Religion and Revolution: Terry Eagleton's Literary Appropriation of the Doctrine of Creation

Richard Greydanus, *McGill University*

In the paper that I am presenting, I want to consider what the work of the British Marxist Terry Eagleton in the related fields of literary theory and cultural studies has to offer to a discussion of the revolutionary potentials of religious belief, or lack thereof. Eagleton made a scholarly name for himself with the publication of *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1996), in which he proclaimed the death, or at least urged the execution, of all the different varieties of literary theory deriving from the 'scientific hermeneutics' of German scholars like Heidegger, Gadamer, and Habermas or French structuralists like Levi-Strauss and post-structuralists like Derrida, before calling for a return to ancient art of persuasion, rhetoric. More recently, playing the part of a public intellectual, Eagleton has turned his attention to the Anglo-Saxon world and roundly condemned the prominent atheist popularizers of evolutionary theory Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens for being completely ignorant of the theology they supposed they were criticizing, of burying their own humanity beneath a mass of observational data, and of sterilizing questions of truth by divorcing these from questions of justice. The latter can be found in his *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (2009), which is the polished and published version of his Terry Lectures delivered at Yale University. My interest in Eagleton's work encompasses both the scholarly and the public intellectual sides of his career. In my estimation, both follow from and inform each other; but since I want to consider the significance Eagleton accords the doctrine of Creation and its subsidiary doctrine of the creation of humanity in the image of the Creator, it is the public intellectual that must take center stage. To quote him: 'Whatever else one might think of

Arc—The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University
Volume 38 (2010): 23–31

the doctrine of Creation, it is at least a salve for humanist arrogance.'[1] By humanist, Eagleton means the sort of thinking that sees religious belief as unenlightening, culturally retrogressive, and scientifically backwards, which he pointedly terms arrogant. Something of his willingness to polemicize must be appropriated if we are to appreciate, or at least understand, what Eagleton has to say.

The McGill-CREOR conference has been subtitled 'New perspectives on religion as revolution.' A few terminological questions must be broached before I can enter into my discussion of Eagleton's literary appropriation of the doctrine of Creation. Namely: what is religion? What is meant by revolution? And if the two are brought together, what exactly is new about their alliance? The first question can be answered very quickly by summarizing Eagleton's own definition: any religious belief that begins with the doctrine of Creation is concerned with the ground of the possibility of both the existence and the interrogation of things, that is, answers to 'questions such as why there is anything in the first place, or why what we do have is actually intelligible to us'[2]—which find their answer in God, the Creator. On the terms that Heidegger sets out, this is what is meant by an inquiry into 'the being of entities'. Needless to say, Heidegger's approach to the question will not be Eagleton's, and one can make the further a further observation and say that the doctrine of Creation will provide only one possible answer. Other religious belief systems will each have their own takes on the matter. Let us keep well in mind the variety of options available to us at the present.

An answer to the second question will require a little more space because I intend to return to it at the conclusion of the paper where I will offer an answer to the third. The barest definition of the term revolution is a complete 360 degree turn: a revolution is made if, starting at any point on the circumference of a circle, one follows the circumference in either direction back to the initial point of departure. In conjunction with religious belief, however, revolution will not literally mean completing a natural circuit. It will rather mean something like the radical change of economic/social/political orientation such that the relationships between persons are

1. Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate: The Terry Lectures, Yale University* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 79.

2. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 11.

now palpably different from what they once were. Moreover, we have come to attach to the term revolution an understanding that revolutionary change is change for the better. And since this sort of upwards spiral cannot be understood with reference to the natural circuits of the rising and setting of the sun or the changing of the seasons, if the term is to have significance for us at all, its meaning must be sought in the written records and monuments of the human past. With the French Revolution and the Continental European revolutions that follow, the idea of revolution begins to take on an explicitly secular character—secular in the sense of being divorced from religious belief, divorced from considerations of the grounds for the possibility of the existence and interrogation of things, and of embracing a sort of exclusive humanism that gives prime position to authentically being/making oneself, within which questions about the divine origination of things will cease to be relevant. One thing I take from this is that, by considering 'new perspectives on religion as revolution,' what we are actually considering is the relevance of religious belief in a secular age. Perhaps this is only to state the exceedingly obvious.

But perhaps the exceedingly obvious needs to be stated—and then restated once more, not as a mere rhetorical device, but as a rhetorical argument with a definite objective. For Eagleton, to read a text as literature means to read it with questions about what it is to be a good person in mind. Literary readings, then, are not concerned primarily with abstract questions about 'The Good'. The sort of literary theory Eagleton offers is political criticism—political not in the sense of offering a political critique, but as a recognition that anything that might be written comes out of a definite political situation,[3] which he understands in light of the classical definition of the term polis: to be in community with others. His concerns are analogous to Charles Taylor's concern for human flourishing, which encompasses concern both for self and for others.[4] The political is thus inherently moral as it is concerned with the exercise of power in interpersonal relations as such.[5] A literary reading of a text, by this definition,

3. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 195.

4. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 17.

5. For discussions of Eagleton's understanding of 'political', see Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 24–83; Terry Eagleton, 'The Contradictions of Postmodernism,' *New Literary History* 28.1 (Winter 1997): 1–6; John Clifford and John Schilb,

can be extended to include almost anything that has ever been written. Even a dry-as-dust paper on some esoteric topic in biology or chemistry could be read literarily: its author would have published the paper with some good of a small community of scientists in mind, and potentially some good of a wider community. The pretense to scientific disinterest, of pursuing knowledge for its own sake, is one of the curious modern forms of idolatry Eagleton will challenge.[6] Another is the idea that there is a timeless wisdom contained within a particular set of texts that will inspire projects like the Great Books Program.[7] Both of these, if we follow Eagleton's direction, misunderstand the basic conditions of human existence.

Eagleton identifies his own work with the work of Karl Marx, but it is clear that the identification is not a whole-hearted one. On the one hand, there was the empirical scientist Marx who thought he could sit at a desk, read books, and peer into the past in order to discern the laws of class relations much like a scientist would look through a telescope or a microscope in order to discern causal patterns in the observable world. On the other hand, there was the scientific prophet Marx who projected the dialectic of class consciousness into the future and foretold its immanent resolution in a classless communist society. Between a human past that must be interpreted and a human future that can only be anticipated, however, Eagleton recognizes that the activist Marx correctly identified the inequitable relations between bourgeoisie and the proletariat, between the haves and the have-nots.[8] The version of Marx that Eagleton adopts is not the scientific Marx, but the activist Marx, for whom questions of justice are perennial and do not necessary wither away with the oppressive state apparatus, through the wishful application of a Hegelian dialectic given a inverted, materialist interpretation. Because Eagleton stands with the activist Marx, he does not need to understand the fundamental conditions of human existence in a reductively materialist sense. If he did, it would be difficult to imagine him speaking appreciatively about the doctrine of

---

'A Perspective on Eagleton's Revival of Rhetoric' *Rhetoric Review* 6.1 (Fall 1987): 22–31, at 23–5; David Alderson, *Terry Eagleton* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2004), 76–82; James Smith, *Terry Eagleton: A critical introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 77–85.

6. Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 14.

7. Eagleton, Literary Theory, 11.

8. David Alderson, *Terry Eagleton* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 19, 53.

Creation, which is meaningless without reference to a non-material Creator. Rather, he views the fundamental conditions of human existence as being bodily conditions.

Bodily conditions for Eagleton are not a matter of 'the body', as it is appropriated in contemporary academic discussion. As it is with 'The Good', to speak of 'the body' is to make use of an abstract universal concept applicable to every body, and so to say nothing distinctive about any body in particular. One scholar summarizes the point like this: 'Eagleton's objection to contemporary theorisations of the body is to their "culturalism", their focus on the body's "constructedness."'[9] Eagleton rather emphasizes the fact that the human body anchors our speculative forays in a concrete reality. Bodily conditions are personal possessions: my body, your body, his body, her body. Bodily conditions impose limitations: I can only be here at any given moment, never both here and there. Bodily conditions are also dependencies: I must eat in order to survive; I must sleep in order to recharge my biological batteries. Bodily conditions bring our rational faculties alongside the sensual passions; neither can they be mastered nor disregarded. Without a secure grounding in the bodily senses, as well, the human mind strays beyond its natural domain.[10] Bodily conditions force us into community with others; they also presuppose the community of others. Storks do not leave babies on the front porch; and no newborn baby begins to forage for food immediately after it leaves the mother's womb. In a summary conclusion, we can say, we are our bodies. Eagleton cites Thomas Aquinas instructively, saying, '[T]here is no such thing as a dead body, only the remains of a living one.'[11]

---

9. Alderson, *Terry Eagleton*, 83.

10. Eagleton's discussions about the nature of bodily existence can be found scattered throughout his writings. For a discussion of the relation between faith and reason in conjunction with bodily existence, see Eagleton, *Reason Faith, and Revolution*, 127–33. For a discussion of the relation between reason, passion, and sensual desire, through the categories of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, see Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 1–41. For a critique of Cartesian dualism, see Terry Eagleton, 'Peter Brooks on Bodies,' *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others* (London: Verso, 2003), 129–135. For a discussion of language and theory in conjunction with bodily existence, see Eagleton, 'The Significance of Theory,' 24–8.

11. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 71.

Examples of the dependent communal context of bodily life could be multiplied indefinitely: fulfillment of sexual desire; emotional need for companionship; the need for assistance, moral, financial or otherwise. They provide a self-evident, existential critique of modern conceptions of individual autonomy; they also bring to the fore the hallmark Marxist problematic of labour. As communities provide themselves with the basic necessities of life, relations of authority between persons are established, and quite often abused. Eagleton demonstrates his socialist credentials when he says, 'The only good reason for being a socialist, in my opinion, is that one cannot quite overcome one's amazement that the fate of the vast majority of men and women who have ever lived and died has been, and still is today, one of fruitless, unremitting labour.'[12] Elsewhere, making the obvious point that a majority of the laboring people that have ever lived have never had the leisured opportunity to pursue literary studies, he says, 'Any cultural or critical theory which does not begin from this single most important fact, and hold it steadily in mind in its activities, is in my view unlikely to be worth very much.'[13] His conclusion, as one scholar will describe it, is that 'the final test that is proposed for [theory is] its ability to take a corporal form.'[14] There is a good towards which together we ought to strive in our scholarship; theory is to be measured against a moral norm. But this sort of moralizing conclusion is not an endorsement of an oppressive totalitarian ethic; or, to be more specific, it is not an endorsement of individualistic ethic. It forces the reader to come face to face with the ever-present discomfort and difficulties that living in community with others poses for each one of us. The human body, as one scholar highlights, becomes for Eagleton 'a basis for a political solidarity,' but it does so precisely because it is our shared 'suffering, mortal, needy, desiring bod[ies]' is the only possible basis of a common humanity.[15]

Eagleton draws attention to the fact that religious belief is 'the single most powerful, pervasive, persistent form of popular culture in human history.'[16] It offers something to the high and the low, the wealthy and the

12. Eagleton, 'The Significance of Theory,' 33.
13. Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 215.
14. Smith, *Terry Eagleton*, 108.
15. Smith, *Terry Eagleton*, 112.
16. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 52.

poor, the educated and the uneducated, the governor and the governed. That it answers all-encompassing 'questions such as why there is anything in the first place, or why what we do have is actually intelligible to us,' why this is the case should be apparent. At the same time, to say that religious belief is the most successful form of popular culture is not automatically a vote in favor of believing, since believing usually involves accepting, to some degree, the instruction of some mediating teacher. Dogma or doctrine, which simply mean things taught, very easily assume the other meaning we generally associate with them: a mode of thinking foisted upon the uneducated masses, usually to their material disadvantage.

Eagleton recognizes that the doctrine of Creation is dogma, a teaching, but he also recognizes its effect is to advantage everyone with respect to everyone else by disadvantaging no one, or to disadvantage everyone with respect to everyone else by advantaging everyone. It is universal in its application because it says that every human being is created in the image of God, placing each person in direct communion with the ontological ground that renders existence, life, intelligible. The first couple chapters of the Book of Genesis, from which the doctrine is derived, are thus not to be read like a natural history that sees event of creation begin precisely at 6 p.m. on October 22nd, 4004 BC, according to Bishop Ussher's calculation, and then extend over the six days that actually correspond to six 24-hour periods of time. Like the rest of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, Eagleton insists we read the Book of Genesis as literature, a point which neither Dawkins nor even Hitchens, a professor of literature, seemed to be able to grasp. As literature, the doctrine of Creation has something to say about human flourishing. Its meaning is both moral and natural: not natural in modern sense of natural knowledge gleaned from scientific observation and experimentation, but natural in the classical sense of the way human beings are and they way they ought to be. The doctrine of Creation *ex nihilo* means that the world is created 'out of nothing, rather than out of grim necessity.'[17] As such, it is a perpetual critique of the speculative excesses of reasoned attempts to derive an ultimate meaning for human life from the mere observation of nature and it is a guard against deriving universal laws from *a priori* principles. Eagleton embellishes by saying, 'Logocentrism is

17. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 8.

for the angels.'[18] A God who creates *ex nihilo* is pure liberty; and if human beings are said to be created in his image, they have a share in that liberty, 'which is to say [Eagleton comments] that in a splendidly big-hearted gesture, he is the source of atheism as well as faith.'[19] The point to be taken from all this is that, 'All authentic theology is liberation theology.'[20]

Eagleton's Marxist reflections of the meaning of God, as Creator, and the world, as his creation, are scattered throughout his published works. A favorite strategy of his when arguing against contemporary critiques of religious beliefs is to point out that, most of the time, they have either misunderstood or forgotten what there are critiquing. One lengthy reflection goes under the title, 'Invitation to an Orgy,' an orgy of sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste, of flesh, sweat, and blood, and of intertwined bodies. The first chapter of the Book of Genesis describes a remarkably mundane world populated by bodies—sun, moon, and stars, lakes, land, and sky, plants, animals, and human beings—within which this orgy of sensual experience fits quite nicely before it concludes, 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.' The bodily conditions of our existence are possessions, limitations, dependencies, that are entirely appropriate to creatures like ourselves; they are also the reason for our fragility.[21] We overstep the bodily conditions of our existence and forget our fragility, all too often at the expense of others. For the self-satisfied rationalist or the perpetually dissatisfied anti-rationalist who have forgotten those bodily conditions, the doctrine of Creation should drown them is a veritable orgy of sensual experience; but, as Eagleton directs us, orgy is better understood as inordinate, self-aggrandizing desire, just as easily pleasurable as it is violent.[22] One's own self takes precedence over other persons, to the disadvantage of those other persons. And where is the Creator in all this? Adopting the language that might be used by any one among of a number of Hebrew Prophets, Eagleton says, 'You shall know him for who he is when you see the hungry being filled with good things and the rich being sent empty away... Astonishingly,

18. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 80.
19. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 17.
20. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 32.
21. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 131.
22. Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, 31–6.

we are saved not by a special apparatus known as religion, but by the quality of our everyday relations with another.'[23]

Eagleton proposes through his project to recover rhetoric as a form of political criticism to pay attention to the one thing that has not changed appreciably in living or recorded memory: the bodily conditions of our existence, our possession of its limitations, dependencies, and fragility, something which corresponds quite readily to a world described in the first few chapters of Genesis. Through this lens, the French Revolution and the Continental revolutions that follow look less like complete revolutions of 360 degrees and more like an incomplete half-turns. To complete a revolution, after all, one must return to the point at which one began.

What exactly is new about an alliance between religion and revolution was my third question. Eagleton's sympathetic Marxist answer, if you have followed my presentation of his use of the doctrines of Creation, would be: not much at all.

23. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 19.