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**WAS JESUS A REVOLUTIONARY?**

by

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## Was Jesus a Revolutionary?

Terry Eagleton

Jesus Christ was almost certainly executed as a suspected political rebel against the Roman imperial state. We know this because crucifixion was a penalty the Romans reserved almost entirely for political offences. The point of the punishment was not so much the agony it involved, but the fact that dissidents were pinned up in public view as a grim warning to other potential agitators. Their broken bodies were turned into advertisements for the power of Rome. Even so, Jesus got off fairly lightly. (I once made the mistake of saying that on BBC radio and was the recipient for the next few months of letters from conservative Evangelicals who promised to pray for my soul while deeply doubting that I was actually in possession of one). If Jesus really did only spend a few hours on the cross, as the New Testament records, then his fate could have been far worse. Some of those who were crucified thrashed around for days. What probably helped him on his way was the scourging he is said to have received shortly before his death. A massive loss of blood would have meant that he died more quickly. If you're going to be crucified, be careful to shed a lot of blood beforehand.

Was Jesus really a political rebel? Almost certainly not. It's true that a good deal of what he said might have sounded to the casual bystander like sound Zealot stuff. The Zealots, memorably satirised in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, were underground Jewish revolutionaries who planned to bring the Roman state down by force. They were also extreme Jewish nationalists who dreamed of creating a purified, Jewish theocratic state once they had kicked out the occupying forces. In some ways, then, they were not all that far removed from Al Quida today, or (more to the point) those Israeli settlers who butcher and humiliate the Arabs they dispossessed of their land and think they're doing God's will. The Pharisees, who were not at all as black as the gospel-writers (for their own political purposes) paint them, were more or less their theological wing. Perhaps Jesus cursed the Pharisees so roundly partly to put some daylight between himself and the Zealots. Even so, the Pharisees were an interesting, much maligned bunch, admired by most Jews for their piety and good works. Unlike the Sadducees, they seem to have played no part in Jesus's death, despite the grossly improbable suggestion in Mark's gospel that they wanted to have him killed because of his good works. The gospels have it in for this group, and we don't really know why. No Pharisee, by the way, would have thought it against the Mosaic Law to do good works on the Sabbath. To see them as simply legalistic is a slur. The liberal wing of the Pharisees was probably sympathetic to a good deal that Jesus said, to the point where one might classify him as a liberal Pharisee, though he stands to the left even of this group, not least

in his declaration that no food was unclean, which would have been fighting talk even in liberal-Pharisaic circles.

Even so, there were probably Zealot militants, not all that far removed in their political views from the IRA, in Jesus's immediate entourage. One of his comrades, Simon, is directly referred to as a Zealot, while two others, James and John, are given a nickname ('Sons of Thunder') that might suggest Zealot sympathies. Judas Iscariot's surname may allude to his place of birth, but it could also be translated as 'dagger man', which might put him, too, among the anti-colonial insurgents. Perhaps he sold Jesus out to the occupying powers because he had expected him to be some kind of Lenin and was bitterly disenchanted. Even Peter, Jesus's right-hand man, carried a sword, an odd thing for a Galilean fisherman to do. The so-called thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus were almost certainly Zealots, as (probably) was Barabbas, the prisoner who was released by Pontius Pilate in Jesus's place.

When Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth while pregnant with Jesus, the gospel written by the man we call Luke puts into Mary's mouth a triumphant chant known to the church as the *Magnificat*. It speaks of God having raised up the lowly and cast down the mighty, filled the poor with good things and sent the rich empty away. This theme of revolutionary reversal is almost a cliché of the Hebrew scriptures: you will know God for who he is when you see the poor (or as St Paul colourfully calls them, the shit of the earth) coming to power. Yahweh, a terrorist of love rather than a middle-class liberal, is most certainly in this sense a revolutionist. The dispossessed are known in the Hebrew scriptures as the *anawim*, and Mary herself, as an obscure young Galilean woman favoured by God, is being presented by Luke as a representative of them. So is her son, who is homeless, propertyless, celibate, peripatetic, averse to material goods, hostile to the family (almost all the references to the family in the NT are resoundingly negative) and a thorn in the flesh of the political establishment. He is also remarkably laid back about sex, as the story of the woman of Samaria suggests. (To talk to a woman without his minders present was bad enough; to talk to a woman with a colourful sexual history was even worse; to talk to a *Samaritan* woman, given that the Jews regarded Samaritans as a low form of life, was even more outrageous). In fact, there is almost nothing about sex in the New Testament, a fact which some of his sex-obsessed followers seem not to have noticed. Some scholars believe that the words Mary is made to sing here were a kind of Zealot chant – the kind of thing they might have shouted on demos had the Romans been liberal enough to allow them.

Yahweh, in other words, is not a religious God. You cannot make graven images of him, because the only image of him is human flesh and blood. You can't even pronounce his name: Yahweh is not actually his name but a kind of pseudonym. In the prophetic books of the Bible, he tells the Jews that he hates their burnt offerings and that their incense stinks in his nostrils. What are they doing, he asks, about welcoming the immigrants, protecting the widows and orphans and shielding the poor from the violence of the rich? Jesus himself is squarely in this Judaic tradition: it is not the pious who will enter the kingdom of

God but those who feed the hungry and visit the sick. In fact, in an extraordinarily audacious moment in the New Testament, he suggests that the riff-raff of the highways and by-ways will take priority in entering the kingdom over those faithful to the Mosaic Law. He himself eats with crooks and whores without first asking them to repent, in clear violation of Judaic orthodoxy. He has come to overthrow the Satanic image of God – the image of God as Patriarch, Big Daddy, Judge, Censor, Superego, with whom you have to bargain your way to heaven by being righteous and respectable. ‘Satan’ in Hebrew means Adversary or Accuser, and is really a false image of Yahweh - the image of him cultivated by those masochists among us who want a big nasty bastard of a God in order to be punished and thus be gratifyingly relieved of their guilt, not some wimpish, limp-wristed deity who allows us to murder him without a struggle. In contrast with Satan, Jesus is the image of the Father as friend, comrade and lover, counsel for the defence rather than judge on the bench, a bearer of the scandalous news, offensive to the ears of the morally self-righteous everywhere, that we don’t have to bargain our way to heaven because God loves us just as we are, in all our moral squalor. Morality for the NT is not about rules and regulations (Paul describes the Law as ‘cursed’), and certainly not about sex, but about what Jesus calls abundance of life, namely learning how to enjoy ourselves, how to live to the full, which for this particular document is a matter of living in and through each other.

All the same, it’s hard to classify Jesus as a Zealot. If the Romans had really suspected him of leading a treasonable bunch of insurrectionists, they would have almost certainly have rounded up his disciples after his death, which doesn’t seem to have happened. Besides, Jesus apparently believed in paying taxes to the Roman state (‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s...’), while the Zealots did not. This is not necessarily to say that he lent his support to the imperial power. ‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’ doesn’t mean that politics is one thing and religion quite another. Any such distinction is an anachronistic misreading, which the Jews of the time would probably have found unintelligible. It is only the modern age which enforces such a clear division between politics and religion. The Jews who listened to Jesus’s sayings would have known well enough that the things that are God’s include justice, mercy, alms-giving, a devotion to the poor, bringing low the arrogance of the mighty and so on, all of which have their political implications. It didn’t mean going to church. There were no churches. And Jesus’s followers didn’t need them anyway, since they were Jews, who worshipped, as Jews do, in the synagogue. They didn’t see themselves as part of a new religion, and neither did Jesus.

If Jesus wasn’t a nationalist revolutionary, why then was he murdered by the state? The straight answer is that we don’t really know. The accounts of his various trials provided by the Gospel are partial, confused and obscure. Maybe the gospel-writers themselves were unclear about the question. They were not, after all, eye-witnesses. Jesus was certainly not executed because he claimed to be the Son of God. For one thing, that wouldn’t necessarily have been a big deal. All Jews were the sons and daughters of God. Israel was collectively the Son of God. There

would have been nothing necessarily blasphemous in the assertion. Anyway, Jesus cannot have intended the phrase in a literal sense, since God is not generally considered to have testicles. For another thing, if Jesus had intended to suggest that he himself was divine, he would almost certainly have been stoned to death for blasphemy on the spot, which is at least one good reason why he makes no such declaration. Only once in the New Testament, and then ambiguously, does he seem to endorse the title. In general, however, he is notably wary of being labelled, giving the slip to the various categories that others try to foist on him. He sometimes talks of the Son of Man, but this is highly obscure as well. It isn't even always clear whether he's referring to himself or someone else when he uses the title. The Son of Man is a shadowy figure in the Book of Daniel, but in Aramaic, the language of Jesus, it can also just be a discreet way of indicating oneself in order to avoid repeating the first person pronoun, as with the English phrase 'yours truly'. And nobody ever got strung up for that.

He certainly does not present himself as the Messiah, the military chieftain who would lead the Jewish people to a triumphant victory over their enemies. For one thing, the exclusively Judaic idea of Messiah would have made no sense to any but Jewish Christians. Greek Christians and others would have found it unintelligible. Anyway, the Messiah wasn't meant to be the saviour of humankind (the Jews had no interest in that) but a purely local Jewish figure, a kind of Che Guavara type. The Messiah was supposed to spring from the house of David, which is why Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Except that he almost certainly wasn't. The gospels get him from Nazareth to Bethlehem by the narrative device of a census, in which everyone had to go back to where they were born in order to be counted. Well, for one thing, can you think of a sillier way of taking a census? Why not just count people where they are? For another thing, if there had been such an event, the whole of the Roman empire would have been gridlocked and log-jammed from one end to another, and we would almost certainly know about it from secular sources, which we don't. There is no historical record of such an event. There was a Roman census a few years later, but it was confined to one part of the country only.

In any case, Messiahs don't get themselves crucified. The idea of a crucified Messiah would have struck the Jews of the time as an unspeakable moral obscenity. (The same goes for Jesus's command to let the dead bury their dead – a brutal, frightful thing to say to a people for whom burying the dead was a sacred duty). Instead, Jesus appears to go out of his way to undercut the ardent expectations of his followers. While some of them are probably anticipating a victorious march on the Jewish capital, Jesus enters Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, in a deliberately satirical, deflationary, carnivalesque gesture. He is a sick joke of a Messiah, one whose actions constitute a satirical commentary on the nature of political power as such. The power he himself represents is the only authentic and enduring one – the strength which springs from solidarity with breakdown and failure, from a compact with the non-being and self-dispossession which is the *anawim*. When St John speaks of 'the powers of this world', he means

the kind of violent, corrupt regime which did Jesus to death, and which are today busy burning Arab children in the name of freedom and democracy. Among the apologists for this extremism are a lot of humane, quiet-spoken, eminently reasonable middle-class academics, who dislike violence when it happens in Belfast but cheer it on in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It's doubtful that either the Romans or the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling caste, actually suspected Jesus of seditious intentions. He had probably visited Jerusalem several times before, and no move had been made against him by the authorities. Anyway, how was this tiny gang of illiterate, peripatetic peasants and fishermen to overthrow the state? But it might have been politically convenient for the ruling powers to have pretended that he had subversive aims. Jesus came up to Jerusalem at the time of Passover, the feast which commemorates the emancipation of his people from slavery in Egypt, and the political atmosphere in the capital was probably electric. A lot of people would have been looking to Jesus to do something, which he did — but according to the Scriptures it was resurrection, not insurrection. Freedom from the Egyptians would have brought to mind freedom from the Romans, and there would have been the usual assortment of minor prophets, weirdos, visionaries, hippies, apocalypticists, half-baked holy men and other such John the Baptist types knocking around the city. The place probably looked something like Woodstock. Aware of Jesus's enormous popularity with the masses (though it's possible, some scholars think, that the Baptist, a much more theatrical character, was even more popular), the Jewish chief priests might well have feared that his presence could trigger an uprising which might bring the full force of Roman power down on the backs of their hapless people, and thus made a pre-emptive move against him. Such an insurrection happened forty years later, when a bunch of madcap Zealot adventurists made their strike against the Romans with catastrophic consequences for the Jews, leaving the Temple in ruins. The Sanhedrin may have had Jesus killed because they were out to prevent such a disaster.

As proof of his disruptive intent, the priests might well have appealed to the fracas in the Temple, when Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers and drove them out of the place. This was not some anti-capitalist or even anti-commercial demonstration. Jesus would have known well enough that those who came to the Temple to sacrifice animals might have their offering rejected as impure by the priests, and would consequently need to buy another on the spot. For this, they might need to change their local currency into the metropolitan one. Hence the need for animal traders and money changers. Jesus's objection would not have been to this, but perhaps to the fact that the sacrificial tributes which people then offered were not really their own. Instead, they were part of a lucrative trade which enriched the clerical authorities, and this seems to have been enough to rouse Jesus's plebeian fury. He also shows a potentially blasphemous disrespect for the Temple by claiming that it will be replaced by his own flesh and blood. He's talking, incidentally, about a complex of buildings that was about the size of twelve modern football pitches, and prophecies that not one stone will be left on

another, which as the archaeologists are aware turned out not to be literally true. He is striking at the whole apparatus of priestly power, which may well have been enough to get him arrested. An assault on the temple was tantamount to an assault on God.

It wouldn't, however, have been enough to get him executed. The right to execute was reserved by the Romans, who would have taken no interest in the esoteric theological squabbles of their colonial underlings. It was no concern to them whether an obscure, itinerant country bumpkin from provincial Galilee had delusions of religious grandeur. The country was positively stuffed with religious cranks and fanatics. They would most certainly have been alarmed, however, had Jesus been reported to them as a political threat, and it is probably this that the Sanhedrin did. In a shabby political manoeuvre, then, Jesus may have been sent to his death as a political agitator or Messianic pretender without either the Jews or the Romans actually crediting the charge. It was simply expedient to get him out of the way. The sign pinned above his cross - 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews' - was probably a well-calculated sneer. The logo could be read as a kind of black joke, a piece of bathos rather like 'Fred Smith of Ballymena, President of the Universe'. 'Galilee' was a joke to the sophisticated Jerusalem set, as the Irish are to the British and the Newfoundlanders to the Canadians.

The New Testament presents the Roman governor Pontius Pilate as a vacillating, well-meaning, rather spineless liberal with a metaphysical turn of mind ('What is truth?', he inquires of Jesus). This, however, is a flagrant falsification. We happen to know something about the historical Pilate, enough to be sure that he was a brutal despot who executed at the drop of a hat, and already stood accused at the time of bribery, cruelty and execution without trial. In fact, he was finally dismissed from the imperial service for dishonourable conduct. And you had to be pretty dishonourable to be sent packing by the Romans. He would certainly have executed Jesus or anyone else without a qualm, without for a moment thinking having to believe that they were guilty. For their own political purposes, the gospel writers are out to shift the blame for Jesus's death away from the Romans and on to the Jews. Jesus himself refuses to assign blame to his killers and appeals instead to the notion of false consciousness to let them off the hook: 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do'.

The Christian belief is that crucifixion isn't quite the last word. However dire the circumstances, the power which springs from self-dispossession will win out in the end. In Christian doctrine, this is known as the resurrection. Jesus's comrades were so convinced that Calvary was not the last word that some of them were prepared to go to their own deaths for this faith. That Jesus has risen from the dead is first reported by women, who were not regarded by the ancient Jews as acceptable witnesses. It is second-class citizens who are first granted this revelation. The body which the various witnesses saw, however, was marked with the wounds of crucifixion, to signify that there is no transformed existence without voyaging all the way through self-dispossession with the hope (but absolutely no guarantees) of emerging somewhere on the other side. Like much tragedy, the

narrative of crucifixion and resurrection signifies that there can be no remaking without a prior breaking, a case that has political implications. Or, as W.B. Yeats more memorably put it, 'Nothing can be sole or whole That has not been rent'.

In the end, Jesus was killed because he spoke out fearlessly for love and justice in a political world which finds such things deeply threatening. He was, in short, a martyr, one who gives up his life as a precious gift to others, like Martin Luther King or Steve Biko. It was because he was prepared to let himself go, with no thought of recompense or return, that according to the doctrine of the resurrection he was so profusely rewarded. As the New Testament puts it, those who lose their lives shall find them, and according to the gospel-writers those least capable of doing this are the rich and powerful. There are some who regard the Gospel as a source of false consolation - pie in the sky and the opium of the people. They have clearly not taken note of its central message: If you don't love you're dead, and if you do they'll kill you. Either you can find an image of the truth of human history in a reviled, tortured, polluted body on a cross, which is what's known as faith, or you can't. Either you believe that new life can only spring from such self-dispossession, or you believe that things really aren't that bad and go and cast your vote for conventional politics.

So Jesus wasn't a Lenin. For the NT, however, this is not because he's a good middle-of-the-road pragmatist, but because in some sense he *is* the revolution. The ultimate revolution is the resurrection of the body, an event that has to be dimly prefigured in the politics of the present. One reason why Jesus wasn't a Lenin is that he seems to speak at one point of the kingdom of God as arriving in the lifetime of some of those around him. Certainly Paul, and probably the gospel writers, expected the kingdom to materialise very soon indeed. They would have been utterly incredulous had they known that history would stagger on at least as far as 2014. So these men and women had no conception of what we might call secular political history. There was no time for politics: instead, one should simply stand surrendered in faith to the Lord who was imminently to arrive. They would have had little or no conception of how collective human agency might play its part in the coming of God's kingdom - an awareness that began gradually to dawn on the church when the kingdom failed imminently to arrive. Somehow, our own efforts to transform the earth are an integral part of its advent. When the kingdom finally arrives, the scum and refuse of the earth will come to power, so the Gospel promises, while the rich and powerful will be sent empty away. And this reversal can't simply be postponed to the future, but must be continually anticipated in the present, in a mode of political transformation implacably hostile to the sovereign powers of this world - Stormont, Downing Street, the White House, all that - whose project the kingdom will bring to fruition. And that, I might suggest, is not best done by being a good middle-class liberal.

## COMMENTARIES

### Jesus Among the Marxists

Diarmid Finnegan

(Queen's University Belfast)

In this brief response, I want to offer a comparison between the Karl Kautsky's early-twentieth-century reconstruction of Jesus and Eagleton's Christ. I will use this comparative reflection to raise a couple of more general questions for discussion.

Although it is not often appreciated, there has been an interesting tradition of reconsidering Jesus within Marxism, broadly understood.<sup>1</sup> Marx himself did not pay Jesus much attention. Engels was fascinated by early Christianity and by, more peculiarly, the Book of Revelation. It was Karl Kautsky, Engel's confidant and biographer, who took Jesus and the gospels most seriously. In his work, *Foundations of Christianity*, which first appeared in German in 1908 and was translated into English in 1925, Kautsky, as well as dissecting the communistic character of 'the primitive Christian community' included a significant amount of commentary on the gospels.<sup>2</sup>

In Kautsky's account, the gospels are replete with base fabrications deliberately designed to distance Jesus from any resistance to imperial Rome and to set up a calculating opposition between Jesus and 'the Jews'. Like Eagleton, Kautsky dismisses out of hand Matthew and Luke's birth narratives, particularly the empire-wide census that forced Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem. To Kautsky the idea that people had to return to their place of birth was outrageous. On this Kautsky's notes, 'even today the age of railroads, such a decree would lead to inordinate confusion'. Kautsky also mocks the gospel portrayals of Pilate noting, like Eagleton, the very different character sketches in Philo and Josephus. More generally for Kautsky, already by the late first century the compilers of the gospels were stamping out the revolutionary potential of Jesus the political rebel and communistic radical. To counter this, Kautsky works hard to strip out what he too took to be the politically-motivated fabrications of the gospel accounts to bring back into view 'glimmerings' of the 'simple truth' about Jesus.

If value was to be found in the gospels, it was only because the gospel writers had to deal with persistent memories of a Jesus who collaborated with a Jerusalem-based proletarian community marked by 'fanatical class hatred'. This Jesus, before anything else, sought to overthrow political oppression and rescue the marginalized, downtrodden and poor. He was also deeply hostile to the family and displayed a radical indifference towards material possessions, property, land and sexual morality. But unlike Eagleton, Kautsky is convinced that Jesus was a

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Boer has recently drawn attention to this tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity: A Study in Christian Origins*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1925.

political rebel – not just a suspected one - and had been intent on a violent uprising against the Roman rulers. Again unlike Eagleton, Kautsky argues that the church in a nascent but definite form was already in existence before Jesus died. After his death, however, Jesus became an ‘international saviour,’ a novel feature of the early Jesus movement that set it apart from other more narrowly nationalist Jewish groups. The communistic church in Kautsky’s telling thus preceded and produced certain core beliefs about Jesus, not least his resurrection from the dead.

When Kautsky discusses eschatology, the coming Kingdom, he is, perhaps, closer to Eagleton. He shares with Eagleton the commonplace view that the early Christian communities believed that the Kingdom was ‘at hand’. But he was anxious to stress that this did not mean that ‘there was no time for politics’.<sup>3</sup> In a way that echoes some more recent proposals in scholarship on the historical Jesus, he argues that the resurrection, and the eschatological hope of a coming Kingdom was not a belief that forever deferred justice and freedom to some otherworldly future.<sup>4</sup> In keeping with Jewish messianic beliefs in general, the kingdom of God was, in Kautsky’s description, ‘earthly’. You could, Kautsky suggested, exist in the present state of being and enter the Kingdom of God. It was only later, Kautsky argues, that Christians began to define the resurrected body as spiritual rather than corporeal.

This whirlwind comparison between the Kautskian and Eagletonian Jesus raises a couple of questions that might be worth airing. First, what accounts for the differences between Kautsky’s and Eagleton’s Jesus? Eagleton seems to opt for a non-violent Jesus. Kautsky, on the other hand, thought the ‘non-violent’ sayings of Jesus were a product of the ‘rich and prosperous’ adherents of Christianity who wanted nothing to do with those set on opposing the ‘sovereign powers of this world’.<sup>5</sup> Here, Eagleton’s view is arguably more plausible. But is it simply that historical Jesus scholarship has shown that Kautsky’s views are untenable? Perhaps in other respects, Kautsky’s account can still be defended. Certainly, his view of the apocalyptic beliefs of the earliest followers of Jesus might find more support from contemporary Jesus scholars than Eagleton seems to allow.

Second, is there a danger that a strongly Marxist reading of the canonical gospels places too much confidence in the ability to discriminate between a canonical and historical Jesus? Both Kautsky and Eagleton speak in assured tones about a ‘gospel’ behind the canonical gospels. And the reconstructed Jesus of both Kautsky and Eagleton turns out to be a rather attractive figure for those with Marxist sympathies. At the same time, parts at least of that composite (and sometimes contradictory) portrait seem to be rather un-dialectical. For example, the suggestion that Jesus was in some principled and absolute sense ‘anti-family,’

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Eagleton, ‘Was Jesus a revolutionary’. Religious Studies Forum Annual Lecture, Queen’s University Belfast, 4 June 2014.

<sup>4</sup> On the ‘new perspective’ on early Christian apocalypticism that emphasizes its ‘non-dualistic’ nature, see Crispin Fletcher-Louis, ‘Jesus and apocalypticism,’ in Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (eds) *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 2877-2909.

<sup>5</sup> Eagleton, ‘Was Jesus a revolutionary’.

does not look as secure when it is set alongside the criticism Jesus levelled at Pharisees that *they* were causing people to disobey the fifth commandment, honour your father and your mother (e.g. Mark 7: 1-13; Matthew 15: 1-7). A wider issue is that Kautsky and Eagleton's account of the attitude of Jesus towards the Law of Moses, and even towards Jewish purity laws, has been strenuously called into question by at least some historical Jesus scholars.<sup>6</sup>

Let me say in conclusion that I have huge admiration for Eagleton's longstanding efforts to bring religion in general, and Jesus in particular, back into political philosophy and cultural criticism. So I don't at all intend the comparison between Eagleton and Kautsky to be an invidious one. But I do think it raises some challenging questions about efforts to resurrect an image of Jesus that can serve a radical socialist politics.

### **Response to Terry Eagleton**

Richard English

(University of St Andrews)

Thanks to Professor Eagleton for such a stimulating Lecture, and also for his shelf of highly original books. I first encountered Terry's work while a History Undergraduate at Oxford, where I read his 1986 book on Shakespeare, a brilliant interrogation of important bardic tensions, especially the fact that Shakespeare's 'belief in social stability is jeopardized by the very language in which it is articulated' (Eagleton *Shakespeare*, p.1).

Professor Eagleton's focus today is on one of the few figures in human history unambiguously more important than Shakespeare. And serious discussion of Christ necessarily involves reflection again on tensions. Here is someone whose organizational adherents have so often prized power and hierarchy, and yet in whose own experience on earth – as the historian Diarmaid MacCulloch has reminded us – 'it is often the poor, the ill-educated and the disreputable whose encounters with God are most vividly described' (MacCulloch, *History of Christianity*, p.77).

Such tensions are clear from Terry's lecture (with Jesus being so committed to love and justice, then how could he but be in tension with so much that occurs in our hate-filled and unjust world)?

In recent times indeed much of Prof Eagleton's work has focused on religious matters and importantly so. His sparkling 2009 book *Reason, faith and revolution* offered a wonderful response to the hubristic ignorance of some of the famous new atheists among the clerisy. And his most recent book – *Culture and the death of God* – brilliantly explored the resilience of The Almighty despite the frequent historical attempts there have been to kill him off (incidentally pointing out how

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Paula Fredriksen, 'Did Jesus oppose the purity laws,' *Bible Review* 11(3) (1995): 18-25; 42-47.

ludicrously misfocused so much of our attention to ‘Cultural Studies’ is in Universities, given Cultural Studies’ lack of engagement with the most serious popular culture that there is: namely, religion.)

My job today is a minor one, and so I’ll be very brief, and raise three issues which seem to me central to Professor Eagleton’s splendid lecture, and perhaps worthy of wider debate/discussion.

1. The first is on the definition of what it means to be ‘a revolutionary’. This might mean someone keen to overthrow and replace an established government or political system (which it seems to me that the historical record suggests Jesus not to have been). It might also mean someone keen on a radical or innovative alteration in society and its attitudes and structures, and perhaps with the notion of suddenness rather than more gradual change. (The standard dichotomy in so many examination questions concerns ‘revolution’ versus ‘reform’ – usually, in historical reality - not least Irish historical reality - a much more blurred distinction than people often assume.)

In this second sense, it seems to me that the historical Jesus was clearly a revolutionary, and (relatedly) that the subversiveness of his teaching remains staggering when reviewed seriously. It’s easy (and perhaps not unfair) to criticize political or other institutions when set against Christ’s teaching, but our own individual failings are every bit as stark, I think, when we reflect on what he said: ‘Treat others as you would like them to treat you’ Luke 6:31; ‘Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate’ Luke 6:36; ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all’ Mark 9:35; ‘Go, sell everything you have, and give to the poor’ Mark 10: 21.

If a subversive is someone who seeks to subvert the way that people live, then this man was a subversive and – I would argue, but we might discuss it – a revolutionary in this sense. Unavoidably and extraordinarily and enduringly so, and perhaps more so at individual than at societally-revolutionary level.

2. Terry’s final suggestion about the failings and limitations of middle class liberalism are well-grounded. What we might discuss, however, is what the alternative is. We know what some of them would look like, and they tend often in historical detail not to be pretty. Terry’s right to criticize some of the approaches at Stormont, in Downing St, in the White House. But even starker condemnation of actual policy could surely be levelled at Moscow or Islamabad.

This is not to defend the actions of West European states, or even the one we currently find ourselves in. I’ve been repeatedly critical (for example) of some of the ways that the UK state responded to revolutionary violence in Belfast: but for that criticism to be serious-minded, it has to be set not against what it might look if a state were perfect, than against what other actually existing states historically have done and were likely to do facing the same threat.

Despite the US criticism of the harshness of the RUC in their treatment of the IRA, for example, we now do know exactly how the US would have responded to a major paramilitary/terrorist organization attacking it – given the exaggerated response to a couple of losers attacking the Boston marathon, one can be clear

about the scale of a response to (say) the Mexican Republican Army and its wider constituency had such been a reality in the late-C20th

Russian responses would have been far nastier still, and my wider point is: where do we go if we avoid middle class liberalism?

**3.** An issue raised today and even more starkly in Terry's latest book is something adumbrated by Hans Kung many years ago in (I think) the phrase that 'there are no chemically pure secular humanisms' i.e. that we all inherit something religious, numinous from our pasts. This is a vital point, and undermines much of the social science nonsense promulgated by those who treat religion as merely 'an ethnic identity marker' or some such.

Any serious religion is not just about theology but also about society, the economy, power, identity – and the legacies of these powerful traditions (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and other) inhere within intellectual life in ways that (to its discredit) so many intellectuals seem not to understand.

So: What do we precisely mean by 'revolutionary'? Where do we go if we reject middle class liberalism? What are the implications of recognizing that secularism is more religiously coloured than most people admit? In all of these questions, we are fortunate to have a public intellectual such as Professor Eagleton bravely addressing the issues, with such wit, eloquence, and erudition.