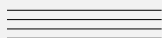


G O D A N D T H E
G A U N T L E T



W I L L I A M

G I R A L D I

Oddly enough, the architects of the Inquisition were not concerned with atheists. In Spain the Inquisitors remained mostly indifferent to nonbelievers, Muslims, and Jews; instead, they focused their murderous energies on heretics, blasphemous Christians, and those Jews who had converted and who were now having a hard time disposing of their Hebraic rituals. In France, the Inquisitors sought to smite the Cathars – a Christian sect whose belief system included elements of Gnosticism and Manichaeism – in a move more political than religious; by challenging the edicts of Rome and the sovereignty of the pope, the Cathars were pre-Lutheran reformers. Pope Innocent III, as lunatic as Caligula, slaughtered some two million people in his holocaust to rid the world of Catharian ideas. Medieval witch hunters, too, from Britain to Germany to Italy would have gladly dined with an atheist: they were misogynistic, celibate monks on a mission to stamp out female sexuality and shrugged off rumors of nonbelievers. These misfits of civilization were sex- and Satan-obsessed in a way that made Calvin proud.

The Inquisition did not fixate on atheists because atheism as we now understand it is a nineteenth-century body of thought –

roughly contemporaneous with the 1859 publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* – made possible by the rationality unleashed in the Enlightenment. The likes of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Karl Marx heartened many an atheistic thinker and artist in the twentieth century: Bertrand Russell, A. J. Ayer, Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, among significant others. Only evangelicals believe that Darwin singlehandedly bolstered global godlessness, a large part of the reason they are so hell-bent on banishing evolution in schools. Darwin was not an atheist, a fact they would soon discover if they took a breather from denigrating him and instead read his pages. Nietzsche, of course, *was* an atheist, but he did not intend his declaration of God's death in *The Gay Science* (1882) to be an original rallying cry for nonbelievers (something that does not exist cannot very well die). Dispensers of incendiary quotes omit the second half of the "God is dead" line as it appears in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–85): "of his pity for man hath God died." Nietzsche has more to say about the emotions underlying a culture that needs to believe than about the anti-theology of a people who never did.

Before Darwin's blueprint and Nietzsche's pronouncements, David Hume in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) had already begun to displace God as omnipotent Prime Mover. Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) revealed the true, nefarious personalities of the priests and popes who ruled the Church (he made it difficult for a congregant to hand over his obligatory weekly donation). And Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) was the first modern and complete materialist explanation of religion. Feuerbach asserted that God is a "projection" of the acute anxieties of the human psyche, that belief is an effort in feeling, an emotional experience worlds away from rationality. His idea that "theology is esoteric anthropology" – *homo homini deus est* (man is a god to man) – would influence Marx and Friedrich Engels, who came to see in the modern world the socioeconomic and cultural forces that allow religion to flourish. But Hindus had realized in the ninth century B.C. that their deities were symbols of psychological powers, and Xenophanes, in rebellion against Homeric supernaturalism, anticipated Feuerbach by understanding that gods are the fabrications

of those people who believe in them: “If cattle or horses or lions had hands, then horses would portray their gods as horses, and cattle as cattle.”

Alistair McGrath, in *The Twilight of Atheism* (2004), marks the beginning of modern disbelief with the routing of the Bastille in 1789: an ideal and perhaps inevitable culmination of the intellectual earthquake that was the Enlightenment. Although atheism “has always been around,” McGrath writes, “it assumed a new importance in the modern era, propelling humanity toward new visions of its power and destiny.” The Privy Council under Queen Elizabeth knew well enough how the godless got around since foul-mouthed Christopher Marlowe was called to defend himself against charges of atheism (he had the characteristic audacity to get himself killed before he could stand trial). But Elizabethan atheism was only exaggerated rebel-posturing that appealed to those such as Marlowe who could not help but upset order. As with any force capable of inciting insurrection, atheism became influential and threatening once it became organized around philosophical credos and practical applications – once the Percy Bysshe Shelleys of the world began penning books entitled *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811). The Bible goes only as far as dubbing an unbeliever “a fool” (Psalms 14:1) because, as with the Inquisitors, the drafters of the Old Testament could not fathom an individual who did not believe in Yahweh. There was simply no alternate way of processing existence. The premodern world, McGrath writes, “was not yet ready for the announcement of the death of the gods.”

It would seem that we in the twenty-first century are still not quite ready, even after the senseless slaughter of the French Revolution, the American Civil War, and both world wars, and after tremendous scientific advancement rendered obsolete the mythological narratives devised to explain our origins. The so-called New Atheists – spearheaded by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris – detonated onto the publishing scene in 2004 with Harris’s *The End of Faith*. There followed Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* (2006), and the two international best-sellers that crystallized the movement and established its vitriolic tenor: Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* (2006) and Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great* (2007). These four writers have

spawned an industry of both like-minded and anti-atheist arguments, so many books, articles, and online debates that one needs an accountant to help tally them.

There is, however, very little that is new about the New Atheists. The pious community in a reactionary uproar against New Atheism behave as if Dawkins and company were the first to posit theses on the absurdity or perniciousness of faith, but the substance of their argument has not morphed all that much since the Age of Reason. Freud considered religion infantile wish making, “universal obsessional neurosis.” In 1930, H. L. Mencken’s *Treatise on the Gods* commenced an attack on the paucity of intelligence in the faithful, all of whom are fated “to live absurdly, flogged by categorical imperatives of their own shallow imagining, and to die insanely, grasping for hands that are not there” (stylistically, Dawkins and Hitchens owe a great deal to Mencken). George H. Smith’s *Atheism: The Case Against God* (1974), a lucid philosophical exposition, attempted to “demolish” that “most widespread and destructive of all the myths devised by man.” During the past two decades, Michael Shermer, founder of the Skeptics Society, has published book after book on the need for skepticism and the poison of supernatural mumbo-jumbo. In 2002, Alexander Waugh (grandson of Evelyn) published the simply titled *God*, a charming atheist polemic with the erudition and divisive humor deeded to him by his surname. But what the New Atheists have contributed to the argument has made all the difference: the caustic, do-or-die urgency of their delivery.

Perhaps it is not remarkable that a set of über-intellectual scientists and polemicists have penned stylishly mordant critiques of religion. Style sticks to a bad boy the way humility sticks to a nun; Lord Byron is a case in point. As A. N. Wilson remarks in his commanding *God’s Funeral* (1999): “Gibbon’s supreme achievement as an anti-Christian propagandist was that style did all his work for him.” Wilson also devotes an entire chapter to Algernon Charles Swinburne, whose clamorous, humanistic poems have style to burn. The New Atheists have stripped Gibbon’s style of its clever suggestions, Swinburne’s of its rabble-rousing, singsong verity. But what they have retained is crucial: the style of revolution – turbocharged. (In fairness, the styles of Harris and Dennett are

much less inflammatory than those of Dawkins and Hitchens, which might be the only time in history that Brits have succeeded in being more obnoxious than Americans.)

Their splashy boat-rocking and noisy insistence cannot in themselves account for the tremendous commercial success of the New Atheists. John Gray writes in *The Guardian* that “the mass political movements of the twentieth century were vehicles for myths inherited from religion, and it is no accident that religion is reviving now that these movements have collapsed. The current hostility to religion is a reaction against this turnabout.” In other words, the millions of consumers of angry diatribes against religion have been made fearful, which has always been the best way to get people to part with their money. The terror attacks of 11 September, the behind-the-scenes theocracy of George W. Bush’s eight-year regime, the possibility of long-range nuclear missiles in Iran: people are scared, and they are blaming God. The megaphone used by the New Atheists might not be entirely novel, but it is, for the first time in history, being listened to and celebrated across large swaths of populations in the West.

Every celebration, though, must have its fulminators, and Terry Eagleton is the latest to join the throng of scholars denouncing the New Atheists for simple-minded assertions, lack of theological sophistication, and, in Eagleton’s words, “a worthless caricature” of religion, “rooted in a degree of ignorance and prejudice to match religion’s own.” (James Carse, in his 2008 book *The Religious Case Against Belief*, contends that the New Atheists’ take on religion is “hasty caricature.” One wonders how often the anti-atheists are going to caricature one another.) Eagleton himself knows something about controversy: as a registered anti-American socialist who believes with Chomskian tenacity that America got what it deserved on 11 September, he touts the purity of Marx’s vision and barrels down the well-paved Moral Highway revealing Satan’s hand in capitalist ventures. He is also one of the most revered literary theorists in the West; his best-selling *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) helped refurbish the teaching of literature throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (and this despite the fact that it failed to introduce significant insights and now reads, even after subsequent editions, as a somewhat dated exercise). *After Theory* (2003), the follow-up to *Literary Theory*, indeed follows

its predecessor in being simultaneously sapient and confused. This attack on postmodernism employs Eagleton's trademark erudition and humor, except that the chummy, wink-wink style ultimately undermines the intelligence of his argument. Also, Eagleton is incapable of writing a book without lambasting Americans; in *After Theory*, we are the "tasteless, clueless philistines who run the world."

His newest book, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, a refutation of the New Atheists, is part of the prestigious Terry Lecture Series at Yale University, a series that has hosted such luminaries as Paul Tillich, Carl Jung, and Erich Fromm (the name of the series, Eagleton jokes, has nothing at all to do with his own first name). One marvels at Eagleton's great mind at work even as it sometimes works in the wrong ways. He begins with a Dawkinsian pitch – "Religion has wrought untold misery in human affairs . . . a squalid tale of bigotry, superstition, wishful thinking, and oppressive ideology" – and follows with the luke-warm dispensation of platitudes to the devout: "Jewish and Christian scriptures have much to say about some vital questions." The left, Eagleton believes, has been conspicuously muted on some of these questions – "death, suffering, love, self-dispossession" – which is rather like believing that the elderly have nothing to say about Medicare. He also admits to knowing "embarrassingly little" about science and religion, and of course this begs an obvious question. Terry Eagleton has never been confronted with a solemn issue on which he did not delight in disgorging wisdom, some of it earned, some of it artificial.

Of the "four horsemen" of New Atheism – they call themselves this admiringly – Eagleton mentions Daniel Dennett only in dismissive passing and Sam Harris not at all. Dawkins and Hitchens are his targets (Irish/English hostilities?), and in a typically comical linguistic maneuver, he conflates their names to "Ditchkins." Although this misnomer dominates Eagleton's criticism, he does recognize the difference between the two and prefers by a large margin Christopher Hitchens, his onetime Marxist-in-arms. He objects to Dawkins on the grounds of sloppy logic but also because "Dawkins's doctrinal ferocity has begun to eat into his prose style." Eagleton is a maestro of mixing supreme cerebral stuffiness with a working-man's humor, and also of charging others with misdeeds

he himself is guilty of. This is the most oft-cited passage from *The God Delusion* and no doubt the one Eagleton has in mind when he castigates Dawkins's prose: "The God of the Old Testament is . . . a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." As a world-famous literary theorist, Eagleton should be qualified to distinguish deliberate overstatement from a careless barrage of purple. This is a passage from *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*: "The Christian church has tortured and disemboweled in the name of Jesus, gagging dissent and burning its critics alive. It has been oily, sanctimonious, brutally oppressive, and vilely bigoted. Morality for this brand of belief is a matter of the bedroom rather than the boardroom." The two passages are similar in register even though Dawkins hams it up for the camera (never mind that Eagleton's second line is redundant and the meaning of the third known only to him).

How exactly does Eagleton, a nonbeliever himself, differ from Ditchkins? The distinction is one between what Eagleton calls "liberal humanism" and "tragic humanism." He comprehends the New Atheist position as one that naively desires only to tear down the jailhouse walls of mythology in order to grant us freedom, whereas Eagleton himself realizes that the mission is much trickier: "Only by a process of self-dispossession and radical remaking can humanity come into its own." True enough; Eagleton recognizes humankind for what it is: an insecure, uninformed, ill-mannered, and ego-driven mess that looks to confirm our delusions rather than abolish them with facts or with the compassion made possible through literature and art. But the program Ditchkins calls for is no less one of self-dispossession and radical remaking. Eagleton wants to accuse them of Hegelianism or positivism, but neither thinker claims that history is inexorably bound to progress, and as a scientist Dawkins would be out of a job if he did not demand that our knowledge of the world must be empirical. Eagleton rightly names the cataclysms inflicted when technology works for madmen and "progress" is apprehended by a bent mind, but it is preposterous for someone who uses antibiotics and airplanes to dismiss technology and then view progress with a paranoid eye. Eagleton often sounds like a schizophrenic from a spy

movie, always worried that we are going to kill each other in a blaze of nuclear bombs. He sacks the liberal humanism of Ditchkins because such an ideology wrongly assumes that the mythological fabric of the human mind can be altered, that humanity walks a one-way path to betterment, and that our quagmires can be survived with reason. His own tragic humanism, meanwhile, knows that people are pigs – “perversity and aberration are constitutive of the human condition” – and that only a mutiny against capitalism can make us pretty.

Furthermore, Eagleton has a rather suspicious understanding of Christianity, which he believes “invented the concept of everyday life,” and instead of attempting to clarify the meaning of that mysterious, nonsensical statement, he instead relies on a note directing his reader to the work of Charles Taylor (Eagleton is mightily impressed with Taylor’s 2007 work *A Secular Age*, a book so obese it could anchor a battleship). If you knew nothing else about Jesus of Nazareth except what Eagleton offers here, you would have little doubt that he was a registered Marxist who perhaps fought with Castro in the wilds of Cuba. In an uncomfortable reversal of those early Aristotelian scholars who looked for Christ everywhere in the literature of the Greeks and Romans, Eagleton reads socialism into Christianity to bolster his anticapitalist endeavor. His notion of salvation is not the redemption of souls through a murdered messiah, but “protecting the poor, orphaned and widowed from the violence of the rich.” This might indeed be partly true for socialism and, at times, for Jesus himself, but it does not touch the Christian doctrine of salvation. Christian faith, Eagleton writes, is the belief that “the very frailty of the human can become a redemptive power. In this, it is at one with socialism, for which the harbingers of a future social order are those who have little to lose in the present.” (For an admirer of Nietzsche, Eagleton has casually overlooked the fact that what Nietzsche found so odious about Christianity was exactly that it appealed to those who had little to lose – to the losers. Nietzsche was appalled by the feebleness of Christian morality and instead preferred the ecstatic spirit of existence the Greeks called *daimon*.) For Eagleton, Christianity and Marxism are both “about culture and civilization together . . . the free self-realization of flesh-and-blood individuals and a global cooperative commonwealth of them.” Poor

Jesus: Eagleton stretches him this way and that in order to stuff him into a socialist's uniform. That's the problem with an ideologue: everywhere he looks he spots either his own precious philosophy or the bushy beards of his enemies.

What is more, Eagleton enjoys beating Ditchkins for logical fallacies and ecclesiastical ignorance and then he himself throughout this book writes of Christians as if there were only one kind. He believes that the Resurrection for Christians "is real enough, but not in the sense that you could have taken a photograph of it had you been lurking around Jesus's tomb armed with a Kodak." Also, "God does not 'exist' as an entity in the world. Atheist and believer can at least concur on that." Which Christians and believers is he referring to here? Certainly some theologically sophisticated Christians consider God and the Resurrection real only in the way "a poem is real," but Eagleton obviously has never visited the Pentecostal South or Colorado Springs, that mecca of American Evangelism, where millions of Christians believe precisely that God exists as an entity in the world and that they could have snapped a photo of Christ rising in glory from his grave. (In a puzzling move, Eagleton acknowledges the gap between sophisticated believers and the average faith of millions, but the acknowledgment does not evolve into analysis and does not prevent him from otherwise placing all Christians into one camp.) To comprehend Christendom as a homogeneous whole is an assault on rationality more egregious than Ditchkins's assertion that rationality alone can rescue humankind. Eagleton attacks the New Atheists with the same reasoning he accuses them of using against the faithful, which is precisely the reasoning the faithful themselves use in order to sustain their faith: reasoning without regard for competition or even coherence – the reasoning of subjectivity and self-righteousness.

The main gripe Eagleton and the anti-atheists have against Dawkins and company, aside from unashamed bellicosity, is their supposed tenuous grasp of all matters theological. (In a review of *The God Delusion* for *Harper's*, the humorless Christian novelist Marilynne Robinson epitomized in less than a paragraph how this gripe can turn ludicrous.) Eagleton breaks John Updike's first commandment of book reviewing: "Try to understand what the author wishes to do, and do not blame him for not achieving what

he did not attempt.” To claim that Ditchkins is theologically illiterate is to miss the point of his enterprise entirely. (Eagleton’s own grasp on theology, by the way, is not exactly firm. He avows at one point that “all authentic theology is liberation theology,” never mind the fact that it was Augustine’s *City of God* that turned so much of Christianity against sex, damning perfectly healthy and curious people to lives of guilt and shame. Never mind, too, that Augustine’s dastardly notion of original sin has succeeded in forcing susceptible churchgoers to feel awful about themselves. One wonders what definition Eagleton has invented for “liberation.”) The allegation of theological simplicity is itself much too simple, especially if one adheres to Gordon Kaufman’s definition of theology, in *God the Problem* (1972), as quite straightforwardly “the human task of thinking about God,” a task Ditchkins more than fulfills. Even so, theology as systematic philosophy is not religion: Ditchkins attacks the latter while Eagleton accuses him of sloppiness with the former. He might as well contend that a golf fan has no right to criticize the swing of Tiger Woods because he does not fully grasp Newton’s Second Law of Motion.

Eagleton first made this indictment in his essay on *The God Delusion* for *The London Review of Books*: “What, one wonders, are Dawkins’s views on the epistemological differences between Aquinas and Duns Scotus?” And Dawkins, in the preface to the paperback edition of *The God Delusion* (2008), answers Eagleton directly: there was not “the slightest hope of Duns Scotus illuminating my central question of whether God exists. The vast majority of theological writings simply assume that he does, and go on from there.” Dawkins also could have noted that much of Church doctrine derived from theology has enjoyed the easeful position that God is beyond all knowing, a stance obliterated by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s clever observation that “a nothing will serve just as well as a something about which nothing can be said.”

Ditchkins assails religion on the same grounds as Freud: religion as ridiculous superstition, as “illusion” that rules our lives and keeps us penned in preschool. In his Terry Lecture of 1979, *Freud and the Problem of God*, the theologian Hans Küng cites Freud’s “emphasis on the childish helplessness of the individual person and of mankind as a whole.” Freud understood that theology was an esoteric sport with no nexus to the fears of humankind. How

many Christians care to recognize the mark of Duns Scotus in the sprung rhythm of Gerard Manley Hopkins? And how many Christians believe a handyman from Galilee rose from the dead and now listens to their prayers from his perch in heaven? If Ditchkins adopts “the Yeti view of the belief in God,” as Eagleton calls it, it is because his targets maintain that very view. Jerry Coyne, writing recently in *The New Republic*, was one of the few scholars remarking on this debate who appreciated why Ditchkins did not bother to comb through two thousand years of Christian thinking and produce a systematic theological dismantling of belief in God: Dawkins “did indeed produce a middlebrow book, but precisely because he was discussing religion as it is lived and practiced by real people.” He was discussing, in other words, the Freudian concept of how anxieties lead to illusions.

In one of the smartest sentences in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* – Eagleton, like Nietzsche, excels at the aphoristic, thereby compensating for various missteps elsewhere – Eagleton writes, “If reason has trouble with value, faith has problems with fact.” How do we quell that trouble, those problems? Aristotle believed that if you locked two intelligent men in a room for a long enough period of time, the truth would be discovered. He was, perhaps, being too generous in his conception of men and not allowing for the personal agendas that persuade one to misread his opponent. When Hitchens claims with Freud that religion belongs to “the bawling and fearful infancy of our species,” Eagleton chooses to think he is referring to Aeschylus, which is about 150,000 years away from Hitchens’s true meaning: those first *Homo sapiens* on the African savanna who found themselves confronted by meteorological cruelty – by “immense dangers threatening us from outside and from within ourselves,” as Küng has it – and forced to form hypotheses with limited cognition. Eagleton is willing to assume that religious faith can signal “interior depth,” while Ditchkins assumes it always signals cerebral vacuity. Eagleton thinks science requires faith and can include as much myth as religion – a view that performs the notable feat of misapprehending the simple definitions of *science*, *faith*, and *myth* – while Ditchkins knows that it does not (when William James wrote in 1911 that “our scientific temper is devout” he did not mean that it requires faith). Rather than the truth

coming out of this locked room containing Eagleton and Ditchkins, a medic would need to rush in to stanch the bleeding.

In Eagleton's marvelous little book *The Meaning of Life* (2007) – valuable especially for its insights into Arthur Schopenhauer and Beckett – he recognizes simultaneously the absurdity of the concept and our ceaseless urge to find it. God cannot die because, as Feuerbach knew, *we are him*. Carl Jung ends his 1937 Terry Lecture, *Psychology and Religion*, this way, the only way: “Nobody can know what the ultimate things are. We must, therefore, take them as we experience them. And if such experience helps to make your life healthier, more beautiful, more complete and more satisfactory to yourself and to those you love, you may safely say: ‘This was the grace of God.’”