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## Holy Terror

By Terry Eagleton

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0-19-928717-1.

<sup>[1]</sup> This book has all the qualities one expects from a new work by Terry Eagleton, who is correctly described on the back cover as ‘one of the world’s foremost cultural critics.’ It is erudite, witty, and concise. Tracing the prehistory of the concept of terrorism, Eagleton guides us with assurance from the world of Euripides and Saint Paul to that of D. H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad. He admits at the outset that the route he takes us on is arbitrary, and that is part of the fun of the trip: like a good tour-guide, he lingers on his favourite spots sharing insights that make familiar texts seem fresh.

<sup>[2]</sup> Still, for all the book’s virtues, my initial reaction as I was reading it was one of frustration. I was frustrated not by what Eagleton says but by what is left unsaid: there is no mention of Muhammad, nor of the *Quran*, nor of more recent Muslim thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb, whose teachings provided the inspiration for al-Qaeda. I did not expect that Eagleton would write a beginner’s guide to Islam – there are enough of those in existence already, written by specialists in the subject – but I had expected some attempt to get to grips with Muslim culture. On reflection, I wondered whether this frustration was not a symptom of my failure to understand the purpose of the book, rather than Eagleton’s failure to achieve the goals that he set for himself. Re-reading the preface, I found that Eagleton does clearly define his aims at the outset. He explicitly states that he is not attempting yet another political study of terrorism, and adds that ‘Like a number of my recent books, then, this one seeks to extend the language of the left as well as to challenge that of the right.’ (v) The extension of the language of the left that Eagleton seeks is to reintroduce words such as ‘evil’ ‘pious’ and ‘sacrifice’, vocabulary that he describes as ‘metaphysical’, although given the variety of meaning that term carries, one could also describe these words as ‘religious’ or ‘theological’. Since the religious vote was apparently an important factor in determining the outcome of the last American presidential election, Democrats in the U.S.A. have been talking a lot about the electoral advantages of mentioning God now and again. However, Eagleton is far from offering a quick and easy guide to religious words for politicians seeking a few extra votes. As he reminds us at the end of the book, offering someone new vocabulary opens up new possibilities of thinking, and if our understanding of vocabulary is suitably nuanced, our thinking can be more precise.

<sup>[3]</sup> For example, Eagleton notes that the word ‘sacrifice’ is unfashionable in

left-wing circles, because it can be used as a ploy to by the powerful to trick the weak into meek acceptance of the status quo: 'It smacks of a morbid cult of self-abnegation, as its victims come to revel in their own powerlessness and rub their meekness aggressively in others' faces.' (128) However, as he points out 'The word "sacrifice" originally means "to make sacred"'. Sacrificial rituals involve taking some humble or worthless piece of life and converting it into something special and potent.' (129) Eagleton then considers the circumstances under which an act of apparent self-destruction can bring about a genuine transformation of values, focussing particularly on the way in which the death of an innocent can expose structures of injustice. (135) It does not follow, of course, that every act of self-destruction is a sacrifice. Eagleton is certainly not praising suicide bombers who, he points out, do not die so that others may live but rather 'die so that other may die so that others may live.' (100) Eagleton wants his readers to become attuned to the subtle distinctions between sacrifice and other forms of self-destruction, and to the political value of sacrifice, so that political discourse may be enriched. Eagleton is particularly suited to this task because of his understanding of the inhibitions that many have about the use of such mediaeval language. His extended discussion of literary examples provide the reader with exercises in discernment, to use another word with theological resonance, learning to appreciate the subtle distinctions implicit in the metaphysical vocabulary.

<sup>[4]</sup> However, the book is not simply a theological dictionary. Eagleton does not merely introduce the reader to theological vocabulary, he uses it to say something about terrorism. His conclusions are not unpredictable. He argues that terrorism is the result of injustice, and so the best way to prevent terrorism is to prevent injustice. (15) That is not to say that he excuses terrorism, or is arguing in favour of making concessions to terrorists themselves. As he points out, to provide a reason for someone's action is not to excuse it, in fact, it is arguable that having a reason for acting is a precondition of moral responsibility. (116) Similarly, to say that a way must be found to transform the situation of the victims of our unjust actions, and so prevent terrorism, is not the same as identifying the terrorists themselves with the victims whose situation should be transformed. (140)

<sup>[5]</sup> Many readers, including, I suspect, Eagleton's intended audience, will already be disposed to accept the thesis that learning to respond correctly to injustice is the best way to prevent terrorism. This is fortunate, because Eagleton does not have much to say to persuade those who disagree: those who want an informed account of Western complicity in corrupt Arab regimes had better turn to Noam Chomsky. Eagleton sometimes writes as if Muslim fundamentalism is an inevitable karmic consequence of Western injustice. He tells us that 'Today, Islamic terrorism aims to bring down its Western antagonist by conspiring with a self-destructive impulse at its heart.' (112) Eagleton's expertise in Western cultural history qualifies him perfectly to expose the dark side of Western culture, and it is important to undermine the dangerous illusion that the West is the defender of all that is good and pure against the forces of darkness. But it is also an illusion to suppose that Islam is the mirror image of Western civilization, and therefore that

to understand Islam, Western civilization need do no more than examine itself. I would not accuse Eagleton of subscribing to this illusion, but there is little in this book to dispel it.

<sup>[6]</sup> This is a pity, because many of Eagleton's insights about Western culture lead naturally into questions about Islam. For example, Eagleton suggests that the eucharist, the founding ritual of Christianity, is a symbolic form of social revolution. (132) Islam is a religion that commenced with a real social revolution. One of Eagleton's central points, which he takes from Hume and Burke, is that all societies are founded on violence, but then over time it is possible to hide these violent origins, and thus time gives the appearance of legitimacy. (64) He points out that with societies such as Northern Ireland and Israel, whose violent origins are more recent, the violence cannot be hidden, and the result is instability. (66) The *Quran* is a revolutionary manifesto, and Muhammad's life was that of a revolutionary leader: so in Islam, the violence on which society is founded, so far from being hidden, is sanctified in the canonical text and enacted in the life of the most revered and imitated figure. If the violence of founding is a dark secret at the heart of Western thought, as Eagleton suggests, (67) the difference is that Islam wears its dark heart on its sleeve. This explains why Islam arouses such horror in the West: of course, the immediate reason for fear of Islam is 9/11, but all too frequently, it is when people turn to the study of this history of Islam that they come to see 9/11 not merely as an aberration, but as a natural outcome of the teachings of Muhammad and the *Quran*, and thus a fear of al-Qaeda becomes a fear of Islam. Eagleton says that the West today has no other response to Islam except fear because we lack the ability 'to decipher the symptoms of weakness and despair in the raging fury at the gate. . . ' (133) However, he is content to decipher the signs of Western civilisation, leaving the task of deciphering Islam to others.

<sup>[7]</sup> As to whether Eagleton succeeds in enriching left wing political discourse with metaphysical vocabulary, time will tell, but it seems to me that he has done a good job in this regard. As to his prescriptions on terrorism, the problem seems to me that he is platitudinous rather than erroneous. Starting from one of the most urgent problems of our times, Eagleton casts light on texts that have become part of the Western literary canon. However, he is better at using the political problem of terrorism to cast new light on the texts than using the texts to cast new light on the political problem of terrorism. Perhaps it was not part of his goal to do the latter, but if that is so, it is a pity that he did not aim higher. In any case, readers who start out without any false expectations should be able to enjoy reading the book without any sense of frustration.