How does a theologian review Terry Eagleton's *Culture and the Death of God*, and why should a theologian review it? Notwithstanding the theological orientation of its title, it is not written by a theologian and nor is it written for theologians. It is not even, in any strict sense, an academic work, even though it is written by an academic, and a highly-credentialed one at that. It is, in fact, a work of cultural commentary, the published version of the 2012 Firth lectures delivered at the University of Nottingham. The book is written for a readership (obviously including academics) engaged by the current condition of Western culture. And as a piece of cultural commentary, its explicit theological orientation is unusual, albeit not unique. But it is not that in itself which makes the book interesting to a theologian or worthy of a theologian's review. What is likely to claim the theologian’s attention, as was certainly the case with this theologian, is the sheer confidence with which Eagleton, a non-theologian, inserts theological ideas into discourse about contemporary Western culture, and that he inserts them with both sympathy and understanding.

Of course, that confidence is an element of the book at all will be no surprise to anyone familiar with Eagleton’s work. The book is characteristically fast-paced, variously bewildering (or intimidating) in the range of thinkers and ideas engaged, frequently humorous (often very much so, and sometimes caustically so), rhetorically powerful, and unrelentingly uncompromising in the cultural analysis presented. Nor will the theological orientation of the book come as a surprise to Eagleton's readership. This book continues an explicit preoccupation with theological issues and their relevance to the West which has characterised Eagleton’s writings since “9/11,” an event which precipitated the return of religion to the discourse of

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political theory which had otherwise, according to Eagleton, treated religion as a topic which had successfully been dispensed with.\(^2\)

To the extent that the book is a response to the theological failures of modernity’s politics, the theologian who reads this book will not find those failures countered by either a nostalgic or triumphalist appeal to Christian theology. Nor will theologians find any particular appeal to the work of “contemporary” theologians—who, as it happens, are almost totally absent from Eagleton’s argument. Instead, the theology in which Eagleton places such confidence is distinctly classical Christian theology—but with a certain twist. There is, at least prima facie, a certain bleakness to his presentation of Christianity: a frequent return to the crucifixion, a definite interest in the doctrine of sin, and, in the climax of the book, a focus on the place of the tragic in Christian thought.

To see why such an account of Christianity should emerge, it is necessary to stress the book’s concern with politics—a concern which is actually obscured by the absence of the word in the book’s title. Indeed, the book is not confined to the pairing of “God” and “Culture” (a pairing which one might well more readily expect to emerge from the guild of “contemporary” theologians). For Eagleton there is no theology which is not political, just as there is no culture which is not political. Indeed, to some extent, the key point towards which the book moves is that “culture” has emerged as the most recent substitute for “God” and that it is this use of culture (defined in a particular way) which has failed politically. Eagleton’s argument, if not explicitly so then at least implicitly, moves towards calling for a better theological politics to challenge the contemporary social investment in culture which, he believes, has been a failure. Moreover, it was 9/11, and, it must be said, other eruptions of religious fundamentalism, including those within Christianity, which exposed it as a failure. Eagleton’s account of the problem raised for the West by fundamentalism is articulated in this lengthy passage near the end of the book.

Ideologically speaking, the West has unilaterally disarmed at just the point where it has proved most perilous for it to do so. Furnished with a mixture of pragmatism, culturalism, hedonism, relativism and anti-foundationalism, it now confronts a full-blooded metaphysical

antagonist, one brought to birth in part by its own policies, for which absolute truth, coherent identities and solid foundations pose not the faintest problem. It is true that the West continues to believe, formally speaking, in such irrefragable absolutes as freedom, democracy and even (at least in [the United States]) God and the Devil. It is just that these convictions have to survive in a culture of scepticism which gravely debilitates them (p.198).

So how does classical Christian theology, with an orientation to the tragic, help Eagleton to offer this analysis and how does its retrieval, or at least a re-engagement with it, help the West to avoid the “peril” to which it is now exposed? To answer that question, it is necessary to see how Eagleton gets to this point. Let me turn, then, to a summary of the story he tells of the West’s rejection and displacement of God.

Against the view that the Enlightenment was driven by a philosophical critique of Christianity’s theological claims, Eagleton points out that “[r]adical objections to Christianity came to a head in hostility to the role of the church in politics” (p. 6). Accordingly, the Enlightenment, “was a political culture not just a set of philosophical texts” (p. 8). And, for Eagleton, the Enlightenment’s failure was precisely political. Its “universalism and cosmopolitanism … paid too little heed to the fact that local customs, pieties and affections are the places where power must embed itself if it is to flourish” (pp. 32–33). Moreover, Eagleton sees the same problem with the forms of religion (for example, Deism and liberal Protestantism) which accommodated themselves to the rationalizing impulse of the Enlightenment. In reference to Deism, he writes: “Nobody was likely to sacrifice their lives for such a cerebral creed, as they might at a pinch for the Christian Gospel” (p.30).

Eagleton then turns from the Enlightenment’s rationalism to the Idealist attempt to recover spirit, following its repudiation by the Aufklärer and the philosophes. For Idealists, “rationalism is in danger of bleaching the world of inherent value” (p. 47). So the Idealists sought a “natural supernaturalism” (p. 47). A new foundation, but neither God nor reason needed to be found. Subjectivity, in its various guises, becomes that foundation. Yet despite the attempt to be free of rationalism, Idealism retains its systematic impulses (for example, as in Hegel), a fact which has implications for its popular traction, or, more precisely, its failure to gain any popular traction. So Eagleton concludes: “In the end, Idealism proved too cerebral a doctrine. … It may have replaced the Reason of the philosophes with a somewhat less sanitised Spirit, but it found it hard to translate its truth into an everyday idiom” (p. 56).
Romanticism likewise seeks to remedy the Enlightenment’s legacy of spiritual aridity, but without Idealism’s systems. The result is a focus on desire, imagination and the quest for the Infinite. With references to Coleridge, Fichte, Schleiermacher, Novalis and Blake, Eagleton summarises the enormous investment placed in poetry, art and literature: they combined to “re-enchant a world gone stale and sour” (p. 102). Moreover, they “are all precious resources for social renewal” (p. 114), but not unambiguously so. The idea of self-determination, the Romantics’ imaginative resistance to the present, is, writes Eagleton, “politically double-edged. It can mean republicanism, anti-colonialism and popular democracy, to be sure; but it is also the creed of the captains of industry” (p. 116). Romanticism no more offers political cohesion than Idealism.

Noting the failure of Rationalism, Idealism and Romanticism, to generate a politics that could produce a coherent substitute for religion, Eagleton turns his attention to “culture”: “If this had always been the most plausible candidate to inherit the sceptre of religion, it was because it involves foundational values, transcendent truth, authoritative traditions, ritual practices, sensuous symbolism, spiritual inwardness, moral growth, corporate identity and a social mission” (p. 120). Here, Eagleton engages extensively with the work of Matthew Arnold for whom culture would come to the rescue of fragmented and anarchic societies. Yet, religion was not to be ignored in this appeal to culture; instead it was to be recast: “… a degutted, demythologised version of Scripture, shorn of its supernaturalism, may claim the allegiance of the common people and continue to exert a restraining moral influence on them” (p. 135). In this regard, Eagleton argues that Arnold’s strategy reflects what is common to all the movements he has cited:

From the theism or agnosticism of the enlightenment to the mythologising of the Romantics and the demythologising of the Victorians, there is a pressing concern that the common people should believe—whether in the sense of being abandoned to their barbarous superstitions for reason of political prudence, introduced to a more rational religion, subjected to secular mythologies, incorporated into some soi-disant culture state or, as with Arnold, sold a gentrified form of Christianity that has been poeticised away for more convenient mass consumption (p. 135).

The failure fully to be rid of religion would finally be exposed by Nietzsche (with no small contribution from Schopenhauer). Christianity had enjoyed
an “enlightened afterlife” (Eagleton quotes the phrase from Andrew Werneck) and Nietzsche set out to dissemble it. Thus dissembled, it was countered by Nietzsche’s Übermensch. And here lies the death even of culture as a socially binding phenomenon: “Culture as a form of life in common is cast aside so that culture as individual self-realisation may flourish all the more freely” (p. 164). Culture must give way “to a new species of animal, one that will behave like an aesthetic artefact in bestowing the law on himself” (p. 164). According to Eagleton, “[o]ne of Nietzsche’s finest achievements is to demystify cultural idealism” (p. 165).

Yet the “death of God” is also the point at which “culture” reaches, as it were, its own “enlightened afterlife,” namely in the form of postmodernism. On the one hand, it may well reject absolutes and universal foundations. It may well deconstruct the view of the human as a creature with a purpose: the death of God implies the death of the “Man” who had emerged as the rebellious mirror image of ‘God’: “There is not much left to disappear” (p. 192). Or, to put the matter more theologically: “It is not so much that there is no redemption as that there is nothing to be redeemed” (p. 190). Whereas modernity was exercised, even traumatized, by the death of God, it makes no claim upon postmodernism: “There is no God-shaped hole at the centre of its universe” (p. 186). Yet, on the other hand, its rejection of absolutes and universal foundations leads to postmodernism’s own absolute and universal foundation: culture.

[T]hough there is otherness in plenty, there is no Big Other, no grand totality or transcendental signifier. Besides, though other cultures may be incommensurate with one’s own, there is no other to culture itself. Culture goes all the way down, as God himself was once thought to do. It is a shamefaced form of foundationalism (pp. 190–91).

In a culture founded on such an idea of culture, there is little room for certainty and much room to dismiss it as pathological: “In an age in which the concept of certainty smacks of the tyrant and technocrat, a certain agnosticism becomes a virtue” (p. 194). The suspicion towards certainty is a political failure because it fails “to take heed of those who need a degree of certainty about their situation in order to emancipate themselves from it” (p. 194). It is unable “to invest everyday existence with a sense of purpose and value” (p. 199). Hence it is a culture that finds itself unable to counter or resist the certainties that produce fundamentalism. “It is into this spiritual vacuum that religion was able to rush …” (p. 199).
Such is Eagleton’s narrative of modernity’s displacement of God, a displacement which would be followed by God’s return in the form of religious fundamentalism. In many ways, Eagleton’s narrative is hardly original. The resilience of religion, and the failure of the secularization thesis, has been much noted in recent years. The observers have included atheists, such as Jürgen Habermas in his famous essay, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age.* They have also included those who write with some personal appreciation of faith, such as Roger Scruton in his *The Soul of the World.* Then there is the enormous contribution of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age.* Yet there is something about Eagleton’s particular presentation of the narrative which claims a theologian in a way that, if not unique, is certainly uncommon. Here I return to the observation I made at the outset: it is not just the confidence with which Eagleton inserts theological ideas into his narrative, it is also the particular twist he gives to those theological ideas.

Theology emerges in Eagleton’s narrative in two ways. The first is in the way he exposes the critics’ failure to grasp the nature of the idea of God they were rejecting. The second is in the way he points to the theme of the tragic as that which Christianity is able to offer to the “new configuration of faith, culture and politics” (p.208) for which he calls in the book’s final sentence. Arguably, on Eagleton’s reading, the most serious misreading of the Christian tradition executed by its modern critics is precisely around the idea of divine sovereignty. Where modern thinkers transferred ultimate authority from God to humanity, what they handed over to humanity was an exaggerated, non-Christian view of divine authority, thus inflating humanity’s importance in its own eyes. Eagleton pounces on the theological error. “It is theological orthodoxy to hold that the sovereignty of God is not that of a despot, however benevolent, but a power which allows the world to be itself. It is thus a critique of human sovereignty, not a prototype of it” (p. 143). Misreading the theology it was rejecting, modernity did not entirely insulate itself from despots.

This is not unrelated to another area where modernity forfeited an opportunity to engage Christian theology at a greater depth: sin. According to Eagleton, some modern thinkers, “too dewy eyed about humanity”

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(p. 92), dismissed the doctrine of sin as demeaning. In doing so they surrendered the moral realism intrinsic to the Christian doctrine of sin. This doctrine can function as an invitation to take a “soberly realistic account of the tenacity of human egoism, the persistence of violence and self-delusion, the arrogance of power, the compulsive recurrence of conflict [and] the fragility of virtue” (p. 92). For Eagleton, a culture that bypasses sin is a culture intent on “buying [its] cheerfulness on the cheap” (p. 92).

Eagleton is no less severe on those who sought to revise Christianity in order to maintain religion’s role of ensuring social cohesion. Matthew Arnold’s non-metaphysical portrait of the Jesus who, as “mildness and sweet reasonableness,” binds the masses together in the service of culture comes in for a particularly strong theological rejoinder:

Arnold fails to consider the possibility that the relevance of religion to the masses might lie not in the need for political stability, but in the fact that the Jewish Bible presents Yahweh as a champion of the poor and powerless, a non-deity who spurs religious cult, rails against fetishism and idolatry, refuses a title and image and sets his people free from slavery (p. 137).

Ultimately, Eagleton wonders whether the divinity which was displaced by modern culture was little more than a fetish in the first place, a fetish helped along by the church’s distortions of its own faith. Eagleton reminds his readers of the God proclaimed in the Christian gospel:

[T]he God of Christianity is friend, lover and fellow accused, not judge, patriarch and superego. He is counsel for the defence, not for the prosecution. … For Christian faith, the death of God is not a question of his disappearance. On the contrary, it is one of the places where he is most fully present … . [Jesus] is a sign that God is incarnate in human frailty and futility. Only by living this reality to the full, experiencing one’s death to the very end, can there be a path beyond the tragic (p. 160).

Here we see Eagleton explicitly picking up the theme of tragedy. As a theme of art and philosophy, tragedy has been a major means of criticism of modernity and its rationalism, and implicitly also of postmodernism. It reveals reason “as the frailest of faculties” (p. 178) but it also resists nihilism because it “clings[s] to human value while acknowledging its fragility” (p. 178). It is because Christianity equally resists rationalism and nihilism that it has something reparative to contribute to this culture and politics that have been pulled in both directions, and weakened and impoverished by both.
The source of Christianity’s resistance to both rationalism and nihilism is precisely, as noted above, Jesus’ death. Or, as Eagleton puts it at one point: “Christianity, [a] faith which turns on an executed body, places death at the centre of its vision, in the belief that there can be no flourishing without confronting it” (p.143). Or again: “Christian faith turns on the tragic action of confronting affliction and despair in order to redeem them” (p. 171). Jesus’ death “is the place where both God and man undergo a kind of keno-sis or self-humbling, symbolised by the self-dispossession of Christ. Only through this tragic self-emptying can a new humanity hope to emerge. In its solidarity with the outcast and afflicted, the crucifixion is a critique of all hubristic humanism” (p.159).

But the repair which such a faith, focused from its very core on confronting death, might perform is not that of social cohesion or moral uplift. It is a certain kind of politics. This is Eagleton’s point in the book’s final paragraph.

If religious faith were to be released from the burden of furnishing social orders with a set of rationales for their existence, it might be free to rediscover its true purpose as a critique of all such politics. … The New Testament has little or nothing to say of responsible citizenship. It is not a “civilised” document at all. It shows no enthusiasm for social consensus. Since it holds that such values are imminently to pass away, it is not greatly taken with standards of civil excellence or codes of conduct. What it adds to common garden morality is not some supernatural support, but the grossly inconvenient news that our forms of life must undergo radical dissolution if they are to be reborn as just and compassionate communities. The sign of that dissolution is a solidarity with the poor and powerless. It is here that a new configuration of faith, culture and politics might be born (p. 207-208).

So how should a theologian respond to this appropriation of Christianity? Certainly, Eagleton’s view of Christianity is as much a critique of Christianity as it is of modern Western culture. The orientation to the tragic, whilst far from absent from Christian thought, has never been a dominant preoccupation of theologians. Still less has it been a concern of Christian piety (which is more likely to use faith as an escape from the tragic). Yet Eagleton’s alertness to the nexus of Jesus’ death, tragedy and a particular form of social existence is salutary. And, it is salutary not least in pushing a theologian to a theological locus almost completely bypassed by Eagleton, namely ecclesiology. Indeed, it is the reference, only in this final paragraph to “our forms of life” and to “just and compassionate communities,” which raises
the question not asked by Eagleton: Who is responsible for the creation of such forms of life and communities?

There is a sense in which Eagleton fosters the view that there is something “natural” or “inevitable” about religion (although they are not terms he uses). He draws attention to its resilience, suggesting in the Preface that “[r]eligion has proved easily the most tenacious and universal form of popular culture” (p. ix). Its tenacity is due in part to its “capacity … to unite theory and practice, elite and populace, spirit and senses, a capacity culture was never quite able to emulate” (p. ix). Religion fills the God-shaped hole which the modern West has never quite been able fill. On the other hand, this hole was very easily filled by forms of religion based on dogmatism, indifference to justice, and prone to violence. The hole generated by the modern criticisms of religion may well be far more amenable to such forms of religion than to the tragic form of Christianity that Eagleton articulates. So when Eagleton calls for a “new configuration of faith, culture and politics,” any such configuration will require its own permanent resistance to the forces of “religion” which will want to preserve a “religion-shaped hole” as their natural abode. It is not so much that this vision of Christianity, and the forms of life it generates, fills the religion-shaped hole in the modern West, but that it is a counter to religion so defined. A tragic form of Christianity is likely to find itself in constant tension with the resilience of religion. Any new “configuration of faith, culture and politics” will remain a contested configuration.

And, it will be contested as much by the West’s political theorists as by the proponents of religion. It is interesting to compare Eagleton’s approach with that of the political theorist, Mark Lilla in his 2007 book The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West.⁶ Lilla also documents (although more prosaically than Eagleton) the separation of political theory from theology during recent centuries in the West. He also notes the historical novelty of such a separation, so much so that he speaks of the West presently “living in an experiment.”⁷ For Eagleton, the experiment has failed. For Lilla the experiment is worth persisting with, notwithstanding the persistence of other cultures (by which he means Islam) in binding politics to theology. So he writes: “We have wagered that it is wiser to beware the forces unleashed by the Bible’s messianic promise than to try exploiting them for the public good.

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⁷ Lilla, The Stillborn God, 308.
We have chosen to keep our politics unilluminated by the light of revelation. If our experiment is to work, we must rely on our own lucidity.”⁸ This experiment will also involve learning to “welcome moderate transformations in Islamic political theology that might improve political life.”⁹ It is notable that no such welcome is extended to Christian political theology. It is as if that has been dealt with.

Eagleton’s argument suggests that Christianity might yet produce forms of life which “might improve political life.” It seems unlikely, however, that this will be taken up by political theorists on any significant scale. If it is to be taken up at all, it seems to me that it will be by the Christian community itself being intentional about generating “forms of life” and “just and compassionate communities.” This, moreover, would require those same communities to realize that they too are “living in an experiment.” But the experiment is not just a new combination of political theory and theology. It is arguably an experiment in theology itself, specifically an experiment in ecclesiology. It would involve a re-shaping of the Christian theological imagination as well as the pious imagination around the “dispossession of Christ.” To some extent, this also means an ecclesiology which entails a “dispossession of the church.” For only as such might any such new configuration of “faith, culture and politics” register as “improvements in political life.” Of course, it is not that such theologies and ecclesiologies do not already exist. But Eagleton’s work is a prompt to sharpen those theologies and to prompt theologians to attend to the forms of life which their theologies generate and the role of those forms of life in the wider politics of the contemporary West.

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⁸ Lilla, The Stillborn God, 309.
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