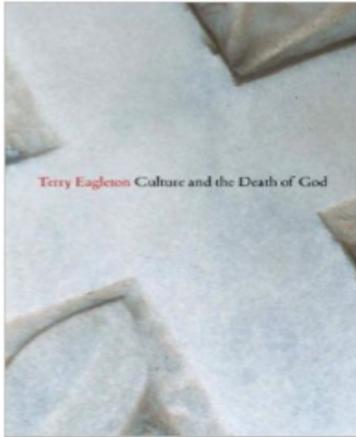




BOOK REVIEW: CULTURE AND THE DEATH OF GOD BY TERRY EAGLETON

Terry Eagleton's *Culture and the Death of God* is a dense tour-de-force that launches one through the ways modernity, in its multiple forms, has sought to frame all of life without reference to God. More than a decade ago the American sociologist, David Seligman, framed the issue Eagleton engages, in his book *Modernity's Wager*. He proposed that at the core of the modern imagination was a drive to shape all of life from a human center that had no need of God except, perhaps, as some vague guarantor of our activities.



Eagleton's book investigates some of the critical ways this modernity, since its birth in the seventeenth century, has sought after replacements for God that could take in the whole range of humanity. It was not enough that those who were *enlightened*, or the *philosophes*, should appreciate this new world being brought into being by their imagination. If the romantic elites alone could apprehend this vision, privileged as they are with their direct experience of the world, then the modern agenda would have failed. The radical wager to finally live life without God required that this bracing new world should be grasped and embraced by everyman (woman), by the crowds, by the common people. And as Charles Taylor has brilliantly proposed in his book, *A Secular Age*, that embracing has indeed become the normative standpoint for practically every citizen of the west. We all now

live in a secular age. For Eagleton this fact is not without its great complexities and profound challenges. God keeps coming back in all kinds of strange, embarrassing and, today, radically dangerous and irrational ways. This secularity still contains within it profound expressions of this human need for the Other in which transcendence plays an irrevocable part, in new fundamentalisms, and in a renewed search for God among growing numbers who find the modern surrogates deeply unsatisfactory.

Culture and the Death of God is a challenging, academic read that reviews a breadth of intellectual and social movements over the last three centuries. It examines the ways each sought to construct an intellectual, cultural or aesthetic space that would remove the need for God, only, in Eagleton's analysis, to pursue the divine elsewhere. He is not sanguine, after covering this history, that our western societies can discover hopeful futures by continuing on this path. The hopeful note is that religion (Christian faith) has a rich, continuing presence and power. Indeed the Almighty has proved remarkably difficult to dispose of.

The book is laid out as a series of engagements with primary intellectual movements of modernity ranging through Enlightenment, Idealism, Romanticism, the Modernism that emerged after this, wherein the death of God seemed to be taken for granted, and finally the critical emergence of *culture* in the Post-modern, as a primary surrogate for God. The book starts with the early Enlightenment. Echoing the language of Charles Taylor, Eagleton's beginning sentence expresses so much of what is at stake for the re-forming of Christian life in the West: '*Societies become secular not when they dispense with religion altogether, but when they are no longer especially agitated by it*' (p.1). This is our situation from which there is no return. We have all travelled these past several hundred years into a new space and geography that has fundamentally changed who we are as societies, irrespective of our religious beliefs. There remains religion, there remains belief in God (of some sort) but few are particularly agitated or feel any deep need for religion or God in their lives. Even all those reports from eager church growth sociologies proposing growth or even 'revivals' in certain parts of the West are largely reports of people with Christian memory, reverting to forgotten religious practices after a hiatus. But this represents such a small and diminishing set of people as the memory of the Christian story continues to drain away. Eagleton guides us through these transformations making the argument that

the surrogates for God (rationality, experience, the aesthetic, culture, and art) failed to address a continuing hunger for God in a secular age.

The book is classic Eagleton with its brilliance of analysis, sophisticated synthesis of complex themes and movements and his continual acerbic wit. He disdains to construct straw men. Take the Enlightenment thinkers as an example. He is quick to point out that, contrary to popular myths, these were not anti-religious leaders.

When it came to religion, a good deal of this audacious intellectual project landed us in a spot not far from where we were in the first place, furnished with a new, more plausible set of rationales. The task was not so much to dispose the Supreme Being as to replace a benighted version of religious faith with one that might grace coffee-house conversation in the Strand. For the most part it was priest craft rather than the Almighty that the movement had in its sights (p.6).

Can anyone call that a bad thing! The Enlightenment assault on religion was a political rather than a theological affair. The zealots of reason in this period still had some form of religious faith and were not focused on the disposal of God.

In sections on Idealism, Romanticism and the emergence of 'culture' and the aesthetic, Eagleton demonstrates how the history of the modern age is

...among other things the search for a viceroy for God. Reason, Geist, culture, art, the sublime, the nation, the state, science, humanity, Being, Society, the Other, desire, the life force and personal relations: all these have acted from time to time as forms of displaced divinity. (p.45).

He traces how some of the drive within movements such as Idealism and Romanticism was an ongoing hope to wed the rational and beautiful with the everyday so that the broad masses might be tempted to embrace the surrogates and viceroys of God introduced by the elites. 'Beauty is truth and truth is beauty' (Keats) is one such attempt to wed the rational and the sensory. It is an example of this greater drive to bring the new vision of the intellectuals into a place that could be embraced by ordinary people in their everyday (superstitious) lives. The drive here, in the displacement of the Almighty, was to present a vision that would capture the hearts and minds of the masses. Such a vision needed to be an admixture of traditional values (people had to see something of their narratives in the new) with the new visions of culture, aesthetics and capitalism for which God was not a useful or practical category. It is in this context that the one emerging movement (capitalism) elaborated the new mythologies (for example the invisible hand of the market, consumerism, self as maker and so forth) to displace religious traditions for the masses.

Eagleton's analysis of the emergence and role of the *aesthetic* and *culture* (both now irrevocably

wedded in the primary capitalist drives of our time) as two of the major replacements for God is brilliant. It presents a sobering assessment of how western societies have gone down the road of seeking to dispense with God from the center of our lives in any formative, material, everyday way. It seemed for a time that new myths (nationalism and the state – perhaps the most destructive myths produced by the modern West), art, culture, and feeling would suffice as replacements for the Christian God. They didn't and they aren't! Eagleton's book is an incredible resource of well-framed reflection and engagement with the primary movements that have sought to embed the secular (functionally living without a need for God in daily life) in the imagination of the West over these last three hundred years. It's not an easy read, not in the least because we now live in a time of 'afterwards' – after the loss of the social, cultural, philosophic and political history of the period we've just moved through. Many will wonder who the people are that Eagleton mentions (Blake, Fichte, Holderlin, Raymond Williams, Arnold, Toynbee, Feuerbach to name just a few of the more obvious). He is not writing to a large audience who live inside the modern story these and others have created. Too many of us live in a time of massive upheaval without the capacity to see the lay of the land in the way Eagleton does for us so well. Google can't help us in this space.

In Eagleton's estimation the viceroy's aren't up to the job even though, through into the Post-modern, there remains no lack of trying. I'm not clear about the extent to which Eagleton's Catholic background shapes his framing of this book so the following comments are made with some trepidation. After this long and fine analysis, towards the end of the book Eagleton acknowledges that in the post-modern turn and the unbridled power of capitalism ('Given its pragmatic, utilitarian bent, capitalism, especially in its post-industrial incarnation, is an intrinsically faithless social order' p.195) we have entered a space which is more and more spiritually bankrupt and, at the same time, being filled with a resurgence of terrorizing and radical religious movements.

The Christianity that, in drinking long at the well of the modern movements Eagleton has described, now offers little more than moral uplift, aesthetic charm (share, care and be fair while appreciating the richness of the tradition, or some take on Schleiermachian piety of infinite responsibility). But the Catholic in Eagleton reads correctly that something profoundly different is required to address the situation. In the end, whether it is presented in the form of *Reason*, the *Absolute*, the *moral imperative*, the *aesthetic moment*, the *Dasein* [2] and on and on it goes, all of these movements have, in spite of their deepest instincts, presented disembodied viceroys for God. In this sense they are, each in their own way, failed proposals. At the core of Christian faith there is a crucified body (p.205). The center of Christian practice is not primarily remembrance but Eucharist – the continued living out together around tables, in bread and wine, the real presence of a God who only and always turns up in God-forsaken places in the ordinary and everyday. This is neither about moral uplift nor some evangelical inner experience of the self but the embodied God who meets us in the corporeal everydayness of our trouble lives and rekindles an imagination that the world is not for us (the lie of capitalism) but we are for the sake of the healing of the world (the vision of the prophets of this very Jewish God). The nature

of truth, the forms of reason are to be discerned and practiced from within this corporeal everydayness where the embodied and bloodied God is present.

[1] Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, (New Haven: University Press, 2014).

[2] Dasein is a German word, used by Heidegger to describe his concept 'being-in-the-world' or 'dwelling'.



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