

After religion: the commitment and love of *This Life*

Inscriptions

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Correspondence: Torgeir Fjeld, e:
inscriptions@tankebanen.no.

Received: 23 November 2020.

Accepted: 16 December 2020.

Published: 28 January 2021.

How to cite: Fjeld, Torgeir. “Book review.” *Inscriptions* 4, no. 1 (January 2021): 95.

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Book Review

Hägglund, Martin (2019), *This Life: secular faith and spiritual freedom*, Anchor Books: New York.

Literary theorist-cum-philosopher Martin Hägglund has entered onto the world stage with bravura. After dabbling in obscure analyses of brick-thick novels by Marcel Proust and convoluted textual decodings in the vein of Jacques Derrida, the Swedish critic has broken ranks with his small-town background and entered the literary and philosophical commons with a treatise on *This Life*. From the outset, Hägglund’s thesis is simple: belief in an eternity, in an afterlife, cannot rhyme with spiritual freedom, since such a belief answers beforehand the question that in this life should be our primary concern; it suspends the decidability of our commitments. To Hägglund, any object of secular faith is crucially dependent on practice: those things (institutions, projects, relationships) to which we are faithful do not exist independently of our commitments: on the contrary, their existence is sustained through our devotion.

First and foremost, *This Life* is a *philosophical* treatise, an attempt to bring together complex literary readings with forays into philosophy, theology and politics. Hägglund is trained as a literary theorist (from Cornell), and it is his creative and deeply insightful engagements with a wide variety of complex and timely literary texts that is the main asset of this book. It is also clear that Hägglund’s ambitions have a further reach in *This Life*, evident not only in the way he adds texts beyond the traditional canon of literature, such as Augustine, Martin Luther King, and Adam Smith, but also from his attempt to synthesise literary textual approaches with philosophical thought (Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche) and political perspectives

(Adam Smith, Karl Marx, David Ricardo).

It is a vast canvas. However, with Hägglund’s solid competence and friendly, kind pen, it is an enlightening and at times *fun* read. Reviews have been overwhelmingly positive¹, Hägglund has been interviewed by *Vogue* and on *MSNBC*, becoming a bit of a philosophical celebrity, and most recently becoming the first Scandinavian winner of the highly prestigious René Wellek Prize, all on the back of *This Life*.

What makes Hägglund’s argument an asset is that, unlike the “four horsemen of the New Atheism,” Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, Hägglund is careful not to directly falsify or even ridicule the theist. If there is an attempt at refutation here, it is convoluted and oblique; instead, Hägglund makes a *positive* case for what he tentatively refers to as *secularism*. However, his secularism is something else and different from what we usually signify by this term: his is not merely a state that allows its subjects to practice their religions in whatsoever way they may please; his path is distinctly *non-religious*. And still, his arguments are more concerned with matters of ideas and metaphysics, than with organisations and their collective, unintended consequences, as was the case in the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Take, for instance, Hägglund’s approach to responsibility, care, or love. In these cases, it is our commitment to what he calls *secular* life that enables us to experience the kind of fragility necessary to truly be responsible, to care, or love. With secular faith the purposes of our lives “depend on our commitments,” and these commitments can only be sustained within a *limited*, i.e. finite, life-world. It is in the nature of a commitment, in Hägglund’s view, that it can be lost. To dedicate ourselves to an unmissable object, value or being, to something that exists outside any time or space cannot truly constitute a commitment, since it cannot be lost; there is nothing at stake.

Thus, when our commitment only superficially attaches to a finite value, person, or project, while in

¹See, e.g., the review by Martin Rayburn in the journal *parrhesia*, showing the intricate construction of Hägglund’s treatise: <https://www.parrhesiajournal.org/>.

actuality our dedication is directed to a domain that is infinite and eternal, we are departing from Immanuel Kant's dictum, the golden rule, that we should not treat others as means to an end, but as ends in themselves. In a discussion of C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* Häggglund notes that what Lewis described in the book was a desire to be with his wife, who had died, so that their relation would continue to be characterised by vulnerability and an openness to transformation by the other. In contrast, with Christian theology one is "not supposed to love mortal beings as ends in themselves, but merely only as means toward the love of God."² To Häggglund, the Christian imperative to love your neighbour does *not* mean that we should love our neighbours for their own sake, but rather that "you should *neither* love yourself *nor* your neighbour in their own right," since neither you nor your neighbour "have any value in yourselves, but merely by belonging to the eternity of God" (79). However, to be committed to something that *cannot* be lost isn't really a commitment at all, since the "motivation to undertake any form of project—to sustain a commitment, to pursue a form of action—requires that the project be precarious: that it not be given as a fact, but must be upheld by conviction and fidelity" (44).

Crucially, Lewis's fidelity to his wife was grounded in the reality that she might be lost to him, and that he would suffer intolerable pain as a consequence. A prospective eternal life promises to cancel or annul such pain by offering instead a life that cannot be lost. To Häggglund this is the very definition of religion: "religious [is] *any idea of being absolved from the pain of loss*;" however, "such absolution is not only impossible to attain but also not a goal worthy of our striving, since it would remove the care that animates our lives" (47). In short, the ideal of eternal life not only is a false hope, it also reduces our ability to care for and love people and projects in *this life*; it obstructs our ability to be *responsible*. Referring to Nietzsche, Häggglund affirms that it is pernicious to endorse the ideal of eternal life or being, "since it leads to a devaluation of the commitment to temporal, finite life" (48).³

Similarly, Häggglund draws on Augustine to make the point that love can only exist in so far as it is connected to *uncertainty*: "The moment of uncertainty [in love] cannot be eliminated, since 'out of your heart you believe in a heart that is not yours'" (72). While ultimately rejecting *secular faith*, Augustine, correctly in Häggglund's view, dissected it as a state where we are fundamentally *dependent on others* to live on and to flourish: "you have to keep faith in your friends, your partner, or your children" (73). And it is this very dependency that renders the secular believer vulnerable; when we rely on something which by its very constitution is beyond our control (unlike, say, faith in an eternal state or being) we depend on something that can be lost to us, and the experience of such a loss renders us *concerned*: we are, as Häggglund puts it, "bound to care" (41).

When we claim that Häggglund's project is better described as *anti-religious* than anti- or *a-theistic* it is because the latter terms rely on theism, a *deus*, or diving being, as their counterpart: Häggglund's opponent is both more complex and more varied. It has been noted that self-proclaimed atheists tend to overlook the wide variety of God-concepts, and that in most cases atheists limit themselves to argue against the possible existence of an "eternal, non-physical, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent (i.e., morally perfect) creator-God."⁴ However, Häggglund's target is something better articulated as *the promise of salvation and eternity* held out by such theists, and by their non-theistic complements. Again, while Häggglund does not attempt to provide a comprehensive critique of non-theistic religion, he specifically targets a version of Buddhism, and its attendant concept of nirvana. To Häggglund, "the Buddhist notion of nirvana—whether conceived as an immanent tranquillity of being in the world or as a transcendent peace beyond life—is a clear and consistent version of the religious idea of eternity" (52). The problem with Häggglund's furtive analysis here is that it becomes *too* quick and simple. His equation of a certain concept in some discourse on Buddhism with the kind of metaphysical longing we find in Augustine rests on a disregard of a specifically Buddhist understanding of subjectivity (*who* is it that experiences "timelessness", what happens to the "I" or ego that goes beyond the parameters of *drive*, etc.), and of the absence of anything equivalent to Christian *salvation* in Buddhist thought. Consequently, we are given to wonder if equating "nirvana" with *paradise* holds up, and whether it brings Häggglund's cause any further.

Ultimately, Häggglund's book is greatly indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, and his life-affirmative philosophy. Häggglund is not alone in picking up the pieces from Nietzsche's shattered legacy; however, he is able to combine a sharp atheism, or even anti-theism, with a rigorous and enlightening brand of social analysis, which renders his kind of anti-religion distinctly and refreshingly different from the "four horsemen of New Atheism." For Häggglund a commitment, *any* commitment, be it personal, social or political, is *contingent on* what he calls secular faith, since it is only when we fully acknowledge the fragility of a project that we can truly strive for it, to make it succeed and live on, even beyond our own mortality.

²Martin Häggglund, *This Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 2019), 42. All page references to the book will henceforth be placed in parentheses in the text.

³See Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁴Paul Draper, "Atheism and Agnosticism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford University, Fall 2017), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/atheism-agnosticism/>; cf. Jeanine Diller, "Global and Local Atheisms", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 79, no. 1 (2016): 7–18, doi:10.1007/s11153-015-9550-1.

This is what makes Häggglund's approach to anti-religiosity so compelling: while some "New Atheists" made critique of religion a cornerstone to an elaborate construction of scientism, Häggglund makes no effort to defend science as a replacement to religion. It isn't in some objective view of the world, some more truthful rendition of our condition, that we will find secular redemption; rather, we can only begin to uncover our own, personal destiny when we make our lives our own through the process of appropriation which we, after Martin Heidegger, himself a student of Nietzsche, can call en-owning, or, *Ereignis*. In this there is a critique of science, in the sense that, for Heidegger, the epoch of technicity, our epoch, is the era when we no longer make and use science and technology to master our world, but where technology begins to master and use us. It is against this terrifying prospect of *Gestell*, the metaphysics of scientism, that Heidegger holds out the possibility of again taking charge of our lives, our knowledge, and, ultimately, ourselves.

This is the kind of liberation, at once personal and social, that Martin Häggglund offers as the end of secular faith.

*Torgeir Fjeld*⁵

⁵Ereignis Center for Philosophy and the Arts.

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scholarship,
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