



Interactions With Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate, Terry Eagleton, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009, 185 pp.

[PLEASE NOTE: The Notes to this essay are illustratively integral.]

Introduction

I had generally felt uninterested in the recent spate of neoatheistic publications, including *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, and *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens. Both books and the “God Debate” are the focus of the book under discussion. In 2010, Eagleton, a noted literary critic and theoretical Marxist, is slated to give the most prestigious series of theological lectures in English today: *The Gifford Lectures* at the University of Edinburgh, on “The God Debate”, that will continue his probing this theme. With Eagleton’s offering, I suddenly realized how vital to our very humanity this discussion is! What, if after all, both the dilemma of the human condition and its solution cut far more deeply than the best offerings of secular good works done by say the International Red Cross, the Canadian International Development Agency, or the American Peace Corps? What if, after all, most of the Christian West with its early inversion of the Cross into ultimate symbol of violence, the Sword, was massively unfaithful to humanity’s ultimate destiny of peace that Judeo-Christian Scripture knows as the *Kingdom of God*? This publication raises these issues exquisitely and much more.

Eagleton playfully amalgamates the above atheistic authors under the signifier “Ditchkins”, so alike, and so incredibly *ignorant* (in the strict sense of meaning “not knowing”) are the two authors about their subject matter.¹ The book itself is based on *The Terry Lectures* given by Eagleton last year at Yale University.²

I have similarly generally felt uninterested in more than a century of “Historical Jesus Quest Studies”, and usually put issues of atheism and New Testament revisionism together – over against hermeneutical revisionism of the Bible. New Testament theologian Luke Timothy Johnson³ says of Historical Jesus Questers generally:

Perhaps after all these authors have not escaped the tendencies so acutely described by [Albert] Schweitzer. Does not [one such author’s] picture of a peasant cynic preaching inclusiveness and equality fit perfectly the idealized ethos of the late twentieth century academic (quoted in Richard Hays’ *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation – A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, p. 167)?

¹ Eagleton reviewed Dawkins’ book under the title, “Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching” (http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/print/eagl01_.html). Andrew O’Hehir reviewed Eagleton’s book under the title: “Those Ignorant Atheists” (http://www.salon.com/books/review/2009/04/28/terry_eagleton/print.html).

² See: <http://www.yale.edu/terrylecture/eagleton.html>.

³ Johnson explains his earlier disinterest in “The Historical Jesus” over against the authentic Jesus of the Church’s New Testament, and directly challenges fanciful “Historical Jesus Questers” in his book *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*.

It seems that both kinds of naysayers too often trade in arrogance and disdain towards the traditionally “faithful”. The naysayers also seem to aver we’d all be much better off if we or “God” or Jesus were made in *their* image: “liberal dogmatists, doctrinaire flag-wavers for Progress, and Islamophobic intellectuals (p. 169)”, or early twenty-first century (mainly) white male academic ultimately “enlightened” Jesus Questers. C.S. Lewis wrote decades ago ruefully that there is regularly a fresh crop of publications every fall of such tiresome revisions. This appears to be still the case.

I recently sat through a marathon session with a friend who presented what to me was thin gruel of his reductionist faith in “Jesus”; a Jesus stripped of almost anything transcendent. This was all to insist, my friend explained, that he was still a “Person of the Book”. My friend had once been a church elder, but had hardly darkened the door of any church in over 20 years; and now the “Book” à la Marcion for him had a few pages ripped out, quite a few: even if now different pages from profoundly antisemitic Marcion⁴... “Church” for him has now been written off as only a great evil worldwide and across 2,000 years. Every time I’ve heard this from him and others, it seems akin to claiming all Germans are mass murderers because the Nazis were; savaging all institutions of higher learning because universities developed the nuclear bomb; excoriating all atheists because Stalin and henchmen slaughtered millions of innocents.⁵

When my friend in his marathon turned to the teachings of Paul, he began, “Paul, damn him!...” This was not to offer an alternative biblical interpretation à la *ecclesia semper reformanda* (the church is always reforming itself), rather a diatribe that rejected Paul outright as “fanciful inventor” of Christianity. This is by contrast to what the Church has known over the centuries Paul (and Jesus!) to have believed and taught. My friend’s wife for her part at one point thought Dawkins and Hitchens were a kind of supreme word on God, and Bishop John Spong the same on Christianity. This seemed like turning to Osama bin Laden to learn about Western civilization, or to Billy Graham to have explained the theory of evolution.

I have often quoted Scripture on how such revisions and dismissals feel to me:

⁴ Given the horror story of Western antisemitism (this spelling purposely chosen by James Carroll in *Constantine’s Sword* more fully mentioned in the next footnote), thankfully my friend has chosen at least different passages from those Marcion savaged.

⁵ My friends ignore testimonial about this “abominable” Church like the commencement address by noted Canadian journalist Brian Stewart of the Canadian Broadcasting Commission (CBC), “On The Front Lines”. Stewart remarks: “I’ve found there is NO movement, or force, closer to the raw truth of war, famines, crises, and the vast human predicament, than organized Christianity in Action.”; and again: “I don’t slight any of the hard work done by other religions or those wonderful secular NGO’s I’ve dealt with so much over the years... But no, so often in desperate areas it is Christian groups there first, that labor heroically during the crisis and continue on long after all the media, and the visiting celebrities have left.”

(http://www.utoronto.ca/knox/pages/News%20and%20Events/brian_stewart.htm).

My friends likewise disregard any observation like columnist Barbara Kay’s (in the *National Post*): “The Christian faith, uniquely among the world’s religions, has inspired an awesome tradition of ministering to the lepers most of us cannot bear to look at.” (<http://www.barbarakay.ca/archive/20050622banishthesin.htm>)

That said, there is also a desperately wicked self-righteous and violent dark side to the Church, which for instance both the book and movie *Constantine’s Sword* by award-winning Christian novelist and social commentator James Carroll presents. Another instance is *The Death Penalty: An Historical and Theological Survey*, by Christian historian James Megivern. If Christians do not read and weep about such stories we are not worthy of the name.

“They have taken my Lord away... and I don't know where they have put him.” (John 20:13b)

Wherever that place is, it has not been for me interesting, let alone compelling or truthful. But it has been sobering that so many turn away from the New Testament's Jesus. I return to this a few times in this paper. It is motive in part for this extended essay.

I once heard a lay Catholic theologian say that she always encouraged her students to watch or read anything about Jesus. “But”, she added, “I tell them if they really want to get blown away, go back and read the New Testament!” There is nothing more radical than the New Testament itself! It is a hot potato impossible of holding onto without getting burned with the fire of to-the-bone conversion! Peeking in behind the scenes to understand some of how theatre works is fine, depending. But if one really wants to experience Shakespeare, the best way is to sit back and let the play be the thing as direct experiential phenomenon to catch the conscience of not only the king, but of all who come under its magisterial spell! This will not happen by constantly pulling back the curtain to see what's going on, any more than Nature can best be studied in an antiseptic laboratory rather than *phenomenologically* in the field (something that throughout his career Johann Wolfgang von Goethe challenged Isaac Newton on⁶). Shakespeare, an actor and part of a theatre group after all, was not intended to be primarily experienced behind the curtain or in the classroom. Neither is the Church's book, the Bible.

I've long reflected on what motivates “Ditchkins” or my church-rejecting friends in their hatred (René Girard calls it *recrucifixion*) of some combination variously of God, Jesus, Church and the New Testament, given the Bible's own excoriating project against religion.⁷ I've long-since discounted “superior rationality”, let alone greater subject awareness; though the shrillness of precisely such claims from the Ditchkins, Spongian and *Jesus Seminar* crowd are as sorry as disingenuous⁸.

“At the heart of every act of terrorism”, a person who worked closely with jailed terrorists observed, “is an unhealed wound.” I suspect that too often, at the heart of every act of faith-rejection is an unhealed wound, personal or historical, real or imagined, somehow delivered by the Church. This is greatly sobering for the Church! It is also challenging to not become intimidated by the anger that seems too often irrationally dispensed by the Church's “victims”/detractors. Though God knows, there is enormous room for legitimate anger at the Church (something to which Eagleton repeatedly alludes and begins with, as any self-respecting Gospel apologist should)! This antagonism presents however too frequently as wild flailings of a

⁶ See David Cayley's CBC *Ideas* series, “How To Think About Science”, for more on these differing approaches to scientific inquiry: <http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/features/science/index.html>. Goethe wrote: “The highest thing would be: to grasp that everything factual is already theory. The blue of the sky reveals to us the fundamental law of chromatics. Do not search for anything behind the phenomena: They themselves are the teaching (Dennis L. Sepper in *Goethe Contra Newton*, p. 158).”

⁷ Eagleton writes: “There is a document that records God's endless, dispiriting struggle with organized religion, known as the Bible (p. 8).”

⁸ Eagleton explains: “If I try in this book to ‘ventriloquize’ what I take to be a version of the Christian gospel relevant to radicals and humanists, I do not wish to be mistaken for a dummy (p. xii).” Biblical and systematic theologians and a host of others who believe the Bible is where “the play's the thing to catch the conscience of the human being”, are not only on to something as foundational as the grand human enterprise of emancipation, the best are, whatever else their faith signifies, decidedly also not “dummies”!

childish temper tantrum that does indiscriminate postmodern “deconstruction” to be sure⁹, but leaves behind a very bitter taste and nothing constructive in its place to give oneself to passionately. Whatever else he consequently does, my revised-Person-of-the-Book friend hardly “evangelizes” or participates in any kind of mission at all about his relationship to this Reconstructed Jesus or to the God of Same; rather he spends hundreds of hours in private religious study outside of any active community of dialogue¹⁰, while railing against the Church generally and some churches in particular. To this observer, there appears to be *little Good News in that!*

Preface

Still, one *must* immediately agree with Eagleton that

Religion has wrought untold misery in human affairs. For the most part, it has been a squalid tale of bigotry, superstition, wishful thinking, and oppressive ideology (p. xi)¹¹,

as the author begins his Preface. Those who ignore or suppress this are arguably on a par with Holocaust deniers¹². He also suggests that God, if there is one, surely could have chosen some better means of redemption than *religion!* Anyone possessing even a passing acquaintance with Western Church history surely agrees enthusiastically!

On the other hand, Eagleton explains after the opening statement, “But it is also the case, as this book argues, that most such critics buy their rejection of religion on the cheap (p. xi).” Eagleton sustains an argument that

When it comes to the New Testament, at least, what they usually write off is a worthless caricature of the real thing, rooted in a degree of ignorance and prejudice to match religion’s own. It is as though one were to dismiss feminism on the basis of Clint Eastwood’s opinions of it (p. xi).

Eagleton employs many similar arresting similes throughout the book. This aids comprehension of some at times arcane argumentation. He writes later,

Besides, critics of the most enduring form of popular culture in human history [i.e. religion] have a moral obligation to confront that case at its most persuasive, rather than grabbing themselves a victory on the cheap by savaging it as so much garbage and gobbledygook. The mainstream Christian theology I have outlined here may well be false; but anyone who holds to it is in my view deserving of respect... Ditchkins,

⁹ Eagleton takes issue with “postmodernism” in *The Illusions of Postmodernism*.

¹⁰ James Carrol and James Megivern just mentioned remain active churchmen. I have an excellent relationship with my two friends – a point made now given my repeated mention of them. Luke Timothy Johnson similarly dedicated a book on the Christian Creed (one that directly contradicts noted religion writer Karen Armstrong’s and most “progressive Christians’ ” disaffected contention that Christian belief does not matter) to his brother Patrick “in the full knowledge that he will not be convinced by anything in it (*The Creed*, p. viii).” Johnson on the contrary wrote the book to argue compellingly that “the creed may be the essential instrument needed for the church to regain a sense of its own integrity and to recover a healthier reading of its Scripture (p. viii).”

¹¹ He writes later:

The non-God or anti-God of Scripture, who hates burnt offerings and acts of smug self-righteousness, is the enemy of idols, fetishes, and graven images of all kinds – gods, churches, ritual sacrifice, the Stars and Stripes, nations, sex, success, ideologies, and the like (p. 18).

¹² This is my suggestion. James Carroll argues in *Constantine’s Sword* (book and documentary) that in fact the Church in its centuries-long antisemitism and silence towards Nazism is profoundly accessory to the Holocaust.

by contrast, considers that no religious belief, anywhere or anytime, is worthy of any respect whatsoever. And this, one might note, is the opinion of a man deeply averse to dogmatism.

Insofar as the faith I have described is neither stupid nor vicious, then I believe it is worth putting in a word for it against the enormous condescension of those like Ditchkins, who in a fine equipoise of arrogance and ignorance assert that all religious belief is repulsive (pp. 33 & 34).¹³

In moving to the content of Eagleton's book, the temptation to be resisted is quoting it all! Eagleton so gets it in my view, so articulately expresses it, and so compellingly draws the reader in (if one has eyes to see, Jesus might say I think), that it felt to me again and again like rereading the Gospels.

One reviewer (Andrew O'Hehir) said he read the book through twice in realization that it was beguilingly simple yet very profound, despite the author's playful confession of knowing "embarrassingly little about (p. 2)" either of the two topics *The Terry Lectures* are to be about: religion and science.

Chapter 1: The Scum of the Earth

The book has four chapters, as there were four *Terry Lectures*. In the first, "The Scum of the Earth", Eagleton persists with a theme of dislike for those who "buy one's rejection of a belief system on the cheap (p. 5)". He charges that from the outset "Dawkins makes an error of genre, or category mistake, about the kind of thing Christian belief is (p. 6)." – namely that crassly sees "God the Creator as some kind of mega-manufacturer or cosmic chief executive officer, as the ... school of nineteenth-century liberal rationalism tends to imagine... (p. 6)". He likens this kind of nonsense to thinking "that a novel is a botched piece of sociology (p. 6)", and that life for Dawkins and Hitchens "would seem to divide neatly down the middle between things you can prove beyond all doubt, and blind faith (p. 6)." Eagleton adds: "[A]ll the most interesting stuff goes on in neither of these places (pp. 6 & 7)." I'll come to his chapter on reason and faith.

He derides Ditchkins for misapprehending then consequently rejecting what Christian faith is designed to do ("straw-Christian faith"), targeting Ditchkins' critique in particular of the faith's failure to explain the origins of the universe. Eagleton rejoins: "But Christianity was never meant to be an *explanation* of anything in the first place. It is rather like saying that thanks to the electric toaster we can forget about [Russian playwright] Chekhov (p. 7)."

Eagleton gets it: "God for Christian theology is not a mega-manufacturer. He is rather what sustains all things in being by his love, and would still be this even if the world had no beginning (p. 7)." God made the universe *ex nihilo*, claims Eagleton, meaning out of no necessity, and it is the domain of science to discover its workings. He writes playfully:

¹³ Eagleton adds chillingly:

I also seek to strike a minor blow on behalf of those many millions of Muslims whose creed of peace, justice, and compassion has been rubbished and traduced by cultural supremacists in the West. We live in an age in which, since 9/11, racism is becoming once more intellectually respectable (p. 34).

There is thus a curious connection between the doctrine of creation out of nothing and the professional life of Richard Dawkins. Without God, Dawkins would be out of a job. It is thus particularly churlish of him to call the existence of his employer into question (p. 9).”

He adds:

Science is properly atheistic. Science and theology are for the most part not talking about the same kind of things, any more than orthodontics and literary criticism are. This is one reason for the grotesque misunderstandings that arise between them (pp. 9 & 10).”

He also suggests that God is “a kind of perpetual critique of instrumental reason (p. 10).”, that he is indeed gloriously pointless in explaining anything about the creation, as Ditchkins *ad nauseum* pointlessly argues.

Eagleton is in nonetheless awe of the order, coherence and intelligibility of the universe over against

those for whom the spectacular successes of science have rendered religion redundant; [yet] there are others for whom those successes spring from a fundamental fact – that our minds seem somehow attuned to the fundamental stuff of the world – which is itself cause for metaphysical reflection (p. 12).”

He asks:

Is it equally reasonable for science to place its faith in the consistency of mathematics, even when Gödel’s second theorem demonstrates that it cannot be proved? Do we too easily take for granted the fact that before we have even come to reason, the world is open and available to us in the first place? Instead of just asking for reasons or explanations, should not science be struck by all the complex stage-setting which this demands (p. 12)?

Eagleton has also published a book on Jesus Christ with an introductory essay followed by the Gospels. When he turns to discuss Jesus, as in his introductory essay, he summarizes that Jesus, unlike most responsible American citizens, appears to do no work, and is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. He is presented as homeless, propertyless, celibate, peripatetic, socially marginal, disdainful of kinsfolk, without a trade, a friend of outcasts and pariahs, averse to material possessions, without fear for his own safety, careless about purity regulations, critical of traditional authority, a thorn in the side of the Establishment, and a scourge of the rich and the powerful (p. 10).

This description is enough to make most Ditchkins types *and* most “conservative” Christians run the other way – or (one could wish) go back and read the Gospels. Such a Jesus is either rejected outright by Ditchkins or is an affront to most God-fearing religious people particularly in America. *Their* Jesus runs an Empire for patriots, and most emphatically *does not run* corporate America out of the temple/church. “Jesus fails miserably to talk like a five-star general (p. 15).” is the comment.

Christian morality is also beside the point, Eagleton claims, since its goal is for humanity to

live most richly and enjoyably, relishing one's powers and capacities purely for their own sake (p. 13).

In fact,

The morality Jesus preaches is reckless, extravagant, improvident, over-the-top, a scandal to actuaries and a stumbling block to real estate agents: forgive your enemies, give away your cloak as well as your coat, turn the other cheek, love those who insult you, walk the extra mile, take no thought for tomorrow (p. 14).¹⁴

But Ditchkins will have nothing of this kind of morality, displaying a distinct *petit bourgeois* distaste of it. Like Canadian United Church minister Gretta Vosper in *With or Without God*, who claims Jesus is no longer needed for contemporary morality, Ditchkins' pontificates that Jesus' morality is irrelevant now that humanity has come of age; any more than God for the French Revolution *philosophes* was needed to explain the nature of things. Of Ditchkins Eagleton comments: "Neither... is afflicted with an excess of modesty (p. 14)."

Unlike stern fundamentalist moralists however,

[God] is therefore able to let us be; and the word for this is freedom, which is where for Christian theology we belong to him most deeply (p. 15).¹⁵

Jesus and Saint Paul both declared that freedom was what the entire Christian enterprise is about. But this freedom presupposes a type of bondage – to God in Christ: hence Paul's "slave of Christ" language, Jesus' "Master" self-designation *vis à vis* his followers. Eagleton asserts

Denying that our freedom thrives only within the context of a more fundamental dependency lies at the root of a good deal of historical disaster. It is certainly one of the driving forces of Western neo-imperialism today (p. 16).

He continues:

For orthodox Christian doctrine, it is our dependence on God that allows us to be self-determining, as it is our dependence on language or history or culture which allows us to come into our own as persons... We can fantasize like Oedipal children that we would be more free by breaking loose from the sources of our life, but this is self-deception. Instead, our parents have to find a way of nourishing us which also contains the potential to let us go, so that their love can become the ground of our independence rather than the impediment to it.

... This then is what it means to say that God has created us in his own image and likeness, since he himself is pure liberty. It follows that he is also the ground of our ability to reject him – which is to say that in a splendidly big-hearted gesture, he is the source of atheism as well as faith (p. 17).¹⁶

One can argue that the Hebrew prophets and Jesus are in a sense one source of Western atheism, especially Jesus' derelict cry on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Theologian Jürgen Moltmann rightly posits that this cry is ultimately either one of atheism, or of

¹⁴ An outstanding read of Jesus in this light is Richard Hays' *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

¹⁵ "In fact, Jesus has very little to say about sin at all, unlike a great many of his censorious followers. His mission is to accept men and women's frailty, not to rub their noses in it (p. 20).", Eagleton comments later.

¹⁶ There is no liberty without structure, freedom without form. There is likely sheer exhilaration in jumping from an airplane unencumbered by any kind of backpack. There is however severe comeuppance one could call "The Splat Factor" for such reckless exercise of freedom.

a whole new way of understanding that God has taken into his very existence as Trinity the pain of human existence, thereby forever being changed. Canadian victims advocate Wilma Derksen talks along this line of the “temporary atheism” of some of her colleagues after a murder in the family. The Hebrew scriptures are similarly redolent with “atheistic” lamentations to God throughout the Psalms, the prophets, and in the Book of Lamentations.

Eagleton points out that liberalism draws on Christian sources:

...the liberal doctrine of freedom derives among other sources from the Christian notion of free will, rather as the liberal belief in progress has a distant resonance of Christian ideas of Providence.

... Secular liberalism is in no sense the “natural” antidote to religious faith (pp. 17 & 18).

Salvation then is not about religion, but

Feeding the hungry, welcoming the immigrants, visiting the sick, and protecting the poor, orphaned and widowed from the violence of the rich.

...Christianity is all rather disappointingly materialist, unglamorous, and prosaic (p. 19).

In fact,

The whole cumbersome paraphernalia of religion is to be replaced by another kind of temple, that of the murdered, transfigured body of Jesus (p. 20).

And thus:

For Christian teaching, God’s love and forgiveness are ruthlessly unforgiving powers which break violently into our protective, self-rationalizing little sphere, smashing our sentimental illusions and turning our world brutally upside down (p. 22).¹⁷

Amongst other upside down new realities is the rehabilitation of the Law to its rightful place: the gem stone in a setting of ultimate grace and mercy. Therefore,

It is the flayed and bloody scapegoat of Calvary that is now the true signifier of the Law (p. 22).

Then the chilling comment:

Which is to say that those who are faithful to God’s law of justice and compassion will be done away with by the state (p. 22).

One could add to that last phrase, “or by the Church”.

Again I say, Eagleton gets is! – as this next quote ominously and ironically indicates:

Here, then, is your pie in the sky or opium of the people, your soft-eyed consolation and pale-cheeked piety. Here is the fantasy and escapism that the hard-headed secularist pragmatist finds so distasteful. Freud saw religion as mitigation of the human condition; but it surely would be at least plausible to claim that what we call reality is a mitigation of the Gospel’s ruthless demands, which include such agreeable acts of escapism as being ready to lay down your life for a total stranger. Imitating Jesus means imitating his death as well as his life, since the two are not finally

¹⁷ Donald Kraybill wrote a powerful treatment of this Gospel theme: *The Upside Down Kingdom*.

distinguishable. The death is the consummation of the life, the place where the ultimate meaning of Jesus's self-giving is revealed (pp. 22 & 23).

Eagleton keeps on capturing Gospel meaning, adding in the very next paragraph:

The only authentic image of this violently loving God is a tortured and executed political criminal, who dies in an act of solidarity with what the Bible calls the *anawim*, meaning the destitute and dispossessed... His death and descent into hell is [*sic*] a voyage into madness, terror, absurdity, and self-dispossession, since only a revolution that cuts that deep can answer to our dismal condition (p. 23).

Again, on the next page:

Given the lamentable state of humanity, this unashamed utopia does not come easily. I mean by "lamentable state" the prevalence of greed, idolatry, and delusion, the depth of our instinct to dominate and possess, the dull persistence of injustice and exploitation, the chronic anxiety which leads us to hate, maim and exploit, along with the sickness, suffering, and despair which Jesus associates with evil. All this is what Christianity knows as original sin. The coming of the kingdom involves not a change of government, but a turbulent passage through death, nothingness, madness, loss, and futility. It is this passage which in Christian mythology is signified among other things by Christ's descent into hell after his death. There is no possibility of smooth evolution here. Given the twisted state of the world, self-fulfillment can ultimately come about only through self-divestment (p. 24).

Eagleton also gets it about the Gospel and the human condition like Ditchkins, Gretta Vosper, *Jesus Seminar* Jesus Questers, my above-mentioned friends and a host of others apparently do not. At the end of the book, the author again brings this shattering insight into focus:

The distinction between Ditchkins and those like myself comes down in the end to one between liberal humanism and tragic humanism. There are those 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 a myth¹⁸, 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... 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. There are no guarantees that such a transfigured future will ever be born (pp. 168 & 169).

Eagleton is scathing here the way the Gospel is, claiming all other human pretension about saving/changing the world is "so much sentimentalist garbage, ideological illusion, fake utopia, false consolation, ludicrously upbeat idealism... (p. 27)." The Gospel's claim is utterly stark:

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

¹⁸ I think Eagleton intends "false myth".

progress, for which, as we shall see, Ditchkins is a full-blooded apologist. There are rationalist myths¹⁹ as well as religious ones. Indeed, many secular myths are deguttled versions of sacred ones (pp. 27 & 28).

Social critic Ivan Illich rang the changes on the theme that “the corruption of the best is the worst”.²⁰ In both the Church’s and secular society’s institutionalization of the “best” of Christianity, something monstrous and freedom-destroying for humanity emerged instead. How does one liberate from the institutionalization of the ultimate historical act of Liberation itself, the Incarnation and Cross?

Glenn Tinder in *The Atlantic Monthly* posed the question, “Can We Be Good Without God?”²¹ Eagleton broadens it to:

For Christian faith, so I take it, the phrase “atheistic humanism” is not so much erroneous as oxymoronic, since there can be no full humanity without God (p. 28).

As to sexuality,

Jesus is remarkably laid back about sexuality, unlike those millions of his followers who can think of hardly anything else, and who have that much in common with the pornographers they run out of town... [Jesus] seems to take the point that compulsively sleeping around betrays an inability to live fully (pp. 28 & 29).

One becomes what one hates because one is latently that way already. And “free love” is an addiction like any substance. Further,

Sin, Thomas Aquinas claims, has so distorted our emotional natures that we are unable to enjoy sex as we should. If by sin one means violence, aggression, envy, exploitation, acquisitiveness, possessiveness, and so on, then that these damage our creaturely and affective life can scarcely be denied (p. 30).

But there is nothing in the New Testament about the badness of the body Eagleton underscores.

He writes,

It is worth adding that Jesus’s attitude to the family is one of implacable hostility (p. 31).

something Dawkins greets “with chilly suburban distaste (p. 312).” On the contrary,

He does not see that movements for justice cut across traditional blood ties, as well as across ethnic, social, and national divisions. Justice is thicker than blood (p. 31).

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori is a line from the Roman lyrical poet Horace (*Odes* iii 2.13). The line can be rendered as: “It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.”, a notion savaged in Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*. John F. Kennedy’s famous remark, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” has a noble ring, but is fundamentally contrary to biblical justice. Both family and nation are invariably points of idolatry in Christian understanding. It is not therefore surprising that James Dobson of *Focus on the Family* is both blindly pro-family and pro-American Empire. As with so much American Evangelicalism, he is “sold under sin” to religious idolatry divested of justice.

¹⁹ Again, I believe he means “false myths”.

²⁰ See David Cayley’s *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*.

²¹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/religion/goodgod.htm>

Over against the perversions of loyalty to family and country,

One reason why Christianity has proved intuitively attractive to many people is that it places love at the centre of its vision of the world – even if, as we have seen, its version of love is peculiarly unlovely... That love is the focal point of human history, though everywhere spurned and denied, has a convincing enough ring to it in one sense... The concept of political love, one imagines, would make little sense to Ditchkins (pp. 31 & 32).

Eagleton reflects,

Now I would be reluctant to label the account of Christian faith I have just given liberation theology. All authentic theology is liberation theology... I should add, however, that holding views like this is an excellent strategy for anyone wishing to get rid of all their friends and colleagues at a stroke, provoking as they do irritation from the secular left and outrage from the religious right (pp. 32 & 33).

The author recognizes that the antagonism between him and Ditchkins is not only theological but political. This is because, one must add, love of God is only seen in love of neighbour/enemy: that *theology and politics are one*. The Ten Commandments (better, “Ten Prerequisites For Full Humanity”) are distilled by Jesus to “Two”, of which love of neighbour is litmus test of the former, of which “love of enemies” is litmus test for love of neighbour. And Paul and James distil further “The Two” to “One”, “Love your neighbour as yourself”, alternatively labelled “the fulfillment of the law” and “the royal law”.

Paul says in this very context on the negative pole: “*Love does no harm to its neighbour* (Romans 13:10). On the positive he says: “*Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God* (Ephesians 5:1-2).” To the extent therefore we fail to love our enemies, to that extent we reject God²². Put another way: *State violence is a-theism, its purveyors a-theists*.²³

²² This ironclad biblical logic places the Christian on impossible collision course with the sole prerogative of the state not granted its private citizens: lethal violence against domestic (criminals) and foreign enemies. Theology and politics are indeed, at this irreducible level, *one*. And this “One” denies the state its self-arrogated sole prerogative to do lethal violence, in fact considers the state in this way an idol. Given that the vast majority of Christian believers in Western states throughout history have upheld state violence, *the vast majority of Christian believers are idolatrous*. In this context, the New Testament teaches, “You cannot serve God and Country” – and for the same reason, ultimately, as Jesus gave when he stated, “You cannot serve God and Money”. This is magisterially shown in Willard Swartley’s *Covenant of Peace*.

²³ The “a” in Latin signifies “without”. Lee Griffith in *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God* asks:

What would this mean if it were true that we love God only as much as the person we love least?

Would it not mean that, when we have finally won the victory in our war on terrorism, when we have finally managed to exterminate all the thugs and Hitlers and terrorists, we will have expressed nothing so much as our total confidence in the death of God? (p. 263)

At another point he asserts:

Violence is a form of proselytism which preaches that there is no God. The preachments of violence are more effective than televangelists, more zealous in winning converts than those who sell religion door to door. As we wait for God, terror surrounds us with a message offered as holy writ: “God is not.” (p. 68).

(note continued next page)

Eagleton begins to close in finally on

The difference between science and theology, as I understand it, is one over whether you see the world as a gift or not; and you cannot resolve this just by inspecting the thing, any more than you can deduce from examining a porcelain vase that it is a wedding present. The difference between Ditchkins and radicals like myself also hinges on whether it is true that the ultimate signifier of the human condition is the tortured and murdered body of a political criminal, and what the implications of this are for living.

Faith, Ditchkins seems not to register, is not primarily a belief that something or someone exists, but a commitment and allegiance – faith *in* something which might make a difference to the frightful situation you find yourself in... Christian faith, as I understand it, is not primarily a matter of signing on for the proposition that there exists a Supreme Being, but the kind of commitment made manifest by a human being at the end of his tether, foundering in darkness, pain, and bewilderment, who nevertheless remains faithful to the promise of a transformative love.

...Your average liberal rationalist does not believe that despite the tormented condition of humanity there might still, implausibly enough, be hope, since they do not credit such a condition in the first place. This is one important reason why God-talk makes no sense to them, though it is by no means the only reason. Plenty of people repudiate God for eminently creditable reasons; but as far as this point goes, Ditchkins rejects him for reasons which are both boring and politically disreputable.

As the first truly global mass movement in human history, Christianity finds in what it sees as the coming kingdom of God a condition of justice, fellowship, and self-fulfillment far beyond anything that might normally be considered possible or even desirable in the more well-heeled quarters of Oxford and Washington (pp. 37 & 38).

He goes on to say that capitalism is inherently godless, adding,

As such, it is atheistic in all the wrong ways, whereas Marx and Nietzsche are atheistic in what are by and larger the right kind of ways (p. 39).

He says that spiritual New Ageism is one place of refuge, offering an escape from the world, not a mission to transform it. He sees religion in the guise of Islamic radicalism and Christian fundamentalism as “less the opium of the people than their crack cocaine (p. 42).” This kind of religion seeks indeed to change, not escape, the world, “quite ready to embrace its technology

One wonders about chaplaincy in this context of atheism and inverse evangelism. Whereas the Good News calls for good seed to be sown indiscriminately to bring forth *life*, war calls for weapons of mass destruction to be launched indiscriminately to bring forth *death*. *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 6:23). Hence Saint Paul’s words elsewhere in this context:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete (2 Corinthians 10:3 – 4).

“Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52) Church Father Tertullian claimed that these words to Peter thereby “disarmed the Church forever”. Obviously not! (More on this below.)

and forms of organization, whether in the form of chemical warfare or media technology (p. 42).” The problem?: “It is just that fundamentalism offers a cure which is probably even worse than the sickness (p. 43).”

Several programs like *Teen Challenge* mainline clients on Jesus to release them from multiple substance abuse. Similarly, many legitimate treatment programs put heroin addicts on methadone. Jesus and methadone may be preferable substances, but they are no less addictive just the same. In Gerald May’s *Addiction and Grace*, we are told that on the one hand, “God” is the only non-addictive entity we can relate to; on the other, “religion” is the most addictive substance of all. This is surely the import of Jesus’ castigation of religion in his day:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are (Matthew 23:15).

A tragic illustration is in fact Ted Haggard, disgraced American Evangelical pastor, former head of the National Association of Evangelicals, and father of five, for whom “high on Jesus” was not high enough, was supplemented or superseded in fact by paid-for-sex gay encounters over several years, and other homosexual liaisons; and methamphetamine use to enhance sex. Meanwhile Haggard railed against homosexuality and drug abuse in Jesus’ name, led campaigns against same-sex marriage, and evangelized through his church of 16,000 members aggressively at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. This latter activity is documented with pathos and irony in Oren Jacoby’s *Constantine’s Sword*, especially in light of Haggard’s spectacular fall (which, by his current website account, is all now behind him).

As tragically demonstrated in the book and movie just mentioned, whenever the Cross of Christ is inverted/unsheathed, it becomes “Constantine’s Sword”. It is not only that the Church itself, from traditional Constantinian Catholic to Third Wave charismatic, consequently embraces a mission to populate hell by the very faith propagated, it shows its profound addiction in its commitment to such inversion through idolatry of “God and Country”.

The papal legate Arnaud Amaury in the early 13th century, in response to the question of how to know who are the faithful Catholics and who are the heretics, instructed the papal armies in a crusade against the heretical Albigensians/Cathars in southern France: “Kill them all, God will know his own”. The massacre of 20,000 villagers at Béziers in southern France ensued, and up to a million “heretics” were murdered in the end. If all heretics/unbelievers of the Church are going to end in hell anyway (a place of eternal conscious punishment like the temporal Nazi Death Ovens, for only God can sustain life in such everlasting attenuated torment – something Hitler and his henchmen could have only dreamed about!), there is no problem if God’s enemies are expedited to perdition a tad earlier by Constantine’s Sword.²⁴ This at the hands of the

²⁴ I explore at various points this travesty of interpretation of the dominant Western Church doctrine of hell as a place of eternal conscious torment in my novel, *Chrysalis Crucible*, not least in a climactic scene at the ovens of Dachau Concentration Camp. Thankfully, the Eastern Orthodox read their New Testaments, over against for example evangelical Larry Dixon’s piece of interpretative travesty, one fully endorsed by lead evangelical J.I. Packer, in *The Other Side of the Good News: Contemporary Challenges to Jesus’ Teaching on Hell*. See my review at http://clarionjournal.typepad.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/wayne_northey/, that challenges the Western Church’s dominant teaching on war and hell. “Don’t they read their Bibles?”, one repeatedly asks. Of course they do! It is rather a question of reading the Bible about a God ultimately of grace or condemnation.

Church, profoundly addicted to its own religious zeal that translated to unslakable thirst for blood.

Eagleton observes,

Yet if New Ageism is apolitical, Christian fundamentalism is antipolitical. It may be politically militant, but it is basically a form of culturalism, seeking to replace politics with religion. Much the same is true of Al Qaida. Nothing is more antipolitical than planting bombs in public places, even in the name of a political cause.

...This is religion that is once more prepared to agitate and kill (p. 43 & 44).²⁵

Sadly in the West, most Christian religion since Constantine has not only been prepared to “agitate and kill”, it has done so to its domestic and foreign enemies in the main throughout its existence despite Jesus’ injunction, “Love your enemies”. Saint Augustine in fact authorized just such mass slaughter in the name of the state provided there was an internal attitude of “love for your enemies” by the state killers, who ideally were only Christians. *This is possibly the greatest imaginative folly ever committed – then massively emulated by theologians – in the Church’s history.*²⁶

Go join the police or the army, then go out and kill with love in your heart! Try it! Or much more readily, just watch the movie *Jarhead*²⁷, declared by a member of Canada’s elite forces known to the author to be dead-on accurate about contemporary Western military training. Then contact the good Saint Augustine to discuss killing the enemy with love in your heart, as portrayed in that movie! Then try to convince anyone that our military and their (invariably) lying politicians anywhere in the world are “civilization’s finest”!²⁸ Try it! There should be a

²⁵ 87 percent of white evangelicals in April 2003, according to a Pew Charitable Trusts poll, endorsed President Bush’s decision to go to war. This included almost every major white evangelical leadership voice in America from Billy/Franklin Graham to Max Lucado. This was also true of most of the hierarchy and flock of the American Roman Catholic Church.

²⁶ A. J. Coates wrote:

St. Augustine, a major contributor to the just war tradition, argued that, despite the horror of war and the pain and suffering that soldiers inflict on one another, war can be fought without violating the law of charity: to fight without hatred and with compassion is a basic moral imperative. According to realism, however, the imperatives of combat are altogether different. In the first place, military training, or the preparation for combat, is designed to generate in the soldier feelings, dispositions, states of mind that undermine any moral capacity or inclination to fight ‘justly’ or compassionately, let alone ‘lovingly’. The military trainee is to be divested of his civilian and pacific responses and turned into an efficient ‘killing machine’. Not only is he to be taught how to kill, but the ardent desire to kill is to be implanted in him. In this way behaviour and attitudes that in peacetime would be regarded as beyond the pale become in war the moral or professional norm. As Field Marshall Montgomery advised: ‘The troops must be brought to a state of wild enthusiasm before the operation begins... They must enter the fight with the light of battle in their eyes and definitely wanting to kill the enemy’ (Montgomery, [B. L., *Memoirs*], pp. 88 – 9)’; (*The Ethics of War*, p. 29).

²⁷ See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jarhead_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jarhead_(film)).

²⁸ A. J. Coates explains:

The moral prohibition of lying, for example, makes good sense in the context of personal relations, but no sense at all in affairs of state. Telling the truth is a moral luxury that politicians and diplomats can rarely afford. More than that, the fulfillment of their public duty will require them not only to conceal the truth but to suppress it and twist it constantly (*The Ethics of War*, p. 36).

whole category of theology named “Saint Augustine’s Perversion” for such unfathomably wicked and destructive thinking.²⁹ If their actions are civilization’s “finest models”, *God have mercy on all members of such “civilizations”; their citizens modelled after their ultimate defenders, the military and state politicians; and those under their/our domination!* Mahatma Gandhi was asked by Winston Churchill what he thought of Western civilization. His famous response was, “I think it would be a good idea.” Indeed.³⁰

Chapter II: The Revolution Betrayed

In Chapter Two, “The Revolution Betrayed”, Eagleton continues his spirited contrary to Ditchkins. He says,

There are always topics on which otherwise scrupulous minds will cave in to the grossest prejudice with hardly a struggle... for militant atheists it is religion.

...When it comes to God, liberal rationalists who are otherwise accustomed to enforcing fine discriminations are permitted, agreeably enough, to be as sloppy and raucous as they please. In the face of so-called irrationalism, science yields to stridency with hardly a struggle. Like the so-called war on terror, such rationalism is in danger of mimicking the ‘irrationalism’ it confronts in the very act of seeking to resist it (pp. 51 & 52).³¹

Eagleton says that “Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great* is littered with elementary theological howlers (p. 53).”, and gives several examples.

He mentions also issues of biblical criticism on which so many founder, largely one can argue, because the Bible is the Church’s book, and to read it with understanding presupposes commitment far more importantly than a PhD and Religious Studies posting, or a pig and whistle. Contemporary English-language scholars like Walter Brueggemann, N.T. Wright, Luke Timothy Johnson, and Willard Swartley immediately come to mind. There are scores of other-

²⁹ I would propose an American candidate for contemporary first prize to be Richard Land of the *Faith and Religious Liberty Commission* of the Southern Baptist Convention, in his open letter to former President George Bush in October, 2002: <http://erlc.com/article/the-so-called-land-letter/>. The letter is an amazing piece of religious “anti-theology” co-signed by several of America’s then finest evangelical leaders; a document in fact based upon Augustine’s invention of Christian Just War Theory. True to the case in Augustine’s original theory, Land also does not cite Scripture.

³⁰ More on “civilization” below.

³¹ The work of René Girard presents that “we become what we hate” invariably because we are fundamentally imitative beings. Jesus’ words, “Resist not evil.”, meaning implicitly *Resist not evil **in kind***, captures this succinctly. Eagleton adds a little later in similar vein,

God Is Not Great is also a fine illustration of how atheistic fundamentalists are in some ways the inverted mirror image of Christian ones. And not just in their intemperate zeal and tedious obsessiveness.

...Given that [Hitchens] argues for much of the time on the same level as the fundamentalists, the difference being mainly in the point of view, it is all too obvious on what side of his own divide he falls (pp. 53 & 54).

Shakespeare’s Queen Gertrude of course demonstrated this in her famous line, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.” American Episcopalian Bishop John Spong has sadly made a career of this fundamentalist folly, as have to varying degrees some postmodernist revisionist biblical scholars and neoatheists. Such nonsense is too readily the cultural air we breathe. C.S. Lewis warned in *The Discarded Image* something like: *If we persist in “seeing through” everything, we’ll probably end up seeing nothing at all.*

language European, Asian, African, South American etc., scholars as well, many of whose collective mountain of books have also been translated into the *lingua franca*. These are prolific and meticulous biblical scholars. Swiss scholar Karl Barth was the towering Mount Everest systematic theologian in the mid-twentieth century. He wrote more than many read in a lifetime, and was amongst numerous honours an award-winning German prose writer.

Eagleton's comment is:

This is not to relegate the Bible as a whole to the realm of myth, poetry, and fiction, thus shielding it conveniently from rational or historical investigation. It is simply to indicate that the relations between these domains and historical fact in Scripture are exceedingly complex, and that on this score as on many another, Hitchens is hair-raisingly ignorant of generations of modern biblical scholarship (p. 54).

We live in a postmodern age of easy cynicism and dismissal. In a response to a talk on Saint Paul I was invited to give at a Mennonite Church not long ago, one such woman sneered in the discussion period: "I haven't read Paul since I grew up in a church that thought he was the ultimate oracle. I hate him because he's such a whiner!" Okay... I'd just presented Paul as one of the original geniuses of humanity, of tireless and fearless energy and commitment to his cause; as arguably the most impactful social revolutionary of the ancient world if not of all history; as anything but misogynist, antisemitic, socially conservative, a sexual prude, etc. – over against his detractors such as my friends mentioned above.³² "Paul, damn him!...", because he "whines" and "invented" Christianity?: I guess one is welcome to any opinion... But please, at least discuss the issue! Some of us want shown a tad more respect, integrity, and plain responsible scholarship...

Eagleton says that fundamentalism of any kind is failure of the imagination. He says when it comes to religion, "Hitchens's imagination fails catastrophically. Like Dawkins, he fails to grasp the nature of a theological claim (p. 54)." Antagonism towards religion in general, the Church in particular, is not a good starting-point for judicious assessment of either. How can a formerly secular journalist like award-winning CBC's Brian Stewart mentioned above, see the Church in action on all continents for decades and consequently himself get baptized into the Church; and my friends, who both grew up and were baptized as youth in the Church, eschew it vehemently for the last two decades? Jesus' repeated challenge, and that of the Hebrew prophets was: "If you have eyes to see, see."³³

³² Saint Augustine fits some of the accusations above, tragically, but Saint Paul – anything but! As of this writing, July 30, 2009, you can access a two-hour recent audio presentation on Saint Paul in the direction I mention, by Cindy Bisaillon on *CBC Ideas*, entitled "The Man Of The Roads":

<http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/features/man-of-the-roads/index.html>. For hundreds of resources in this direction as well, see: <http://www.thepaulpage.com/>. Hitchens on the other hand suggests Paul and all religious founders were infantile, to which Eagleton in scathing irony rejoins:

Paul may have had the mind of a toddler, indeed in Hitchens's estimate must have had. But his literary works betray surprisingly little hint of it (p. 76).

"Paul, damn him!..." indeed. This smacks of sheer insolence – albeit no doubt from some source of pain and hurt. But blame Paul for his own misuse? Blame the Jews for the Holocaust? The blame game for victims never works.

³³ This in Matthew 13:14-15:

In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear

Then Eagleton delivers his prophetic blow to the Church:

Yet it is most certainly Christianity itself which is primarily responsible for the intellectual sloppiness of its critics. Apart from the signal instance of Stalinism, it is hard to think of a historical movement that has more squalidly betrayed its own revolutionary origins (p. 55).

Though I think all of us are primarily responsible for our own intellectual sloppiness if so, sloppiness that seems to abound in the field of religion on both extremes of “conservative” and “progressive”, I think the Church past and present nonetheless horrifically incites “seeing red”. This is mainly because of the God-awful discrepancy between the Church’s *supreme ideal of self-giving love* (the biblical word is *agape* and resonant with profound neighbour/enemy embrace), and its worldwide centuries-long *spectacular failure to read its own texts with love the ultimate theological hermeneutic*, and a *life of love* the only centralizing ethic. In short, in the main: *the Western Church has failed massively and miserably in its theology and in its politics whenever agape has been less than its hermeneutic and modus operandi.*

This is precisely Jesus’ and Paul’s teaching, to cite but two texts:

Matthew 5:43-45; 7:21-24 (*The Sermon on the Mount*):

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

... “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ [And sadly, ‘endorse/do massive slaughter?’] Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...

Ephesians 5:1-2:

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

It is not just that whatever else, *not all Christians are dummies*. It’s also that whatever else, *not all Christians are unloving!* Some in Church history have actually *tried* to live out their faith according to the Two Greatest Commandments:

Matthew 22:35-40:

One of them, an expert in the law, tested [Jesus] with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and

with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’

greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Hmmm. Yet Ditchkins will have none of acknowledging this as commendable ethic, let alone that any Christians have lived it out! On the contrary, *they* poison everything!³⁴ Eagleton deftly repeatedly lances such xenophobic disingenuous nonsense. Despite the Lenin's, Stalin's, and Mao's, I and others actually believe that some atheists have demonstrated love and integrity in human history. In that acknowledgement, one is suddenly light years removed from Ditchkins on the intolerance/fundamentalist scale. They and a crop of their neoatheist ilk sadly and unnecessarily occupy the nadir ground.

Eagleton somewhat rightly comments:

Christianity long ago shifted from the side of the poor and dispossessed to that of the rich and aggressive. The Liberal Establishment really has little to fear from it and everything to gain... The [Christian] suburbanite response to the *anawim*, a term which can be roughly translated into American English as "loser", is for the most part to flush them off the streets.

This brand of piety is horrified by the sight of a female breast, but considerably less appalled by the obscene inequalities between rich and poor. It laments the death of a fetus, but is apparently undisturbed by the burning to death of children in Iraq or Afghanistan in the name of U.S. global dominion. By and large, it worships a God fashioned blasphemously in its own image – a clean-shaven, short-haired, gun-toting, sexually obsessive God with a special regard for that ontologically privileged piece of the globe just south of Canada and north of Mexico, rather than the Yahweh who is homeless, faceless, stateless, and imageless, who prods his people out of their comfortable settlement into the trackless terrors of the desert, and who brusquely informs them that their burnt offerings stink in their nostrils. One is told that there is an American prayer "for High Achievers," in which God is said to be "the greatest achiever of all." In fact, the only one of his achievements we can actually see with our eyes is the world; and if this is the best he can do, one is distinctly underwhelmed by his talents (pp. 55 & 56).³⁵

³⁴ Eagleton writes:

The countless millions who have devoted their lives to the selfless service of others in the name of Christ or Allah or the Buddha are simply wiped from history – and this by a self-appointed crusader against bigotry.

...In any case, Hitchens's book appears to claim any good that religious men and women have achieved for the cause of secular humanism, which is rather like arguing that any advances made by feminists are due entirely to the benign influence of their fathers (p. 97).

³⁵ When Saint Augustine in 410 AD witnessed the sack of Rome, and the encroaching threat of "barbarians", the Roman Church by then had embraced the legitimacy of Empire, which one church historian describes as "the triumph of ideology" (Alistair Kee, *Constantine versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology*). By then, Empire ideology contradicted the non-violent, nonacquisitive Way and Cross of Christ. It was consequently no stretch ethically to move to Crusades against external enemies, and Inquisition against internal enemies. Kee wrote:

"But there is one conquest made by Constantine, the effect of which still continues to the present day, his most surprising yet least acknowledged... He conquered the Christian church. The conquest was complete, extending over doctrine, liturgy, art and architecture, comity, ethos and ethics... But this achievement, unheralded then, unrecognized now, represents Constantine's greatest conquest, the one

Not all in the church however “bowed the knee to wealth and power” then, since, or now. There has always been what the Bible calls a “remnant”; one, by its very minority status that is ever in danger of its own self-righteousness and arrogance, of becoming what it hates.

Majority Christianity to be sure has displayed the upturned Sword dripping with blood and vengeance far more in Western Christianity than the nonviolent Cross awash in mercy and grace. The former sadly is the primary truth of Western Church history, the latter joyfully the Ultimate Truth of human history. Eagleton’s thesis is: *Do not throw out the Babe of Bethlehem/Incarnate Resurrected Lord of History with the bath water!* But throw out the filthy and bloody bath water one must!

Eagleton is no triumphalist, *triumphalism* being a signal grand tragedy of Church history, and an abject abomination and horror story over 17 centuries, likely beyond that of all other institutions/movements known to humanity. Fail to acknowledge this, to that extent *fail to embrace the Truth that will set humanity free*. This is the essence of contending that majority Western Christianity is idolatrous towards the state in all ages since Emperor Constantine. White American Catholicism and Evangelicalism in particular arguably reached their idolatrous apogee during the Bush administration years. “God Bless America!” was its collective self-righteous cry; “God Have Mercy on America!” in truth its only desperate hope!³⁶ America survived these savagely idolatrous years such as it did, because *mercy triumphed over judgment* (James), and *where sin abounded, grace did much more abound* (Paul): this despite majority America’s collective overweening religious depravity and arrogance.³⁷

Eagleton:

The Christian church has tortured and disembowled in the name of Jesus, gagging dissent and burning its critics alive. It has been oily, sanctimonious, brutally oppressive, and vilely bigoted. Morality for this brand of belief is a matter of the bedroom rather than the boardroom. It supports murderous dictatorships in the name of God, views both criticism and pessimism as unpatriotic, and imagines that being a Christian means maintaining a glazed grin, a substantial bank balance, and a mouthful of pious platitudes. It denounces terrorism, but excludes from its strictures such kidnapping, torturing, murdering outfits as the CIA...

This brand of faith fails to see that the only cure for terrorism is justice. It also fails to grasp to what extent the hideous, disfigured thing clamouring at its gates is its own monstrous creation. It is unable to acknowledge this thing of darkness as in part its

which has persisted largely unchallenged through the centuries in Europe and wherever European Christianity has spread.

...“To be declared heretical by the norms of orthodox Constantinian Christianity may be a source of relief and encouragement to those who seek to follow Christ (pp. 154 & 169).”

³⁶ The story Jesus tells in Luke 18:9 – 14 could sadly permit swapping out “Pharisee” for “conservative American Christian”. The punch line is: *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

³⁷ Read the “Land Letter” mentioned earlier, as one instance of this amazing self-righteous depravity: <http://erlc.com/article/the-so-called-land-letter/>.

own, unable to find its own reflection in its distorted visage.³⁸ In the light of all this, the bellicose ravings of Ditchkins are, if anything, too muted. It is hard to avoid the feeling that a God as bright, resourceful, and imaginative as the one that might just possibly exist could not have hit on some more agreeable way of saving the world than religion (p. 57).

Eagleton is reflecting in these last sentiments a longstanding biblical tradition of railing against, of wildly lamenting, of viciously castigating God for the hell of a mess the world is in. This as indicated is a form of Western “atheism” that is profoundly spiritual, deeply rooted in victimization, unjust pain, surreal unmitigated horror at so much wrong with the world. It is reflected in Psalm 22, the opening line Jesus quotes from the Cross³⁹. The author continues:

I am talking, then, about the distinction between what seems to me a scriptural and an ideological kind of Christian faith – a distinction which can never simply be assumed but must be interminably argued. One name for this thankless exercise is what Nietzsche, who held that churches were the tombs and sepulchres of God, called in Kierkegaardian phrase saving Christianity from Christendom (pp. 57 & 58).

I would slightly alter Eagleton’s next statement:

Any preaching of the Gospel which fails to constitute a scandal and affront to the political state is in my view effectively worthless (p. 58).

After “political state” I would add, “in its self-arrogation of sole right of exercising lethal violence against its enemies”. The state rightly prevents its citizens from killing its enemies. It must renounce that lethal right for itself if it is to be properly ethical. The state itself is otherwise perpetually and invariably supreme model for the violence of its own citizens, from schoolyard

³⁸ Political scientist Mahmood Mamdani in *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, 9/11, and the Roots of Terror*, says international terrorist organizations are America’s creation. “Not only does he argue that terrorism does not necessarily have anything to do with Islamic culture; he also insists that the spread of terror as a tactic is largely an outgrowth of American cold war foreign policy. After Vietnam, he argues, the American government shifted from a strategy of direct intervention in the fight against global Communism to one of supporting new forms of low-level insurgency by private armed groups... ‘In practice,’ Mr. Mamdani has written, ‘it translated into a United States decision to harness, or even to cultivate, terrorism in the struggle against regimes it considered pro-Soviet.’... ‘The real damage the C.I.A. did was not the providing of arms and money,’ he writes, ‘but the privatization of information about how to produce and spread violence — the formation of private militias — capable of creating terror.’ The best-known C.I.A.-trained terrorist, he notes dryly, is Osama bin Laden... Drawing on the same strategy used in Africa, the United States supported the Contras in Nicaragua and then created, on a grand scale, a pan-Islamic front to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. Whereas other Islamic movements, like the Iranian revolution, had clear nationalist aims, the Afghan jihad, Mr. Mamdani suggests, was created by the United States as a privatized and ideologically stateless resistance force. A result, he writes, was ‘the formation of an international cadre of uprooted individuals who broke ties with family and country of origin to join clandestine networks with a clearly defined enemy.’ (quoted in Hugh Eakin, “When U.S. Aided Insurgents, Did It Breed Future Terrorists?”, *The New York Times*, April 10, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/10/arts/10MAMD.html?pagewanted=1&th>.)”

Like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*’s monstrous creation, Al Qaida is the C.I.A.’s gift to the world. The C.I.A. in turn (whose Virginia headquarters has at its entrance Jesus’ words: “You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall set you free”), like *Frankenstein* plays God (worldwide), and leaves in its wake, like the former Soviet KGB and Nazi SS, horror, death, terror and destruction. Its operatives are in fact murderers and liars and purveyors of everything antithetical to human freedom – except American Empire freedom to rape, kill, assassinate, overthrow, steal etc., at will. See further instance below about Allende’s Chile.

³⁹ *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?...*

bullying to mass murder⁴⁰. Ultimate violence prevention is only possible when the state renounces resort to violence itself. Self-protection, yes. Lethal violence, no.

But, “if religion has so flagrantly failed to live up to its own founding principles, what about liberalism?”, he asks. He cites

The violent suborning of freedom and democracy abroad, the misery wreaked by racism and sexism, the sordid history of colonialism and imperialism, the generation of poverty and famine, the warfare and genocide of sublime proportions, the arming and championing of one odious tyrant after another? What human carnage terrorism has so far murderously wreaked in the West is minor indeed compared to the long history of slaughter and oppression of the West itself... Most of those Western commentators who have greeted the crimes of Islamic terrorism with panic and hysteria have not shouted quite so loudly about the long catalogue of atrocities of their own supposedly enlightened civilization. Why was it only after 9/11, when they themselves became for the first time potential victims of attack, that their moral indignation broke cover so stridently? There is nothing wrong with protesting against bloodthirsty bigots who seek to deprive you of your limbs, so long as you have the elementary sense of justice to point out that one major reason for this criminal intent is the shameful way the West has treated others in the past (p. 61).⁴¹

Eagleton shows that America’s “teachable moment” was lost in strident reassertion of old values that amongst others were racist, sexist, and militaristic. So,

The grim news was that the United States’s moment of tragic crisis was in no way a spiritual conversion. On the contrary, it was business as usual, only a good deal more so (p. 64).

Over against the revolutionary force of Christian *agape*,

Ditchkins and his ilk support, by and large, the political status quo with varying degrees of reformist dissent... His campaign against fundamentalism has been signally unmatched by an equally forthright critique of global capitalism, a system which breeds so much of the anxiety and sense of humiliation off which fundamentalism feeds... One cannot imagine Ditchkins describing the capitalist system as “almost unequivocally demonic,” words used of it by the greatest twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth (pp. 64 & 65).

Eagleton contrasts the life-giving, freedom-bringing intent of the Ten Commandments, including implicitly Jesus’ summation into the “Two Greatest Commandments”, and Paul’s and James’ further distillation into one which is “the fulfillment of the law” and “the royal law”, namely “Love your neighbour as [being] yourself”, with

⁴⁰ The movie *Jarhead* illustrates the Western state’s profound commitment to teach extreme bullying in its military training. The research of retired American Lt. Colonel David Grossman into the science of killing he has dubbed “killology” (<http://www.killology.com/>), demonstrates the state’s commitment to teach knee-jerk massive killing on command. Two other studies worth noting are Jared Diamond’s *The Third Chimpanzee*, and David Livingstone’s *The Most Dangerous Animal*.

⁴¹ Lebanese political scientist Gilbert Achcar argues precisely this in *The Clash of Barbarisms: September 11 & the Making of the New World Disorder*.

Ditchkins, [who] in short, is not just a liberal rationalist, but a readily identifiable English middle-class liberal rationalist... His God-hating is by no means the view of a dispassionate scientist commendably cleansed of prejudice. There is no such animal in any case. It belongs to a specific cultural context (pp. 65 & 66).

And Ditchkins' cultural context in this case turns out to have quite contentedly waged many "savage wars of peace" (as Rudyard Kipling dubbed them in his abominable ode to British and American Empire self-righteousness, "The White Man's Burden"). Or as military historian Tami Biddle wrote in *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare* of the Ditchkins' forebears ilk: when in the 19th-century aerial warfare was still only imagined, it meant "English-speaking peoples raining incendiary bombs over the enemy to impose the customs of civilization".

This perverse imagination in fact turned real during World War II under Allied command in over 40 German and nearly 70 Japanese cities, with resultant civilian casualties in each country approaching one million.⁴² 100,000 civilians in Tokyo alone were immolated in horrendous holocaust March 9 & 10, 1945. After the atomic bombs dropped later that year, General Curtis LeMay in charge of operations, chortled that "we scorched and boiled and baked to death more people in Tokyo on that night of March 9-10 than went up in vapor at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined". He was technically wrong: 120,000 civilians instantaneously lost their lives in those two attacks three days apart, and tens of thousands died subsequent agonizing deaths. It is now estimated that when aerial bombing was used first in World War I, there were about 10% civilian casualties. In World War II, the estimate rose to 50%. Currently, with cruise missiles, drones, and smart bombs, the estimate is at 80% to 90% civilian casualties in conflict zones like Afghanistan and Iraq.

Former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara admitted in Errol Morris' documentary *The Fog of War*, that he and LeMay, under whose command he worked, would have been charged with war crimes had the Allies lost the War. Instead, LeMay became the most decorated military commander ever to 1945, and McNamara rose in power to become the architect of the monstrous crime of mass murder and environmental degradation known as the Vietnam War, with full U.S. government (and one must add, with almost complete conservative and liberal Christian, and atheist) backing.

Eagleton also goes after the left for its attacks on religion, as he points out that Ditchkins falls silent about the horrors of the sort mentioned above, result of his kind of horrific progressive liberalism:

Marxism began among other things as a response to a Christian movement which had betrayed its origins, and ended up in a whole sector of the globe doing the same...

In a similar way, the disgusting betrayals of the Christian churches stand, as we have suggested, under the judgment of the Gospel itself (pp. 67 & 68).

As Ivan Illich constantly lamented: "The corruption of the best is the worst."

Eagleton prods at Enlightenment and early capitalist origins, saying:

⁴² This was the casualty number predicted for American Marines if there had been a military land invasion of Japan. This was used before and after to justify the use of atomic bombs. Two in fact were dropped on defenseless civilians in two Japanese cities in August, 1945. The irony is beyond tragically immense.

The Enlightenment was deeply shaped by values which stemmed from the Christian tradition. But it was also right, as Ditchkins argues, to see actually existing religion as part of the barbarism it sought to face down. Even so, in a choice irony, it inherited its brave campaign against superstition partly from Christianity itself, with its rejection of all false gods and prophets, all idols, fetishes, magical rituals, and powers of darkness, in the name of human flesh and blood.

...At the same time, this enlightened liberal humanism served as the legitimating ideology of a capitalist culture more steeped in blood than any other episode in human history. This, one may note, is what Ditchkins unaccountably forgets to say. Only Marxism recounts the story of how these contrasting narratives are secretly one. It reminds us of the mighty achievements of Francis Bacon, but also of the fact that he believed in torture. It insists that modernity means both contraception and Hiroshima, liberation movements and biological warfare. Some people think it Eurocentric to point out that Europe was the historical home of modernity, forgetful that this also means that it was also the home of the Holocaust. The radical answer to the question of whether modernity is a positive or negative phenomenon is an emphatic yes and no... [T]he liberal Enlightenment that Ditchkins champions has been at one and the same time an enthralling advance in humanity and an insupportable nightmare – the latter tale moreover as verso of the recto of the former, the two colliding histories structurally complicit rather than contingently cheek by jowl (pp. 69 & 70).

Eagleton scathingly says,

If ever there was pious myth and piece of credulous superstition, it is the liberal-rationalist belief that, a few hiccups apart, we are all steadily en route to a finer world (p. 70),

which he calls “brittle triumphalism”. With reference to this kind of liberalism that like Christianity betrays its own origins, Eagleton claims that

One vital reason why the United States has declared an open-ended war on terror is to ensure a flow of open-ended profits for a large number of its corporations (p. 71).⁴³

Yet, ironically,

The surest safeguard for freedom in this Orwellian world would seem the training of death squads and the arming of dictators. The United States has a long-standing policy of supporting theocratic monarchies in the name of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The forces of the Christian right, far from constituting a minor swamp of irrationalism awaiting its moment to be mopped up by the irresistible advance of Reason, have become integral to the workings of the U.S. political system, in a squalid

⁴³ Eagleton comments later:

Scientific development and moral evolution would seem to go hand in hand, for Dawkins as for the dewy-eyed Victorian rationalists. The idea that science might actually have contributed to our degradation as well as to our refinement is not even curiously considered. Nor is it by Hitchens. They are both excellent examples of finely intelligent men who have been rendered obtuse in certain respects by ideology (p. 87).

This is the obverse of triumph of Sword ideology (*in hoc signo vinceres* – in this sign you will conquer), which was the vision of the labarum – the Sword – on the Milvian Bridge that Constantine claimed to have seen, and that unsheathed Peter’s Sword for the Church ever since.

alliance of preachers, lobbyists, businessmen, televangelists, Washington power-brokers, and right-wing politicians (p. 73)

Eagleton berates an easy black-and-white division of the world into reasonable (Western values of Enlightenment and Progress) and unreasonable (Eastern religious superstitions), noting that

The choice between West and East is sometimes one between which particular squalid bunch of murderous fanatics one prefers to back. And this, one would have thought, might be the occasion for a humility and self-criticism for which Ditchkins's writing is not remarkable (pp. 74 & 75).

One such Western group of "murderous fanatics" was in fact the manufacturers of the atomic bomb, not to mention a long list since of nuclear and conventional weaponry designers/producers straight from the bowels of hell. The supporting cast fully in the know of these "murderous fanatics" was in fact a list that included in the past Winston Churchill, Harry Truman, and William Lyon Mackenzie King; today a whole bevy of "normal" university, scientific and military type and all top commanders at NATO; every Western politician who has backed NATO and the War on Terror to the present; and the majority of Western democratic citizens who fail/failed to declare, "The Emperor has no clothes!" and call for a stop to all Western "murderous fanaticism" including the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. To be sure, and tragically, these "murderous fanatics" recently included a triumvirate of G8 Evangelical Christian leaders: George Bush, Tony Blair and (the only one left) Stephen Harper. But Hitchens is vehemently pro-murderous fanaticism in his support of the War on Terror, as is in large measure the Western Liberal Establishment, of whom Canadian Liberal Party leader Michael Ignatieff is one of the most intelligent and urbane – but no less murderous.

Eagleton draws on Canadian Christian philosopher Charles Taylor's massive study, *A Secular Age*, to suggest that the new Progressive image of Western Man on the emergence since 1500, Western Man coming of age in a world that after all does not have or need God, that this maturity

is inseparable from a certain infantile anxiety... Sovereignty proves to be inseparable from solitude. At the peak of his assurance, Enlightenment Man finds himself frighteningly alone in the universe, with nothing to authenticate himself but himself... What is the point of extracting from the world with one hand values which the other hand has just put in? What is it for the human subject to stand on a foundation which is itself (pp. 82 & 83)?

The other irony for Postmodern Western Man is, in the very act of deconstruction, he finds himself cutting off the nose to spite his face, sawing off the limb he himself has been standing on! And this nose at its finest, this limb at its sturdiest, both invariably prove to be of Christian origin. This is a stark dilemma one of my two friends alluded to above simply does not get or if so cares not to acknowledge. Her best values are in fact Christian *agape*-based. Admitting that is for her ideological *anathema*. The other word for it is *fundamentalism*. Eagleton shows at various points in the book this Western Liberal dilemma of eschewing-while-unwittingly-or-otherwise-embracing Christian values.

Eagleton speculates that Hitchens in particular in his crusading atheism and in his seeking to extract transcendent meaning from literature, is in fact misguided. Eagleton warns that in the case of literature this is actually dangerous, even destructive. He further castigates Ditchkins and postmodernists:

The idea of progress needs to be rescued alike from the complacency of Ditchkins and the modish scepticism of the postmodernists... There is indeed progress – as long as we bear in mind that the civilization which manifest it is also one which seems bent on destroying the planet, slaughtering the innocent, and manufacturing human inequality on an unimaginable scale (pp. 84 & 85).

Again,

We have it then, from the mouth of Mr. Public Science himself [Dawkins] that aside from a few local hiccups like ecological disaster, ethnic wars, and potential nuclear catastrophe, History is perpetually on the up. Not even beaming, tambourine-banging Evangelicals are quite so pathologically bullish. What is this but an example of blind faith? What rational soul would sign up for such a secular myth (pp. 87 & 88)?

Eagleton also accuses Dawkins of being a true child of 19th-century Positivism in his belief in the secular myth of “memes”.⁴⁴ Further,

An enlightened trust in the sovereignty of human reason can be every bit as magical as the exploits of Merlin, and a faith in our capacity for limitless self-improvement just as much a wide-eyed superstition as faith in leprechauns... A form of rationality which detaches itself from the life of the body and the affections will fail to shape this subjective domain from the inside, thus leaving it prey to chaos and violence. Primitivism is the flip side of rationalism (pp. 89 & 90).

Eagleton allows that

Ironically, the idea of progress has a religious resonance... Christian theology believes in the possibility of transforming history without the hubris of the idea of Progress (pp. 92 & 93).

He knows that civilized and barbarous, enlightened and irrational are not the simple antitheses Ditchkins intimates. In fact,

Liberal rationalism, that is to say, has its own metaphysical articles of faith, and to that extent has something in common with the religion it excoriates... How far is the dream of a thoroughly rational future a substitute for heaven? Is “Progress” the liberal-rationalist translation of “after-life”? Has liberal rationalism really got out from under religion (p. 95)?

Anthropologist René Girard says all civilizations are based on a founding murder that is covered up and studiously denied by religion, just as the biblical original murder of Abel was⁴⁵. So the liberal myth about “civilization” as Gandhi rightly observed is shot through with lies.

⁴⁴ Dawkins’ non-science about memes is also challenged in one episode of Cayley’s CBC *Ideas* series, “How To Think About Science”.

⁴⁵ Theologian James Williams studied this at book length in *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*.

What this fable overlooks is the fact that barbarism and civilization are not only sequential but synchronic – that human civilization is among other, rather finer things a “higher” or sublimated form of violence and aggression... [B]arbarism remains one of the secretly enabling conditions or barely concealed underside of that precious thing we call civilization – a barbaric subtext which with the help of George Bush and his neocon gangsters has in recent years become rather less shamefaced and subterranean. The violence which normally founds nation-states does not simply give way to subsequent civility. Instead, it is sublimated into the business of keeping Nature aggressively under control, without which civilization finds it hard to survive. It is also sublimated into the task of defending the political state, and is now known as the military, the law, or political authority. One reason why terrorism is so alarming, quite apart from its moral obscenity, is that it reveals to civilization something of its own disavowed secret self. At the heart of freedom lurks a certain coercion, just as reason is always infiltrated by its opposite (pp. 96 & 97).

We become what we hate in other words, because we *are* at least latently what we hate! After 9/11, the American nation agonized over why the world hated it! Brilliant Bush nailed it with proverbial Texan provincialism as “they hate our freedoms”. The reality is slightly otherwise: *the United States is hated because it is a ruthless Empire as grotesquely “uncivilized” as any that preceded it; as any that vied or vie for power with it, such as the Soviet Union and China, Japan and Nazi Germany.*

Eagleton cites two examples of American barbarism:

It is a familiar fact (though not, apparently, all that familiar to the U.S. media) that, thirty years to the day before the attack on the Twin Towers, the United States government violently overthrew the democratically elected government of Chile, installing in its place an odious puppet autocrat who went on to massacre far more people than died in the World Trade Centre. The United States also supported for many years a regime in Indonesia that probably exterminated more people than Saddam Hussein did (pp. 100 & 101).⁴⁶

Eagleton continues with many other instances, saying none however justifies legitimation for the use of terror.

Chapter 3: Faith and Reason

He moves on in Chapter Three to a discussion of “Faith and Reason”, noting that “Richard Dawkins claims with grandiloquent folly that religious faith dispenses with reason altogether (p. 109)”... Eagleton continues scathingly:

Even Richard Dawkins lives more by faith than by reason. There are even those uncharitable observers who have detected the mildest whiff of obsessive irrationalism

⁴⁶ For more on such barbarisms, see the documentary by Patricio Guzmán, *Salvador Allende*, and *Missing* by Costa Gravas (which elicited an eventually dismissed lawsuit); William Blum’s books on American Empire (one of which *Rogue State*, after being cited by Osama bin Laden, caused the end of his speaking engagements on American campuses): (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Blum); and The American Empire Project (<http://www.americanempireproject.com/>). Well-documented studies (sadly) abound.

in his zealous campaign for secular rationality. His antireligious zeal makes the Grand Inquisitor look like a soggy liberal (pp. 109 & 110).

But the point is, reason qua reason is simply inadequate, just as science qua science can never discover through science its own foundational values and starting-points.⁴⁷ Several Ditchkins errors about religious faith are addressed by Eagleton:

- God is not a possible object of cognition for which “faith” is the necessary instrument, since there is otherwise no evidence
- Christianity is first performative before it is propositional⁴⁸
- Only fully paid-up rationalists think that nothing is certain but indisputable knowledge
- “Fundamentalists are faithless. They are, in fact, the mirror image of skeptics (p. 114).”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Eagleton remarks:

...Ditchkins’s belief in the value of individual freedom differs from [“scientific observation or an everyday piece of cognition”]. Ditchkins cannot ground such beliefs scientifically, and there is absolutely no reason why he should (p. 123).

David Cayley of *CBC Ideas* draws on his twenty-four hour series “How To Think About Science” (<http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/features/science/index.html>) in opining:

[Terry Eagleton’s] conclusions resonate in various ways with a theme that runs through “How To Think About Science” in several different keys: *science’s complete dependence on purposes and presuppositions which are necessarily established outside of science* (italics added).

⁴⁸ James William McClendon Jr. wrote a classic three-volume Systematic Theology that began with *Ethics (Systematic Theology Volume 1)*, an ethical reading of the Bible that was also what Glen Stassen calls “just peacemaking”, in line with the anabaptist (lower case is intentionally used by McClendon Jr.) understanding, in line also with The Sermon on the Mount and Plain material in Matthew and Luke, and with James (though Martin Luther hated this “right strawy Epistle” for it), who summarized it thus:

James 2:18

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

The essence of this *doing* in turn is given by the prophet Micah as “justice” to neighbour and enemy (which has been called the “high water mark of Hebrew spirituality” over against all manner of sacrificial offerings, religious observances and pietisms; which is quoted by Jesus in Matthew 23:23; which goes in tandem with the Two Greatest Commandments, namely love of God and neighbor/enemy):

Micah 6:8

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

⁴⁹ Interestingly, such sceptics demand 100% certainty like the unseeing dwarfs in C.S. Lewis’ *The Last Battle* – and like Evangelical “apologists” such as Josh McDowell in his travesty, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, and other books, or a series of misguided books by Lee Strobel (<http://www.leestrobel.com/store.php>), all designed to do the impossible: coerce faith. (In the past this was attempted during the Crusades at the point of the sword; in the present, Evangelicals do it at the point of decision in evangelistic “crusades” (another travesty), or at the point of the pen in such books as just mentioned. They are all equally unsuccessful – even when they “succeed”, as Jesus chillingly warned about religious addiction in Matthew 23:15.) Over against these *unfaithful* mirror images of sceptic and fundamentalist defender, Eagleton writes:

Herbert McCabe, who holds the orthodox view that Christian faith is reasonable but not provable, points out that demanding watertight proofs can actually be a reactionary move (p. 115).; and again:

If proof means whatever compels assent, it is in drastically short supply. Thomas Aquinas certainly did not believe that the existence of God was self-evident.

...A hunger for absolute justification is a neurosis, not a tenacity to be admired (p. 124).

Such “proofs” at minimum are inauthentic and invite derision and accusations of preaching to the choir, which McDowell for instance gets at this site (The accusation rings true. I once belonged to that choir.):

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/jeff_lowder/jury/http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/jeff_lowder/jury/.

Eagleton says that *reasons* for being in love can be given by one person that can be fully understood and agreed to in terms of that loved person's qualities, but may in no way induce loving commitment or being in love.

At some point along the line, a particular way of seeing the evidence emerges, one which involves a peculiar kind of personal engagement with it; and none of this is reducible to the facts themselves, in the sense of being ineluctably motivated by a bare account of them (p. 116).

As Michael Polanyi has demonstrated and as Eagleton also asserts, "reason" itself is dialogical and involves a faith commitment, presupposing a previous community of dialogue that is trusted and a "given".⁵⁰ Science and religion in part talk past each other when their spokespersons miss this very point. No amount of screaming and denunciation can make an outsider respond to me intelligently if he has not one clue about the language (game – Wittgenstein) I am using – and certainly no trust in the interlocutor!⁵¹

Eagleton draws on left-wing atheistic French philosopher Alain Badiou:

Badiou grasps the point that the kind of truth involved in acts of faith is neither independent of propositional truth nor reducible to it. Faith for him consists in a tenacious loyalty to what he calls an "event" – an utterly original happening which is

⁵⁰ There is this exchange in my novel, *Chrysalis Crucible*, set during the Vietnam War (pp. 107 – 109):

"In my third year," Andy responded, "I was studying Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, an 18th-century German intellectual and literary critic. He was drinking at the wells of an incipient Enlightenment understanding of reality that is, of course, the air we breathe today. He ended up taking on a Christian pastor who took strong exception to Enlightenment thinking in a public exchange of letters. Lessing is credited in this exchange with having written the unofficial motto of the Enlightenment, in response to Orthodox Christian belief: 'There is an ugly broad ditch between the accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason.'"

... "So Lessing was saying," Gary paraphrased his statement into a question, "that historical events so claimed by Christians, such as the Crucifixion and Resurrection, are not in themselves 'self-evident 'truths,' compared to the 'necessary truths of reason' held universally by the clear-minded, such as the belief that the earth is flat, which was once held universally as an axiomatic truth?"

... "Well," Andy replied, "there was a 'self-evident' truth Lessing himself was overlooking. The truth is, 'truth'—even the 'necessary truths of reason'—is not so obviously 'true' or 'necessary' after all."

Dan could not hold back. "The great Michael Polanyi objection, precisely! Had Mr. Lessing been able to transport himself magically and linguistically to the head hunters roaming around New Guinea at the time, he'd have quickly found out how non-universally-self-evident were his 'necessary truths' after all, perhaps only moments before falling prey to their 'necessary truth,' namely, outsiders were best in the cooking pot, and his sun-shrunken head pride-of-place charm above the chief's doorway.

"Such counter-cultural 'truth' to Lessing's might have been just the corrective needed to have nipped in the bud the overweening arrogance of the emerging new orthodoxy called 'Enlightenment,' which quickly displaced Christianity amongst the educated elite. At the very least, it might have lopped off Lessing's own smug rationality by turning it into an emaciated piece of door decoration. The Enlightenment myth of necessary truths of reason is precisely that: a myth about as compelling as a wrinkled prune—or a shrunken head."

⁵¹ Eagleton writes:

Among the assumptions that science takes for granted, for example, is the postulate that only "natural" explanations are to be ruled in. This may well be a wise supposition. It certainly rules out a lot of egregious nonsense. But it is indeed a postulate, not the upshot of demonstrable truth.

... Science, then, trades on certain articles of faith like any other form of knowledge (p. 131).

out of joint with the smooth flow of history, and which is unnameable and ungraspable within the context in which it occurs. Truth is what cuts against the grain of the world⁵², breaking with an older dispensation and founding a radically new reality. Such momentous “truth events” come in various shapes and sizes, all the way from the resurrection of Jesus (in which Badiou does not believe for a moment) to the French Revolution, the moment of Cubism, Cantor’s set theory, Schoenberg’s atonal composition, the Chinese cultural revolution, and the militant politics of 1968.

For Badiou, one becomes an authentic human subject, as opposed to a mere anonymous member of the biological species, through one’s passionate allegiance to such a revelation... But truth is also a question of solidarity, involving as it usually does the birth of a believing community such as the church. This commitment opens up a new order of truth, and being faithful to this truth is what Badiou means by the ethical. Like divine grace, a truth event represents an invitation which is available to everyone. Before the truth, we are all equal (pp. 117 & 118).

This is what Michael Polanyi meant about rationality operative only within a community of dialogue with prior values and faith commitments. This is why so many atheistic web sites as alluded to above, or books by neoatheists such as Ditchkins’ are little more than quaint and completely beside the point for the committed Christian believer (or any kind of religious faithful). They no doubt are “true” to that unbelieving community of dialogue, and they are welcome to their “truth” – even though it will not set them free, which Christians believe only the Gospel can. Christians happen also to believe they are wrong about that “truth” against the larger scale of Truth. Too bad that postmodernists do not even permit such a metanarrative says Eagleton, René Girard, Stanley Hauerwas and a host of Christian believers. Too bad that modernists such as Ditchkins (more like 19th-century discredited Positivists and schoolyard liberals, claim Eagleton and Stanley Fish (the latter in a review of *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*.) cannot abide Christian Truth.⁵³

⁵² Stanley Hauerwas, America’s “best theologian”, so dubbed by his peers, gave the 2001 Gifford Lectures under the title *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (also published), the first part of the title an expression borrowed from pacifist Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, to underscore how *against* the grain of the fallen world Christian revelation is in its “just peacemaking” initiative! This is like cosmologist and Templeton Prize winner George Ellis’ and theologian Nancey Murphy’s *The Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology and the Sciences*, who point to the *kenotic* (self-giving and nonviolent, as in Philippians 2:1 – 11) nature of the universe as model for all human relationships.

Hauerwas asserts throughout his multitude of theological publications that “the Christian message is not only true, but provides the one true account of ‘the way things are,’ of ‘the way the world is.’ Christians, he says, proclaim the truth that God revealed in Jesus. Christianity is not just ‘their truth, but the truth for everyone.’ (quoted from: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_32_118/ai_80680233/)”

⁵³ Eagleton observes:

[S]cience, like any other human affair, is indeed shot through with prejudice and partisanship, not to speak of ungrounded assumptions, unconscious biases, taken-for-granted truths, and beliefs too close to the eyeball to be objectified. Like religion, science is a culture, not just a set of processes and hypotheses. Richard Dawkins declares that science is free of the main vice of religion, which is faith; but as Charles Taylor points out, “to hold that there are *no* assumptions in a scientist’s work which aren’t already based on evidence is surely a reflection of a *blind* faith, one that can’t even feel the occasional tremor of doubt.” (p. 132)

If the little girl's coin has been lost down the street where it is dark, no amount of searching under the street light (of vaunted liberal rationality and scientific Progress) will find it! No God- or Jesus-questing of any sort in any case will do. For as Karl Barth observed:

Alone among all the religions, Christianity is essentially a pointer, pointing backwards and forwards and in either case upwards, towards the movement of this different being; a movement that differs from all religions, all human leaps and superstructures, and is indeed opposed to all religion (*Fragments Grave and Gay*, p. 28).

In response, the only thing the human can do about the lost coin like our lost humanity is *stand still and wait for God* (but not like Samuel Becket's nihilistic *Waiting For Godot*), as in "Stand still and see the salvation of the LORD". This was a command given to the fleeing Hebrews out of Egypt, to Gideon against the Midianites, and elsewhere, and which, as Mennonite Old Testament theologian Millard Lind argues in *Yahweh Is A Warrior*, is the primary ethical motif of ancient Israel in relation to its enemies. This is ultimate theological backdrop for Jesus' injunction, "Love your enemies", and why Christians reject God if they take up arms and support the state in doing so.⁵⁴

So "faith articulates a loving commitment before it counts as a description of the way things are (p. 119).", Eagleton gleans from Badiou. Eagleton adds:

"A believer, after all, is someone in love," observes Kierkegaard in *The Sickness unto Death*, a claim that by no means applies only to religious believers. For Saint Anselm, reason is itself rooted in God, so that one can attain it fully only through faith.

⁵⁴ Barth continues, incidentally concurring in one respect with Hitchens' assertion that "religion poisons everything" – namely when religion is *humanity's doomed search for God* (including, Barth affirmed throughout his writings, Ditchkins' religious/transcendence quest through Western secular liberalism!):

If Christianity is properly understood, that is, on the basis of the historical sources, the documentation of its origins in the Old and New Testaments – and that, incidentally, is the task of theology – it is impossible to shut one's eyes to the realization that, in contrast to religion, *its essence is not man's arising to go to God, but God's arising to go to man...* [God] took part in the this-worldly, terrestrial history from which Christianity takes its name, and provided a unique demonstration of his existence in the man Jesus Christ. Christianity in its origin and essence is still present wherever men listen to the call of this God, are awakened and empowered by him to have faith, love and hope, and wherever they are obedient to him. *Essential Christianity consists of – or rather happens when there is – active attentiveness to the acts and word of God. Thus Christianity begins when religion ends, when religion has been finally overcome.* Theology, incidentally, suffered its worst fall from grace when it began to look upon and present itself as the 'science of religion' (pp. 28 & 29, italics added).

This last sentence speaks to the difficulty of understanding Christianity through the rightly atheistic task of science, and is warning of inherent profound misunderstanding to all who study the faith "scientifically" outside the context of commitment to the Church. *This is why I think my two friends above cannot grasp/believe Christianity*: they have no love for the Church that Christ loved and gave himself for, against which, Jesus promised, the "gates of Hades" shall not prevail. They therefore have no (legitimate biblical) faith, for the Bible is the Church's book. And in this sense it is true: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – outside the Church there is no faith and hence no salvation, not because God decrees it, but because God agonizingly accepts it. (The best definition of God's *wrath* is: *God's covenant love in an agony of wishing to restore the broken relationship to humanity.*) This is also why lots of academic publications about the faith miss it, since the authors, brilliant as they are, and perhaps possessing integrity within their own academic disciplines (as in the case of my two friends whose integrity is sterling), are cut off from the only conduit to Christian spiritual understanding available, the only community of dialogue for this kind of Truth: the Church. Canadian United Church minister Gretta Vosper in her *With Or Without God*, Canadian Anglican priest Tom Harpur's notions of "the pagan Christ", and American Episcopalian Bishop John Spong's many *midrashes*, and others, illustrate however exceptions to this rule.

This is part of what he means by his celebrated assertion “I believe in order to understand” – a proposition which in a different sense could also apply to believers like socialists and feminists... All reasoning is conducted within the ambit of some sort of faith, attraction, inclination, orientation, predisposition, or prior commitment. As Pascal writes, the saints maintain that we must love things before we can know them, presumably because only through our attraction to them can we come to know them fully. For Augustine and Aquinas, love is the precondition of truth... (p. 120). This is obviously why Jesus is so insistent that “The Two Greatest Commandments” are bidirectional interdependent love.

Further, knowledge is defined through engagement, that presupposes faith, that leads to intelligibility. This in turns depends upon availability, a moral/justice notion, connected directly to virtues.

In the end, only love (of which faith is a particular form) can achieve the well-nigh impossible goal of seeing a situation as it really is, shorn of both the brittle enchantments of romance and the dishevelled fantasies of desire. Clinical, cold-eyed realism of this kind demands all manner of virtues – openness to being wrong, selflessness, humility, generosity of spirit, hard labor, tenacity, a readiness to collaborate, conscientious judgment, and the like; and for Aquinas, all virtues have their source in love. Love is the ultimate form of soberly disenchanted realism, *which is why it is the twin of truth* (pp. 121 & 122, italics added).

Eagleton admonishes:

We must not try to disfigure what we strive to know through fantasy, or reduce the object of knowledge to a narcissistic image of ourselves (p. 122).

Wow! Is this perhaps what Paul meant in: *knowledge puffs up, but love builds up* (I Corinthians 8:1); or that we must ever be engaged in *speaking the truth in love* (Ephesians 4:15).

Eagleton returns to his whipping-boys:

Hitchens is clear that secular liberals like himself... do not rely “solely upon science and reason,” so he is not contrasting belief with scientifically based propositions. What he is really doing is contrasting his own beliefs with other people’s. “We [secular liberals] distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason,” he observes (5). Most Christians do not in fact hold that their faith contradicts science – though it would be plausible to claim that in some sense science contradicts itself all the time, and that this is known as scientific progress. Hitchens fails to distinguish between reasonable beliefs and unreasonable ones. His belief that one should distrust anything that outrages reason is one example of a reasonable belief, while his belief that all belief is blind is an example of an unreasonable one [and of course self-contradictory!] (p. 125).

Eagleton then introduces the ethical calumny:

Ditchkins does not exactly fall over himself to point out how many major scientific hypotheses confidently cobbled together by our ancestors have crumbled to dust, and how probable it is that the same fate will befall many of the most cherished scientific doctrines of the present. As for outrages to reason, there are those who would

consider Hitchens's raucous support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq to be precisely that. (Dawkins, to his credit, strongly opposed the war).

...Later on he refers disparagingly to "people of faith" (230), apparently unaware that as a champion of both free speech and imperial aggression, neither of which can be demonstrated in the laboratory to be unequivocal goods, he must logically fall under this description himself. He lands himself in this mildly comic intellectual mess because he seems to assume that all faith is blind faith (pp. 125 & 126).

Eagleton compares this to faith in one's children, which may be legitimate or indeed blind, since some may in fact turn out to be serial killers and consequently rightly negate faith held in them.⁵⁵

He observes further:

Humanists differ from religious believers, *God Is Not Great* informs us, because they have no "unilateral system of belief" (250). One takes it, then, that Hitchens stands ready at any moment to jettison his belief in human liberty, along with his distaste for political tyrants⁵⁶ and Islamic suicide bombers. In fact, of course he turns out to be a skeptic when it comes to other people's dogmas and a true believer when it comes to his own. There is, by the way, nothing wrong with dogma, which simply means "things taught". The liberal principles of freedom and tolerance are dogmas, and are none the worse for that. It is simply a liberal paradox that there must be something close-minded about open-mindedness, and something inflexible about intolerance... As British prime minister Tony Blair remarked in a classic piece of self-deconstruction: "Our tolerance is part of what makes Britain Britain. So conform to it, or don't come here." Hitchens dislikes people who "*know* they are right" (282), but most of the time he sounds very much like one of them himself. It is sheer bad faith for him to claim that he is provisional about his own liberal-humanist values. He is nothing of the kind, and there is no earthly reason why he should be. Besides, if he dislikes know-alls, how come he hangs around with some of that fundamentalist crew known as neocons (p. 127)?

So for Eagleton, reason "does not go all the way down (p. 127)." He cites several noted thinkers for whom "It was not self-evident... that reason was to be prized (p. 128)." He also indicates dilemmas over the nature and status of rationality itself,

to what extent, for example, reason encompasses the aesthetic, imaginative, intuitive, sensuous, and affective; in what sense it might be a dialogical affair; what counts as a rational foundation; whether reason inherently implicates the values of freedom, autonomy, and self-determination; and whether it is substantive or procedural, axiomatic or contestable, instrumental or autotelic. We may ask to what extent it

⁵⁵ By this standard, Mahatma Gandhi displayed no faith in the serial killers of his day (or in the "civilizations" that spawned them): Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Josef Stalin, Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, William Lyon McKenzie King – to name a few, and only for starters. Today's recent and current serial killers include George Bush, Barack Obama, Tony Blair, Gordon Wilson, Vladimir Putin, Stephen Harper – to name a few and only for starters...

⁵⁶ He in fact loved Bush and the "neocon gangsters" (Eagleton), which for instance fellow journalist Chris Hedges challenged in *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, and in "The Christian Right and the Rise of Fascism" (http://www.theocracywatch.org/chris_hedges_nov24_04.htm).

represents in its totalizing, all-explanatory nature a recycled version of the mythologies it sought historically to oust; whether it is to be modeled primarily on our knowledge of objects or on our knowledge of persons; and what relations the rational ego maintains with the superego and the primary processes. We may further inquire what we are to make of the fact that even before we have started to reason properly, the world is in principle intelligible in the first place; whether it is true that we reason as we do because of what we do, and whether reason is to be associated with common sense and moderation, as it is by liberal rationalists like Ditchkins, or with revolution, as it is by John Milton and the Jacobins (pp. 128 & 129).

He wonders:

It is hard to feel that such considerations lie to the forefront of the mind of Richard Dawkins, whose rationalist complacency is of just the sort Jonathan Swift so magnificently savaged. It is equally hard to feel that they have been much brooded upon by Christopher Hitchens, who as a superb journalist but an indifferent theorist is more at home with the politics of Zimbabwe than with abstract ideas (p. 129).

He comments:

For the philosopher Fichte, faith (though not the religious variety) is prior to and foundational of all knowledge. For Heidegger and Wittgenstein, knowledge works within the assumptions embedded in our practical bound-upness with the world, which can never be precisely formalized or thematized. "It is our acting," Wittgenstein remarks in *On Certainty*, "that lies at the bottom of our language games." Know-how precedes knowing (p. 130).

He continues:

There are, then, still a great many telescopes up which science is churlishly reluctant to peer. Science has its high priests, sacred cows, revered scriptures, ideological exclusions, and rituals for suppressing dissent. To this extent, it is ridiculous to see it as the polar opposite of religion. There are those topics which in Foucaultian phrase are scientifically "in the truth" at any given time, and those which happen for the moment not to be.

...Though Dawkins's *The God Delusion* is astonishingly tight-lipped about the cock-ups and catastrophes of science (he castigates the Inquisition, for example, but not Hiroshima), most of us are aware that, like almost any interesting human pursuit from staging a play to running the economy, science is a lot more dicey, precarious, anomalous, and serendipitous than its publicity agents would have us believe, and that many of its practitioners will go to quite extraordinary lengths to preserve a tried and trusted hypothesis (p. 133).

Eagleton says he'd for instance take the Inquisition over chemical warfare, and asks,

Who needs an angry God to burn up the planet when as mature, self-sufficient human beings we are perfectly capable of doing the job ourselves (p. 134)?

This of course, thanks to science and liberal Progress.

Further:

So science is about faith as well – which is not all it shares with theology. Rather, as the churches have largely betrayed their historical mission, so, one might argue, has a good deal of science.... [S]cience belongs to a specific social history that the abstract rationalists too easily forget. Like religion, a good deal of science has betrayed its revolutionary origins, as the pliable tool of the transnational corporations and the military-industrial complex. But this should not induce us to forget its emancipator history. Like liberalism, socialism, and religion, science stands under the judgment of its own finest traditions (p. 136).⁵⁷

The author takes a swipe at naïve pluralism and postmodernism:

In a pluralistic age, conviction is thought to be at odds with tolerance; whereas the truth is that conviction is part of what one is supposed to tolerate, so that one would not exist without the other. Postmodernism is allergic to the idea of certainty, and makes a great deal of theoretical fuss over this rather modest, everyday notion. As such, it is in some ways the flip side of fundamentalism, which also makes a fuss about certainty, but in an approving kind of way (p. 136).

And so “Conviction itself is condemned as dogmatic (p. 136).”

He opines:

Our age is accordingly divided between those who believe far too much and those who believe far too little – or as Milan Kundera would put it, between the angelic and the demonic. Each party draws sustenance from the other. The age is equally divided between a technocratic reason which subordinates value to fact, and a fundamentalist reason which replaces fact with value (p. 137).

Faith for Eagleton is not so much function of choice but of intuitions already held.

The Christian way of indicating that faith is not in the end a question of choice is the notion of grace. Like the world itself from a Christian viewpoint, faith is a gift. This means among other things that Christians are not in conscious possession of all the reasons why they believe in God. But neither is anyone in conscious possession of all the reasons why they believe in keeping fit, the supreme value of the individual, or the importance of being sincere. Only ultrarationalists imagine they need to be... The rationalist tends to mistake the tenacity of faith (other people’s faith, anyway) for irrational stubbornness rather than for the sign of a certain interior depth, one which encompasses reason but also transcends it. Because certain of our commitments are constitutive of who we are, we cannot alter them without what Christianity traditionally calls a conversion, which involves a lot more than just swapping one opinion for another. This is one reason why other people’s faith can look like plain irrationalism, which indeed it sometime is (p. 139).

By the end of this chapter, and this far into the argument, I’m tempted to add to this last statement, “Of whom Ditchkins is chief!” But Saint Paul, from whom this statement is paraphrased, in line with Jesus’ stern “Judge not...”, in fact only places himself into that category of sinner. But come on, Ditchkins (and ilk)! It would be nice if you ‘fessed up a little! Okay!... We’ll all go to the confessional together!

⁵⁷ Eagleton at various points makes this case about liberalism and socialism.

Chapter 4: Culture and Barbarism

The final chapter, “Culture and Barbarism”, begins with wondering why “has the God question suddenly broken out anew (p. 141).” Eagleton does not believe it comes mainly from 9/11, though

It is true that some of the debate took its cue from there – an ominous fact, since intellectual debate is not at its finest when it springs from grief, hatred, hysteria, humiliation, and the urge for vengeance, along with some deep-seated racist fears and fantasies. 9/11, however, was not really about religion, any more than the thirty-year-long conflict in Northern Ireland was over papal infallibility. (It says much about Dawkins’s obsession with religion that he subscribes in *The God Delusion* to the fallacy that the struggle in Northern Ireland was over varieties of Christian belief.) Radical Islam generally understands exceedingly little about its own religious faith, and there is good evidence, as we have seen, to suggest that its actions are for the most part politically driven (p. 141).

Just as The Death of History was being trumpeted, “meaning that capitalism is the only game in town (p. 142)”, the West

overreached itself, found itself confronting a freshly insurgent antagonist, and in doing so discredited the postmodern thesis that grand narratives were at an end. Just when ideologies in general seemed to have packed up for good, the declining global hegemony of the United States put them back on the agenda and in the form of a peculiarly poisonous brand of neo-conservatism. A small cabal of fanatical dogmatists occupied the White House and proceeded to execute their well-laid plans for world sovereignty; like characters in some second-rate piece of science fiction. It was almost as bizarre as Scientologists taking over 10 Downing Street, or *Da Vinci Code* buffs patrolling the corridors of the Élysée Palace (pp. 142 & 143).

“Advanced capitalism”, Eagleton argues, “is inherently agnostic (p. 143).” – yet needs “God”. “Modern market societies tend to be secular, relativist, pragmatic, and materialistic (p. 143).” Nonetheless,

As President Eisenhower once announced in Groucho Marx style: “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious belief – and I don’t care what it is.” Religious faith in this view is both vital and vacuous.

...Liberal society’s *summum bonum* is to leave believers to get on with it unmolested – rather as the English would walk by if you were bleeding at the roadside, not because they are hard-hearted but because they would be loath to interfere with your privacy (pp. 143 & 144).

This is well and good, Eagleton argues, when all is going well. Place such a liberal society under sudden attack which has captivated in fear the imagination of the post-9/11 West, “It is much less of a benefit in times of political tumult (p. 146).” In fact, failing to hold strong opinions, allowing many divergent views, is quintessential liberalism. The only problem is, this very attitude can nurture Holocaust deniers, the right to aggressive pedophilia, and a host of other

bizarre and destructive notions, of which whole gaggles of *aficionados* are readily to be found on the Internet. Eagleton comments with irony,

One of the more agreeable aspects of Christopher Hitchens's polemic against religion is that he is properly unafraid to declare that he thinks it poisonous and disgusting. Perhaps he finds it mildly embarrassing in his new post-Marxist persona that "Religion is poison" was the slogan under which Mao launched his assault on the people and culture of Tibet.⁵⁸

Eagleton is concerned about a "surfeit of belief" spawned by agnostic, late-capitalist civilization because it helps create conditions for fundamentalism.

It is also because when reason becomes too dominative, calculative, and instrumental, it ends up as too shallow a soil for a reasonable kind of faith to flourish. As a result, faith lapses into the kind of irrationalism which theologians call fideism, turning its back on reason altogether. From there, it is an easy enough step to fanaticism. Rationalism and fideism are each other's mirror image. The other side of a two-dimensional reason is a faith-based reality. "Where reason has retreated," writes John Milbank, "there, it seems, faith has now rushed in, often with violent consequences." If reason has trouble with value, faith has problems with fact. Neoconservatism is a species of fideism, untroubled in its ideological ardour by anything as trifling as reality. Fundamentalism is among other things the faith of those driven into zealotry by a shallow technological rationality which sets all the great spiritual questions cynically to one side, and in doing so leaves those questions opened to being monopolized by bigots.

Conversely, reason, as I have argued already, has to ground itself in something other than itself to be authentic *as reason*. If it grounds itself largely in material interests and political dominion, rather than in some kind of loving fidelity or peaceable community, faith and reason will spin apart from each other, becoming those bloodless caricatures of themselves known as fideism and rationalism. There is another sense, too, in which a paucity of faith leads to a surplus of it, which is simply that if the West really did have faith in a gospel of peace, justice, and fellowship, it would presumably not spend so much of its time burning Arab children to death, and thus would not have to worry quite so much about people crashing aircraft into nuclear reactors in the name of Allah.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ One could expect in fact that Hitchens should grandly get the (repeated) joke in Eagleton's book at his expense, and as grandly order drinks all around in Eagleton's honour the next time they are together in the bar, especially if the former is as bibulous as Eagleton avers. One suspects however that Hitchens has already launched or planned to launch vituperative diatribe equal to that in his *God is Not Great* in response to Eagleton's book-length exercise in "liberalism" at Ditchkins' expense. We are, when all is said and done, all too human. The Bible calls this sad condition "original sin", a post-Resurrection doctrine of "great joy for all the people" however, according to theologian James Alison in *The Joy of Being Wrong*, if we indeed only 'fess up!

⁵⁹ The fact that Richard Land mentioned above could recruit a gaggle of major Evangelical leaders to sign the "Land Letter" in 2002; that virtually every white Evangelical leader in America immediately blessed the War on Terror proposed by President Bush in the days following 9/11; that almost every American Roman Catholic bishop similarly with obsequious Eusebian voice cried out, "God Bless America... and Drop Those Bombs!", does not bode well for oh so "religious America", where, since its founding "religion has been up, morality down" according to church historian Bishop Stephen Neill.

A good number of Evangelical leaders from the (Billy/Franklin) Graham's to James Dobson, were personal invitees to the White House to "bless America" in its new post-9/11 Terror Initiative, the personal "final solution" of

Eagleton permits himself to imagine for a moment what even a pinch of Kingdom Come might look like, but not the “Kingdom Come” radical Islamists and War on Terror religionists blast their enemies to:

There can surely be no doubt that if these values really were to prevail, the world would be a great deal better off. Justice would be brought to bear on the conflict between Palestine and Israel. Humanity would regard itself as exercising stewardship rather than dominion over Nature. War would give way to peace. Forgiveness would mean among other things forgiving the crippling debts which burden poor nations. Mutual responsibility would oust selfish individualism. It is just that, for all this to happen, believers themselves would have to take their own values seriously. *And there seems to be fat chance of that* (p. 149 & 150, italics added).

Eagleton reflects on the emergence of a common culture, so necessary for modern states.

A common culture in a more radical sense of the term is not one in which everyone believes the same thing, but one in which everyone has equal status in cooperatively determining a way of life in common (p. 153).

Gerald Vanderzande of *Citizens for Public Justice* in Canada used to ring the changes on this form of multiculturalism.

And so,

the neocons: endless War on Terror in the form of “everlasting holocaust” that would extend American Empire like Hitler’s Reich in perpetuity. This included devotional writer Max Lucado who barely had time to change his suit and tie from another trip serving the Lord, before he set off for the White House to bless a new Herodian “slaughter of innocents”. Yet, by his endless devotional claims, Lucado is madly in love with Jesus (and America too... perhaps a tad more so?) who “loves the little children, all the children of the world”, but Lucado is a little less enamoured of the Arab children in Iraq and Afghanistan for whom Christ died to be sure...

But, sadly, since thousands of Arab kids must die, Christ died a little more for American kids, who in fact get to watch the War on Terror fireworks in front of their TV sets eating all their favourite American snacks. This is not unlike the *Left Behind* series’ dispensationalist imagination about the front row grandstand seats all the “saints” will have to watch the Battle of Armageddon conflagration (the saints themselves floating serenely above the fray with their heavenly Christian stadium safely tucked away in the arms of Jesus). This in turn is not unlike the U.S. Air Force fighter pilots who deliver massive holocaust to civilian and terrorist alike from the safety of their grandstand seats 30,000 feet up where all is well and so peaceful... “Oh how I love Jesus”, conservative religious America croons... even if Jesus is loved a tad less than America’s flag which is worshipped daily across America in all schools. (But, too sadly, Jesus is banned in some schools. And conservative America, in dripping irony, is outraged that Christian religion is banned from some schools... while civil religion is American school children’s ubiquitous supersized daily fare.)

On such perverse religiosity Jesus pronounced a series of woes in Matthew 23, and said in John 8:44 that all such religious devotees

belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

René Girard points out that these texts were not directed towards the “Jews” any more than the Hebrew prophetic texts were directed towards the “Jews”, but towards a religion, all religion, all sacred texts and legitimations of endless scapegoating violence that has been a dominating culturalism “since the foundation of the world” in all societies and times, and from which he claims Jesus brings emancipation. See a vast array of resources on Girard at: <http://www.uibk.ac.at/theol/cover/>.

If the British or American way of life really were to take on board the critique of materialism, hedonism, and individualism of many devout Muslims, rather than Muslims simply to sign on for a ready-made British or American culture, Western civilization would most certainly be altered for the good (p. 154).

Then comes the dire challenge,

Part of what has happened in our time is that God has shifted over from the side of civilization to the side of barbarism... One might go further and claim that the new form of barbarism is known as culture (p. 155).

Except that the West has of course all the good “customs of civilization” (that indeed can be now – and massively! – imposed from above not by the God of Jesus Christ but through aerial warfare as Tami Biddle noted above), the “others” have culture/barbarism.

Eagleton adds,

More precisely, colonizing nations are civilizations, while most colonies or former colonies are cultures (p. 155).

This of course is the nepotistic narrative of Rudyard Kipling’s vision of “The White Man’s Burden” bequeathed to the United States throughout the twentieth (America’s) century.⁶⁰

Eagleton observes in line with Ivan Illich’s theme that the corruption of the best is the worst, “Christianity began as a culture but then became a question of civilization (p. 157).”

It is one of Ditchkins’s strengths that whatever else he may be, he is certainly not a culturalist. Indeed, he leans much too far in the other direction (p. 158).

And,

There is a certain sacred resonance to the idea of culture. It has, after all, sought for a couple of centuries or more to serve as a secular alternative to a failing religious faith. This is not a wholly ridiculous notion. Like religion, culture is a matter of ultimate values, intuitive certainties, hallowed traditions, assured identities, shared beliefs, symbolic action, and a sense of transcendence. It is culture, not religion, which is now for many men and women the heart of a heartless world (pp. 158 & 159).

Marx thought of religion as soul for a soulless world, not just as an opiate.⁶¹

But,

Works of [culturally generated] art cannot save us. They can simply render us more sensitive to what needs to be repaired. And celebrating culture in the sense of a way of life is too parochial a version of redemption (p. 159).

Many white liberals for instance in North America in a paroxysm of self-flagellating misplaced penance, have made a fetish of everything *aboriginal*, some embracing native spirituality

⁶⁰ But America practised arguably from its inception “state exceptionalism” – Alexis de Tocqueville’s term – meaning “My country, right or wrong!” This was worked out in its founding vision of a new “Promised Land”, and in the 1823 Monroe Doctrine that meant pacification of all peoples from sea to sea – of necessity stealing gargantuan land tracts from the Indians and Mexicans, and slaughtering massively any who dared to resist the White Man’s God-given right to conquer America north of the Rio Grande, and as it proved to be, though attempted otherwise in the failed War of 1812, south of the 49th parallel.

⁶¹ Religion as opium in fact is in line with Jesus’ warning against religious evangelism in Mathew 23:15.

(usually meanwhile jettisoning “Christianity”, the last acceptable Western cultural scapegoat). But this hypocritical show has rarely meant giving back the land...

Eagleton continues to reflect on the interplay of culture and civilization, noting that

Religious faith has established a hotline from personal interiority to transcendent authority – an achievement upon which the advocates of culture can only gaze with envy. Yet religion is as powerless as culture to emancipate the dispossessed. For the most part, it has not the slightest interest in doing so (p. 166).

In other words, religion addressed matters of the heart, but rarely socio-political justice in its application.

Still,

[T]heology, however implausible many of its truth claims, is one of the most ambitious theoretical arenas left in an increasingly specialized world – one whose subject is nothing less than the nature and destiny of humanity itself, in relation to what it takes to be its transcendent source of life. These are not questions one can easily raise in analytic philosophy or political science.... We find ourselves, then, in a most curious situation. In a world in which theology is increasingly part of the problem, as Ditchkins rightly considers, it is also fostering the kind of critical reflection which might contribute to some of the answers (p. 168).

But would Dawkins or Hitchens pause even for a moment to consider the cogency of Eagleton’s arguments? Eagleton seriously doubts that Ditchkins will “read this book and experience an epiphany which puts the road to Damascus in the shade (p. 168).”

He concludes:

The distinction between Ditchkins and those like myself comes down in the end to one between liberal humanism and tragic humanism. There are those like Ditchkins who hold that if we could shake off a poisonous legacy of myth and superstition, we can be free. This in my own view is 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. There are no guarantees that such a transfigured future will ever be born. But it might arrive a little earlier if liberal dogmatists, doctrinaire flag-wavers for Progress, and Islamophobic intellectuals did not continue to stand in its way (pp. 168 & 169).

Conclusion

This essay started out as a brief book review. “Brief” proved impossible – and some would say of the writer, “What else is new?” In response and because the repeated lines from Bruce

Cockburn's "Wondering Where the Lions Are" come to mind: "But I'm thinking 'bout eternity/Some kinda ecstasy got a hold on me".⁶² I guess Jesus, The Gospels, Paul, and Christian faith *make others and me want to sing* rapturously and at length, whereas Ditchkins, Spong, *The Jesus Seminar*, and my two friends seem hard put to strike a single note of joy – albeit do go on at length themselves! I have yet to come across, cannot however imagine it, one song about life or eternity inspired or composed by any of the above!

In a song inspired by the Gospels, Bob Dylan sings: "Gotta Serve Somebody".⁶³ If we are not consciously serving Christ, we are nonetheless serving something/someone – since "serving" is inescapably bound up with our humanity. In a similar ineluctable humanity-bound-upness, we all live "by faith" in something/someone. Reason versus faith is not, has never been, the issue. Claiming so is folly, as indicated in the classic I Corinthians 1:18 - 31text on which Eagleton's book is commentary. In words from the Book of Joshua, humanity is ever challenged to make a choice, ever modelled the only ultimate choice for freedom, for humanity to make: "... *Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD* (Joshua 24:15)."

As mentioned, when I first met my two friends over three decades ago, one was an elder in a Christian church, the other would have readily dropped what she was doing and have prayed with a friend over any concern. Their subsequent rejection of the Church and variously of orthodox faith and trust in God have been a life foil for me. When a Christian friend heard recently from me about their denunciation of the Church, she said immediately and insightfully: "They've been hurt by the Church!" – as I mused above. Again I say, this is very sad, and far too common a story!

At elections there sometimes occurs a widespread voter sentiment about a candidate dubbed "Anybody but..." My two friends deny their hurt was origin of their self-chosen ecclesiastical exile. Both like Ditchkins and Spong cite "rational" grounds. Both say "Anybody but the Church's Jesus; anything but the Church!" One probably could have written (some aspects) either of Ditchkins' books; the other could have written Spongian *midrashes*.

Here is the rub: the Hebrew prophets and Jesus did write and sound like Ditchkins. And their diatribes are core teachings of the Bible. The early church did write *midrashes* in response to the violent, scapegoating and addictive nature of religion. And their writings are called the New Testament.

The problem with Ditchkins and company, the problem with the *Jesus Seminar* and company, is: *neither naysayer camp is remotely radical enough about the human condition or humanity's hell-bent addiction to religion*. In the terminology of Eagleton, their radicalism *does not go far enough down for freedom*.⁶⁴ Only one thing does: "That's the power of the Gospel":

⁶² See http://www.tsrocks.com/b/bruce_cockburn_texts/wondering_where_the_lions_are.html.

⁶³ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqxW6E24Jh8>; for the lyrics see: <http://www.bobdylan.com/#/songs/gotta-serve-somebody>.

⁶⁴ Paul cries: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1a)."

It will make a weak man mighty
It will make a mighty man fall
It will fill your heart and hands
Or leave you with nothing at all
It's the eyes for the blind
And legs for the lame
It is love for hate
And pride for shame

That's the power of the gospel
That's the power of the gospel
That's the power of the mighty power
That's the power of the gospel⁶⁵

⁶⁵ You may listen to Ben Harper's song at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjDy_kNGq0. The rest of the lyrics are:

Gospel on the water
Gospel on the land
The gospel in every woman
The gospel in every man
Gospel in the garden
Gospel in the trees
The gospel that's inside of you
The gospel inside of me

That's the power of the gospel
That's the power of the gospel
That's the power of the mighty power
That's the power of the gospel

In the hour of richness
In the hour of need
For all of creation
Comes from the gospel seed
Now you may leave tomorrow
And you may leave today
But you've got to have the gospel
When you start out on your way

That's the power of the gospel
That's the power of the gospel
That's the power of the mighty power
That's the power of the gospel