

Terry Eagleton: The New Atheism and the War on Terror

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Terry Eagleton: The reason I write so much is, actually, I don't share this habit of reading other people's books, which I've always found extraordinarily intrusive, to peer into people's private space. If I want to read a book, I just have to write one, you see, so this is why Ajaz can't keep up with me. I can't keep up with myself, either. It's delightful, always, to be back in Columbia, and I'm very grateful to Akeel Bilgrami in particular for inviting me here, rescuing me from Notre Dame for a couple of precious secular days, as it were. There we are.

Why are the most unlikely people, myself included, suddenly talking about God? I mean, why is it that just when the Almighty, like some aging celebrity, looks set for a well earned retirement from the public stage, no doubt glumly surveying the squalid course of the history he's created and bitterly regretting having fashioned the slightest particle of matter, not least Dick Cheney – I mean, why is it that at this supposedly post-metaphysical, post-religious, post-historical point perhaps, He's been whisked abruptly back on center stage, besieged by paparazzi, jostled by professors? Why have bookshops, at least where I come from, suddenly started sprouting sections called, "Atheism," which they certainly didn't have before? Why is it that Richard Dawkins and myself have been asked to contribute front-page articles on the so-called God debate? To what? No, not The Church Times, not The Guardian, but The Wall Street Journal, circulation 20 million I believe. What's going on here?

I told The Wall Street Journal editor I'd be delighted to contribute, as long as my last sentence could be, "Jesus would never have been invited to write for The Wall Street Journal." I mean, why in the world is the world suddenly thronged with atheists who are obsessed with religion as puritans are with sex? This is true even in England, where religion is generally a rather moderate sort of slightly shamefaced, discreet sort of thing where people are likely to believe that once religion starts to interfere with your everyday life, it's time to give it up. A little like alcohol, perhaps, you know? One can't imagine the queen's chaplain asking you whether you've been washed in the blood of the lamb. He might ask you to pass the sherry, or something of that kind. That would be more his liquid, I think. You know, we are a moderate race. We like doing things gradually. If ever we decide to drive on the right hand side of the road, we shall do so gradually.

Though I think, perhaps, one must linger a little here over the word "atheism". I mean, in order to reject religious faith, an atheist, presumably, must first grasp something of what it entails. That would seem a fairly simple, straightforward condition for being an atheist. Rather as you can't argue about the value of synecdoche, or metonymy, if you think they're small towns in upper New York State. Whereas, I must confess, it seems to be deeply doubtful that Ditchkins – as I have taken the liberty of dubbing Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens in a remarkably cheap and extraordinarily attractive book called, Reason, Faith, and Revolution – it seems to be highly doubtful whether they could be called atheists at all, since they don't seem to have any idea of what it is they're criticizing.

More or less, to a man and woman, every single champion of the anti-religious case, for example, subscribes to what I've called in this remarkably cheap and extraordinarily attractive book, what I've called "the Yeti theory of faith." They imagine, deluded that they

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are, that the question “Do you believe in God,” is rather like the question, “Do you believe in the Yeti,” or the Loch Ness Monster, or alien abductions? Speaking of alien abductions, as I very frequently do, I should mention that my wife and three of my five children are actually American. As the man in Samuel Beckett said about one of the two thieves on Calvary being saved, that’s a reasonable percentage, I think. But they belong to that rather reviled and persecuted minority of Americans who haven’t been abducted by aliens. You can, in fact, attend therapy courses on this. You can sort of pretend you’ve been abducted, or they set up abduction scenarios for you or they tell you it’s fine. It’s fine not to be abducted.

The belief in God, as I hope any first year theology student would tell you –and this is quite independently of whether you do happen to believe in God or not, I think the point applies both ways– belief in God has very little indeed to do with subscribing to the proposition that there exists somewhere a supreme being. The grammar of, “I believe in God,” is only superficially equivalent to the statement, “I believe in Bigfoot,” or “I believe that some goblins are gay.” I mean, the devil is said to believe in God’s existence, yes? But he certainly doesn’t believe in him. Abraham had faith in God, but one imagines that he wouldn’t even have been able to conceive that God didn’t exist. But he had faith in God. As far as I understand it, as a bit of an outsider, faith, for Christianity, is the kind of commitment manifested by a tortured and executed political criminal at the end of his tether, foundering in atrocious pain and a sense of utter bewilderment and abandonment, who nevertheless remains faithful, perhaps for reasons he doesn’t even understand himself, to a belief in the power of transformation.

If you’re going to talk about it, surely it’s that kind of language game, not the Yeti one, that you’ve got to talk about. As I understand it, again, I may be wrong, the stark signifier of faith for Christianity is the mutilated body of one who was homeless and property-less, denounced the rich and powerful, was remarkably laid back about sex, unlike almost all of his followers, was virulently hostile to the family, held that the losers and deadbeats would inherit the earth, spoke up for love and justice, and was done to death by the state for his pains. If you don’t love, you’re dead, and if you do, they’ll kill you.

It’s hardly any wonder, surely, in the light of this, that the figure of Jesus isn’t exactly the most fashionable thing in Richard Dawkins’ North Oxford, or Chris Hitchens’ Washington, the posher bits of Washington. When Richard Dawkins excitedly announced recently on a television program – incidentally, the only thing I really know about Richard Dawkins is that his wife is in Dr. Who, if anybody knows about Dr. Who here. That’s the most important thing about Richard Dawkins, none of this Darwin nonsense. His wife – would you believe it? – is actually a star in Dr. Who. It’s true. When he recently announced in some – yet another program on Darwin, on television back home, he said that evolution proves that our ancestors were winners, he says. So, I suppose, they bequeathed us to the world. It seems to me his statement was far more contrary to the spirit of the so-called New Testament, than his reflections on the origin of the universe.

No one who liked Dawkins can write with breathtaking smugness, oozing moral complacency at every turn of phrase – I hope he’s not here, by the way. I don’t think he’s here. He tends to follow me around a bit, you know. Suddenly turn around, and see him out of the corner of my eye. Nobody who writes, quote, “that most people in the 21st century are morally way ahead of our counterparts in the Middle Ages, or in the time of Abraham, or even in the 1920’s,” he adds, nobody who writes that could possibly, it seems to me, have the depth of tragic, unflinching moral realism that Christian faith demands, impossibly demands. For the good professor, it would seem everyone just keeps getting nicer and nicer. And the more he goes on about that, the more one appreciates the disruptive potential of the radical potential, if you like, of the doctrine of original sin.

Dawkins just doesn't believe that things are all that bad, and no doubt, in his corner of North Oxford, they're not. It seems to me that the ultimate division between people these days is not so much between left and right, but those who see how atrocious the situation is and has been, and those who, with the best will in the world, don't and think that's sort of lurid, left hyperbole, or something of the kind. I mean, the fact that he doesn't believe things are that bad is, of course, the reason why he doesn't believe in the need for any kind of radical change. Though he did, to his credit, oppose the Iraq war. His self satisfied enlightenment doctrine of progress is, in this sense, I think, distinctly anti-progressive.

Christopher Hitchens is equally ensnared in this primitive superstition of progress, writing as he does in *The God Delusion* — there's now a book in Ireland, by the way, called, "The Oh My God Delusion," which was just bound to happen, I think, really. I quote Christopher that, "We can look forward to the evolution of our poor brains and to stupendous advances in medicine and life extension," as often, you find Hitchens speaking like Michael Jackson, whose hope that he would live forever was, as we know, a trifle premature.

Ditchkins and Hawkins talk about primitive superstition. No superstition surely could be more primitive, more complacent, more unreflective, uncritical, than this tired rehash of some enlightenment doctrines. Not, as I will say later, that I wish to set myself up simply as a critic of the enlightenment, far from it. Ditchkins is every bit as theologically illiterate as he is about what faith means, and not just religious faith, any kind of faith. He's just as theologically literate about the doctrine of the creation. He seems to imagine that it's something to do with how the world got started, how the world got off the ground. Yes? And that science can offer a vastly more plausible explanation of it than can the Book of Genesis; surprise, surprise.

But again, as I hope any first year theology student might tell these distinguished intellectuals, the doctrine of creation isn't about that at all. It has nothing whatsoever to do with that. The New Testament, for example, has almost nothing to say about God the sort of celestial manufacturer. Theologians are not in competition with astrophysicists any more than sculptors are with stock brokers. The greatest theologian, I suppose, whoever wrote, excepting perhaps Saint Paul, Thomas Aquinas, thought that it was quite possible that the universe had no origin at all. Yet, he believed, of course, in the doctrine of creation. He just didn't think it was some kind of pseudo science. As far as that went, all that sort of Dawkins like business, Aquinas says you've got to be an atheist or implies you've got to be an atheist. Creation doesn't concern the manufacture of the universe, and if you want to know what it does concern, then if you'll approach me later in private, for an extremely modest fee, I'll let you know.

Ditchkins seems to imagine that religious faith is meant to be some kind of explanation of something, and therefore, of course, falls down in relation to science. He makes a fundamental category mistake, in other words, about it, which is the idea that the religious faith is meant to explain the universe. It's rather like supposing that Hamlet is a study in clinical depression or that Moby Dick is a report on the whaling industry. So this is a crass error, okay? So, it's doubtful, I think, that one can even award the title of atheist — which, of course, is an honorable title — to such a botched understanding of religious faith, any more than, say, one would describe Brad Pitt as an anti-philosopher. I mean, to be an anti-philosopher like Kierkegaard, or Nietzsche, or Adorno, Freud, Wittgenstein, Derrida you have to oppose philosophy for philosophically fascinating reasons, which I take it is not the case with our friend Mr. Pitt.

Even so, having said that, we're left with the question that I began with of why has the Almighty suddenly crept in from the wings to center stage again, in this post-metaphysical

era, supposedly? And there are, of course, lots of reasons for that, but I think you could do worse, if you wanted just a simple brief explanation, you could do worse than say 9/11. I mean, of course, the recent 9/11. I don't mean the 9/11 that happened almost exactly 30 years before when the United States government violently overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende of Chile and installed in its place an odious dictator who went on to kill far more people than died in the World Trade Center. But I don't want to go on about something the media talked to you about all the time. They never stop mentioning history professors and politics professors falling over themselves to talk about the first 9/11. I don't want to be tedious about it. There was, actually, even a 9/11 before that, which was the birth of Theodor Adorno, but only right wingers think that was a catastrophe.

Of course, a lot of these debates go further back. Of course, Chris Hitchens and Dawkins have been arguing their case, Dawkins with increasing, alarming evangelical fervor, for quite a long time. But I think that the debates were given new focus, a new intensity, by 9/11. It's only since then, really, that writers like Hitchens who, of course, was mildly atheist all along, but certainly since then they've become, as it were, sort of militant, card-carrying atheists, rambling on dyspeptically about the virgin birth and other things you don't expect to find in *Vanity Fair*.

I should perhaps add that many years ago, Hitchens and I were fellow comrades in the same far left organization in Britain. But he has matured, grown up. I almost said sobered up, but that might be stretching the point. Settled in Washington, made his peace with the Pentagon, and discarded his infantile left illusions, whereas I have remained stuck in the same old tedious groove, unable to accept reality, that the world has changed. Yes? Clinging to my outmoded beliefs like a toddler to his blanket. Even so, Hitchens tells us in "God Is Not Great," that he feels no less radical than he did then, as a young man. A view about as widely shared as a few that Kate Winslet is the Antichrist.

The fall of the World Trade Center, of course, happened not long after some ideologues in the West, in the wake of the Cold War, had declared that history itself was now at an end, in the sense that the various grand narratives of modernity, progress, reason, enlightenment, science, classical liberalism, Marxism, and so on, were now definitively over. What remained, what would thrive, what would flourish, was a definitively post-metaphysical pragmatic form of capitalism, which was now the only game in town. But there was an enormous irony here, I think, but it took some years to begin to perceive, which was that the very sort of intellectual triumphalism, which could promulgate the end of history reflected an actual political triumphalism across the globe, in the wake of the Cold War in particular, which resulted with consummate irony in the unleashing of a new grand narrative, namely radical Islam.

The very act of trying to close down history succeeded in prising it open again. The very act of announcing these grand narratives that had supported Western history so buoyantly were now themselves over, was tied into, was locked into a political global situation in which that act itself was a part of a hubris, and a triumphalism which, among many other reasons, helped to unleash and catalyze radical Islam. And this irony of opening up history in the very act of trying to close it down, was not new. Hegel, who believed with disarming modesty, that history had now culminated inside his own head succeeded simply by virtue of this in, of course, unleashing a whole set of reposts, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Marx, and so on, generating a history that he tried to close down. The avant-garde tries to wipe clean the historical slate to create a tabula rasa for their own unique creations. But that, of course, is in itself an historical act, which piles more history onto the very history that you're trying to eradicate.

The result was, then, that the West now found itself eyeball to eyeball with a full bloodedly metaphysical opponent, for whom absolute truths, rock solid foundations, irrefutable identities, and so on, posed no problem whatsoever. What they did – but they didn't, they don't. But this, at just the point when the West itself was in danger of lapsing into an unholy mélange of moral relativism, political pragmatism, ontological antifoundationalism, and philosophical skepticism, a mixture whatever you may say for it, or against it, has the disability of being gravely ideologically disarming, not least at a time of unforeseen political crisis. Islamism then was forcing the West to confront some very big questions indeed, at exactly the point where, in laid back post modern style, it is least morally and intellectually equipped to do so, where it has, in a certain sense, engaged in a kind of unilateral disarmament.

There are plenty of reasons, of course, for opposing radical Islam, not least its habit of blowing innocent civilians to bits. It has to be opposed, and opposed, if necessary, by force. There are many excellent reasons for detesting small, clandestine groups who plot to maim and murder innocent men and women, though admittedly, some people think the CIA are doing quite a good job. One of the more subtle reasons for being alarmed by Islamism, however, I think, is that it lays bare the contradiction between the West's urgent need to believe, and its chronic incapacity to do so. And this is a very perilous political point.

Capitalists civilizations, just in the nature of the beast, can't help being averse to what one might dub deep belief. The United States here is, in many senses, is often an exception in certain regards, but I don't think it is in that sense typical of advanced capitalism, because of the enormous importance, not least of its peculiar religious and ideological history. But in general, I think it's fair to say, market societies are inherently secular, relativist, materialistic. Whatever their citizens may high mindedly proclaim. The problem, however, is that to legitimate their operations, they stand in need of values and principles rather more edifying and eternal than this. They can't just generate up their values from what they do, because if they did that, they would risk ending up with all of the worst values.

Values mustn't just reflect or express what you or a society does. They must also act functionally to legitimate it, and this is a real problem given, as it were, the inherent atheistic, or at least let's say agnostic nature of market societies, where a belief can actually be a real obstacle and embarrassment. It's needed, of course, for certain foundational ideological purposes, but simultaneously, it can also get in your way. To look at when one asks what people believe, of course you don't listen to what they say, you look at what they do. You look at the beliefs implicit in their behavior, implicit in their everyday conduct. You note the rhetoric, of course, but you note the relation, or indeed, the dysfunctional relation, perhaps, between that rhetoric and the material reality.

And as far as that is concerned, I think one might say that modern marketplace societies are caught in a performative contradiction between what they do and what they say they do, between their activities and the descriptions that they tend to give of them. Nowhere is this more glaringly obvious, I must say, as an observer, as an outsider, than here in the United States, which is, on the one hand, doubtless the most rabidly materialistic nation on the planet, but which is also one of the most full throatedly metaphysical, at least to the ear of an outsider, awash with pious, elevated late Victorian, hand-on-heart rhetoric about God and freedom and country, and this great nation of ours, and God's special respect for certain corners of southeast Texas, and that sort of thing. I mean, a rhetorical mode that could only cause a jaded European to stare at his shoes and wait until it stops.

The more ruthlessly secularized, rationalized, pragmatic and technocratic your actual behavior, the more you will need to appeal to such rather heady and sometimes implausible

forms of legitimation, drawing note on earlier bourgeois ideologies in the main, drawing noted on the pre-history, the ideological pre-history of advanced capitalist societies. But by the same token, the more you need these kinds of ways of talking, and so on, the more you will risk discrediting them, undermining your own sacred rhetoric by your own profane activity. And there's nothing such societies can do about that, because it is a structural contradiction. They may square the circle as best they can, here and there of course.

Nietzsche had an extraordinary, scorchingly radical solution to that. Nietzsche said – well, I'm paraphrasing in here – Nietzsche said, "If there is this, as it were, contradiction between the base and the superstructure, to use Marxist terms, if the superstructure, a certain religious metaphysical superstructure, is simply out of sync with an inherently pragmatist, materialist base, then just throw away the superstructure." Hair-raisingly radical. Don't you see? He says, "You don't need it anymore. It's not working. It only serves to bring what you do into discredit." By highlighting this embarrassing discrepancy, and again, it's like the toddler's blanket. You think you need it, but when the toddler throws the blanket away, he'll discover the most astonishing thing of all; namely, he didn't need it at all. Yes? God is dead, and Nietzsche will add, "And you have killed him." Not some hairy atheistic lefties swarming onto the scene, who have choked and strangled God or pulled the plug on him. "It is you," Nietzsche says, "in your ordinary, profane activities, that have pulled the plug on the Almighty, but you won't admit it. You won't cough up to it. You're pretending he's still alive." And you don't need to. You don't need to. It'd be much more plausible, he says, if you just threw that superstructure away.

The world then, I think, could be said to be currently divided between those who believe far too much, and those who believe far too little. And then there are decent, rational people like me, who stand somewhere in the middle here, neither extreme nor being exemplified. Late capitalist cultures are not given to an excess of belief, and this for at least two reasons. For one thing, of course, liberal democracies don't so much hold beliefs as believe that people should be allowed to hold beliefs. They display a certain creative indifference, as they see it, to what their citizens actually believe, as long as they're allowed to get on believing it, and crucially, as long as they don't act upon beliefs which would prevent other people from believing what they believe.

Well, whatever one thinks about that agnosticism, in my view it's in certain ways very laudable.

In fact, it's not at all politically prudent, not least at times like this. For example, the fact is that people's beliefs in the situation are bound to collide with one another, to the point where any fundamental consensus becomes well nigh unachievable, and that is ideologically and politically dangerous, as well as being a characteristic of modernity that many an ancient or medieval would surely have found inconceivable. I mean, almost everybody agrees that roasting babies over fires is not the most civilized way to behave, but we can't agree on why we agree on that, and we probably never will. The price of freedom, then, is potentially tragic conflict, as well as a certain vulnerability in the face of a robustly foundationalist enemy, who knows all too well what he is about.

For another thing, capitalism is just not the kind of life form that demands too much of its citizenry by way of belief. As long as they roll out of bed, pay their taxes, refrain from beating up police officers and so on, they can believe, more or less, what they want. The state doesn't give a damn about what they believe, with the proviso, the caveat, that I entered earlier. It's not belief that keeps the system ticking over, as it is what keeps the Lutheran Church or the Flat Earth Society ticking over. And that system, once again, is bound to look peculiarly feeble and fragile when confronted with a stoutly absolutist foe.

Post modernism, in particular, commits the grave error of regarding all passionate conviction as ipso facto dogmatic. Great mistake, you know.

Voltaire, incidentally, shared that prejudice. It's skeptical not just about this or that faith, but as it were, faith as such. It tries to get by on as little of the stuff as it possibly can, like a recovering cocaine addict. For this brand of thought, all certainty becomes authoritarian, and as such, is aligned with a certain kind of liberalism. As is, perhaps, I think this is surely the reason why so many young people today, not least in this great country of yours, insert the word "like" every three seconds into their discourse. To say, "It's, like, 9:00," is less unpleasantly dogmatic and authoritarian, than saying, "It's 9:00," with that kind of Stalinist ring to it, a situation where that kind of delight in ambiguity has infiltrated the everyday language of a whole generation.

But I think there's more to the situation than that, let me say, because surely the deepest irony, surely, is that liberal secularism actually, of course, breeds fundamentalism, whether of the Texan or the Taliban variety. Speaking of which, Americans seem to me sometimes to be peering anxiously out towards the East, saying, "Are we about to be swamped by fundamentalism?" Haven't they looked around themselves? They're here already. Yes? You don't have to look out to the East. But these two sworn antagonists are surely, at some level, not at every level, but some level, sides of the same coin. Fundamentalism, like most forms of virulent aggression, probably has its roots in fear rather than in hatred, in anxiety, which then gives rise to hatred. I think the opposite of love is not, in fact, hatred. I have to disagree with Mr. Bloom here. I don't mean Harold, I mean Leopold. But of course, anxiety can give rise to hatred.

Fundamentalism is the visceral creed, as we know, of those who have been driven into spiritual fanaticism of one kind or another by a shallow, purely technological rationality, which leaves all the deeper spiritual and material and moral issues disdainfully to one side, thus leaving them open to be monopolized by the rednecks and the bigots. The other side of the two-dimensional rationality is a faith-based politics. It's not at all surprising that old fashioned Victorian rationalists, like Ditchkins, can only think of faith as anti-rational, and thus guilty of the heresy of fideism, or they would be if they were believers, if you see what I mean. All faith, for Hitchens certainly, is blind faith. An extraordinary proposition. All faith is blind faith. Blind faith, and a purely instrumental rationality go together like Laurel and Hardy. They help to define each other. Nor is this secret complicity between too much belief and too little belief simply an intellectual affair.

Radical Islam is, among other things, as we know, a product of Western imperial civilization. Indeed, Ajaz Ahmad has written superbly on this very point. It was the mid 20th century Western onslaught, for its own purposes, on secular left nationalist, left revolutionary more liberal elements in the Muslim world which created the vacuum into which Islamism, radical Islam was able to move. It was the United States that was directly complicit in the murder of some half million secular leftists and revolutionary nationalists in Indonesia in the 1960s, that ousted liberal and secularized Arab leaders, such as Nasser in the Middle East, for its own imperial ends. It created the situation in which such leaders couldn't carry on, and of course, which deliberately fostered Islamist jihad in Afghanistan. In these respects, the chickens are coming home to roost.

It seems to me an extraordinary irony that faced with this kind of militancy, whose actual behavior is so often morally abhorrent, thinkers like Ditchkins, Dawkins, Hitchens, Ian McEwan in Britain, one or two others, Salman Rushdie, to some extent, should reach for the very sorts of grand narratives that advanced capitalism has supposedly discredited. This seems to be yet another irony of the situation. These foundational stories of science, reason,

progress, humanism, civility, enlightenment, and so on – and let me emphasize that it seems to me, as against the kind of vulgar critique of enlightenment, the vulgar post modern critique. All of these have a precious kernel of truth to be rescued. Even post modernists believe in progress and the sense of accepting anesthetics when they go to the dentist, I imagine. I mean, it's just progress with a very large "P," that people don't like. Everybody likes progress. They just don't like Progress.

That those very narratives belong, of course, to an earlier, historically earlier, more buoyant, more self-assured bourgeoisie when the middle classes were still on the make, when they still had the world at their feet, when as Marx in his undying praise for the revolutionary middle class would remark, "They were the most revolutionary force in human history." In those days, as it were, the middle classes were rising. If you open any historical text book, at any point whatsoever from the Neolithic period to NATO you will always find it will make three statements. First of all, it was an age of rapid change. Secondly, it was essentially a transitional epoch. And thirdly, the middle classes went on rising. That's why God put the middle classes on the earth, to keep rising. Bread or something. But the extraordinary irony of the situation, surely, is that some precisely grand narratives that were thought to have discredited, as it were, by the late development of the bourgeoisie itself, are now anxiously being reached back to in this much more fearful and unstable later historical era.

But I suppose my argument has been, in a sense, that this is, among other things, an intellectually disreputable and rather panic stricken reaction to Islamist insurgency, which a reaction that has its own culturally supremacist tones, I think, in the work of people like Hitchens and Dawkins and some others. It's also, in a certain sense, surely, a misplaced reaction. I mean, to attack religion here, because all of the evidence would seem to be that such Islamist militancy is scarcely motivated by religious faith at all. It's politically motivated, if you can make that distinction. In fact, its advocates probably know about as much about the Qur'an as Lady Gaga knows about the Book of Leviticus. Right? By and large, radical Islam is politically and not religiously motivated, as was the case with the devoutly Catholic IRA. The struggle in northern Ireland had almost nothing to do with religion, though those were a major set of terms in which it was fought out.

What I'm suggesting, then, is that some of the so-called new atheism belongs, as it were, to the intellectual wing of the war on terror. Some of it is much more sophisticated and important and self-conscious than that, but some of it does. Certainly in England, scandalously, it is exactly the liberal literati who are supposed to be the guardians of the flame of tolerance, and so on, Rushdie, Amis, McEwan, Hitchens, and the like, who have been the first to fall for a kind of caricatured off-the-peg version of enlightenment, in their panic stricken response to the assault from the East. But it's remarkable, too, how blind those literati are to the crimes – how alert they are to the crimes of radical Islam, and how blind they are to the crimes of their own civilization.

That particular vulgarized myth of progress sees civilization and barbarism as sequential. First there was barbarism, out of which civilization was painfully wrestled, and they always sickeningly slide back into it. It's a resolutely linear myth. The alternative, of course, is to see civilization and barbarism as synchronic, rather than as sequential. For ever emancipation and accompanying oppression, for every magnificent cathedral, a pit of bones. As far as I know, the only discourse which, at the moment says simultaneously out of both sides of its mouth, that modernity has been at once an enthralling story of emancipation, whatever the cultural jeremiads might say, and one long nightmare, and moreover, that those two narratives are as close as two sides of a sheet of paper– the only discourse I know that says that, these days, is Marxism, which I think is one good reason to be a Marxist, apart from just annoying people that you don't like at sherry parties and things like that.

There is, let me just touch on very briefly – I’m sorry to have gone on for so long, there is another reason for the resurgence of religion in our own time, which I won’t talk about, but I will publish a remarkably cheap and extraordinarily attractive book on it, sooner or later, which is the failure of the most central attempt to replace religion, which is the idea of culture. And that is, by no mean, a stupid substitution. There are all kinds of important connections between culture and religion, but for all kinds of reasons that I can’t go into, culture was never really able to step into religion’s shoes, even though culture in our own time is important enough to be defined as what you’re prepared to kill for. Or die for. Not many people are prepared to die for Balzac and Beethoven, maybe a few strange people hanging out in caves, too ashamed to come out and face the rest of us. But a lot of people are certainly prepared to die for culture in that sense.

In the end, of course, what is responsible, I suppose, for the new atheism, is religion itself. We live in an age where some Christians regard the glimpse of the female breast as obscene but not the burning of children in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of them worship a God fashioned blasphemously in their own image. The reason why, of course, the Jewish Bible forbids the making of images of God, quite apart from fetishism and all that, is that the only image of God is men and women, his people. They instead develop an image of God as short haired, clean shaven, blue blazered, gun toting, clean living, champion of the rich and powerful rather than of what St. Paul rather racily calls, “The shit of the earth.” To that extent, you might say they’ve got the Ditchkins they deserve. Thank you very much.

Ajaz Ahmad: Great. Thank you very much for that scintillating lecture. Now, I have to do two things. One is to do a bit of a salesman’s job, which is to say that this lecture, brilliant as it was, is merely a glimpse into that cheap and delightful and very attractive book that Terry **Eagleton** was talking about, *Recent Faith and Revolution*, and a very large part of it is actually an exposition of Christian theology, Catholic theology in particular, which would be, I think, of great interest to people who want to look at something on the other side of Ditchkins.

The second thing that I have to do is somewhat more difficult. Akeel Bilgrami, in telling me to come and do this, also enjoined on me the duty to open a discussion with some comments, and preferably, provocations. When I read this very cheap and very attractive book, Christian theology came in the book as the alternative, in a sense, to this new atheism or refutation thereof, or rather the ground upon which you understand faith, and which then shows how shallow the understanding of these people really is. Fair enough. So my dissatisfaction or my inquiry, rather, from you, is this: If these are the two opposites, what happens to the old atheism? And where does that fall into the argument? The alternative to this kind of new atheism and it’s complicity with the war on terror seems to be a great understanding of faith. What happens to the old atheism and where does that stand? I must – I might tell you that it is in that book that I came upon the delightful formulation that God is love’s terrorist.

Eagleton: Or a terrorist of love.

Moderator: It’s your phrase. A terrorist of love, right. And I thought maybe the war on terror might have something to do with it. So that’s one sort of question. The other is, Terry, that it is, in fact, very much to the advantage of Wall Street to keep posing this new atheism, which speaks in the name of western reason, enlightenment, liberalism, toleration, and so on and so forth, and Islamic fundamentalism are the two antagonists. Would it not be more important for us to give far more salience to the idea, which you of course did mention parenthetically, that this is a boogie. This is a boogie. This itself is an ideological move to pose the new atheism and Islamic fundamentalism as the two opposites, and that

what one needs to deconstruct is this. And the fact that, actually, these fundamentalists who are supposed to this, that, and the other, actually have been able to do very little damage to the west, outside their own countries. And infinitely more damage, actually, to people in their own countries. That, I mean, to serve – that this itself, this pairing of these two things is the basic ideological move.

Eagleton: Well, I agree with that very much, Ajaz. I mean, not only is there a boogiemán, but there's a need for that, isn't there? And certainly -again, speaking as a visitor to America, I sort of – a need to generate a certain ongoing atmosphere of fear of fear. There are, of course, real things to be feared. There's no doubt about that. But as you implied, proportionately to the actual activity of radical Islam, I mean, there are – the threats that my government faces back home – I'm sorry, in Britain, are not from radical Islamists. There are going to be more and more of – you might have seen it on television today from London – of absolutely infuriated and outraged victims of the Tories cuts. That's going to be the plan, and they are perfectly – well, it's not radical. It's not Bin Laden, you know. But it's all that. So I agree entirely.

As for your first point, actually, Ajaz, the – yes, you see, I try to say it – and there is an honorable kind of atheism, for one thing, an atheism which takes the measure of what it's supposing. I mean, what's so dismaying is that the kind of straw target of Jewish or religious or Christian belief, that set up by these, as it were, rather vulgar scientific rationalists, is a belief nobody in their right mind would accept. So the victory is entirely Pyrrhic. It's entirely Pyrrhic. You have enormous fun in setting over – up a stereotype that then you gleefully proceed to knock over, and absolutely nothing has happened. You know?

If I could just add an autobiographical note here, quickly. I was educated in good old style, papist kind of way, knocked around a bit by the Christian brothers and so on. It never did me any harm. But at the age when I normally would've thrown all of this away as the junk it largely was, let me stress, I went to Cambridge and happened to encounter at that time a version of Christianity that was not necessarily true. I'm not talking here about that, but that it cost you something to turn down. You actually – you couldn't just do it on the cheap. You had to buy that, you know. Whereas, I live in a country, Ireland, where almost every intellectual on every street corner, and there are soi-disant intellectuals in every pub on every street corner are people who exactly bought it on the cheap. An older and honorable atheism of the kind associated certainly with Marx, among others, I think is – or with Feuerbach, you know, is very different from that.

Ajaz Ahmad: Yeah, let me open this to a discussion. Akeel, how much time do we have? We can go on. Right, okay, fine.

Audience Member 1: Hello, Professor **Eagleton**. Thanks for coming today. And thanks for the wonderful lecture. I want to address the question that, when you speak of the historical context for the new surge of atheism, are you speaking that alienation, which many great minds of the 19th century regard as a key problem of the society in which religion is the cure, is like – this alienation is over for our time, or do you have new meaning for this alienation, and other substitutions of the cure? Sorry for my rather –

Eagleton: Well, you can sit down. Cure is – the concept of the cure, though, is actually part of the problem, isn't it? You see – I mean the idea of – which certainly Ditchkins has, and of course rejects – the idea of religion largely is consolation, and therefore objectionable on all kinds of good old humanistic and other grounds. Or, yes, as substitute or displacement or compensation or consolation, or whatever. But it seems very strange, in one sense, doesn't it, to think about Christianity in that light, when its leader told his comrades in pretty well

no uncertain terms that if they did what he did, they'd be murdered. You know? I mean, all right, there might be some consolation beyond that, but in a very straightforward, practical way, particularly if one looks, as it were, at the tragic dimension, as I would say, of that whole tradition of faith, which very notably isn't looked at by these people at all, that you have to start rethinking the idea of something as a cure of alienation, or whatever else, it may be for disunity, or whatever. That anodyne notion – I'm not saying that all notions of consolation are anodyne by any means. Consolation is a vital activity. But there is, I mean, a very popular anodyne notion of that, which is exactly what, say, people like Feuerbach and Marx rejected.

Audience Member 2: Hi. My question is: What, for you, is vital about this debate? What is crucial for you to take a position in the debates that are being waged by Dawkins and Hitchens? Because some people would see them as sort of beneath you, and what – so what's your engagement? And I'll also add, in the interest of full disclosure that I'm a PhD student in the religion department here who's studying atheism. So anything you say may be wedded to my own arguments about why it's vital in my fellowship applications.
[Laughter]

Eagleton: Yes, just approach me later for a small fee, okay? Well, I suppose what I was trying to say in my paper was, first of all, what fascinates me about it is the fact that it's happening at all and why. Why now, and so on. And secondly, I suppose the sudden resurgence in opposition to religious fundamentalism or faith, of a rather sort of off-the-peg kind of revamped enlightenment. Do you see? I went on to talk about it. I mean, well, of course, it's almost a cliché of discussion of enlightenment, that it was a very religious phenomenon, actually, wasn't it? At least it was very obsessed by religion. A very interesting example of how the Western bourgeoisie, even at its most militant, was not in fact at a crucial point in its revolutionary formation, able to give the slip to a traditional religious ideology. So I'm interested in questions of that kind, and why, as I say, certain grand narratives, which only a few years ago had thought to have been confidently ditched, perhaps too confidently rather glibly, maybe, in some cases, are now back with a vengeance, and that this has got something to do with God, something to do with religion. He's coming again.

Audience Member 2: I'm back. Is there a chance that these debates, I mean, The Wall Street Journal, 20 million circulations – is there a chance these debates are going to influence policy decisions in Britain and in the United States? Is there a vital political import that you see, or if it's more of a cultural question, why a cultural question, and then what's going on there?

Eagleton: Well, I don't think it's going to influence anything in Britain. I mean, nobody in Britain believes in God. You know? I mean, they might say they do to get a few more votes. I mean, that's a very interesting question, as far as the question of belief goes. What does it mean for David Cameron to say he believes? I mean, or I don't know, Bush, or whoever, Obama? That relates to the point I was making about the discrepancy between the rhetoric and the reality, the discrepancy between beliefs that are embedded in forms of behavior, fleshed out, lived, and beliefs which are a little more ornamental, as it were, than that.

In fact, I'm interested in the fact that religion of course, is not going to be ditched in this country, because of the enormous role, vital role it's played, not least ideologically. But I wouldn't put it past advanced capitalism in the more godless Europe to simply junk that whole discourse as no longer really relevant. What the danger – in other words, the danger of taking the Nietzschean road, for a state, is that people have this uncomfortable habit of raising very fundamental questions, not least at times of political crisis. What is it all about?

Where did capitalism come from, Mommy? To which one gives a sort of late Wittgensteinian answer, "Well, it's just what we do, dear." But that won't do, that answer won't do when the situation gets a little hotter, as it were. So there may well be good reasons why Europe will cling onto a discourse it doesn't really believe in. That's my point. It doesn't really believe in it. It's the queen's chaplain view of religion.

Audience Member 3: Hi, thank you for the talk. I'd love to hear whether there's a connection that you would make to literary form. You talked about people like Rushdie and Amis and Ian McEwan, and if a cliché about the novel is that it's inherently secular form, is there a new atheist novel? And what does it look like? And what is wrong with it?

Eagleton: Oh. How long have we got? Well, that's a very good point, the first point you make. It's interesting that, essentially, the liberal guardians of the flame, and those who somewhat rather hysterically reacted, say, to the British equivalent of 9/11, 7/7, but that they are almost to a man – they're men, in fact – literary people. I was – I had the misfortune to be at a literary conference in Brazil in July, I think, or August. I say misfortune, because Salman Rushdie was there as well, and there was this sort of low French farce element, whereby he would open a door, see me, and close it again. [Laughter]

You see, it is the Martin Amises and the Ian McEwans and sort of literary fellow travelers like Chris Hitchens. Well, that's not surprising in itself, is it? Because for a long time, literary London has been a center of metropolitan liberal ideology. But what is rather more surprising is the fact that the reaction should've been so intemperate and knee-jerk in this from the very people that one would've expected a more measured and reflective attitude towards. The novel of course was famously defined by Georg Lukasc as the world abandoned by God. Yes? That a certain providential plotting had now given way to a much more – I don't know, realist one in which God wasn't really imminent any longer. And there's a certain point, of course, certain good old rationalist notions of progress secular notions then take over from Him. The world is in a middle march from one stage of civilization to a higher one, and you don't really need to call upon God for that at all. So, I suppose there's an argument that the novel is the great form – isn't it? – of a material, thoroughly pragmatic, secular society, even if it might have to brandish a bit of religion at the end, to satisfy some people.

Ajaz Ahmad: Would you consider Satanic Verses a novel of new atheism?

Eagleton: Oh, right, yeah, yeah. I don't know, actually. I suppose, in a way, it's got elements of that, although I suppose one would now have to be talking about a text that was published in the wake of everything that's happened – see how that – that's gonna take some time, isn't it, I suppose, to infiltrate through, so to speak. Yes, I think somebody wanted – sorry, yes? Go ahead.

Audience Member 4: Yeah, I was sort of interested in the sequence of events that you described, by which we have a sort of pupilistic fundamentalism set up against a sort of secular humanism that no long really wants to say anything articulate, and which the response by Dawkins and Hitchens and other intellectuals from that sort of area is a sort of what you said, an off-the-peg enlightenment, or off-the-peg sort of rationalism. And I guess what I was thinking is, I mean, do you – is that more of a diagnosis for you, or is it a – I mean, is that what you think is going to continue to happen, that Europe will continue to attest a sort of attachment to enlightenment that it no longer practices? And should there be in an ideal world, or in some sense, a different response? Should the response be Marxism? I don't know.

Eagleton: Well, I mean, you have to have – first of all, that’s an interesting question. But let me say, it’s not just – as I might have implied at times – just a conflict of ideas. Isn’t it? This structural – it’s a structural matter whereby certain kinds of, as it were, faithlessness – I don’t mean in the religious sense necessarily just, but certain kinds of faithlessness increasingly drive other people into quasi-pathological fundamentalists or other sorts of activity, and that that is built into the nature of global capitalism as it is at the moment. It’s not going to go away because we might think our way beyond it, or whatever.

But yes, I do think, on your second point, that – well, there surely must be a better response than just, as it were, rehashing the enlightenment, not least from people like Christopher Hitchens. I mean, I have an enormous admiration for his work in many ways. He is a superb writer, and he was a very good giver-out of leaflets as well. But Christopher is an intellectual in the most – in a way, in the most vital sense, a practical, public intellectual, one of the great figures in that sense, in this country and elsewhere. But he’s not really an intellectual in the sense of knowing all about Condiac and D’Alembert, and that kind of knowledge of the enlightenment. It’s very much a sort of reach-me-down second derivative kind of version, and that’s just not good enough, I think.

Let me say, I mean, the first reaction has to be an attempt to understand, doesn’t it? Now, as I’m sure, of course, anybody living in this country, in this city, is well aware, that’s one of the hardest things to do of all because people won’t let you. Because this piece of shoddy illogicality that one gets again and again, certainly in Britain and I’m sure here, to explain is to excuse. You know? An outright piece of moral and intellectual blackmail. Do they say that about the rise of Hitler? Do they say that Allan Bullock is excusing Hitler, because he’s writing about the conditions under which Nazism arose? Of course not. But there is now that shoddy maneuver, I think. And some of these people I’ve mentioned are actually guilty of it, in that any attempt at an historical, material explanation of the situation, which of course is the only way of politically dealing with it, you can’t deal with an enemy you don’t understand, is itself a kind of insidious complicity.

As I think I say in this remarkable book, the people who really understood what the IRA – I live in Ireland – who really understood what the IRA was about was British intelligence.

British intelligence knew they weren’t just psychopaths. They knew that however atrocious some of the activities of the IRA were, they were doing it for certain political ends, which could be rationally discussed, agreed with, disagreed with, and indeed is being done so right now in Northern Ireland. Yeah? I think it’s gonna be a long time before this country, in particular probably learns that lesson about its current political enemy.

Audience Member 5: Terry, I’m picking up on Ajaz’s question about the Satanic Verses, and just wondering how important you think it would be to date correctly this conceptual linkage you’re making between the new atheism and... If you think of the new atheism as a sort of academic and intellectual complacence, that sits on top of a kind of cold war against Islam, which happens – which is actually generated by a different kind of writer and intellectual, but it sort of sits on top of it with the kind of complacence you were describing very well, actually. You know, North Oxford and so on, but also western rationalities. But I’m just wondering, this cold war against Islam, generated by a different kind of writer, really was happening much before September 11th. I mean if you just look at the caricatures of Qaddafi, well before The Satanic Verses, which are found in the media and so on, it was very much part of a very systematic cold war against Islam, but you know, the other cold war... And so, it may be right – it may be good to actually date it more correctly, just so as to deepen the points you’re making.

Eagleton: Yes, I think that's right. I agree with that. As I said, there is a difficulty of dating, and there's certainly a difficulty, as I think I said, of a direct hook-up between the new atheism and the war on terror in the sense that, of course, new atheists like Dawkins, have been at his trade for much longer. When, say, Ian McEwan, perhaps the most influential novelist in Britain, suddenly begins talking about scientific rationality, then you see that there are new recruits, as it were, to the standard. Hitchens is an ambiguous case because, in a sense, he's always been a militant atheist, but the reasons why he's now writing this book are, of course, thoroughly political and ideological. So, no, I think that is very interesting. I certainly don't know the answer to that, but to plot the trajectory of it carefully, how it is that, as you say, a traditional cold war against Islam then suddenly becomes much more of a religious matter.

Audience Member 6: Thank you again for your talk. You have mentioned quite a number of male authors who have objected to Islam in particular, but you haven't mentioned a couple of female authors, and I wonder if you might think they're on more solid ground in their critique of Islam? I'm thinking of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Azar Nafisi has written about the situation in Iran, and they've been quite prominent public intellectuals in this country since 9/11. But I wonder if, from their point of view, the critique of Islam looks particularly more urgent than the critique of enlightenment? And I wonder if you just have something to say about – I do think it's important, as you said to understand where the religions are coming from, but I also wonder if you would think that there are points at which it's important for us to critique religions.

Eagleton: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah, absolutely, yes. Yes, nothing is more foolish than the idea that I can't criticize your belief because you have it. It's rather like having freckles, or something. I wouldn't refer to anybody's freckles. Oh, absolutely. I mean, one of the things I like about Hitchens' case is that he's – and not that I necessarily agree with this – is he says that religion is disgusting. It's not just as you would say in the good old traditional liberal fashion, well, has a little bit of good and a little bit of bad, and so on. You know? I mean, Hitchens is very rude about it. And that must surely be part of any such discourse without any sense of coyness or embarrassment or whatever.

Oh, yes, and – but I mean, of course, in a sense, your point, the point you make includes, implies a lot of the critique of radical Islam has come from within the Muslim world itself. You know? And then when people suddenly leap on that bandwagon from various points in the west, they either don't know that, or they can't be as focused and specific in that way as an insider is able to be, or semi-insider is able to be. So, I mean, in that sense, it's not very different – is it? – from a situation in which some ferocious critiques of Western fundamentalism, have come from within the west itself, of course. Yeah, go ahead, sorry.

Audience Member 7: Thanks for your talk. This question about legitimation, on the one hand, as in the requirement for a meta-narrative as a sort of cover story, covering over the kind of definitional faithlessness of late capitalism. On the one hand, I sort of agree with that, on a basic level, but on the other hand, this premise troubles me, this pairing of faithlessness and – it's a sort of – it's a temperature gauge. If we get too much faithlessness, it sort of disturbs everything, and as you said, it gets too hot, and you require a kind of covering ideology to come in and calm things down again. That's a familiar sort of Marxist narrative, right? And I wonder if that's – that premise is not too parochial, in the sense that it's late capitalism in western Europe that is, in fact, the singularity, and that in many places where you have late capitalism, which is of course not just Anglo-America, but many other places, it isn't so easily paired with faithlessness. And it's a sort of standard modernization narrative, right? I mean, you have to add it back in, as it were, because it's been stripped away. But

has it, in fact, been stripped away to begin with, and therefore is legitimation the kind of pat answer?

Eagleton: Yes, that's an excellent question. Well, you see, it is hard, isn't it? Because what I was trying to argue is that there's a sense in which – as I think I said – advanced capitalist market societies are inherently faithless, faithless just by virtue of what they are. It's not – as it were, it's neither a criticism nor an approbation. It's just an observation, really. But of course you're dead right. They are – those systems are embedded in many different life forms in Catholic Latin America, in parts of the Muslim world, and so on. And so, yes, I mean, I am being much too sweeping there, but what I mean is, I think, tangentially speaking, there's a collision here. It's still in good old Weberian terms, part of the mission of capitalism to disenchant. Yes? And of course, in – and in doing so, it manages to re-enchant in very strange ways, but that's certainly not to say, and I agree with the implication of your point, that just can – one can easily ride roughshod over societies where there are very deep traditional roots of religious and other kinds of belief. Absolutely not. There's trouble ahead if you try and do that.

Audience Member 8: I wanted to thank you for a very entertaining talk, but I felt like I perhaps wanted to address the question of the – let's say, like, the theological knowledge of jihadists, or something like that. Does it seem a bit glib to sort of say that the motivations for jihadism are not religious, that they are, like, purely political? When it seems like there's a very, like, powerful ascetic ideal behind the kind of motivation that would go towards suicide bombing, or – and just as it would for the murder of abortion doctors, or something like that. It seems like religion is a pretty key factor in there, and I just wondered if that doesn't need to be accommodated a little bit better?

Eagleton: Yes. There are other people here who I'm sure could answer this better than I can, but I think I was guilty, for example, of somewhat confusing religion and theology. I was talking about the theological illiteracy of some fundamentalists, whether Christian or otherwise, Muslim, say, which of course, is not the same as religious practice and faith, is it? You might be theologically illiterate and still religious faith and practice may play an important part in your politics. Moreover, it raises the question as to extent those are separable, or in what sense they're separable. So all of that is true, and that's a necessary corrective, I think. It's just that I was thinking of empirical research in Britain, for example, particular among young Muslims who are now being besieged by a whole battery of, as it were, Foucaultian techniques, which would seem to suggest that in some fairly direct sense, they saw their motives as political. That is to say that what angered them was what was being done politically to the Muslim nation as a whole, and that the talk about jihad was somewhat less substantial – I mean, they can talk more easily, it would seem about the political situation, which you know, is not surprising, in many ways.

Audience Member 9: So it seems to me that much of your theological position, if we can call it that, rests on at least an adaptation of liberation theology. And maybe this is evident given your autobiographical background. But I was wondering, I guess my question is threefold. So, a) Have you been in conversation with thinkers about liberation theology? You were just at Notre Dame. I don't know if that was the first thing on their syllabus. Secondly, have you considered conceptions of liberation theology that are not exclusively Christian or Catholic? And I'm thinking of people like Farid Esack and Islamic liberation theology. And then, third, what you think liberation theology really is today, in our time, or maybe where it is in, for example, the slums of Venezuela with murals of Jesus with machine guns. What is the shape, and what is the face of liberation theology today?

Eagleton: Well, very quickly, I know nothing about Islamic liberation theology, though ignorance has never deterred me from anything. I think there's a sense when you say, "What is liberation theology," I mean, wouldn't one want to claim that, in some sense, all authentic theology must be liberation theology? There's something so slightly labelish about, well, this bit is liberation theology, or what we have in, say, Bolivia is liberation theology. One just has to look very closely at notions at liberation and emancipation in the scriptures. When and where is very important, isn't it? I mean, the point you made there. As some people know, I mean, in the 1960s I was part of a sort of Catholic left movement in Britain, which had some good ideas. One of its drawbacks, however, one of its several drawbacks, was that it was just historically misplaced. You see, it was before, really, things began moving in Latin America. It was even before the northern Irish troubles, which we were rather closer to. In that context, you may have some very good ideas, but there's not much you can do with them. So I think the question of location, and historical location, is very important there.

Audience Member 10: So, to my understanding, and correct me if I'm wrong, you seem to be defining the new atheists as scientific rationalists. In your mind, was there ever a, quote/unquote, "old atheism?" Like, can there be a true atheist, i.e. one that has, or does rather, really truly understand faith, and then chooses to believe that there is no God? Can that happen?

Eagleton: Oh, I think absolutely, yes. There's the Ivan Karamazov situation isn't there? Yes, I understand all about God, but sorry, I'm handing in my entry ticket. I don't want anything to do with it, as long as children suffer, and as long as people are in misery and so on. I mean, absolutely I think there is. Also, of course, atheism is not necessarily paired with scientific rationalism, is it? Not only because there are obviously scientists who are religious believers, but because – I mean, Marx is a famous atheist, but I wouldn't really derive his atheism very directly from rationalism. Marx is that most unbeatable of characters who is at once an enlightenment rationalist, and a romantic humanist. Very hard to beat that combination, actually. It can cover most situations. And I don't think there's necessarily a direct equation. There are many different sources for atheism, in other words, and the Dawkins type is, to my mind one of the least interesting of those.

Audience Member 11: I'd like to know what you think of the response that there is another way to think about the question of faithlessness. I don't know much about theology, but I read a bit about the death of God theology, which is engaging with the question of – from a deconstructive religious turn to looking at how one can basically using Agape, using the notions of Christian faith, approach it after the death of God in a Nietzschean sense, as transvaluation? So, I think there's another response possible from theology, within theology, to the political problems, and taking questions of the war on terror seriously, I wonder if you know much about that? Could you say something about that? And the question of nihilism, which is at its heart, some philosophers argue, like Simon Critchley at the New School, that and I don't agree with the argument that the fundamentalists are nihilists for their destructive turn. So perhaps you could say something about those two things?

Eagleton: Yes, I never quite understood the latter point, actually, the fundamentalists and nihilists. Nihilists seem to me to be the near cousins of fundamentalists, in that, the idea that unless there are absolutely solid grounds or rules, you open the floodgates to chaos, is a very common, well neigh pathological syndrome, particularly among – not only among fundamentalists, but let's say among non-fundamentalist types of conservatives, that the alternative to absolutely bounded rules and irrefragible foundations is chaos. And that's why those foundations and so on, truths, are so important. That's surely not true, is it? I

mean, that's so right for deconstruction that one – the idea that without those rules you will have chaos is come again, you will have mere anarchy, is just a kind of form of pathology, really.

So I would see a certain kind of nihilist as the sort of spiritual heir of the fundamentalist.

But I don't – your point about the death of God, the point you were making first of all, yes, one has, of course, to remember that Christianity is all about the death of God, isn't it? Not as though it's just a particular current to it. I mean, for Christianity, the only good God is a dead one. But I know what you mean. You're referring to a particular theological development. Yes, except I suppose you've got to kind of beware of too obsequiously trying to accommodate a certain worldly logic there. I mean, that did happen, didn't it, in Iran, that period, sometimes, that really Christians were trimming their sails, trimming their metaphysical sails as it were, to fit in with a sort of rather – a secular liberal logic that perhaps they should've been criticizing, rather than trying to conform to.

Ajaz Ahmad: Yes, maybe we can just take this question, and after that –

Audience Member 12: Hi. This is a question about literature. I was – it was very disappointing to read Martin Amis talk about how, like, the Muslim community needs to be collectively punished. And it was very pleasant to read your rebuttal to that as well. So, my question is, did you find yourself reevaluating their work, of Martin Amis for example, after he made that comment? And I think, like, a more general question is, like, how do you evaluate, like, writers, for example, like Knut Hamsun, who are supposed to be very good writers, but also held a very disturbing philosophy?

Eagleton: No, alas. Would that the world were so simple that suddenly my literary opinion of Martin Amis fell sharply once he said the rather disgraceful things he did. Incidentally, I think one of the most disgraceful things about Amis was that he didn't apologize. You see, he did, in a sense, out of the side of his mouth, admit that this was said in the haste of an interview and all that. And he changed his views. Oh, excellent, you know. Well, why don't you say, "Sorry," to all of the people that you're offending? He didn't. And I think that was very bad. No, actually, just the other week I gave my 13-year-old son one of Martin Amis' novels to read, just proving how munificent I am, how forgiving, long suffering, merciful. Yes. I do think Amos is – I mean, I've got my criticisms of Amos as a novelist, but I think he is extraordinarily – and very, very funny as well, much funnier than his father.

And you then extend that in your final remarks as the general and very vexed question of, as it were, the relation between the judgment – aesthetic judgments and political ones. Let me just say something very quickly. I mean, I – I can't possibly answer that, but let me say very quickly, it's a very familiar situation, isn't it? – that almost – that many, many of the high modernist writers had just quite disgraceful politics. You know? But, if you think of, say, Conrad, Yates, Elliot, Pound, Lawrence, they were all on the right, in many ways, but they were radicals of the right. They had absolutely no time for mainstream, liberal, suburban, industrial, bourgeois, democratic civilization. For as it were, the world of E.M. Foster, let's say, the major modernist art in Britain, and the only indigenous modernist art in Britain was Irish the rest of it had to be imported, was firmly of the right, but it was a scorching critique from the right, and not from the left, of the priorities of bourgeois society, bourgeois civilization. And I think that something of the – not everything, but something of the aesthetic value of that body of work has a lot to do with its ability to pose very fundamental questions, whether from the right or elsewhere.