

Annual Lecture 2016

# The Death of God and the War on Terror

Terry Eagleton

Theos 



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# The Death of God and the War on Terror

Terry Eagleton





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# The Death of God and the War on Terror

Atheism is nothing like as easy as it looks. It may be simple enough at the individual level, but for whole societies to achieve this condition has proved remarkably hard.<sup>1</sup> In fact, modernity is littered with the rubble of failed surrogates for the Almighty, all the way from Reason, *Geist*, art, science, culture and Humanity to Nature, the People, the nation, Society, the state and Tom Cruise. No sooner has God been rejected than he is smuggled in the back door again, sometimes in heavy disguise. I don't of course mean to suggest that these phenomena are *nothing* but stand-ins for the deity, but all of them have fulfilled such a function at various times in their careers. Religion has traditionally played such a vital role in legitimating political regimes that our rulers could hardly look upon the disappearance of God with any degree of equanimity, which is one of several reasons why there have been various largely doomed attempts to fill his shoes.

I say 'largely doomed' because religion is an exceedingly hard act to follow. It has, in fact, proved to be far the most tenacious, enduring, widespread, deep-seated symbolic system humanity has ever known, not least because it is able to connect the everyday customs and practices of billions upon billions of ordinary people with the most august, transcendent, imperishable truths. It's the most successful form of popular culture in human history, though I wager you won't find it on a single cultural studies course. Culture can mean the values and beliefs of a cultivated minority, or it can mean the way of life of a whole people. Culture in the latter sense can nowadays be defined as that which you're prepared to kill or die for. Nobody is prepared to kill for Balzac or Beethoven, except perhaps for a few weird people hiding out in caves too ashamed to come out and face

the rest of us; but culture as language, symbol, custom, belief, kinship, and ethnicity and so on is widely considered to be well worth giving up one's life for. Only religion has been able to merge these two meanings of culture, the aesthetic and the anthropological, into a whole, uniting priest and laity, intellectual and populace, idea and institution, metaphysical speculation and popular piety, ritual and social reality, in ways that can only turn any other symbolic system green with envy. Today, the most successful substitute for religion is sport. It is sport which is the opium of the people, which lays on the weekly liturgies, supplies the canon of legendary heroes and provides the sense of solidarity which one might previously have found in a chapel or cathedral.

We now arrive at an enormous irony. After a whole series of botched attempts to dislodge the deity from his throne and replace him with some suitably secularised version of himself, European civilisation finally succeeded in despatching him to the outer darkness. Not, as it happens, with Nietzsche's defiant announcement of the death of God, but about a century later, in its so called postmodern phase, when capitalist society had changed to the point where Nietzsche's clarion call could now be both safely and conveniently heeded. It couldn't, really, in his own time, because when middle-class society is still in the process of constructing and consolidating itself, it needs some fairly grand ideological motifs – Progress, Science, Reason, Humanity, the Supreme Being and the like. Once it has settled down to the mundane business of making profit, however, it can afford to be faithless, and indeed can benefit from being so, since faith, whether religious or otherwise, is a divisive, controversial affair, not good in that respect for social cohesion. In any case, a consistency of self and belief doesn't sit particularly well with the volatile, adaptive, mutable human subject of advanced capitalism. Indeed, postmodern capitalism makes the disastrous mistake of regarding conviction itself as both dogmatic and authoritarian: begin with a robust belief in goblins and you end up with the Gulag. This fear of dogmatism is why so many young people today use the word 'like' every four seconds. 'It's nine o'clock' sounds unpleasantly absolute and definitive, whereas 'it's like nine o'clock' is suitably tentative,

provisional, open-ended and exploratory. When asked recently whether he had any convictions, the former Mayor of London replied that he had once picked one up for a driving offence. I should add that the faithlessness of late modernity is also a signal gain. Once religion, like art and sexuality, becomes privatised in the course of modernity, the purity police are much less likely to break down your bedroom door. Sexuality, art and religion are now nobody's business but your own, like breeding gerbils or collecting statues of George Bush, which represents both a welcome emancipation from state power and a withering of the social sense.

Advanced or postmodern capitalism can afford to go relativist, pragmatic and anti-foundational, post-absolutist, post-metaphysical, post-theological and even post-historical, as the same regime couldn't so easily in its more adolescent phase. Belief isn't what holds it together, as it is what holds the Boy Scout movement or the Lutheran Church together. Too much belief is neither necessary nor desirable for such social orders. It is politically dangerous and commercially superfluous. As long as their citizens roll out of bed, go into work, pay their taxes and refrain from beating up an excessive number of police officers, they can believe more or less what they like, an attitude that ancient or medieval civilisation would have viewed with utter bemusement. Or, at least, they can believe anything that doesn't threaten to undermine this very framework. In the eyes of Friedrich Nietzsche, the grandfather of postmodernism, truly noble spirits refuse to be the prisoners of their own principles. Instead, they treat their own most cherished opinions with a certain cavalier detachment, adopting and discarding them at will. One's beliefs are more like one's manservants, to be hired and fired as the fancy takes one, than like one's bodily organs.

Contrast this with the philosopher Charles Taylor's insistence that belief is actually constitutive of selfhood – that one couldn't have an identity and not believe, though the convictions in question don't need to be absolute. The left-wing historian A.J.P. Taylor once informed a committee interviewing him for an Oxford fellowship that he had some extreme political views but held them moderately.

Of course you may still call upon some kind of metaphysical discourse to help legitimate what you get up to, not least in the midst of a political crisis. Otherwise, however, it is a matter of endorsing the view of the English gentleman who remarked that when religion begins to interfere with your everyday life, it's time to give it up. (In this sense it's rather like alcohol.) It's a view that Jesus Christ was imprudent enough to disregard. What Nietzsche was the first to see was not only that God was dead on his feet, but that it was the stout bourgeois himself, not some bunch of long-haired leftie atheists, who had done him in. It was the inherently rationalist, pragmatist, utilitarian logic of the marketplace that had rendered such high-sounding metaphysical notions implausible – which is to say, in an arresting irony, that the material base of middle-class society was busy undermining its own ideological superstructure. The faithlessness of advanced capitalism is built into its routine practices, rather than in the first place a question of the scepticism of its individual citizens. The market would continue to behave faithlessly even if every one of its participants were a born-again evangelical. The stout bourgeois is a true believer in his church or in the bosom of his family yet a rank agnostic in his counting house, and it was he who was putting himself ideologically out of business.

God was dead, but though many did not believe in him anymore, they needed to convince themselves that they did. Like Othello confronted with Desdemona's supposed infidelity, they were caught in a state of cognitive dissonance, believing and disbelieving at the same time. It was necessary to pretend that God was still alive, keep him on a life-support machine, not least since he seemed to provide the underpinnings of bourgeois morality, which in turn formed one of the foundations of middle-class political power. Like Norman Bates in *Psycho*, then, the middle class, consumed by *mauvaise foi*, had to deny their own act of deicide, frantically cleaning up the scene of the crime. Though the economy may be a rank atheist, the state which stands guard over it needs, so far at least, to be a true believer – if not in theological terms then in metaphysical ones. And the two can't help entering into a certain embarrassing conflict with one another.

Nietzsche's own solution to this contradiction was hair-raisingly radical. If

the metaphysical superstructure no longer works, if you keep subverting it by your own profane activity, then accept that you don't need it anymore and just chuck it away. Accept that God is dead and seize advantage of his absence to manufacture your own values in the manner of the *Übermensch*. It was far too radical a proposal for his time, when grand narratives of one kind or another were still in order, but it became more and more feasible as capitalism evolved into its advanced or postmodern phase. In fact, postmodernity might be described, a little rashly to be sure, as the first thoroughly atheist civilisation, abandoning not only foundations, grand narratives, transcendental signifiers, absolute values and the like but even in a certain sense subjectivity itself, at least of the kind of depth where religious faith might germinate.

And what was the next enormous irony to happen along at just that point? Two aircraft slammed into the World Trade Center. And a new, full-bloodedly metaphysical grand narrative, that of the conflict between advanced capitalism and a certain reading of Islam, was launched with a fanfare, at just the point where the end-of-history merchants in the West, giddy with triumphalistic fantasies inspired by the West's victory in the Cold War, had declared all that tedious stuff to be over and done with. Once the Cold War had been won, the West, or so some of its apologists considered, no longer stood in need of ardent convictions, fundamental truths, grand narratives and sizeable doctrinal systems. And this was convenient, since they didn't fit well at all into the post-ideological climate of advanced capitalism. It's all very well for American politicians to talk about God, the Family, This Great Nation of Ours and Our Brave Men and Women in Uniform (the USA is ideologically exceptionalist in this respect), but you can't really get away with it in the more cynical, hardboiled milieu of Paris or London, where people will simply stare at their feet and wait for it to stop, as a friend of mine does whenever Schoenberg comes on the radio.

Anyway, the irony was that no sooner had a thoroughly atheistic culture arrived on the scene, one which was no longer anxiously in search of this or that placeholder for God, than the deity himself was suddenly back

on the agenda with a vengeance. Not, however, this time on the side of civilisation, not a suitably blue-blazered, short-haired, white-collar, golf-playing God, but a God who had shifted over to the side of so-called barbarism, a wrathful, alien, brown-skinned deity. The Almighty, it appears, was not safely nailed down in his coffin after all. He had simply changed address, migrating to the hills of Montana and the souks of the Arab world. And, despite his premature obituary notice, his fan club is steadily growing, not least in the evangelising of Latin America.

Fundamentalism has its source in anxiety rather than hatred. It is the pathological mind-set of those who feel washed up and humiliated by the brave new world of advanced capitalism and who might conclude that the only way to draw attention to their undervalued existence is to blow the heads off small children in the name of Allah or blow up playschools in Oklahoma City. What had happened was that smaller, weaker nations that had suffered under the West's new post-Cold War triumphalism finally unleashed a backlash in the form of radical Islam. (At this point in the argument, spokespersons for the British media invariably ask whether you're not somehow justifying terrorism by such remarks, obtusely confuse *explaining* with *excusing*). And this meant that the closing down of one grand narrative – the so-called end of history – simply served to open up another, the so-called War on Terror. It was not, to be sure, the first time that a declaration of the end of history had proved a little premature. Hegel believed with attractive modesty that history had now culminated in his own head, but this only generated more history in the form of vigorous rebuttals from a series of subsequent thinkers. The act of blowing the whistle on history and calling the whole thing off is itself a historical act, and to that extent self-refuting. Much the same is true of the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes, which in seeking to eradicate all previous history and create a luminous space for their own projects simply succeeded in heaping a little more history on what was there already.

A further irony of the whole affair was that the liberal agnostic West actually had a hand in bringing this illiberal, theocratic antagonist into existence, even if it still refuses, in Prospero's words about Caliban at the

end of *The Tempest*, to acknowledge this thing of darkness as (in part, at least) its own. An agnosticism designed to ward off fanaticism actually succeeded in stoking it through its predatory foreign policies. So the West has helped to spawn not only secularism but fundamentalism as well, a most creditable piece of dialectics. In the earlier decades of the twentieth century, the rolling back of liberal, secular and left-nationalist forces in the Muslim world by the West for its own imperial purposes (it supported the massacre of half a million leftists in Indonesia, for example) created a political vacuum in that vital geopolitical region into which Islamism was able to move, though you won't read much about that in the newspapers or on the BBC.

What we have, then, is a world divided between those who believe too much (fundamentalists of various stripes, whether Texan or Taliban) and those who believe too little (chief executives, technocrats, Robbie Williams and other hirelings of the inherently faithless social order of advanced capitalism). To paraphrase W.B. Yeats, there are those who lack all conviction and others who are full of passionate intensity. Moreover, in a sort of stalled dialectic, each camp contributes to reinforcing the other. The unity implicit in the term nation=state splinters apart into a narrow ethnic particularism on the one hand and an abstract globalism on the other. As Western politics is reduced to administration, the manufacture of consensus and conflict management, it ceases to provide a language for various issues which are accordingly driven out of the political sphere or symbolic in order to take up home in the monstrous, pathological dimension of the Real – terrorism etc. – so that one form of anti-politics generates another.

When it comes to belief, however, the West is now at a distinct disadvantage, since in yet another irony it engaged in a kind of ideological disarmament in its post-Cold War, postmodern years, imagining it could get by on a mixture of pragmatism, culturalism, relativism, anti-foundationalism, secularism and the like, at just the moment that it was then confronted by a new, full-bloodedly absolutist, foundationalist, metaphysical antagonist. It is true that the West continues, formally at least, to believe in God,



Freedom, Democracy and so on; it's just that these convictions have to survive in a culture of scepticism which gravely debilitates them, which is not by and large the case in the Muslim world. The West is caught in what the linguists would call a performative contradiction between what it actually does and what it says it does – between its routine practices and the way it explains those practices to itself. If you really want to know what someone believes, however, look at what they do, at the beliefs spontaneously embodied in their routine behaviour, not at what they say. It is thus that men and women may not actually believe in God but think that they do.

All this, surely, is one reason for the so-called God debate. For the final irony I have to report is that just at the moment when a postmodern West was in the process of junking the kinds of ideas which had served it supremely well at an earlier phase, but which were now increasingly felt to be embarrassing metaphysical baggage (Science, *Geist*, Reason, Progress, Liberty and the like) at just this moment, some Western thinkers felt the need to reach back into the previous history of the European middle classes and come up with a rather crude, reach-me-down, off-the-peg version of the Enlightenment. Old-fashioned nineteenth-century rationalists like Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens may well have other reasons for arguing against religion; but it is significant, even so, that we should once again be hearing the clapped out language of Reason, Science and Progress at just the point where the West, confronted with radical Islam, seems in need of some rather more robust self-justification for its activities than postmodernism can provide it with. So it is that the American death-of-God thinker Sam Harris, despite his apparent belief that his people are the most morally upright ever to walk the earth, was prepared in the wake of 9/11 to consider a pre-emptive strike against the Muslim world resulting in the deaths of 'tens of millions of innocent civilians'; if it would prevent them developing nuclear weapons.[2] For the sake of clarity, I should add that the 9/11 to which I refer is the World Trade Center event, not the first 9/11, one which happened on that date thirty years previously, when the United States overthrew the democratically

elected government of Salvador Allende of Chile and installed in its place an odious autocrat who went on to murder far more people than died in the World Trade Center. But you won't read much about that in the newspapers either.

Let me end with what strikes me as yet another irony. Postmodernism harbours an ideology known as culturalism, namely the belief that when it comes to human beings, culture goes all the way down. It is, so to speak, wall to wall. You couldn't dig deeper than culture because you would need to call upon culture – concepts, methods, assumptions – in order to do so, in which case you wouldn't be outflanking it at all. What this means, then, is that culture becomes a new sort of foundation – a somewhat shamefaced foundation, to be sure, since culturalists are largely hostile to foundationalism, but a foundation in all but name. And this, one might claim, is appropriate in an age where culture, as I say, means among other things what men and women are prepared to kill for. The irony, then, is that one form of culturalism—Western postmodernism—now confronts another: religious fundamentalism. For fundamentalism is certainly a culturalism of a sort. Postmodern culturalists aren't on the whole prepared to slaughter for their beliefs, since they don't tend to hold them very vigorously in the first place; but they do tend to see culture as a zone of conflict and contention, as of course does religious fundamentalism; and this marks a momentous shift in Western history. It means that for some time now—in fact ever since the flourishing of revolutionary nationalism—culture has been part of the problem rather than the solution. A whole rich, resourceful, hopelessly idealist lineage of liberal or Romantic humanism, for which culture is essentially a ground of reconciliation, has come to an end, as the notion of culture has come to shed its innocence. It is no longer the opposite of politics, as it was, by and large, for the humanistic tradition, but the very language in which political demands are framed and articulated.

But the culturalists are surely mistaken. Culture doesn't go all the way down. In the end, the conflict between radical Islam and advanced capitalism is a political not a religious one. It certainly isn't a row about the nature of God

or the immortality of the soul. The recent war between Nationalists and Unionists in Northern Ireland had precious little to do with culture, though it expressed itself in religious terms. If we need culture, it is because of our material nature, or, as Marx might have said, our species-being. Human beings are all prematurely born –all born helpless and vulnerable, with a huge gap in their nature which culture, in the broad sense of systems of care, nurture and so on, must quickly move in on if they aren't to perish. If we're cultural beings, then, it is because we are in the first place lumps of matter, pieces of Nature, of a certain kind. And, though this may not sound as sexy and glamorous as one would wish, it is to these humble material foundations, not to the hubris of culture that we need first to look.

*Terry Eagleton is a celebrated literary and cultural theorist. He is Distinguished Professor of English Literature at Lancaster University and Emeritus Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford. He is the author of over fifty books; recent publications include Why Marx Was Right (2011) and Culture and the Death of God (2014).*

## reference

- 1 [https://oxfordleftreview.com/olr-issue-14/terry-eagleton-the-death-of-god-and-the-war-on-terror/#\\_ftn1](https://oxfordleftreview.com/olr-issue-14/terry-eagleton-the-death-of-god-and-the-war-on-terror/#_ftn1)

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