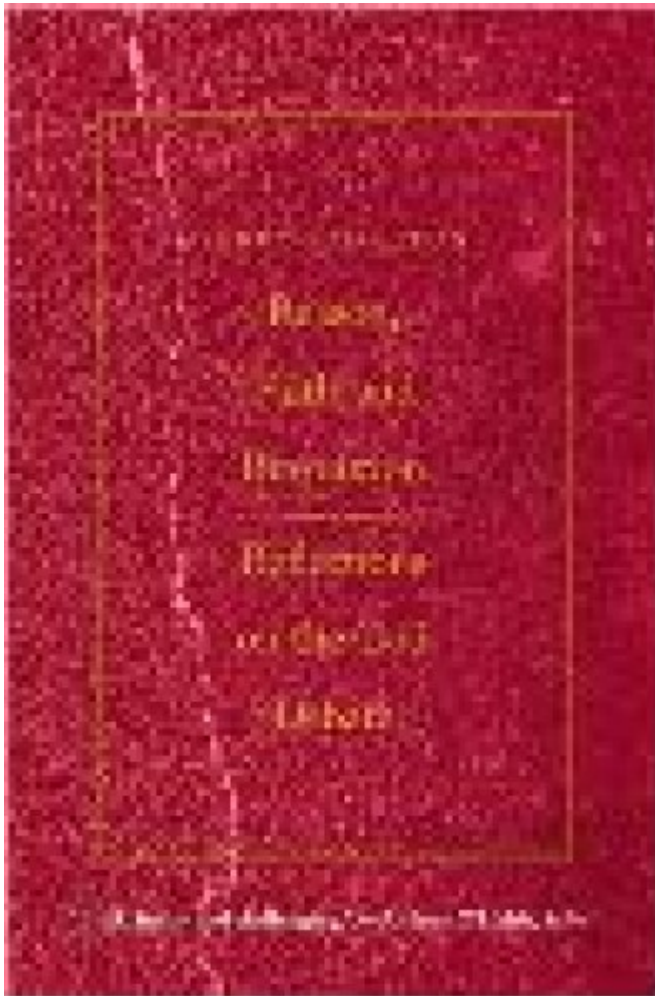


Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [March 23, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate

Terry Eagleton
Yale University Press

Terry Eagleton is many things, all of which converge into intelligent passion and a command of thinking beyond ideological comfort zones. He is a Marxist literary critic and political commentator with hugely respectful engagement with the revolutionary claims of Christian faith. He can be variously puckish, flamboyant, outrageous and erudite—or better, all of these at the same time.

In *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, he presents four of his Terry Lectures at Yale that constitute a frolicking commentary on the assault that Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have mounted against religion. He takes Dawkins and Hitchens together and mockingly refers to them as “Ditchkins.” It is clear that Eagleton had a fine time presenting his case at Yale, and no doubt his listeners had great fun along with him.

The premise of his book is that “faith is for the most part performative rather than propositional.” And since Ditchkins can only parse propositions, he is sure to misunderstand and distort faith from the ground up. Indeed, concerning Eagleton’s adversaries, he writes, “At stake here is a stupendously simple-minded, breathtakingly reductive world picture, one worthy of a child’s crude drawing.”

Eagleton gives considerable attention to the failure of such ignorant reductionism. But the critique is more than matched by his argument that Christian faith, in its performative mode, is a force for social revolution and for social justice, whatever may be the truth of its propositional claims. The effect of the book is to invite thoughtful people past caricature about faith and to summon the faithful to manifest more nerve in the public process.

The first chapter, titled “The Scum of the Earth,” is Eagleton’s articulation of God’s “preferential option for the poor.” He translates *anawim* as “the shit of the earth—the scum and refuse of society who constitute the cornerstone of the new form of human life known as the kingdom of God.” To make the connection, it is necessary to discern the character of Jesus in all his radicality:

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 jobless, 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 scourge of the rich and powerful. . . . 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.

He is the one who embodies the God of scripture:

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.

And the derivative social body is completely an outrage in the world:

To the outrage of the Zealots, Pharisees, and right-wing rednecks of all ages, this body is dedicated in particular to all those losers, deadbeats, riffraff, and colonial collaborators who are not righteous but flamboyantly unrighteous.

Eagleton unfolds the argument by distinguishing religion that is scriptural from religion that is ideological and proceeds to show that Ditchkins is an ideologue for a certain kind of privilege that does not want to be bothered by the world that is embraced by Jesus. The “scientific objectivity” of Ditchkins is laden with status quo ideology:

Dawkins dislikes what has flowed from Abraham for some excellent reasons; but he also finds it repugnant for much the same reasons that one can imagine him harboring stoutly Anglo-Saxon objections to Lacan, Situationism, agitprop, Trotsky, Dadaism, the unconscious, Julia Kristeva, Irish republicanism, and allowing one’s children to run naked around the garden smoking dope.

The lectures finish with a powerful indictment of those who (like Ditchkins) champion a “universal civilization” that is one’s own culture writ large. He makes a useful distinction between civilization and culture:

Civilization means universality, autonomy, prosperity, plurality, individuality, rational speculation, and ironic self-doubt; culture signifies all those unreflective loyalties and allegiances, as apparently as built into us as our liver or pancreas. . . . Culture means the customary, collective, passionate, spontaneous, unreflective, unironic, and a-rational.

Appealing to civilization in order to veto the energy and threat of culture other than our own is an exercise in self-deception. In the end, two of the terms of Eagleton's title, "faith and revolution," are connected and allied, whereas his third term, "reason," of the kind preferred by Ditchkins, is in the end reactionary, a scientific ruse for the defense and justification of a social, political, ideological status quo. I take liberty in quoting the book because one must sense the force of Eagleton's rhetoric in order to grasp how much is at stake for him for a right understanding of faith.