

Forms of Transcendence

Martin Spence led the discussion at the SOF Annual Zoom Conference on Terry Eagleton's talk on the Death of God. Here he gives his own response to Eagleton.

It was clear from the start that the 2021 SOF Conference in July would have to be an online affair. The pandemic was (is) still with us, and a face-to-face gathering was simply not possible. So we set out to make the best of it, and among other things we went looking for online content which might spark discussion. One online item which got a good response was a YouTube talk by Terry Eagleton, entitled 'The Death of God' (2015).

Eagleton's argument

I like Eagleton. He is very much an academic, a Professor of Literature, but he has never allowed a job-title to limit either his areas of interest or his sense of mischief. His articles, books and talks always fizz with ideas, paradoxes, contradictions and knockabout humour. He was brought up a Catholic and became a Marxist, and he retains respect for both traditions while also mining them endlessly for jokes and throwaway lines. So for instance, in his 'Death of God' talk he asserts that: 'Hegel believed that History had reached its conclusion inside his own head' – which manages simultaneously to be a bit true, rather unfair, and quite funny.

'The Death of God' is of course a familiar phrase, conjuring up both Friedrich Nietzsche, and the radical theology of the 1960s – but Eagleton uses it to mean something different. He is concerned here not with theology or individual belief, but rather with the social and cultural *conditions* and *consequences* both of religious belief, and of its absence. So, early on in his talk, when he says that 'Atheism is really difficult', he doesn't mean that it's intellectually sophisticated (no-one who has read Richard Dawkins could possibly think that) or emotionally challenging. He means, rather, that human *societies* need some shared faith or meaning – some shared 'source of transcendent value' – if they are to hold together. He means that it is difficult for *societies* to function in the absence of some such source.

If we apply Eagleton's argument to our own society, it seems to hang together. Not just in Britain but across Christendom, for centuries, there was indeed a shared transcendent value in the form of a near-universal belief in the Christian God, and near-universal acceptance of the rituals and practices associated with the Church as the institutional vehicle of that belief. Eagleton describes this mass-participation religion, with its transcendent messages which steeped daily life in shared meaning, and connected individual experience to divine purpose, as 'the most successful form of popular culture ever'.

However, Eagleton goes on, organised religion is not the only possible source of transcendent value. In the West, modernity has spawned secular alternatives: Art, Science, the People, the Nation, Progress, Communism. But in the last analysis, Eagleton sees these as inadequate God-substitutes, 'doomed attempts to fill God's shoes'. They may still have real power: the idea of 'the Nation', for instance, has inspired sublime poetry, extraordinary self-sacrifice, and bestial cruelty. But this is precisely his point: nationalism is powerful when it mimics religion, lifting 'the Nation' on high to the point where it seeks to become a substitute for God, positing itself as a mystical source of ultimate meaning.

All of which leads Eagleton to pose the question: Can any society survive in the absence of some shared source of transcendent value? And he answers his own question by suggesting that we are right now in the process of finding out, because we ourselves live in just such a society. Eagleton claims that the twenty-first century West is the first society in history which has attempted to hold itself together in the absence of any binding religious or transcendent belief.

We live, he argues, not just in a capitalist society but in a *post-modern* capitalist society, quite unlike the merchant capitalist, or industrial



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capitalist, or state-capitalist societies of previous centuries. He sees post-modern capitalism as both globalised and individualised, a world-market driven by billions of short-term individual consumer choices, with no binding meaning or ethos beyond its own self-reproduction. It holds itself together by stimulating desire, briefly satisfying it through the market, then re-igniting it once more. Unlike previous phases of capitalism which still relied on religion and religious morality, such as a Protestant work-ethic, Eagleton argues that this post-modern phase needs no conviction, or faith, or belief. All it needs is for people to turn spontaneously to the market to satisfy their desires.

But, Eagleton continues, despite appearing to bestride the globe, this faithless capitalism is really quite fragile. For faith and belief persist in the world, sometimes taking violent and intolerant forms, and given the opportunity they will strike back against faithless post-modern capitalism. Hence 9/11.

To sum up then: Eagleton argues that killing off God is a risky business, because religious belief and practice provide sources of transcendent value which bind societies together, underpinning social stability by investing everyday life with meaning and purpose. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many societies claimed to have replaced religion with more modern ideals – Nation or Progress or Communism – but for Eagleton these were merely God-substitutes. Not until our own age, the age of post-modern capitalism, do we truly encounter

a society without faith, without any binding source of transcendent value. And the jury is still out on whether such a society can survive.

Whenever I read or listen to Terry Eagleton, I always find him enormously compelling; his combination of erudition, intelligence and humour carries me along. Sometimes I remain persuaded even after I've allowed the ideas to percolate, but at other times doubts arise, and this is one of those other times. I don't go along with his 'Death of God' narrative, for one big reason: I think he misrepresents religion and its relation to transcendence.

Religion and transcendence

Eagleton argues that religion is the primary and authentic source of transcendent value, and that while secular ideals such as Nation or Progress or Communism may reproduce some of its effects, they only succeed insofar as they model themselves upon the religious original. But underlying this argument is an unspoken assumption that we can treat 'religion' as if it were a thing, a structure, a discrete domain, within society.

I do not accept this. I think that it misrepresents both religion and society. Just as many theologians have insisted that God is not a 'thing' in the world, so I want to argue that religion is not a 'thing' in society. Human society is not a machine consisting of separate and distinct components, one of which is labelled 'religion'. Society is, rather, a dynamic field of activity in which all our actions have many parallel aspects, parallel qualities, which co-exist and interact.

Consider a devout believer participating in a collective act of worship in a church, mosque, synagogue, or temple. This activity is incomprehensible if we remove its religious dimension; worship is, undeniably, a religious act. But it is not *only* a religious act. It is also a linguistic act, a performance of individual and collective speech, spoken and perhaps sung. It is a gestural act involving ritual movement, bowing, kneeling, hand gestures. It is a spatial act, for all the worshippers have travelled from their homes to the place of worship and soon will travel back

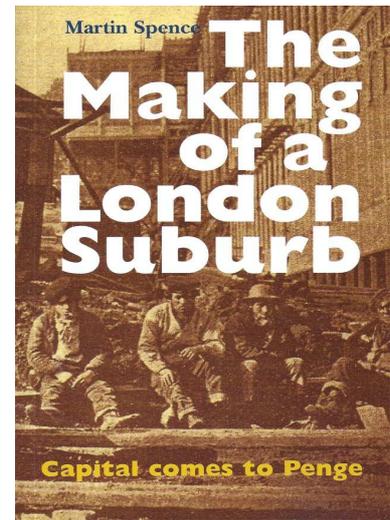
again. It is a sartorial act, involving dress or costume appropriate to the occasion. Above all it is a *communal* act, a meeting with others at an agreed time and place for a shared purpose. None of these aspects – linguistic, gestural, communal and so on – compete with or detract from the religious aspect of worship. On the contrary, they help constitute it, giving it form and practical presence in the world.

This has a direct bearing on Eagleton's concept of 'transcendent value'. In his presentation, he suggests that religion is the authentic source of transcendent value, connecting our worldly lives and experiences to other-worldly ultimate meaning, up to and including divinity. But I think he's got it the wrong way around. I think that transcendent value, broadly conceived as a sense of connection between everyday life and a larger realm of truth or meaning, is bubbling up all the time in all human communities, in a thousand ways, through work and speech and gesture and community. I think that our humanity, our nature as social primates who make tools and sentences, expresses itself as a transcendent impulse, an ever-present urge to reach out for meaning beyond the immediacy of daily life.

This means that religion, far from being the *source* of transcendent value, is a particular form of *response* to it, channelling the transcendent impulse towards other-worldliness and divinity. But there are also other possible responses, which channel it in other directions: towards a heightened sense of human community; or a sense of historical progress or improvement; or unity with the natural world. And these different responses are not mutually exclusive, but mix and merge with one another: hence Judaism and Hinduism, which may combine a profound sense of other-worldliness and divinity with an equally powerful sense that the community of believers is ethnically or nationally defined.

This should alert us to the uncomfortable truth that the transcendent impulse is not necessarily benign. A heightened sense of human community, a sense that each individual life is enriched and made meaningful through participation in a wider fellowship, may lead to generosity and sharing and co-operation – and may equally lead to authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, and violence towards strangers and outsiders.

If there is a transcendent impulse; if it is the case that by virtue of being human, we inevitably and repeatedly seek transcendent frameworks of meaning and validation; then Eagleton's vision of faithless post-modern capitalism



must fall. He has mistaken the decline of certain high-profile religious institutions for a decline in religion as such; and he has taken the connection between religion and transcendent value to be causative and necessary, when in reality it is responsive and contingent. In fact, if the human condition generates a transcendent impulse in the way that I have suggested, there can be no such thing as a faithless human society. There can only be different societies with different transcendent frameworks, some of them clearly and self-consciously religious, others furiously denying any hint of religiosity, but all of them sharing that fundamental urge to enrich everyday life by reaching out to a larger realm of truth and meaning.

Conclusion

The SOF Network's motto states that 'religion is a human creation'. I have suggested here that we are subject to a deep-seated human impulse to seek transcendent meaning, which springs from the material realities of our humanity; our character as social primates, our facility for making tools and transforming our environment, and our possession of language. And I have argued that religion, far from being the source of that impulse, is rather a particular response to it. I hope that this perspective may offer one way of putting flesh on the bones of that motto of ours.

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