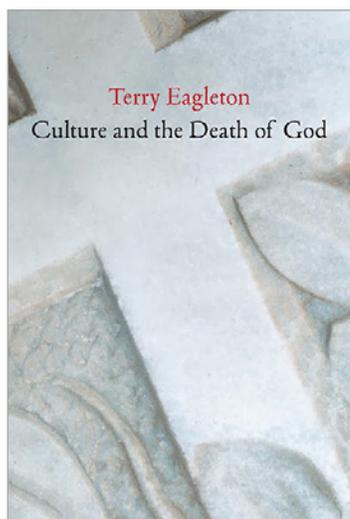


BOOKS FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION



Culture and the Death of God

By Terry Eagleton
Yale University Press, 2015
248pp. \$16.00

“Not believing in God is a far more arduous affair than is generally imagined” (119). Just as an earnest believer can admit the difficulty of faith during a dark night of the soul, Terry Eagleton’s intellectual commitments compel him to admit that a Godless worldview is hardly the straightforward product of reason set out by so many apologiae for popular atheism during the past decade. When the lodestar of the new atheist movement emerged in Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (2006), Eagleton famously drew a line in the sand, annoyed at Dawkins’ shamanistic pretensions. “Imagine someone

holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology. Card-carrying rationalists like Dawkins, who is the nearest thing to a professional atheist we have had since Bertrand Russell, are in one sense the least well-equipped to understand what they castigate, since they don’t believe there is anything there to be understood, or at least anything worth understanding.”¹

As an intellectual history, *Culture and the Death of God* makes clear

that there is something worth understanding about religion. Indeed, the typically postmodern view that religion addresses no substantial questions is a view from nowhere when placed against religion's historical landscape. Most of the book is a critical history of the philosophical movements with the greatest valence on contemporary religious belief. All the while, Eagleton avoids footnotes in favor of his characteristically rich and heady prose.

While the author's personal metaphysical commitments are left opaque, his *weltanschauung* is wholly discrete from that of the new atheists. Far from granting that religion is, as they would argue, nothing more than an epiphenomenon of evolution, Eagleton gives no indication of being anti-metaphysical. His account of Christian political theology is often rich, even while his account of Christian theology proper can be somewhat thin in places. To him, it is the indispensability of Christian theism in the formation of the contemporary mind that settles its value, if not its transcendent grounding. Eagleton's narrative is at once a chronicle of atheism and a history of belief: he begins with the Enlightenment, and moves on to explain the treatment of religion by

the various Idealist and Romantic movements, its fate alongside modernism, its putative, even hesitant death with Nietzsche, and its uncertain lot in postmodernity.

The difficulty in disentangling the two principal threads of *Culture and the Death of God*—atheism and belief—is perhaps the most important metanarrative in Eagleton's writing. Religion and culture occupy what Eagleton aptly calls the "symbolic sphere" (3), but with public religion rapidly taking on water, and culture already half-submerged, a diagnosis is in order through history's long view. Culture, he explains, took on a new character in the late twentieth century, being traded as a commodity for perhaps the first time. It has been made into an industry, spread thin across society—reaching even the most derivative sectors, like media and advertising. This narrowing of the gap between culture and society means that culture can no longer function as a disinterested critique of society's politics. Religion, meanwhile, has become a mere list of propositions when publicly engaged, shedding its rich tapestry of attendant symbols, narratives, and grounding for ethics. Sharing many of these features, culture has long been the best candidate to serve as a surrogate for religion. In Eagleton's view, though, it has,

time and time again, failed to close the rift between the eminences of culture and the masses.

Religion—far and above culture—remains the sole organ of society able to unite the cognitive elite and the unlearned in one single value system. Only religion, Eagleton reasons, seems able truly to distill sophisticated ideas, yielding a "spiritual communion" (121) of elites and poor, in turn closing the gap between exalted truths and everyday life. This is principally why Enlightenment thinkers expended greater energies militating against the Church's political theology than against its dogma, acknowledging that revolutions do not develop organically from new philosophic ideas alone. While some still accuse religion of peddling theology to the elites and mythology to the masses, the charge of classism seems more at home with a sort of Machiavellian pragmatism, which would settle to have society consoled by belief while its elites heroically face the void. Perhaps the militancy in some sectors of secularist ideology has a less intellectual origin than is usually imagined.

Meanwhile, Eagleton is careful to note that atheism, properly speaking, is a phenomenon of modernity, widely held to be an impossible metaphysical position

until the sixteenth century. Rationalist agitators' installation of atheism as state religion, accordingly, was hardly a victory for philosophic thinking, owing instead to innovations in technology, economy, and the social order. This is why rationalist movements sought "to damage the credibility of the clerics, but not to step into their ideological shoes" (29), and to "replace the supernatural with the natural, but to oust a barbarous, benighted faith in favour of a rational, civilised one" (12).

But, as Eagleton continues, "It was a style of thought too thin in emotional and imaginative resources, too shorn of a symbolic dimension, to provide modernity with an assured means of self-legitimation" (29). There was a potent sense that Reason, even if credibly personified, could never fit the Godshaped void: "The God of Scripture has the distinct advantage of being in some sense personal, whereas Reason is distinctly ungodlike in its impersonal hauteur" (33). Morality, meanwhile, "remained largely Christian in provenance" (9).

Religion, Eagleton writes, plays such a central ideological role in history that even when its influence wanes, its functions remain in full form. Thus we observe that history is replete with botched attempts to stand in for religion. Iterations of

the supposed death of God occur when religion's flame burns too low, retreating to the domain of a personal pastime, shirking its place as the buttress of morality and in turn, of culture.

While certain Enlightenment philosophers sought to justify religion through philosophy, Idealists and Romantics pursued more reductive projects, seeking after a "natural supernaturalism" (47). But these efforts only led to the implosion of the self in philosophy. Nationalism, meanwhile, has at times presented a plausible surrogate for religion, conveying "the notion of culture as totality" (86) and also promoting culture as partisan. More than any other theory or association, nationalism formed a link with culture "as a body of artistic and intellectual work, and as a whole way of life" (88). At the same time, where Idealism failed to provide the symbolic language and tradition religion demands, the Romantics' nostalgia for the Athenian blend of virtue and hedonism came somewhat closer to the mark. The idea that the classical age represented the apex of human society provided both a winsome tradition and a surrogate system of myths, reconstituting the self and the imagination, and effectively "re-enchanted a world gone stale and

sour" (102).

But it seems as though most of this philosophic urgency is lost on modernity. "It is when artists, like bishops, are unlikely to be hanged that we can be sure that modernity has set in" (2). This feature of modernity is remarkable not as a reflection of the tranquil order of liberal democracy, but as an indication that few ideas are worth dying for any more. Indeed, modernism's tight grip on metaphysics (mainly through art) made it "one of the last outposts of enchantment in a spiritually degenerate world" (181). By contrast, postmodernism pushes a step further toward the abyss of eliminative materialism, being genuinely "post-numinous" (181) in Eagleton's view. "Whereas modernism experiences the death of God as a trauma, an affront, a source of anguish as well as a cause for celebration, postmodernism does not experience it at all" (186). Buttressing the new atheists, postmodernity stacks the decks in support of unrigorous atheism, in part because "there is no God-shaped hole at the center of its universe. . . . because there is no longer any secret interior place where he might install himself" (186).

Secular, religionless society has trouble, Eagleton admits, determining questions of fundamental value, and thus in

seeking to justify its political power. The problem of elitism surfaces again, with only the cognoscenti aware of the lack of transcendent justification for the political order on whose stability they depend.

One alternative to rewriting faith in secular terms is to remake religion's mythology, making the noble lie even nobler. This might help atheism avoid implosion when the system discrediting religion is "also the one most urgently in need of the symbolic unity that religion can provide" (63). While not entirely naïve about the use of useful fictions, Eagleton still has a somewhat deflationary view of religion in this respect: "Religion has always exploited the resources of image, ritual and narrative. Reason must now strive to do the same, either through a new mythology or through that curious new discourse, bred in Germany in the mideighteenth century, known as the aesthetic" (69). Making religion hegemonic but not coercive requires it to be aestheticized, uniting moral obligation and human inclination. One can't very easily have deep love for the political order or for Reason itself, after all.

Eagleton is hardly unique in proffering that Nietzsche was the first genuine atheist the contemporary mind can summon as its oracle. As he argues, Nietzsche

was in a sense the antitype of some among modern atheists, who suggest their own heroic virtue, facing the void of death and the ultimate meaninglessness of life, but still profit from some consolation offered in religious thought. Instead, Nietzsche sought no wish-fulfillment scheme at all, notwithstanding Dostoyevsky's warning that without God anything is permitted. For Eagleton, Nietzsche "heralds the end of culture" (164) alongside the death of God, even while something resembling culture animates the spiritual life of the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche recognizes, he writes, that if God is dead, so is "innate meaning. The Almighty can survive tragedy, but not absurdity" (155).

This brings us again to the question of how culture can substitute for religion if, as we gather from Eagleton, things aren't looking good for religionists. "Culture is the most complex form of self-awareness, but also the most richly unreflective" (121). Paradoxically, though, efforts to back culture into a corner are fruitless: "Culture cannot be precisely defined because its essence lies in its transcendence of the specific" (125). "What has altered since the Enlightenment, however, is that religious doubt has now seeped into the ranks of the masses themselves, and is never very far

from socialism" (134). The paradox is that dethroning religious elites ultimately hurt religion's tendency to unite high and low in spiritual communion. While elite religious language was always distinct from common piety, the Enlightenment elites' rationality was so remote as to be gnostic. "If the rationality of the Enlightenment was too remote from the religion of the people, religion is now too secluded from the increasingly agnostic masses" (134). It would seem that abolishing religion hardly speaks truth to power, as it only consolidates religious influence to a narrower, nonpareil cultural caste.

Culture can never replace religion, even if it finds surrogates for many of religion's strong points. Much as religion, as a human endeavor, is corruptible, culture is still more corruptible, as it can politicize everything from language to national identity. This is clear even without direct nods to the transcendent. At one point in the book, Eagleton muses about why Marxism, as a culturo-political ideology, could never begin to replace Christianity: "Christians hope still to believe on their deathbed, whereas political radicals trust that they will be free to abandon their efforts long before that point" (88). Where modernists submit culture as an alternative

to politics, postmoderns will rejoin that culture is everything—morality, politics, and myth. “Culture goes all the way down” (191). Where moderns sought truth in the darkness, postmodernism sees nothing to seek after.

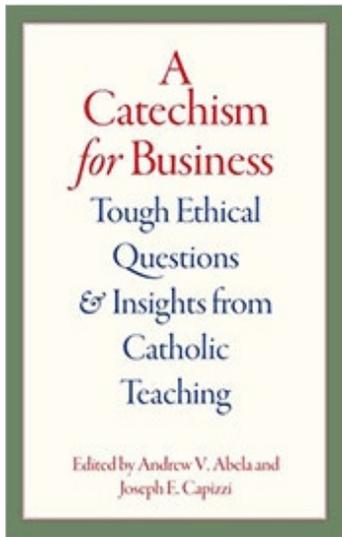
It’s perhaps a slight surprise, then, that Eagleton concludes his work with a hesitant nod toward the “solidarity with the poor and powerless” found in the New Testament. It might provide, he submits, a radical, if “grossly inconvenient” alternative to the postmodern void in our age—the first age during which atheism can exist as fully authentic. In the end, as Eagleton hints, the largest problem with postmoderns’ appreciation of religion is not a matter of theology, but philosophy. It is the corporeality of rationality that spirit-free postmodernity fails to appreciate, and in turn, religion’s big picture. One might complain of the benighted role of atheists who would cling to religion because of its support for moral teamwork or political tranquility. Eagleton ultimately wants to evade this critique. He is far from Machiavellian, but still cannot let slip that religion offers a supernatural grounding for morality. Instead, it is religion’s transformative power on individuals and societies that

postmoderns should admire. It informs us that our lives must undergo radical change if we are to create, in his words, “compassionate communities.” Eagleton’s finish is not in keeping with much of the richness he unfolds about religion in the book, nor is it a full-throated critique of contemporary atheism. But it does represent an important effort to speak of religion in a register largely unknown in the academic circles that formed the likes of Terry Eagleton.

NOTES

1 Terry Eagleton, “Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching: A review of *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins” in *London Review of Books*, vol. 28, no. 20 (19 October 2006) <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/terry-eagleton/lunging-flailing-mispunching>>.

Review by Kevin Staley-Joyce, Assistant Editor, First Things



A Catechism for Business: Tough Ethical Questions & Insights from Catholic Teaching

Eds. Andrew V. Abela and
Joseph E. Capizzi
The Catholic University of America
Press, 2014
152 pp. \$24.95

A few years ago, when I was working for a large corporation, a manager once told me, “What we do here is not calculus—just very complicated arithmetic.” He was, in a sense, making a statement about the entire institution of business. Business is an incredibly practical field, and as managers, we are primarily concerned with very practical decisions, such as how to motivate our employees, allocate an advertising budget, or minimize manufacturing costs. We rarely concern ourselves with questions of underlying theories and principles simply because we do not allow ourselves the time to do so.

In my experience, this arguably necessary focus on practicality can cause a great degree of difficulty for the Church in her pastoral ministry to business leaders because theologians and pastoral ministers tend to be much more comfortable in the realm of theory. When businesspeople and theologians occasionally come into dialogue, they are often positioned on opposite sides of a chasm of misunderstanding. Pastoral advice intended for business leaders can too often seem lofty, nonspecific, or even simply naïve in its disregard of the practical considerations that face a manager.

However, even practical businesspeople will recognize the prudence in the Church’s hesitance to offer specific prescriptions for the world’s economic and social woes. They would likely agree that her primary role is within the realm of theories and principles and that it is the role of the lay faithful to put theories and principles into practice. Still, the chasm that remains is frustrating for both businesspeople and pastoral ministers alike. Imagine a marriage preparation program that focused solely on the theological principles relating to marriage and never discussed the practical details of communication, conflict management, or raising children. This lack of practicality seems

absurd, but it is often what the pastoral ministry of the Church offers businesspeople, leaving them frustrated and with the impression that Church teachings are not realistically applicable within their vocation.

By elegantly bridging this chasm between theory and practice, *A Catechism for Business* proves itself to be a work of remarkable benefit to the Church and to businesspeople alike. Compiled by editors Andrew V. Abela and Joseph E. Capizzi, it is essentially an encyclopedic collection of various quotations from Church teaching which are presented as responses to a selection of practical business questions. The simple genius is that the questions themselves are very practical, while the responses are not presented as “answers” but rather as brief introductions to the theories and practices that help inform answers to such questions. Thus, the busy reader is not obliged to trudge through a dense treatment of theological principles in order to derive a reasonable answer, yet he or she is also not subjected to an insulting attempt to reduce complex questions into simplistic answers.

The question-and-response format has its benefits and drawbacks, but it is certainly the correct choice for a catechism that aims to be more than a simple introduction

to basic Church teaching while at the same time readable. The questions have been organized into chapters that each focus on a specific theme. After beginning with general questions addressing economic context and general moral dilemmas found in business, the editors move chapter by chapter through the areas of finance and investment, management, marketing and sales, manufacturing, and international business.

The specificity and organization of the questions found within each chapter demonstrates a strong expertise with regard to the nuanced moral dilemmas found in the world of business. For instance, in the chapter on finance and investment, the editors ask, “Is it morally acceptable to minimize the amount of taxes our firm must pay through offshore tax havens or other loopholes in the tax code?” In the chapter on marketing and sales, the editors ask, “Is it morally acceptable to use our advertising to attempt to make people feel inadequate if they don’t buy our product?”

These questions are not the all-too-familiar, insomnia-inducing major hypothetical dilemmas that are carefully concocted for business ethics classes. Rather, they are the seemingly simple questions that are actually found in the everyday lives

of businesspeople. Because of their relevance and practicality, these questions will resonate strongly with lay business leaders.

Equally impressive is the careful selection of the responses to each question. The editors prioritize selections from recent papal encyclicals whenever possible, a decision which draws upon the teaching authority of the Church. But they also recognize that such selections alone can lack grit or applicability, and have thus chosen to sprinkle in passages from papal homilies, addresses, or pastoral documents from certain pontifical councils. For instance, in response to the above question about advertising, readers are presented with two relevant quotations: one from Pope John Paul II’s Encyclical *Centesimus annus* and one from his 1981 message for World Communications Day. The result is a careful balance between teaching authority and applicability that remains readable and relevant.

The benefits of *A Catechism for Business*, however, extend far beyond simple practicality and relevance for the business leader. Although the book may be easy to read in one sense, business leaders will find it quite challenging in another. Indeed, the editors do not shy away from attempting to present a complete summary

of Church teaching on various business issues—even when those teachings present a clear challenge to the status quo found in the American business environment. While the editors might have been tempted to curry favor with business leaders by simply avoiding some of the more problematic practices in modern business such as short-termism, consumerism, financialization, and the prioritization of capital above labor, they successfully avoid this temptation by meeting these issues head-on and deftly citing the Church’s extensive teaching on such issues.

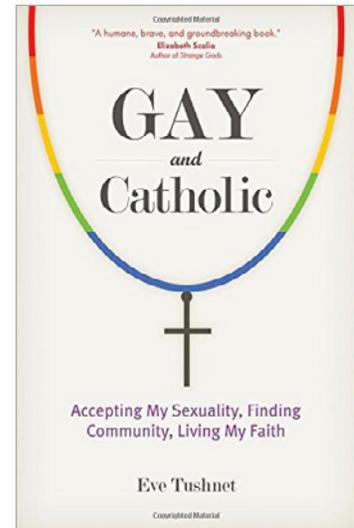
Too often, the pastoral ministry that serves business leaders focuses on the tangential aspects of business, and not on its essential function. We are told that in order to be good Christians in the workplace, we should be nice to our coworkers, pray before meals, and perhaps have an icon or two in our office so that people know we are believers. While these are good pieces of advice, they are applicable to almost any Christian anywhere in the world, not just to businesspeople. By failing to account for the unique characteristics faced by the business leader, we fail to dignify their profession and their charism. By failing to recognize the incredible potential of business as an

institution to be a powerful force for good in the world, we neuter it, and we leave businesspeople with the sense that the majority of their effort throughout the day is meaningless.

A Catechism for Business is a wonderful resource to help prevent this pitfall. Business leaders who read and study this book will certainly come away with a new appreciation for their vocation and their role in building the Kingdom of God. By presenting Church teaching that acknowledges the important role that business leaders play and calls them to a higher standard—one in which employees are justly compensated and can support their families financially and emotionally, one in which the creation of goods and services is ordered towards human flourishing, one in which the wellbeing of vendors, investors, customers, neighbors, and the planet is considered in all business decisions—Abela and Capizzi dignify business as a truly noble vocation worth pursuing and one that is part of God’s plan. And by presenting the content in such an accessible and relevant format, they take a large step towards ensuring that business leaders are catechized and empowered to live out such a vocation.

As such, this book is highly recommended for both pastoral ministers who want to learn more about the lives of the businesspeople whom they serve, and for business leaders who either have specific questions about their jobs or who simply want to learn more about their vocation.

Review by Matt Kernan, Executive Director of Journio, a non-profit organization which designs mobile technology geared towards Catholic young adults (Denver, CO)



Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith

By Eve Tushnet
Ave Maria Press, 2014
224pp. \$15.95

In her first appendix, Eve Tushnet describes Wesley Hill’s *Washed and Waiting* as “the best book we have so far” (183). Tushnet has certainly given Hill a run for his money. In this book, a depth of wisdom, a perceptive thoughtfulness, and a sharpness of wit are all deployed to great effect in her own distinct voice, which shifts effortlessly from the purple (“a husky fluttering laugh like a bird bathing in dust” [22]) to the snappy (“the vodka of bad decisions” [48]).

The reader will be expecting a book about the intersection of homosexuality and Catholicism, not unreasonably, since the title of the book is *Gay and Catholic*.

But this is actually a beautiful spiritual autobiography of a person. Homosexuality is obviously the headliner here. Still, the frankness with which Tushnet talks about alcoholism, and the way it's woven throughout the fabric of the book, deepens the narrative of the first half of the book and the wisdom of the second. Here, addiction is not an ill-deployed metaphor for homosexuality, but a significant part of the author's journey, which colors her experience of both her homosexuality and her Catholicism.

Another deeply illuminating and affecting element of Eve's story is the recurring childhood story of the Exiled Soldier. Re-enacted with varying details, the core of the story is that the Exiled Soldier was punished for a great crime by being forced to stay outside the village of toys, and guard it from outside threats. As Tushnet writes, "I . . . felt a deep identification with this story of conflicted belonging and alienation, guilt and penitence, exile and longing for a home one can't even see or barely remember. For me, this story of the exiled soldier—the underlying loneliness and alienation it expressed, which lay alongside my sociability and strong friends—is a part of my coming-out story, and, eventually, a part of my conversion story" (15).

This book is not merely a memoir. The second part of it is dedicated to helping celibate persons think through ways of living out their lives as Catholics. Tushnet defines a vocation as "the path or way of life in which God is calling us to pour out our love for him and for other particular human beings" (75). While Tushnet is (I think rightly) suspicious of the notion of a vocation to singleness, since it is "defined by lack of connection to others," she is passionately committed to widening an understanding of vocation which has too often been "marriage, priesthood or religious life." She is passionately committed to the belief that we can speak of vocations to friendship, to teaching, to artistic creation, and so on.

This is one of the key contributions of this book. While the virtue of chastity is certainly much more than just not having sex, it doesn't sound like it to the gay person hearing it proposed. They hear an overwhelming "no" without an accompanying "yes," without a sense of how to live their lives, except by not having sex. Tushnet's proposed stretching of the ways in which we think about vocation does enormously important work in helping to change that. Still, all the work she puts into thinking about "What could this mean for

me?" does not turn into a kind of Happy Healthy Celibacy in Five Easy Steps. Her awareness that each person's vocation or vocations are different leads to a great deal of "This might work for you, but maybe that will instead." There are a wealth of directions here, but nearly all of them are more suggestive than prescriptive. This leaves the reader with the clear sense that, however much some of Tushnet's suggestions might work for him, there remains a good deal of work that he must do to figure out what it will actually mean in his life. These are seeds, not full-grown oaks, which is meet and right.

When considering the book's key contributions, the re-imagining of vocation has a contender: the sections on re-imagining forms of connection and community. (Full disclosure: one of these forms of community is a ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics at Washington, D.C.'s Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, where the author and I sit on the steering committee.) I would especially highlight the chapter on friendship. The need to re-imagine the place of friendship is absolutely central to any attempt to find a better way to talk about the lives of celibate people (gay or straight), and Tushnet does an admirable job of calling us to that. There is certainly a growing sense

of this necessity, but Tushnet's particular sensibility leads to important developments. Her inclination to see the possible rather than the definite lends her treatment an unfortunately rare sense that we're talking more about a network of relationships which provide relational sustenance, more than the One Friendship to Rule Them All.

In summary, Tushnet's book is a winning combination of memoir and advice for people who are living a celibate life. I would emphasize that the advice she offers is not only relevant for gay people but also for everyone who finds themselves living celibate lives for the foreseeable future, and everyone who is concerned to find a place for these people in their lives. In a word: it will, I hope, be deeply relevant to all who read it.

As a final note: we are always tempted to ignore appendices, but that is inadvisable here. The first is devoted to resources, the second to questions about the problems of the celibate life, and the third to ways that to both gay and straight Catholics can help the Church be more welcoming. All of them are deeply helpful.

*Review by Joshua Gonnerman, Ph.D.
candidate, Catholic University of America*

