

Michael Morton reviews
*Faith, Reason and Revolution :
Reflections on the God Debate*
by Terry Eagleton

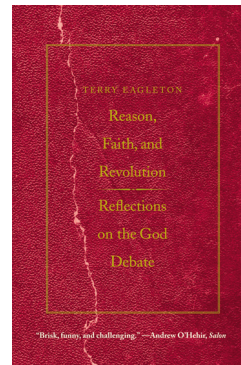
Yale University Press (London & New Haven (USA)). Pbk 2010.
200 pages. £10.99. ISBN: 9780300164534.

Terry Eagleton has grown in stature over the years. From the late 1960s as the editor of *Slant*, a left-wing Catholic magazine brought out in the heady days after Vatican II, he became a renowned literary theorist, Oxford Professor of English and expert on Marxism. He has written over forty books and always writes wisely and well. On his life's work, he comments wryly that 'one of the best reasons for being a Christian, as well as a Socialist, is that you don't like having to work, and reject the fearful idolatry of it so rife in countries like the United States. True civilisations do not hold pre-dawn power breakfasts.'

His latest book is an edited version of the 2008 Terry Lectures, given at Yale University on the subject of the links and disjunctions between science and religion. He professes to know only a little about each, but takes as his adversaries the so-called 'New Atheists', principally Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens (whom he irreverently joins together as 'Ditchkins') and their disdainful dismissal of religion as the roots of all human evil, or most of it.

Writing for the defence, Terry returns surprisingly to his Catholic roots. His argument is that salvation is a political affair and all about the *anawim* (the poor and needy in Hebrew). He concedes that left-wing, radical Christians are a rarity. Faith is not an intellectual assent to propositions; it is always faith-as-trust. Most atheists miss this point. Not only do they have a naïve understanding of God and theology, they inveigh against religion without understanding that they are the least qualified to do so. (After all, why go into it deeply when there are better things to do?)

Yet Terry's Socialism and critical background will not let Christianity off the hook. Clerical abuse of children – especially in Ireland where it was far, far worse than here – the demeaning of women, the move of the Church towards the bourgeoisie are all deeply disturbing. Christianity has betrayed itself badly. On the other hand, it is often more down to Earth than the fantasies of the Enlightenment. It has the power to transform parts of human society without the hubris of Progress. Ditchkins and their allies cannot see that the Enlightenment was a mixed blessing. Neither are they willing to concede what Christian faith has indeed achieved, for that would mean putting tiresome



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qualifications on their dislike of it.

As the book and lectures progress, the reader is led into profound areas of religious belief. That it is not the opposite of reason, only of credulity or fanaticism. The relationship between belief and knowledge is complex: belief can be rational but untrue, but then quantum physics can be 'true' but irrational (or at least deeply counter-intuitive). And then, most people believe in luck, but no-one knows what it is. Faith, as Terry constantly reiterates, articulates a commitment that precedes a description of the way things are. Suddenly a polemic against the New Atheists becomes a profound and stimulating reflection on the nature of religious faith. And this is the heart of the book, the pearl in the oyster.

However, speaking of corny metaphors, sometimes there are things which jar the easy flow of the debate. Terry appears to join his enemies in exaggeration when it comes to organised religions' faults. In his view, nuns (he means religious sisters) who ill-treated children were all 'psycho-pathologically sadistic'. He is also the master of the confusing simile. I puzzled for a while over his point that 'it is rather like saying that thanks to the electric toaster we can forget about Chekhov.' And yet some of his gnomic utterances bear thinking about. That 'there has been no human culture to date in which virtue has been predominant' is a notion that qualifies many beliefs – religious or secular.

This is a well-written and valuable work. Terry Eagleton is reaching a rich maturity and he has much to offer during the course of his debate. That it achieves no resolution is no matter. We could profitably take a line from economics and concede that if we put all the world's theologians in a line, they still would not come to a conclusion.

Michael Morton is the parish priest of St Winefride's Catholic Church in Sandbach, Cheshire. He is a SOF Trustee and editor of *Portholes*.

The hardback of this book was published in 2009 and the paperback is due out this month, March 2010.