

TERRY EAGLETON

Reason, Faith, &
Revolution

Reflections on the God Debate

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Preface

Religion has wrought untold misery in human affairs. For the most part, it has been a squalid tale of bigotry, superstition, wishful thinking, and oppressive ideology. I therefore have a good deal of sympathy with its rationalist and humanist critics. But it is also the case, as this book argues, that most such critics buy their rejection of religion on the cheap. When it comes to the New Testament, at least, what they usually write off is a worthless caricature of the real thing, rooted in a degree of ignorance and prejudice to match religion's own. It is as though one were to dismiss feminism on the basis of Clint Eastwood's opinions of it.

It is with this ignorance and prejudice that I take issue in this book. If the agnostic left cannot afford such intellectual indolence when it comes to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, it is not only because it belongs to justice and honesty to confront your opponent at his or her most convincing. It is also that radicals might discover there some valuable insights

into human emancipation, in an era where the political left stands in dire need of good ideas. I do not invite such readers to believe in these ideas, any more than I myself believe in the archangel Gabriel, the infallibility of the pope, the idea that Jesus walked on water, or the claim that he rose up into heaven before the eyes of his disciples. If I try in this book to “ventriloquize” what I take to be a version of the Christian gospel relevant to radicals and humanists, I do not wish to be mistaken for a dummy. But the Jewish and Christian scriptures have much to say about some vital questions—death, suffering, love, self-dispossession, and the like—on which the left has for the most part maintained an embarrassed silence. It is time for this politically crippling shyness to come to an end.

This book is based on the Dwight H. Terry Lectures which I delivered at Yale University in April 2008. I have preserved the conversational tone of a lecture to begin with, but this rapidly fades into a more conventional style of argument. I am deeply grateful to the Trustees of the Terry Lectures, and in particular to Laurelee Field, for making my stay in New Haven so socially agreeable and intellectually rewarding. The same goes for the many students and academics who attended the sessions.