Sophia (2019) 58:753–759
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-019-00754-8

Spiritual Values for Those Without Eternal Life

Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, New York: Pantheon, 2019

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Published online: 8 January 2020
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Abstract
Martin Hägglund's *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* offers a naturalistic, this-worldly theology with eloquence and heart. Nevertheless, from a religious studies perspective, there is a fair amount to criticize. This review essay identifies two shortcomings in this book and then develops a typology of religious teachings about eternal life in order to assess places where Hägglund's critique succeeds.

Keywords Martin Hägglund · Atheism · Marxism · Secular faith · Eternal life · Transcendental argument

Plenty of thinkers over the centuries have written 'theologies' in the sense of accounts of the nature of human existence and what this nature means for ethics and for the arrangement of our social and political lives. Even if one is willing to use the label 'theology' for non-theistic accounts, however, there are still not many examples of this genre that do not depend upon the supernatural in some form or another. Martin Hägglund's *This Life* (2019) addresses this need for a naturalist, this-worldly theology with eloquence and heart.

Hägglund is a professor of comparative literature at Yale University, the author of three previous books, including an influential one on Derrida and atheism, and a current Guggenheim fellow. *This Life* repudiates religious yearnings for eternal, endless, or everlasting life and seeks to frame all human values in terms of what Hägglund calls 'secular faith,' that is, the devotion to this-worldly projects that can fail or break down, to persons who will die, to a life that is bounded by time.[1] The book offers an often

[1]For a good argument that Hägglund should not call this-worldly commitments a secular 'faith,' see Pippin and Hägglund (2019).

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poignant celebration of loving commitments to those—and *for* those—who will necessarily come to an end. The first half of the book develops this idea of 'secular faith' in three chapters. The first, 'Faith,' examines C.S. Lewis's troubled attempt to reconcile his belief in another world with his grief over the death of his wife, Joy Davidman, and Hägglund uses that attempt to contrast secular faith that is concerned with fragile things and religious faith that yearns for a state of being in which nothing can be lost. The second chapter, 'Love,' gives a beautiful account of Karl Ove Knausgaard's multi-volume opus, *My Struggle*, in which Knausgaard struggles to 'make his life his own' and to affirm the worth of the everyday concerns that constitute that life, and it compares this secular confession to the way these themes are handled by Augustine, Rousseau, Proust, and Hitler. The third chapter, 'Responsibility,' analyzes how, for Søren Kierkegaard, authentic religious faith leads not only to Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac but also, deliberately, to the sacrifice of one's capacity to care. The overarching theme of the book's first half is that although religious faith involves the ultimately incoherent desire not to be vulnerable, there is an alternative.

Hägglund's focus in Part I on this-worldly life as our only source of value leads in Part II to a robust proposal for emancipatory politics. *This Life* endorses a non-reductive materialist account of human subjects (esp. 194–5, 358), and chapter four introduces the idea that human beings have 'spiritual freedom,' that is, not only the capacity for self-determination (that all animals have), but also the reflexive capacity to call one's norms into question. Human beings can ask: as I generate surplus time beyond what is needed to keep myself alive, what should I spend that time doing? In chapter five, 'The Value of our Finite Time,' Hägglund argues that the real measure of the wealth of a society is not the money but the time it creates, and in chapter six, 'Democratic Socialism,' he shows how this way of assessing social and political choices provides an immanent critique of the failures of capitalist political economy. As a better path, Hägglund recommends a democratic socialism based on the three principles that socially available free time should be the way we measure value, that the means of production should be collectively owned, and that we organize society in terms of Marx's formula, 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' (301–314). Unlike almost all forms of left-wing politics that advocate merely redistributing the profits of wage labor in different ways, Hägglund opposes capitalism as a pathological form of life, and he argues that adopting these principles would be a better realization of the ideals of equality and freedom that cannot be achieved given the self-contradictions he identifies in capitalism and liberalism.

Accessible throughout, *This Life* will appeal to scholars, undergraduate students, and intelligent non-academics. The literary critic James Wood insightfully reviewed the book in *The New Yorker* (May 13, 2019), a rare achievement for a book in philosophy of religion, and he proposed that *This Life* can serve as an atheist manifesto for our time. He is not wrong. Nevertheless, from a religious studies perspective, there is a fair amount to criticize.

The first problem is that the book suffers from a lack of depth regarding religious philosophies. For one example, Hägglund argues that one cannot conceive of a God who is both eternally changeless and who cares about the world (e.g., 167). This sounds right to me, but this critique of theism has been explored in detail for at least a century by those who call themselves 'process theists' and 'open theists' who then go on to propose a conception of God that is in at least some respects not eternal. Hägglund does

not seem to have heard of these movements, and he does not engage their temporal theologies. For another example, feminist philosophers of religion like Grace Jantzen have also critiqued the religious desire for immortality, arguing, like Hägglund, that it is precisely the time-bounded nature of our lives that gives them urgency and significance. Jantzen wanted to shift the focus from human mortality (the fact that human beings necessarily die) to human natality (the fact that they are necessarily born into relationship). But Jantzen critiques not only the practice of religious people but also the philosophers of religion who have tended to assume a disembodied subject, 'thrown' into the world without any apparent race, gender, or class. Hägglund does not include this reflexive focus on academia. For a third example, Hägglund's notion of 'a secular faith' is also a well-worked soil. Especially in the USA, there has been a reflection on the naturalist but nevertheless religious-like faith that is required for one to make a commitment to democracy, to science, or to values in a disenchanted world. A quintessential example is John Dewey's *A Common Faith* (1934) which seeks to articulate the implicit trust that people can work collaboratively and creatively to make our social lives better, a trust that does not involve an appeal to the supernatural. (The theme of naturalist faith is prominent in the journal *American Journal for Philosophy and Theology*.) Schubert Ogden has also argued that attention to our actions in the world will reveal an original confidence or trust in the final worth of those actions. This 'existential faith' (1963: 43), Ogden says, is presupposed in all human decision-making. Like Hägglund, Ogden makes a transcendental argument that without this faith, one would never act at all. The two accounts differ, however, in that Ogden not only offers a philosophical anthropology that includes this indispensable feature but also asks the metaphysical question concerning whatever it is about reality that makes our confidence in the worth of our actions not illusory. If everything will eventually end, what makes our choices significant? Hägglund does not pursue this question. In all three of these ways, Hägglund is a fellow traveler to philosophical movements, apparently without knowing it, and this can give the writing a sense of ingenuousness.

A second and more serious problem is Hägglund's narrow view of religion. He defines 'religious faith' as the escapist pursuit of eternal life, but not all religions seek salvation. Not all operate with a two-level metaphysics in which the aim is to get to another world. Not all recommend detachment, *apatheia*, or contemplation as the highest state. In fact, the prototypical activities considered religious are probably the making of offerings, sacrifices, and prayers to superhuman beings in order to obtain good weather, revenge, an easy childbirth, protection on a journey, to overcome a sickness, and so on, practices not mentioned in this book. When people engage in these activities, they are not seeking to escape this world. Similarly, Daoist dietary regimes designed to balance cosmic energies in the body and Confucian rituals designed to improve the harmony in the family are also this-worldly. These religious practices do not frame the body or the family as 'a lack, an illusion, or a fallen state of being' (6). Hägglund's tendentious assumption that all religions seek eternity leads to the view that religious forms of faith, as he puts it, 'disown our spiritual freedom' (356), which is to say that he is defining religion as authoritarian and unreflective. It is not accidental that Hägglund most often illustrates the thesis that religions have a single-minded focus on escaping the world with examples from Christianity and Buddhism, two traditions that made monastic retreat central, rather than from, say, examples from Islamic or Jewish thinkers as they argued for God's law regarding just war or regarding the treatment of

debts. Assuming that religion by definition disowns the desire for freedom leads Hägglund to make clumsy generalizations like 'Buddhist metaphysics eliminates justice' (210), a statement that would befuddle Thích Nhất Hạnh and the wide variety of other engaged Buddhists. Moreover, this-worldly commitments like those in this paragraph are not found only in untutored 'popular religion' and absent among religious elites and their canonical teachings. For instance, when in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* Nāgārjuna critiques traditional Buddhist *abhidharma* and argues instead that that there is no samsara distinct from nirvana, no nirvana distinct from samsara, and not even a subtle difference can be found between them (*MK* XXV, 20; Garfield 1995: 75), he is a Buddhist philosopher rejecting the Buddhist rejection of this-worldly life. The fact that this dispute about the highest good occurs within a single tradition undermines any monolithic view like Hägglund's. In short, *This Life* operates with a procrustean definition of 'religion.'

Hägglund might grant that these examples of religious people watching over children, harvests, journeys, and the weather, desiring to help loved ones and to harm enemies, caring about wars and debts, are all investments in finite, fallible, this-worldly projects, but he might respond that precisely for this reason these are not really examples of the people's *religious* commitments. As Hägglund showed in his analysis of C. S. Lewis's love for Joy Davidman, no religious person lives without coming to care for this-worldly realities, and so a secular faith will necessarily and therefore unsurprisingly be found to permeate religious ways of life. Since my alleged counter-examples are not devotion to 'an eternal being or an eternity beyond being' (28), they would not count, on Hägglund's definition, as examples of religious faith. But such a response would not be persuasive. To be sure, scholars can stipulate the definition of 'religion' that they prefer. But if on Hägglund's definition, prayers to child-bestowing bodhisattvas, sacrifices to war-winning gods, and the manipulation of life-giving cosmic energies are secular and not religious commitments, then his definition is out of line with the paradigmatic examples of the category. The better approach, I would argue, is to define religion more broadly to include not just eternal realities but all superhuman powers, even when they inhabit this world. Such a definition also has the advantage of helping us to read religious traditions not solely as soteriologies, but as sites of teaching about coping with pain in all its forms.

Hägglund treats religion as escapist. But if escapism does not map onto religion as such, then when does it apply?

To address this question, we can use the language of 'eternal life' to distinguish five kinds of religious teachings. The first kind (as suggested above) promises this-worldly benefits like miracle cures and unexpected wealth but does not make any claims about eternal life. Hägglund's critique does not touch such religions, and his definition hides the fact that they exist.

A second kind of religious teaching treats 'eternal life' in a figurative sense. Rejecting the literal meaning, these religious thinkers use 'eternity' or 'the infinite' as a means of attending to a precious or sacred or aporetic aspect of the finite. One sees this infinity in the palm of William Blake's hand and his 'eternity in an hour.' Another set of examples is found in those liberal theologians who, like Rudolf Bultmann, sought to demythologize religious stories away from 'objectifying' interpretations that treat the afterlife as if it were a place, and replace them with an 'existentialist' interpretation that treats those stories as re-presentations of the human condition (e.g., Bultmann 1962).

Agata Bielik-Robson identifies another set of examples in that stream of thinkers, especially from Jewish sources, who attempt after the death of God to overcome the ontotheological premise that 'finitude is privation' and to find the transcendent within the immanent, a position she calls 'religion of the finite life' (2019: xiii). Another set comes from those previously mentioned Buddhists who hold that there is no nirvana distinct from samsara, which is to say that the 'blowing out' that constitutes nirvana refers to the flames of craving rather than the extinction of one's existence as an individual subject. Hägglund does note that some Buddhists treat nirvana as 'a way of being in the here and now, rather than an otherworldly state of being' (51), and this is exactly right. But then he assimilates this mindful or awakened this-worldly living as just another a release from time and finitude (51–2), misreading a metaphor as if it were literal. These language-bending poets and religious thinkers are actually allies to Hägglund's desire to prioritize this life, though his definition of religion seems to keep him from appreciating what they are saying.

A third kind of religious teachings uses 'eternal life' to refer to reincarnation. Bernard Williams (1973: ch. 6) famously argues that the appeal of immortality in the sense of serial lives faces a dilemma: either immortals remember their past lives and they would eventually grow bored, or they do not remember their past lives and it is groundless to say that the serial lives are lived by the same person. Whether or not Williams' still-debated arguments succeed, Hägglund largely overlooks this sense of 'eternal life.' This is a shame. Being reborn repeatedly into this world, though supernatural, would still involve the moral choices, the risked hopes, and the suffering that life without reincarnation entails, and this means that reincarnated beings, though immortal, could share Hägglund's interest in increasing spiritual freedom and in revolutionizing the economy and political institutions to achieve that. For this reason, religious communities that teach this version of everlasting life could provide a third religious ally for Hägglund.

Finally, we get to the real target of Hägglund's criticism, religious teachings that use 'eternal life' to refer to some kind of other-worldly existence. Of course, religious communities have imagined that existence in diverse ways. Hägglund should make at least the following distinction. In one kind of eternal life (fourth in my typology), the highest good is imagined as a static union or communion with ultimate reality—and no other activity. Thomas Aquinas's account of the beatific vision sounds like this, as does Advaita Vedanta accounts of the soul's realization of non-duality with Brahman, and interpretations of nirvana that do treat it as the end of the individual ego. In the other kind (my number five), the individual continues to have a dynamic existence, either in a resurrected and perfected body or in some kind of sublime or spiritual body, but distinct from others and from the ultimate reality (if any), engaging in activities and interacting with others over time. Thus there are Christians for whom an eternal life in heaven, with God and loved ones, and with no sickness, tears, or death, is precisely what they pray for. There are Muslims who desire eternal life with Allah, in Jannah, after the Day of Judgment. There are Mahayana Buddhists who hope that their good deeds or their devotion to Amitābha will lead to rebirth in the Pure Land. In several places in history, there have been religions whose members believe that at least some will be resurrected to bodies that will never die. In addition to the legend of the Fountain of Youth or the elixir in Karel Čapek's *The Makropulos Case*, there have been religious communities sharing stories of those who were able to eat the Peaches of Immortality that grow at the

palace of the Jade Emperor or the fruit of the tree of life that grows in the Garden of Eden. For many, the promised land, a new heaven and a new earth, or a messianic age is a hope that includes the elimination of death. Though 'eternal life' has meant different things to different communities, to overcome death is still a widespread religious desire. My grandfather was therefore typical, I think, when in his 80s he said that he looked forward to being reunited after death with my grandmother, to whom he had been in love and married for 60 years.

Let us call the static and the dynamic kinds of endless otherworldly existence 'timeless repose' and 'everlasting fellowship.'[2] Although Hägglund does not disentangle these as two kinds as I have, he does say that an endless life would be just as meaningless as a timeless one (43), and he gives (different) arguments that can be applied to them. Against the first, he argues that timeless repose is not an action that would be maintained or sustained by the person, and so it is not clear in what sense this kind of life would be intelligible as *mine* (4–5; cf. 86–7, 325). More sharply, 'visions of eternal peace are indistinguishable from eternal indifference' (328). Against the second, he argues that everlasting fellowship, precisely because it has no end, removes the reasons to do something now as opposed to later, and so immortal beings would lose their reason ever to act (5). In both cases, Hägglund is arguing that there is a confusion in the very idea of eternal life. Like soundless music, it is not the kind of thing that one can coherently desire.

To be sure, philosophers, theologians, and ethicists will want to weigh these arguments, and they are not what one might call tightly argued. Hägglund's negative approach to eternal life nevertheless deserves attention for two reasons.

First, his approach is unusual in that it is not theoretical but practical. That is, he argues not that there is insifficient evidence to make belief in another world warranted, but instead that immortality in another world is a not a good thing to desire. As he puts it, 'Religious faith is not a system of belief that I am trying to *disprove*, in the sense of demonstrating the non-existence of eternity. What I am calling into question is the idea that eternity is *desirable*' (28). The central accusation is that a being who became invulnerable would also lose the capacity to care. Identifying one's highest good in another world both misunderstands the real source of value in our lives and (as Hägglund shows with Augustine, Kierkegaard, and C. S. Lewis) drains the value from one's this-worldly attachments. I have argued that Hägglund's assumption that religious people all yearn for eternal life does not apply to all religions, but it still applies to plenty. In an era of growing neoliberal nightmares and apocalyptic climate change, for religious people to focus on this world fully is only going to seem more and more necessary.

Second, Hägglund's negative approach to eternal life is ultimately in service of the positive aim of the book, namely, to 'recall us to finitude' (167, cf. 365). The number of those without religious faith is growing, but they are regularly characterized as suffering both a normative and an existential deficit: they lack both the moral foundation required to hold society together and the ability to find meaning in their lives (14). Hägglund's positive message is that 'our finitude is not a restriction' (332). On the one

[2] Hägglund refers to the first kind of eternal life as 'timeless repose' (28). Kevin Hector (2020) also marks the distinction I am making, categorizing the two kinds as, respectively, 'a mystical strand' and 'an abundant life strand' of eternal life.

hand, this life is sufficient; in fact, it must be sufficient, because the alternative is incoherent. On the other hand, we should not want another world. The positive message of the book is that fragility, vulnerability, failure, loss, and ultimately death are sources of pain, but they are also the necessary conditions for the possibility of a life of significance.

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