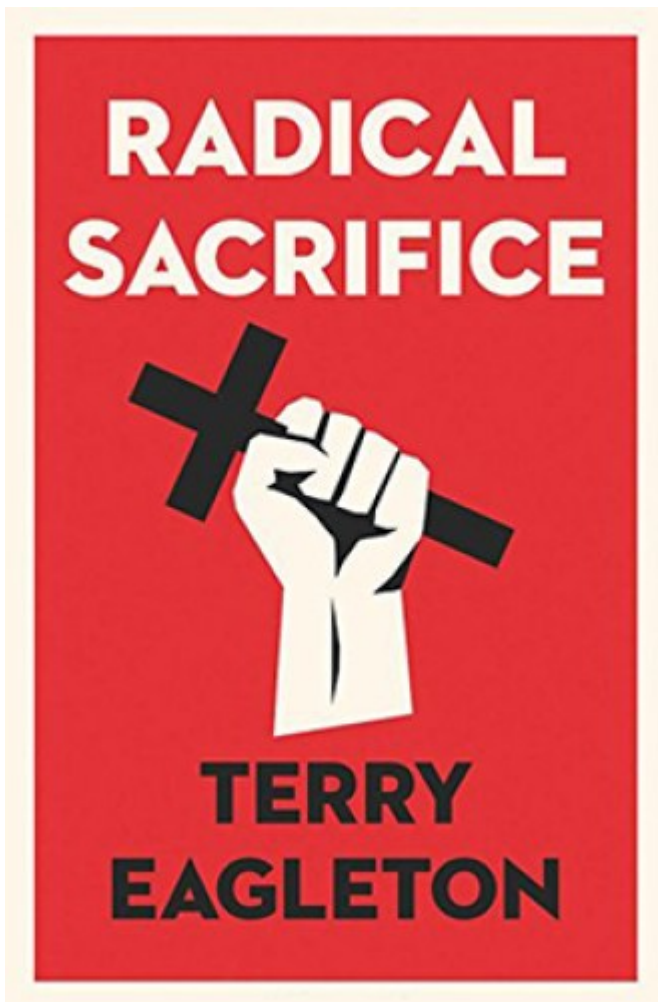


The crucified Christ isn't a tragic hero

In a comic reversal, says Terry Eagleton, the death of God incarnate reveals a fragile social order.

by [George Dennis O'Brien](#) in the [August 29, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Radical Sacrifice

By Terry Eagleton

Yale University Press

The lively cultural critic Terry Eagleton has assembled a collection of ancient sages, Parisian deconstructionists, poets, classical philosophers, and Hebrew prophets to address the role and meaning of death, tragedy, and sacrifice. He notes that in the leftist circles with which he is usually identified, these are not fashionable topics. For many leftists, rationality dominates action to the extent that sacrifice seems an embarrassing hangover from darker ages. Eagleton disagrees, addressing the central concerns of those for whom sacrifice is crucial—not the least of whom are Christians.

Eagleton argues that reliance on rational order is everywhere undermined by “the Real”—a term he borrows from the French psychologist and philosopher Jacques Lacan. Not to be confused with our ordinary notions of the real world, which involves things like dinner tables and massive distant galaxies, the Real reveals itself in the sheer density of life and the dissolution of death. The Real subverts “the symbolic order” that knows tables and stars. Eagleton’s overall project is to review conflicting strategies that speak about—or to—the (unspeakable) Real, ranging from Stoic denial to Christian concepts of salvation.

The book’s final chapter, “Kings and Beggars,” offers a particularly clear account of how the Real undermines the surety of symbols that structure our common world. What final reality attaches to king or beggar? In death they are but common dust. Eagleton points to the cultural practice of carnival as a symbolic recognition of the fragility of the social order. For a day, servants become masters and beggars don royal robes. Eagleton understands Christian Holy Week within the order of carnival. “An obscure layman, blown in from provincial Galilee” is hailed with palms only to be crucified days later under the mocking title “King of the Jews.”

The crucifixion has been regarded since New Testament times as a sacrifice. But what is a sacrifice? Eagleton ticks off 18 definitions of *sacrifice*, from gift to adoration to discharge of a debt. In which sense, then, is the death of Jesus a sacrifice? Is it a radical sacrifice? In a chapter titled “Tragedy and Crucifixion,” Eagleton suggests that “Jesus may be a tragic protagonist, but . . . he is not a heroic one.” The hero dies for a cause, for the sake of some symbolic system that outlives death. The permanent transcendence of the cause is affirmed by courageous death. In contrast, Jesus at dark cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” What does that imply about his cause?

To understand the crucifixion, one has to go beyond the story of heroes and causes. Eagleton rejects a “Big Other” God who sustains the cause for which the hero dies. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross defeats and destroys the reigning symbolic orders of Temple sacrifice and Roman law. Neither is underwritten by a Big Other. In truth, God has no cause except himself. A derelict and deserted Jesus has no cause beyond faith in the Father. “The Father . . . is an abyss of love rather than a copper-bottomed metaphysical guarantee. It is the Father himself who lies at the source of Jesus’ faith, as the object-cause of his desire, and in that sense, he has not been forsaken.”

For Eagleton, the crucifixion is not tragic. It is a “comic” reversal in which the highest becomes the lowest, God becomes the most abject. In carnival, the crucified is God incarnate. It is the triumph of what Eagleton calls God’s “brutal love.” Jesus’ cause is faith in the Father, the bond to the one he calls *Abba*.

Christianity emerges, therefore, not as a cause but as personal attachment to the one who says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the light.” The radical reversal of the cross leads us beyond our human failure to capture life fully lived, and even beyond death’s defeat. The Christian world is finally haunted not by “the Real” but by the unspeakable God.

The great value of *Radical Sacrifice* is that it throws caution over all the words and gestures we have directed at the Real and at the unspeakable God. Caution is particularly important for those who presume to preach or teach the Christian “cause.” Which of Eagleton’s 18 definitions of sacrifice captures the radical sacrifice at the heart of the cross? Make Jesus a tragic hero and “Son of God” cannot be claimed.

It’s not only sacrifice that is elusive. Eagleton also dissects the meaning of martyrdom. The true martyr does not see suffering as the key to salvation. In T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, the character Thomas Becket’s last and unforeseen temptation is the luster of martyrdom, “doing the right thing for the wrong reason.”

In another chapter, “Exchange and Excess,” Eagleton warns about the elusive character of even our best moral impulses. For example, Christianity preaches giving, self-giving, and forgiving. Admirable indeed, but a gift given can too easily revert to the root meaning still found in the German word *gift*: “poison.” A generous gift may become the poison of superiority and subtle revenge, as Eagleton suggests

may be the case in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* when Milly Theale bequeaths her fortune to her false lover, Merton Densher.

I read *Radical Sacrifice* in the prepublication version. Since it lacked the final index, I asked the publisher to send me a copy. I am sorry I asked. The index runs 14 pages and contains all sorts of people. (Even Trump earns a mention.) It will be an exceptional reader who is intimately acquainted with Eagleton's extended cast of characters. But be not afraid: Eagleton's spritely offbeat style and sure eye for the telling quotation sustains his argument.

Eagleton is normally categorized as a Marxist thinker. True enough, though the most Marxist discussion occurs almost as an afterthought on the last three pages. It would seem that the dedication to the Carmelite Sisters of Thicket Priory best captures the spirit of the book.