



ISSN 1941-8450

*Journal of  
Religion & Society*  
Supplement Series

---

**The Kripke Center**

**Supplement 25 (2024)**

---

## Religion in the Public Square

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins

### 11. Being Mortal

#### Martin Hägglund's *This Life* without the Antinomies, a Review Essay

Theodore Grey Dedon, Creighton University

Tom Jeannot, Gonzaga University

Patrick Murray, Creighton University

Jeanne Schuler, Creighton University

#### Introducing and Assessing Martin Hägglund's Immanent Critique

Theodore Grey Dedon

Martin Hägglund, in his reply to critics over his 2019 book, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*,<sup>1</sup> harkens back to the New Atheism movement of the first decade of the

---

<sup>1</sup> This review essay has its origin in a reading group organized by Patrick Murray and sponsored by the John C. Kenefick Faculty Chair in the Humanities at Creighton University, which he holds. Three members of the reading group, Theodore Dedon, Patrick Murray, and Jeanne Schuler, were joined by Tom Jeannot, who was already

millennium. The critiques of religion the new atheists had, he said, had been associated with the dismissal of religious beliefs as superstitious—debunked by scientific knowledge, liberal democracy, and an added posture opposed to religion itself. Suggesting this critique, or posture, is older than one may think, Häggglund (2021) notes that it “holds little appeal for the progressive left.” The new atheist’s critique of religion wrongly “treats beliefs in isolation from their social conditions and does not link the persistence of religion to our alienated forms of life under capitalism.” Häggglund enters this discourse with a twofold swipe at the social order, challenging progressives to renew their understanding of religion and its relationship to the dominant economic regime of the planet. *This Life*, then, offers a vision, leaning on Karl Marx and others, “to open a new political horizon” in an effort to “grasp his vision of emancipation, which transforms the religious hope for another world in light of a secular understanding of ourselves as essentially finite beings” (2021). This vision, he hopes, will do away with capitalism and result in religion withering away.

What follows are four interrelated papers, built off this initial introduction of Martin Häggglund’s immanent critique of capitalism and religion. The first, written by Patrick Murray, assesses Häggglund’s immanent critique of capitalism and challenges the understanding of Moishe Postone used throughout the text. The second, written by Jeanne Schuler, challenges the bifurcated sense of the finite and infinite, returning to the arguments of Hegel as a base for such a challenge. The third, written by Tom Jeannot, articulates that Häggglund’s understanding of religion is faulty, imprisoning religious thought in a disjunctive, not dialectical framework. The final essay, written by Theodore Dedon, argues that while Häggglund has understood the classic distinction between things religious and things secular correctly, his assessment of religious thought would be alien to those he assesses. The four essays, taken in total, appreciate Häggglund’s text in different ways. His goals are admirable, but the four essays serve as a reminder to steer away from dogmatic thinking, which closes down any potential for finding common ground. It is the hope of these authors that Häggglund is challenged to immanently critique religion and capitalism in a more fruitful way.

Häggglund’s 2019 text makes two major and interconnected arguments. First, religion reduces to the realm of eternity. It is not just the belief in eternity, but it is also the desire for eternal life in the first place that Häggglund supposes presents a major challenge to progressive thought. Second, the dominant economic regime on the planet—capitalism upheld through neoliberal democracy—traps humans in unemancipated conditions using belief in eternal life to relegate humans to their present essentially unfree conditions under capitalism. To escape these conditions, progressives can and indeed ought to revive a reverence for finitude—what humans essentially are—contra any reverence for eternity, and establish democratic socialism as the paradigm that can indeed both protect and promote human finitude under the common good. These arguments, contra the new atheists of earlier decades, are more robust, challenging, and interesting—even if flawed by way of exclusivism. It is Häggglund’s desire for this program to animate progressive thought, religious or secular.

---

interested in Häggglund’s *This Life*. The purpose of these responses is to further the discourse, critical or otherwise, on this already impactful book.

The primary assumption Hägglund operates with regarding his critique of religion is that a desire for eternal life undermines our finitude. An eternal life, he says, is “not only unattainable but also undesirable,” as it eliminates the care and passion that animates a human life (2019, 4). Eternal life, in the sense religious believers desire, would render any finite life meaningless, as actions have no purpose beyond their reflection in eternity. The very question of meaning in life itself, then, is sensible only *if* one understands themselves to be mortal, finite, and alive only in this life and in this world. “The sense of my own irreplaceable life,” he says, “is inseparable from my sense that it will end.” This sense of finitude, or as he says, “the sense of the ultimate fragility of everything we care about,” is at the heart of his great distinction in the text between the religious and secular (2019, 5). This distinction permeates his entire political, economic, and philosophical program. That very sense—sensing the ultimate fragility and finitude of all we care for and are—is what constitutes for Hägglund *secular faith*.

Hägglund’s treatment of religion maintains the classic western distinction between the temporal (finite/historical/secular) and spiritual (infinite/eternal/religious) orders. As finite beings, being *in time*, we are conscious of our death and have, in a real way, an omnipresent zero-sum threat as to what we can actually do with our finite time in our mortal lives. Time, in other words, is the real meaning-maker—not our sense or taste for the eternal or infinite. One can spend time with one’s daughters, or one can work on an essay. One can read Dante’s *De Monarchia*, or one can watch Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Mirror*. One cannot, at least not with full presence, do both at the same time. At every point, we as finite persons negotiate this zero-sum challenge and, to the best of our ability, attempt to live out a meaningful life, despite being essentially unfree under capitalism. Eternity, or even the belief in something like it, erodes that meaning, obliterating its fragility and fleetingness—things which make it more potent and important for human beings.

Hägglund, utilizing Marx, argues that social freedom ought to be our highest good and that religious projections will “wither away under emancipated conditions” (2021). Marx, however, does not make this argument precisely, and that is where Hägglund enters, suggesting that Marx’s emancipatory critique of religious faith works with G.W.F. Hegel’s secular notion of the divine. Marx, in this view, did not follow any notion that freedom is a freedom *from* the constraints of social and material life. Rather, Hägglund says, “leading a free life is being free *to* engage, transform, and recognize ourselves in the social world of which we are a part, as well as in our material interchange with nature that is necessary to sustain our lives.” To be free, then, requires that we are socially available *in time*—free time—in *this life*. This dynamic *overcomes* the antagonism Marx laid out between humans and nature and between humans themselves, providing “the solution to the riddle of history” (2021). To achieve this, however, there needs to be a reorientation towards things of *this life* in an effort to recalibrate the importance of finitude, mortality, and fragility.

The way Hägglund uses the classic spiritual/temporal distinction native to so much of Christian theology is refreshingly accurate. So often, atheists or antireligious writers use the word “secular” to mean a lack of religion, but Hägglund productively uses the more historical understanding of the term. In his discussion of the difference between secular and religious faith, he explains that his use of the term “secular” explicitly means “worldly” and “temporal.” *Secular* faith is the form of faith that “we all sustain in caring for someone or something that

is vulnerable to loss” (2019, 5). Hägglund, when discussing the difference between religious and secular faith, explains his commitments well. He states clearly that his goal is not to *disprove* the existence of eternity but instead to call into question the idea itself as desirable at all. Eternity’s desirability, he says, is a “much more pervasive” assumption than any certainty regarding its existence (2019, 28). Theological attempts to prove the existence of God, he argues, are outdated, yet the assumption of eternity’s existence persists on the grounds that it is indispensable and therefore desirable for faith in the first place. To maintain what we love, or even love at all, “there is no reason,” he says, “to have faith in eternity unless one believes that it offers a meaningful consolation for, alternative to, or escape from the loss of what we love” (2019, 28). People believing that eternity does precisely *that* is what makes it desirable, but it does not really. Against believing in eternity as desirable, his point is to show that eternity, and more specifically eternal life, would not fulfill our desire to live on. Only in the commitments arising out of a secular faith can we, as humans, find a truer and deeper commitment to living on, he says. That will come in the form of building up a community and a system that governs that community more in line with humanity’s ultimate concerns. To him, that equals democratic socialism animated by secular faith resulting in humanity’s highest social good: freedom.

The difference between secular and religious faith, Hägglund maintains, can be found in faith’s object. To understand that object, Hägglund turns to Paul Tillich, who provides a description most illuminating of this difference. Tillich, in *Dynamics of Faith*, maintains that faith’s object is in one’s “ultimate concern” (2009, 71–73). One has faith in a concern most ultimate when one is devoted to something or someone, Hägglund says, “as an end in itself, being willing—if the situation so requires—to sacrifice other interests and passions for the sake of what you believe in or hold to be most valuable” (2019, 77). For the religious believer, this is God. And in Hägglund’s frame, both the religious and secular person can have faith most ultimate by this definition. The difference is that, for Hägglund, the ultimate concern of the religious state “would eliminate all concern” (2019, 77). Faith is, in Tillich’s language, about overcoming one’s separation from God and therefore finding oneself reunited with God most ultimate (Tillich 2009, 120).<sup>2</sup> Hägglund thus understands Tillich to be concerned with attaining a “complete security,” where one no longer relies on the uncertainty faith can have attached to it and can therefore let go of all concern. Seeing a similarity in Augustine of Hippo, Hägglund says the same logic follows that faith is provisional and will be replaced, later, in things more certain in the presence of (or reunion with, in Tillich’s language) God. Religious and secular faith have “two different motivational structures” (2019, 77). If one is motivated by religious faith, the goal is to rest in peace with God; if one is motivated by secular faith, contra that, “being concerned is part of what [one] strive[s] for” (2019, 77).

Indeed, Hägglund has accurately assessed what faith does *ultimately* for the religious believer—at least in a sense native to Tillich or even Augustine. But what he has not understood, or at least does not sufficiently account for, is how that *ultimate* concern relates to

---

<sup>2</sup> Hägglund makes the point in note 12 (2019, 397) that Tillich repeatedly makes statements similar to “the human heart seeks the infinite because that is where the finite wants to rest. In the infinite it sees its own fulfillment” (2009, 15). This assertion, Hägglund says, shows that ultimately it is about rest in the infinite to overcome our finitude.

things less so. And this, it seems, is precisely what Häggglund misunderstands about the relationship of the two orders, religious and secular or spiritual and temporal, made normative in so many traditions generally and Christianity specifically. Having that peace, that sense of rest in God, reunion with God, or anything else of the sort is not something *apart* from the world; it is something *in* the world making claims *on* the world *in this life*. When one's ultimate concern is God and one's life is concerned with the perception that God desires reunion with human beings through their lives lived on earth, one is not consigned to a quiet life of resignation. Though Häggglund indeed knows this is how many—perhaps most—of the religious believers he assesses understand this relationship, he is still committed to the logic that their concern is best understood as secular and not religious because they concern themselves with the world. Religious faith, where it seeks to transform the world—as it so often does—is *reduced* to secular faith in this framework.

Many of Häggglund's critics, at least the ones he responds to in 2021, have assessed his use of the distinction between religious and secular as antagonizing and nearly absolute. James Chappel, for example, represented Häggglund's work as having this recent counterproductive understanding of the 'secular' (i.e. a lack of religion or religious belief) at its core. Chappel's review (2019) states that Häggglund sees first a need "to convince the world's population to abandon religion, and then to convince them that secularism entails democratic socialism." As religion would wither away under emancipated conditions, according to Häggglund following Marx, the order may be reversed. Chappel even goes on to suggest that for Häggglund love for the world is impossible, or at least in an antagonistic binary with love of the eternal creator. That is not really Häggglund's point, even if it is one shared often by antireligious socialists or atheists. To Häggglund (2021), answering his critics, this sense of an absolute antagonism between the religious and secular is indeed a political (and perhaps philosophical) "dead end." These are, according to him, misconstrued understandings of his argument.

Having admitted that Häggglund accurately distinguishes between the spiritual and temporal orders, native to Christian theology, it is worth pointing out what his problem essentially is. It is not in his understanding of secular faith and its relationship to the *world*, nor is it in the proposal that secular faith can ground any progressive commitment to democratic socialism or a just world order. In relegating secular faith to something fundamentally apart from religious faith, Häggglund reproduces the same mistake of many new atheists—precisely the kind of thinker he is trying to distinguish himself from. To him, his critics understand his argument to be an external critique of religion. Indeed, looking at Häggglund's 2019 text, this is not an unreasonable assumption—it is precisely how I understood him until I read his 2021 response. In his book, Häggglund makes an *immanent critique* of capitalism and neoliberal democracy, yet in his response to his critics, he suggests he was doing that for religion all along. In his 2019 text, the phrase "immanent critique" is used 18 times. None of these are references to religion, religious belief, or eternity as such. They are all references to capitalism and/or neoliberal democracy. In his 2021 response to his critics, he uses the phrase 'immanent critique' referring to religion almost two dozen times. This shift in thinking, while it may seem negligible, is precisely where he ran into trouble with his critics.

Häggglund's understanding of an immanent critique is clear in his book. "An immanent critique," he says, "does not criticize an institution or ideology in the name of an ideal that is imposed from the outside." Rather, it "locates a *contradiction* between the avowed ideals of an

institution or ideology and the actual practical form it legislates for itself” (2019, 225). This is indeed a fair assessment and, given his response to his critics regarding the problem of religion, seems partially present in his text. But so much of the text, rather than drawing out this contradiction, asserts that religion really keeps us from a life of meaning and/or care for fragility and mortality, while upholding capitalism. The added emphasis on how he means to immanently critique religion, against those critics who saw his distinction between religious and secular as absolute, helps clarify Hägglund’s position immensely. Whether or not it is true or he is right are entirely different questions.

Hägglund’s understanding of religion has been increasingly sensible over time. From his 2011 reply to John Caputo to his 2021 response to critics of *This Life*, it is clear this position is still being refined. Where Chappel’s critique of Hägglund’s text still rings true, regardless if he misunderstood Hägglund’s intentions, is that even the *framing* of such an argument seems needlessly antagonistic. Even in his response to critics, Hägglund uses phrases such as the “overcoming of religion” as desirable. This is utterly foreign to the mindset of those he often uses as champions of secular faith or his ideal economic regime, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Given that this position regarding religion, its relationship to the ideal social order, and in particular as a critique of the dominant economic regime of the planet is still being worked out, it seems wise to consider wherein tensions might block productive solidarity. The critics of the 2019 text had accurate instincts, even if their understanding was off. There is a deep remnant of cultured despoliation in this book. If secular and religious faith really rely on two different motivational structures, as Hägglund argues, it would be wise to utilize both. Perhaps there is a better way of understanding the relationship of religious and secular faith in *this life*.

## Values are No Replacement for Goods: Lost in Capital’s Shadows

Patrick Murray

In his book *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, Martin Hägglund insists on a generic notion of value: “the category of value is a condition of intelligibility for any form of economic and spiritual life” (2019, 406 n. 37). Hägglund relies on this notion of generic value, of “value per se” as he calls it, to frame this key judgment: the capitalist kind of value—understood as a species of the genus value—is a mismeasure of value.<sup>3</sup> “Capitalist value,” which Karl Marx calls “value,” keeps us from achieving spiritual freedom.<sup>4</sup> Pinning Friedrich Nietzsche to Marx, Hägglund calls for a *revaluation of value*. We need a new species and a new measure of value. This “revaluation of value” is the centerpiece of Hägglund’s call for a

---

<sup>3</sup> Hägglund’s phrase “the mismeasure of value” differs from the title of my book *The Mismeasure of Wealth* (Murray 2016) by one word, “value.” Hägglund uses “the measure of value” interchangeably with “the measure of wealth,” equating value and wealth, which slurs the difference between wealth and value (2019, 271–72). The present article explores that difference.

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this article, I follow Hägglund’s usage of “capitalist value” to refer to what Marx calls “value,” though I reject the suggestion that “capitalist value” is one species of the purported genus value.

transition from capitalism to democratic socialism. But the notion of generic value is a blind alley. Generic value is a pseudo-concept: there is nothing for it to be the concept of.

### The Fallacy Involved in the Notion of Generic Value

Hägglund commits the fallacy of thinking that because there is a generally applicable concept of wealth (or the useful) we can speak of generic value, value-in-general. This is the fallacy that Bishop George Berkeley exposes in a criticism of “abstract ideas,” which result from bad abstraction. The fallacy is thinking that because we have a *general* idea of something, we have an *abstract* idea of it. Berkeley warns of conflating general ideas, which are the lifeblood of thinking, with abstract ideas. Berkeley puts these withering questions to John Locke’s claim to have an abstract idea of a triangle as opposed to a general one. Is your triangle in the abstract scalene, isosceles, or equilateral? Is it none of the three? Is it all three at once? Abstract ideas are illusions summoned by bad abstraction: you cannot abstract from being scalene or isosceles or equilateral and still have a triangle.<sup>5</sup> Hägglund conflates the general idea of wealth with that of generic value, the illusory notion of wealth in the abstract.

Generic value is one of several pseudo-concepts—wealth-in-general, utility, and instrumental action—that are shadows of capital (see Murray 2016, 156–88; Murray and Schuler 2023). Shadow forms are ways that capital extends its reach into our thought and discourse. The notion of generic value is a shadow of capitalist value, which necessarily appears in money and prices. Hägglund claims for generic value the homogeneity and quantifiability of capitalist value, but generic value lacks capitalist value’s actuality. Capitalist value is real, though supersensible, necessarily appearing as money. Marx calls capitalist value a “phantomlike objectivity” (*gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*) (1976, 128). Capitalist value is the consequence of the peculiar way that production is organized by capital. Prices provide a common measure of capitalist value, which is congealed abstract labor that proves to be socially necessary. There is no homogeneous and quantifiable dimension of generic value. Generic value is an abstract idea, formed by bad abstraction. Generic value is a shadow of capitalist value. The general concept of wealth, i.e., of useful things or goods, is unobjectionable because it does not presuppose the homogeneity and quantifiability that Hägglund’s value per se does.

Capitalist value is a mismeasure of *wealth*; that is the thrust of Marx’s *Capital*. What we need is not an impossible “reevaluation of generic value”—there is no generic value—but a measure of wealth that would replace capital’s aim of endless accumulation. In my (and Schuler’s) book *False Moves in Philosophy and Social Theory*, it is argued that we must drop the language of “value.” Instead, we should speak of goods or useful things or wealth.<sup>6</sup> As a replacement for “goods” or “wealth,” “value” brings troubling connotations: (1) what makes

---

<sup>5</sup> Marx makes this point regarding usefulness: “The usefulness of a thing makes it a use-value. But this usefulness does not dangle in mid-air. It is conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity, and has no existence apart from the latter” (1976, 126). Generic value dangles in mid-air.

<sup>6</sup> At a meeting of the Metaphysical Society of America at Seattle University in 2019, I made that recommendation to Dr. Robert Neville, former Dean of the Boston University School of Theology. Five minutes later, Neville announced that he had changed hundreds of instances of the word “value” to the word “good” in the book manuscript on his laptop.

anything valuable is that *I value it*, and (2) value posits wealth as having a homogeneous and quantifiable dimension. In losing the traction provided by goods, which are worldly (not abstract), generic value goes down the rabbit hole, replacing goods with (purely subjective) preferences. Since “value per se” trades on the purely subjective, it belongs to the bifurcations in which Hägglund’s thought nests.

### Hägglund’s Misconceived Critique of Postone

Hägglund criticizes Moishe Postone, whom he recognizes as “the pathbreaking Marx scholar” (2019, 272), on several points relating to the notion of generic value. Hägglund charges that Postone conflates the historically specific measure of value under capitalism with the category of “value” per se. Hägglund writes, “According to Postone, the overcoming of capitalism requires the *abolition* of value rather than a *reevaluation* of value. . . . It makes no sense to call for the abolition of the category of value per se, since the category of value is a condition of intelligibility for any form of economic and spiritual life” (2019, 406 n. 37). Postone does call for “the *abolition* of value,” but in interpreting Postone as calling for “the abolition of the category of value per se,” it is Hägglund who “conflates the historically specific measure of value under capitalism with the category of ‘value’ per se.” Postone calls for abolishing value as the social form of wealth specific to capitalism, but he has no intention of abolishing “the category of value per se” since he rejects that notion. There is nothing to abolish.

Hägglund reasons fallaciously in concluding that *because* Postone believes that the transformation from capitalism to socialism “does not require a reevaluation of value [generic value] on our part,” he “does not acknowledge that such a social transformation requires a transformation of our *normative* understanding of the purposes of social production” (2019, 276). Postone does not call for a reevaluation of generic value because he rejects the notion of generic value. Just as there is nothing to abolish, there is nothing to revalue. It does not follow—nor is it true—that Postone envisions no “transformation of our *normative* understanding of the purposes of social production.” In support of his criticism, Hägglund cites Postone: “a new social mode of production will be based upon a new technology” (2019, 276; Postone 1978, 779) and “*not only the goal of machine production but the machines themselves will be different!*” (emphasis in the original) (2019, 276; Postone 1978, 778). Hägglund interprets Postone as endorsing the positivistic, traditional Marxist conception of technology that Postone forcefully opposes.<sup>7</sup> Postone emphasizes that, in socialism, “*the machines themselves will be different!*” because he grasps Marx’s concept of the real subsumption of production under capital (understood as a social form). That concept is absent in traditional Marxism. Hägglund makes no explicit mention of real subsumption, though he gets Marx’s point. The real subsumption of production under capital, which includes the subsumption of “machines,” means the material transformation of production under the social form of capital to extract and accumulate ever more surplus value. That constitutive aim of capital is a normative one.

Postone grasps that the social form of capital is anything but norm-free, though capital promotes the “illusion of the economic,” which conflates the capitalist mode of production

---

<sup>7</sup> For example, Postone writes, “the tensions Marx grounds in the dual character of capitalism’s underlying social forms should be understood not only in ‘objective’—for example, economic and social—terms, but also in ‘subjective’ terms as well, with reference to changing forms of thought and sensibilities” (1993, 369).



with an impossible norm-free production-in-general. When Postone writes of new goals and new machines of production, he is not talking about a norm-free transition. Häggglund seems to recognize that when, a few sentences after quoting Postone, he writes:

If our machines will be different it is not only because our technological abilities will be different [as if Postone were arguing for that or thought that technology could be norm-free], but because *we will design the machines for a different purpose* [as if Postone ignored that]. A difference in purpose is a *normative* difference, which cannot be reduced to material conditions [as if that is what Postone thought], since machines cannot by themselves determine the purpose of their production. (2019, 277)

But Häggglund just quoted Postone saying, “*the goal of machine production . . . will be different.*” A different goal involves a different purpose, and Häggglund holds that a “difference in purpose is a *normative* difference.” So, Postone must be envisioning a normative transformation—as he is.

Häggglund asserts that the “purpose of production is intelligible only in light of a measure of value that cannot be derived from the machines themselves” (2019, 277). In speaking of “a measure of value,” Häggglund refers to *a species of generic value*, so he is asserting that Postone cannot recognize or speak of normative matters without first accepting the notion of generic value. Häggglund is mistaken to think that the pseudo-concept of generic value is required to recognize the normative character of “the purposes of social production.” The pseudo-concept of generic value is not needed to make normative assessments of social forms of wealth and production. If Häggglund’s assertion were true, there would be no normativity since there is no generic value.

Because Häggglund insists that one accept the notion of generic value to speak of normative matters and because Postone does not accept that notion, Häggglund is pressured to make further misconceived criticisms of Postone: “In Postone’s account, historical agents are one-sidedly conditioned by transformations in the material mode of production. He does not address what is required of us to overcome capitalism and what we will have to do to sustain our emancipation when we have achieved it” (2019, 277). Häggglund must contend that Postone adopts a norm-free conception of capitalist value.<sup>8</sup> But in rejecting the traditional (or Ricardian) Marxist conception of capitalist value as the product of labor regardless of its constitutive social form—hence not capitalist but transhistorical—Postone interprets Marx as holding a profoundly normative conception of value: “[capitalist value] is at the very heart of capitalist society. As a category of the fundamental social relations that constitute capitalism, value expresses that which is, and remains, the basic foundation of capitalist production” (1993, 25).<sup>9</sup> Fundamental social relations are normative. Postone devotes a section of *Time*,

---

<sup>8</sup> Allen Wood does claim that Marx’s ideas about capitalist value are purely descriptive—“not in any sense normative or ‘evaluative’ ideas” (1981, 225); Postone does not.

<sup>9</sup> Postone observes, “Value is a self-mediating form of wealth, but material wealth is not; the abolition of the former necessarily entails the constitution of new forms of social mediation, many of which presumably would be political in nature” (1993, 373). Clearly, Postone envisions the “abolition of value” as a normative transformation of the social form of wealth.

*Labor, and Social Domination* to “Modes of universality,” where he addresses the normative aspects of “determinate forms of universality” in relation to “capitalism and its possible historical negation.” He takes a “critical sociohistorical approach to the character of modern universality and equality” (1993, 366). Postone assesses positive and negative normative features of capitalist universality and equality: “this form of universality has had positive political and social consequences and, yet, in its opposition to all particularity, it has also been an aspect of abstract domination” (367). He elaborates on the positive consequences:

These preliminary determinations imply that the extension of the universalistic principles of bourgeois society to larger segments of the population—that is to say, the realization of these principles—which has in part, been effected by working class movements, as well as by those elements of women’s movements and minority movements that have struggled for equal rights, should not be understood as a development that points beyond capitalist society. (1993, 369)

There are tensions, or “shearing pressures,” in capitalism that are rooted in the capitalist form of wealth and point beyond it, though they do not assure any “automatic breakdown of capitalist society or the necessary emergence of oppositional or critical forms of consciousness pointing beyond the existing social formation” (Postone 1993, 369). Häggglund’s criticisms of Postone, then, are misconceived due to his notion of generic value.

### **Häggglund’s Affinities with Neoclassical Economics: Goods as Objects of Desire for A Mortal or An Eternal Being**

Häggglund distinguishes four analytical levels to the conditions for any economy. I will consider the first: “The first level is what Marx calls the level of *appearance*. All economies must appear in some form, and the form of appearance is *price*” (2019, 216). So, not only value but also price is a genus that spans all forms of social life! With this move, Häggglund transplants one of Marx’s most original insights, that prices are the necessary form of appearance of capitalist value, to the transhistorical level of generally applicable categories. In capitalism, prices abound; consider wages, profits, interest payments, and rents. But Häggglund insists that price and cost appear in every “economy”: “Even a noncapitalist economy, however, must appear through some form of price” (2019, 216), which puts all wealth into the commodity form. Since commodities *are* values, this collapses the distinction between wealth and capitalist value.<sup>10</sup> Again: “An economy is not intelligible unless there is a *cost* of production, which means that there must be a price to pay for both parties in an economic transaction” (2019, 216). What does Häggglund suppose are the units of these “costs” and “prices” where there is no money? “Costs” and “prices” in their strict sense are given in units of money. But Häggglund extends “cost” and “price” to all “economies,” which include non-monetary ones. What are the units of “cost” and “price” in those economies?

In positing *prices* and *costs* in all “economies,” Häggglund mimics neoclassical economists like Gary Becker, who finds “shadow prices” in life’s every nook and cranny, and James

---

<sup>10</sup> Postone identifies collapsing value into wealth and value-producing labor into labor as the hallmarks of traditional Marxism.

Buchanan, who speaks of the “opportunity costs” of our every choice. Neoclassical economics presents itself as a transhistorical theory of rational choice based on ordered preferences, which is what’s left once one has abandoned references to goods. Hägglund’s appeal to value per se aligns with the thinking of neoclassical economics in at least four ways:

1. Neither Hägglund nor neoclassicals look to goods as relevant to human choices; they do not think that there are any goods. Rather, Hägglund relies on *valuing*, which amounts to neoclassical *preferring*. Preferring is the successor to pleasure and absence of pain, the touchstones of hedonist utilitarianism. Valuing echoes the Stoic appeal to preferred indifferents to guide our choices regarding “externals.”<sup>11</sup>
2. Hägglund and neoclassicals find “prices” and “costs” everywhere and across history.
3. Hägglund and neoclassicals posit a general “measure of value” to direct us toward the rational choice.
4. Hägglund and neoclassicals hold that a rational way of making practical choices requires what Aristotle rejected, “a science of measurement,” which requires that there be a homogeneous and quantifiable measure of value.<sup>12</sup>

Let us consider more broadly the consequences of Hägglund’s replacement of goods with mortal valuing—preferences. Hägglund insists: “Only a finite being can lead a spiritual life, since only for a finite being can it be urgent to do anything and prioritize anything, which is a condition for valuing anything” (2019, 215). But goods are appropriate objects of desire—whether “urgent” or not—for a mortal *or* an eternal being. Hägglund must reject that simple proposition to make his case for the claim that only mortal creatures can care. Why would a responsive eternal being *not* be drawn to goods? Why would a responsive mortal creature reject as undesirable, even nonsensical, the possibility of eternal attraction to an enjoyment of goods? Of course, if we adopt a purely subjective conception of value, according to which something is valuable *because I value it*, we dispense with goods. Then there would be nothing to attract either a mortal or an eternal being, making this line of criticism moot. But dispensing with goods has disturbing consequences.

These consequences concern not only Hägglund’s rejection of anything smacking of the eternal. Without goods, what orients spiritually free mortals as they value and commit? Mortal beings get through life, Hägglund tells us, by valuing things and making commitments, but why value this or commit to that?<sup>13</sup> Hägglund states, “The originary measure of value is

---

<sup>11</sup> For Stoics, anything over which I do not have complete control counts as an “external.” To be free, happy, and virtuous, I must treat “externals” with indifference. Recognizing that I still must make choices in orienting myself amid “externals,” Stoics introduce “preferred indifferents.” In following my preferences, I make no claim to track goods.

<sup>12</sup> In discussing Aristotle’s objections to the science of measurement, Martha Nussbaum identifies four claims constitutive of that so-called science: metricity, singleness, consequentialism, and maximization. Nussbaum observes that “Aristotle rejects all four of these components of the ‘science of measurement,’ defending a picture of choice as a quality-based selection among goods that are plural and heterogeneous, each being chosen for its own distinctive value” (1990, 56–57).

<sup>13</sup> For Hägglund, valuing and committing are not separable: “To value something, I have to be prepared to give it at least a fraction of my time” (2019, 220).

therefore your finite lifetime. That you value your own finite time *renders intelligible the possibility of valuing anything at all*” (2019, 219).<sup>14</sup> That may be so, yet for Hägglund, my life, my time, is valuable *because* I value it. I do not value my life and my time because they are good. Would I be making the wrong choice *not* to value my life, my time, or would that simply be my choice?<sup>15</sup> How do valuing and committing myself keep from sliding into arbitrary choices and the prospect of “freely” de-committing, divorcing myself from yesterday’s values and commitments? Søren Kierkegaard warns of “the self in despair” that “wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be, to determine what he will have or not have in his concrete self” (1980, 68). Kierkegaard calls this the infinite self, the “negative self,” and identifies it with the stoic self. Hägglund relies on our valuing and committing to bind us to our lives, projects, and social circumstances, but Kierkegaard counters: “The negative form of the self exercises a loosening power as well as a binding power; at any time it can quite arbitrarily start all over again, and no matter how long one idea is pursued, the entire action is within a hypothesis” (1980, 69). This self devolves into a “hypothetical self” (1980, 69).

In Woody Allen’s film *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), we hear, in the words of the philosopher and Nazi deathcamp survivor Professor Louis Levy, the subjectivist mantra: “It is only *we*, with our capacity to love, who give meaning to the indifferent universe.” We face the burden propounded by Jean-Paul Sartre: the meaning of our lives arises from our choices alone. Echoing Sartre’s stoic point, Professor Levy proclaims: “We define ourselves by the choices that we have made. We are in fact the sum total of our choices.” No essence, teachings, traditions, virtues, or mentors serve as guides or share our responsibility. We are without excuses.

Consider the ominous conclusion that Professor Levy draws from his affirmation of the subjectivity of values, “under certain conditions we feel that the thing isn’t worth it anymore.” In an indifferent universe nothing really matters; mattering is up to me. If we lose the taste for living, why not go out the window? In telling Halley Reed (Mia Farrow) what he knows of Levy’s death, Cliff (Woody Allen) cracks a joke, but it is more revealing than he seems to recognize: “He always was affirmative. He always said, ‘Yes’ to life, ‘Yes,’ ‘Yes.’ Now today he said ‘No.’” Cliff and Halley are shocked by Levy’s suicide, but why? At the heart of Levy’s philosophy, which Halley praised as “large and life affirming,” is arbitrariness. Levy’s laconic suicide note underlines that philosophy: “I have gone out the window.” The note repels the question “Why?” To what had Levy been saying “Yes”? Why affirm life in a remorseless universe? Why isn’t “No” every bit as reasonable an answer?

Hägglund’s thinking about practical identity and existential identity might be thought to shield him from Kierkegaard’s reasoning to the baselessness of the hypothetical self, but I think not. Hägglund appeals to Christine Korsgaard’s conception of practical identity: “As a spiritual being, I am acting not simply for the sake of preserving my life or the life of my

---

<sup>14</sup> This claim is a trace of the primacy of the virtue of self-love in Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy, where self-love is the gateway virtue.

<sup>15</sup> Prominent philosophers are dismissive of mortal life; see the quotes from Seneca and Hume in Schuler’s review below. For such philosophers, reflection reveals the pointlessness of mortal life, not its urgency.

species but for the sake of *who I take myself to be*. Who I take myself to be is a practical identity because it requires that I keep faith with a commitment” (2019, 187). Again, all the weight falls on “who I take myself to be” and my commitment. What does what I take myself to be; what do my commitments answer to? What keeps me from taking myself to be something else, to committing myself to something new? Hägglund offers this: “What it means to have a certain practical identity—e.g., what it means to be a political activist—is not only up to me but depends on socially shared norms. I can transform the norms through my practice, but in doing so I am always answerable to others and held to account for myself” (2019, 188). But is not what I answer to ultimately what I take myself to be and what I commit myself to?

Hägglund points out that Korsgaard finds a “missing principle” in her account of practical identity. Hägglund addresses that absence with his idea of an “existential identity”: “A person’s existential identity consists in how she prioritizes her practical identities and responds to conflicts between their respective demands” (2019, 188). This responds to the problem of negotiating conflicts among one’s practical identities, but what “establishes” my existential identity is how I prioritize my practical identities. One’s practical identity involves givenness—what Martin Heidegger calls “thrownness”—which seems to cut against the infinite self in a way that Kierkegaard would approve. But what matters for Hägglund is my existential identity, which it is up to me to “establish” through my choices. But what is the measure for choosing priorities? In a world thought to be without goods, the problem is not mismeasure but lack of measure.

Choice is an aspect of human existence, but pure, ungrounded, and unmotivated human choice cannot originate what is good as we might imagine a divine utterance could create the world from nothing. Without goods, our valuing is a loose cannon. This problem is analogous to the epistemological problem of employing a purely subjective conceptual scheme to order the world. In “The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” Donald Davidson uses the homespun example of arranging things in a closet to assess the idea that a conceptual order is something purely subjective—an order that *we* give the world. Do subjects seeking to know their world apply conceptual schemes to a world that has no intelligible order in itself? Davidson rejects that popular contention with the observation that we can organize a closet—or recognize when one has been organized—only because what is being rearranged, e.g., shoes, jackets, tennis racquets, etc., are already intelligible useful things. If the contents of the closet had no intelligibility of their own, the task of organizing it would lose its sense. Analogously, the task of practically organizing our life in a world where nothing is good lacks intelligibility. Davidson argues for that too: “An appreciation of what makes for such convergence or agreement also shows that value judgments are true or false in much the way our factual judgments are . . . I have argued that values are objective, that they are rooted in things” (2004, 49, 52). “Objective values” are goods. Ordering a life according to (purely subjective) preferences—valuing—is no more intelligible than ordering the world according to (purely subjective) conceptual schemes.

### Democratic Socialism with a False Bottom

In making his case for democratic socialism, Hägglund turns to Marx: “The greatest resources for developing a secular notion of freedom can be found in the writings of Karl Marx” (2019, 212) and to “the pathbreaking Marx scholar Moishe Postone.” He is right to

find here the most penetrating conceptual resources for social theory and transition. Häggglund adopts this lesson from Postone's interpretation of Marx: "Almost all forms of left-wing politics . . . restrict their critiques of capitalism to the mode of distribution, failing to interrogate the measure of value that informs the mode of production" (2019, 272). Rejecting any conception that socialism amounts to redistributing capitalist value, Häggglund concludes that the "critique of capitalism must therefore be aimed at the measure of value itself." But in relying on a false generic notion of value to frame the revolutionary *reevaluation* of value, Häggglund rests democratic socialism on a false bottom. Häggglund counts on valuing and committing to support us, but what supports them?

## Martin Häggglund's Dogmatic Defense of the Exclusively Finite

Jeanne Schuler

For Martin Häggglund, spiritual freedom requires that a society organized around endless accumulation of surplus value give rise to democratic socialism: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs. A book that moves from C.S. Lewis's grief at the death of his wife to overhauling our measure of value might sound rambling. It is not. The topic of the finite unites the diverse analyses. Human existence is defined by temporality. Persons are mortal: being toward death sets the ultimate horizon for all our endeavors. For Häggglund, however, it is not simply that we humans are mortal; no alternative to mortal existence makes any sense.

Our finite existence is shaped by historical conditions. The capitalist value of commodities is determined by average labor time; to reduce necessary labor and expand the surplus labor that creates surplus value is an unceasing goal of capitalism. That is why "labor-saving devices" in the workplace seldom save any labor. Shortening the working day would miss the point of increasing the productive power of labor. Since pumping out more profit is the point, the incentives in the capitalist workplace are to increase the productive power of labor and speed up the production process. This speed-up generates the rush of daily life, as jobs and consuming hold sway. A politics of time is inherent in the contradictions that point beyond capitalism to socialism. To advance toward socialism demands clarity about the finite and how we get to spend our time.

Socialism releases society from capital's grinding pursuit of profit through the exploitation of wage workers. Häggglund observes, "[Karl] Marx argues that the commitment to freedom is betrayed by the social organization and division of labor that is enforced by capitalism" (2019, 229). In capitalism, surplus time is directed at endless accumulation. When accumulation falters, capitalist society sinks into crisis. In a society organized around socialist goals, surplus time would be redirected from capital accumulation to meeting needs, to leisure, and to activities that are chosen as ends in themselves. In democratic socialism, "we are committed to increasing the wealth of our society, but we no longer measure social wealth in terms of capital growth. Rather, our wealth is measured in terms of our actual production of goods and our socially available free time" (2019, 278). For Häggglund, leisure time is the condition and key measure of spiritual freedom. Yes, needs must be met for humans to thrive. In democratic

socialism, institutions will identify and produce wealth freed from the imperative to accumulate surplus value. Organizing around needs will open spaces for individuals and their communities to discern matters of importance and pursue activities that are freely chosen as ends in themselves. A society liberated from capital's treadmill allows for value in the generic sense to be freed from "capitalist value" (which Marx calls "value") and be reimagined. This Nietzschean revaluation of value, replacing the capitalist measure of value with a socialist one, would be undertaken not by the *Übermensch* but by diverse groups. Leisure time, including time for reflection and the exercise of free choice, is necessary to achieve the socialism that makes spiritual freedom possible. Projects arising from free communal deliberation are the mark of human emancipation.

### The Finite: A Neglected Topic

There is much to admire in this ambitious book. Hägglund focuses on the importance of finite human existence, a topic largely neglected in philosophy. People wrestle with the notion of the infinite. Whether or not God exists gets our attention. When great thinkers address ordinary existence, it can be in disparaging terms, as if they were describing sheep or children. Emblematic of this patronizing tone is the Stoic Seneca:

There's nothing so very great about living—all your slaves and all the animals do it. What is however a great thing is to die in a manner which is honorable, enlightened, and courageous. Think how long now you've been doing the same as them—food, sleep, sex, the never-ending cycle. (1969, 126)

David Hume writes in his essay "The Sceptic":

It is certain, were a superior being thrust into a human body, that the whole of life would to him appear so mean, contemptible and puerile that he never could be induced to take part in anything, and would scarcely give attention to what passes around him. (1985, 175).

For Hägglund, overcoming such contempt for the finite is imperative. Clear-eyed allegiance to the finite is the springboard that propels his subsequent discussions of capitalism and democratic socialism. Proper appreciation for finite human existence is the prerequisite for getting clear about any topic. Every inquiry involves presuppositions about those undertaking the inquiry. To pursue a question engages capabilities of those able to think through the problem. What may be described as "just enough phenomenology," acknowledges the general features of human existence that make inquiry possible; human existence is always the prior implicit topic (Murray and Schuler 2023). If the underlying presuppositions are flawed, inquiry is undermined. Hägglund acknowledges the primacy of phenomenology as "first" knowledge.

How do we get at the meaning of finite human life? For Hägglund, how we think about human life connects to how we think about death. Like ordinary people, most philosophers approach death as the event that ends this life the way the period ends this sentence. Death lies outside existence. We are either alive or dead: the disjunction holds. Since death is external to life, we can push death away until situations make this avoidance impossible. The indifference of some philosophers toward death arises from the sense that death has nothing to do with the character of our lives. Epicurus writes:

you should accustom yourself to believing that death means nothing to us, since every good and every evil lies in sensation; but death is the privation of sensation . . . There is nothing fearful in living for the person who has really laid hold of the fact that there is nothing fearful in not living. So it is silly for a person to say that he dreads death—not because it will be painful when it arrives but because it pains him now as a future certainty; for that which makes no trouble for us when it arrives is a meaningless pain when we await it. This, the most horrifying of evils, means nothing to us, then, because so long as we are existent death is not present and whenever it is present we are non-existent. (2012, 156–57)

For Hägglund, the anticipation of our death is not a matter of indifference; it gives our precarious finite lives their urgency. An eternal being would spin its wheels.

### **Religion as Inextricably Inauthentic**

Hägglund is blunt in his judgment that religion blocks authentic human life. The phenomenological subtlety with which Hägglund depicts mortality disappears when he turns to religion. Careful inspection is replaced by sweeping generalizations. Like Ludwig Feuerbach, Hägglund focuses on the essence of religion, and its essence, for Hägglund, invariably rejects finitude and mortality. Religion is anti-life. Any invocation of eternity or God distorts the human self until it is not recognizable. From Judeo-Christianity to Buddhism, the infinite would destroy the finite. Resurrection, in Hägglund's view, signifies the death knell of humanity: a finite being is entombed by the presence of God.

The destructive import of religion centers on time. What is eternal would strip humanity of its temporal skin. Apart from time, humans are not recognizable. A resurrected self would lack relationships and endeavors; it would be incapable of agency. Vulnerability is the defining human feature for Hägglund. Without the risks and uncertainties of temporal creatures, vulnerability disappears and caring becomes impossible. A resurrected self could not care any more than a god can. In Hägglund's mind, eternity would reduce humans to something grotesque, locked into endless praise of God. Merely anticipating salvation puts human vitality in jeopardy.

Persons of deep faith in God are handled curiously by Hägglund. C.S. Lewis and Martin Luther King, Jr., were men of passion for God, for their beloved, and for justice. Hägglund celebrates their contributions by driving a wedge between the faiths he calls religious and secular. In his bifurcating view, a religious person could not mourn the death of their beloved. For the religious, death does not matter. Their eyes are fixed on eternity. When Lewis grieves the death of his wife, Joy, religion slips off like a snakeskin to reveal the secular faith that was always underneath. Eternity's luster vanishes; true spirituality demands that anticipation ends irrevocably with death. Hope for transcendence is foolish and enervating. When King confronts violence in the struggle for justice, he faces death with the readiness to sacrifice all. There is no escape hatch into eternity, no consolation. Hägglund's insistence that he understands heroic religious figures better than they do themselves is disturbing.

Religion is temptation to inauthenticity. No society will move toward socialism without rejecting religion and embracing humanity in a fully secular way. To think otherwise is bad



faith. For Hägglund, authenticity requires that we reject God and religion. A religious person cannot grasp the dignity of this life.

### Hägglund and the Logic of Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness

Hegel is a key source for *This Life*. Hägglund draws from Hegel's accounts of the Stoic and the Unhappy Consciousness to capture the essence of religion. Both the Stoic and the Unhappy Consciousness are addressed in an early chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. They evince the naïve mindset that Hegel calls dogmatic.

In the "Unhappy Consciousness," self-consciousness turns to God after it despairs of finding freedom in the Stoic's inner life and now looks for freedom in the "unchangeable beyond." This religious outlook is thoroughly dualistic: what is essential is separated from the unessential. A dogmatic mindset enforces this division. God signifies the state that persons long for but cannot attain without ceasing to be humans. God must dwell in the beyond. Unlike the Stoic or Skeptic, the Unhappy Consciousness denies the importance of the self and projects all power onto the unchangeable being. The Unhappy Consciousness progresses through stages. In the first form, the unchangeable essence is the absolute antithesis to human life: the unknown God rules from afar. Later, God is conceived of as an individual who begins to resemble persons. As mediation between the human and the divine increases, the unhappiness does not decrease. The humanization of God compels the dehumanization of persons. As God comes closer, humanity shrinks to maintain the distance required by dogmatic faith. The believer, it is felt, receives everything from the hand of God and can take no credit for anything. Convinced of its worthlessness, the self believes that salvation requires complete self-sacrifice. In the final phase of the Unhappy Consciousness, alienation is complete: the self takes no joy in its activity and instead regards itself as an animal, a defiled object that deserves contempt. The closer the self comes to seeing its face in the other, the harder it must work to prevent this presumptuous encounter.

In the grip of dogmatic polarity, we ignore the evidence from experience that our being has worth. When the attitudes that follow from the worship of an unseen God are carried over into worship of a God that is seen, then the potential for spiritual enslavement increases. When all freedom belongs to God, the distance between the human and divine intensifies to safeguard divine freedom. The dualism between essence and non-essence dictates that persons become less human when gods take on human form. At its breaking point, the Unhappy Consciousness posits two persons, the incarnate essence embodying the divine and the inessential human, who signifies nothing.

For Hegel, religions, like all forms of experience, are conceptually constituted. The determinations that constitute experience reveal a logic of consciousness. Again and again, consciousness reaches an impasse that discloses the limits of its current logic. The stalemate ends as new criteria for what is essential emerge that unblock experience. For Hegel, consciousness entails development. It learns from failure and moves to a more developed logic. Hegel's phenomenology is the voyage from naïve simplicity to grasping the conceptuality of experience and knowledge. The Unhappy Consciousness reaches an impasse from which it emerges as reason. The worthless believer gives way to the confidence that reason can uncover the essence of this world without looking to the beyond. At every stage in the *Phenomenology*, consciousness develops.

Hägglund does not share Hegel's view of the Unhappy Consciousness. Hägglund locks religion into the Unhappy Consciousness. In his rigid account, religion is forever stuck in polarization; it cannot develop *as* religion. The only possible advance is to repudiate religion. Hägglund embraces the stubborn dogmatism that he attributes to religion. Hägglund misses the inherent dynamism of experience—inclusive of religion. Development is integral to consciousness; the movement in the *Phenomenology* resonates with the stumbling course of reason in history. For Hegel, religion is not static; it develops from dogmatism to the speculative understanding of God in history. Thus, the penultimate Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology* is "Religion," and its final section is devoted to "Manifest Religion."

Hegel agrees that the Unhappy Consciousness epitomizes alienation. Hegel's *Lectures on Religion* acknowledges that philosophy expresses truth in a more encompassing way than does any religion. But Hegel never repudiates religion. For Hegel, mature religion transcends the Unhappy Consciousness. The highest forms of religion, along with art and philosophy, exemplify the most complete truths humans can achieve, what Hegel calls absolute knowing. Religions take institutional forms, but the truths of religion, e.g., the Incarnation or the Trinity, are not reducible to institutional practices and norms. Hägglund cuts Hegel off. He has no interest in how Hegel tracks freedom to the highest expressions of culture and thought: expressions that include religion.

For Hägglund, there is no remedy for the emptiness of religious categories. The only remedy for a God who necessarily resides "beyond" this life is to abolish religion. This abolition is not a side issue on the path to freedom; it constitutes a condition for understanding the finite. To appreciate the importance of *this* life requires that there be no other. Hägglund recalls the leftwing Hegelians and the young Marx in taking the critique of religion as the gateway to the critique of society. Only by shedding the snakeskins of religion—each of which is as bankrupt as the prior one—does the species recover the energy to undertake the transformations needed to live in spiritual freedom. Religion is the dead weight that blocks this-worldly liberation—the only kind there is.

### The Polarized Categories of *This Life*

When religion denies that death is irrevocable, religion denies the finite. For Hägglund, the mark of the finite is the possibility of loss. Any relationship or project is human insofar as it can be lost. The joy of a devoted parent is not separable from the possibility that one's child can die. Joy and loss are two sides of the finite. The possibility of loss supplies the urgency that runs through human life. We are the watchful servant who does not await the return of the master but awaits the changes that accompany our endeavors, with death as the irrevocable last stage. For Hägglund, faith in God prohibits the sadness that loss brings. Hägglund compares the religious repudiation of the finite to the detachment of Stoicism. For Epictetus, the child that dies is given back to God, who only lent it to us in the first place. There is no cause for suffering in this life. Nothing is lost. A religious person who grieves betrays her faith in God.

Polarized categories are a feature of the dogmatic mindset. Kant sets up dualisms between the finite and transcendent, but this dualism takes a critical, not dogmatic, form. As critical, Kant refuses to establish what lies beyond the finite. Kant makes the case for *faith* in the infinite, but the transcendent is unknowable. The dualism of Hägglund is not critical but

dogmatic. A dogmatic thinker has no doubts about the content of the polarity. Hägglund depicts the infinite and then rejects it as fantastical. What is eternal can be grasped as the grotesque that it is. Hägglund's dogmatism leaves no room for faith in either God or humanity. Humanity's movement toward socialism is a hope based on what is observable in history.

The dogmatic thinker falls short of Kant's critique and the thinking Hegel calls speculative. Take Kant's third antinomy, the dichotomy of freedom versus determinism. Initially, to be free excludes any determination, but Kant's sharp and empty opposition falters as we recognize how biology, language, and culture shape the self. Being determined in the right ways makes freedom possible. The empty notion of freedom fills with content as the dichotomy gives way to reflective determinations that are not one-sided. Thinkers get stuck in dogmatism when reflection does not advance to more concrete concepts. A speculative thinker treats the finite and infinite as inseparable determinants of one another. To grasp the finite takes us through the movements of partiality to the totality, where the truth of the finite is established. Hegel, like Spinoza, realizes that what belongs to God is not separable from the finite. For Hegel, the finite posits the infinite, and the absolute is the endpoint. For Spinoza, the infinite posits the finite; God is the source of all. A deeper grasp of Hegel would challenge Hägglund's dogmatic rejection of the infinite.

For Hegel, dogmatism is the mindset that accepts a dichotomy wholeheartedly. The disjunction is original, unsurpassable, and unquestioned. For Hegel, philosophy begins with dogmatic binaries, as found in Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness, but philosophy thinks its way past one-sided to speculative concepts. We advance beyond dogmatism through reflection. Hägglund's peculiar fixation on religion is a distraction from how dogmatism delimits his account of the finite. The logic of polarity casts a shadow over his discussion of values. Hägglund adopts a view common in the modern world that values are what humans "add" to the world. David Hume speaks of a "new creation" brought about by "gilding and staining" the world with our values. Values are not inherent in the warp and woof of things or actions. A tree is not already good because of its specific properties or way of being. Trees already exist but values do not. Polarization follows Hägglund into this split between a world already there and the values we project onto it. We bring values into existence when we select features of the world to prize. Our lives have meaning insofar as we freely choose and commit ourselves to ends. Nothing is good unless we humans say so.

Hägglund reiterates the fragility and consequent urgency of the finite throughout the book. We must continually dedicate ourselves to these ends or their value is lost. If the relationship goes flat, what happens to its value? Constant efforts maintain the ends that give meaning to our lives, like our dedication to daily care for our children. Once we choose these ends, we are responsible to maintain the values that our choices create. Finite life is freely chosen toil in service to freely chosen ends. Values come into existence with passionate choice. Values are what we have in a world without goods.

Persistent polarity abandons ties to Hegel. Weariness is built into Hägglund's notion of the finite. The toil of creating and sustaining values would be lessened by a metaphysics of the finite that finds goodness inseparable from the world. One does not have to be a theist to understand how the specific features of things figure into their goodness. Our energetic willing neither brings ends into existence nor entirely sustains them. The good inherent in things

elicits passion and invites commitment. We can be thankful for the finite goods that adorn the world and embellish our lives. There is too much toil and not enough celebration in Hägglund's disenchanted finite. Getting rid of God does not get rid of the dichotomies.

## Martin Hägglund's Bad Abstraction of Eternity

Tom Jeannot

Published to rave reviews, Martin Hägglund's *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (2019) is a tour de force, at once scholarly and erudite, personal and passionate, and accessible to a general reading public interested in thinking about the most important things: life and death, meaning, value, and purpose, existential and practical identity, personal relationships and political reality. Part I, "Secular Faith," is internally related to Part II, "Spiritual Freedom," as the critique of religion is related to the critique of capitalism. Concluding his brief for "Democratic Socialism" in the penultimate chapter, Hägglund explicates this internal relation by way of Marx's claim that the "critique of religion . . . is the premise of all critique" (2019, 29; and see Marx 1978, 53), quoting from the same article in which Marx also famously declares that "religion is the *opium* of the people" (2019, 330; and see Marx 1978, 54). Indeed, Hägglund argues that as profit is to capitalism, so God is to religion. "Whether the imaginary flowers [plucked from the chain of religious otherworldliness] are the promises of the free market or the religious promises of eternal life, they serve to make us accept or forget the injustices of *this life*" (2019, 331).

Since *This Life* is written in a personal and confessional way, it seems like a confessional way of responding would not be inappropriate, so I will begin by saying that I found this book profoundly disappointing. It is especially disappointing from the perspective of what was once called a Christian-Marxist dialogue (Hebblethwaite 1977; McGovern 1980). Although Hägglund writes in a warm and even tender way—deeply compassionate, deeply humanistic—a reader can be lulled into forgetting that *This Life* wages as fierce a polemic against Christianity as the classic work that Hägglund leaves unmentioned, Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (2008). *This Life* forecloses on the possibility that a Christian-Marxist dialogue could ever be renewed. The essential antinomy of Hägglund's argument is his disjunction between secular and religious faith, vigorously enforced by the law of excluded middle, the one excluding the other in the most radical way. For the attuned reader, this book in the genre of Hegelian Marxism is therefore notably undialectical at just the point where a dialectical position might seem most apposite, in the dialectic between time and eternity.

Hägglund's relentless critique of the idea of eternity renders the very idea "meaningless" (2019, 43) and empty (2019, 55, 81). "The attraction of eternity is supposed to be that 'there you will lose nothing.' But if you can lose nothing in eternity, it is because there is literally nothing left to lose" (2019, 86). Hägglund's readers are therefore enjoined to "recognize that eternal life would be death, would not be a form of life at all" (2019, 332). In this respect, Hägglund aims to sort out the "central distinction" of his basic scheme, "between *living on* (prolonging a temporal life) and being *eternal* (absorbed in a timeless existence)" (2019, 42). He

writes, “One may ask here why the choice between living on and eternity has to be an either/or” (2019, 42). His book is essentially an answer to this question.

In the immediate context of his insistence on this disjunction, when he reflects on C.S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*, he appeals to what he takes to be significant about death, loss, grief, and mourning. He writes,

If you and your beloved did not believe that your lives were finite, neither one of you could take your lives to be at stake and there would be no urgency to do anything with your time. You could never care for yourselves, for one another, or for the commitment that you share, since you would have no sense of fragility. . . . This is why living on with your beloved is incompatible with being in eternity, even on the level of the imagination. As soon as you remove the sense of finitude and vulnerability, you remove the vitality of any possible love relationship. (2019, 43)

This is Hägglund’s basic argument and the central leitmotif of the work as a whole, which he repeats in various ways like a mantra from beginning to end. His way of proceeding consists in sustained considerations of a series of phenomenological figures, including C.S. Lewis on the occasion of the death of his wife, Joy Davidman (in chap. 1, “Faith”); Saint Augustine on the occasion of the death of his unnamed friend (in chap. 2, “Love”); Kierkegaard’s account of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac (in chap. 3, “Responsibility”); and the final days of Martin Luther King, Jr. (in his “Conclusion: Our Only Life”).

Hägglund’s argument is that being oneself and staking a claim on one’s own existential and practical identity requires the satisfaction of three conditions: “existential commitment,” “motivational force,” and “my belief that I can fail” (2019, 75–76), or the “objective uncertainty” or “necessary uncertainty . . . [that] binds faith to risk from the beginning” (2019, 129). In turn, these are the “three aspects of secular faith,” the aspects that Hägglund believes are negated by “religious faith” or faith in the eternal, such that these two manners of faith are mutually exclusive and irreconcilably opposed. Hägglund attributes this repudiation of religious faith in favor of a secular faith to Hegel. He writes,

At stake here are the conditions of possibility for leading a spiritual life, both individually and collectively. Leading a spiritual life requires a conception of who we *ought* to be as individuals and as a community, what Hegel calls an ‘Idea’ of who we are. Following Hegel’s secular notion of the incarnation, the Idea of who we are is not something that can exist in a separate realm; it must be materially embodied in our practices. Moreover, the Idea of who we are is not contemplative. We cannot discover who we are through introspection, but only by emptying ourselves out in the sense of being wholeheartedly engaged—being at stake, being at risk—in what we do and how we are recognized by others. The Idea of who we are is not an abstract ideal that is external to our form of life; it is the principle of intelligibility in light of which we can succeed or fail to be who we are striving to be. (2019, 367)

A secular faith, a faith in the “Idea” of who we are, is a faith in “this life,” “our only life,” which requires us to embrace the finitude and temporality of the only life we have and

therefore necessarily to abandon religious faith and even a “political theology,” if the form of life most consonant with spiritual freedom is democratic socialism. So Häggglund concludes, “The movement toward democratic socialism is thus inseparable from the overcoming of political theology and the withering away of religious faith. We will recognize that our finitude is inseparable from our dignity and our care for one another. We will acknowledge that everything depends on we the people” (2019, 388–89).

Häggglund’s disjunctive rather than dialectical approach to the relation (or non-relation) of time to eternity depends on the way he construes eternity, as meaningless, empty, and nothing. He achieves this conception of eternity by way of simple negation: eternity is simply what temporality is not, void of any other attributes. It is a bare abstraction without determinate content. In this way, it is a matter of indifference to Häggglund whether our conception of eternity is Christian or Buddhist or any other religious conception, since, as he sees it, “to rest in peace . . . is the common denominator for all religious ideals of eternity.” “The most instructive example is the Buddhist notion of nirvana” (2019, 80). “By subscribing to the value of absolute permanence, Buddhism devalues everything that is impermanent. . . . However, when one removes everything that is impermanent . . . one is literally left with nothing.” “The apparent paradox of nirvana haunts all religious conceptions of eternity. Absolute fullness is inseparable from absolute emptiness and absolute presence is inseparable from absolute absence.” But Häggglund’s “argument is that we should reject the idea that such a state of being is a goal worth striving for” (2019, 81).

On the other hand, Christianity is not Buddhism, and without prejudice to either religion, it is evident that not all religious conceptions of the eternal really do amount to the same thing. However, when they are treated as if they were the same, we have a good reason to believe that we are in the vicinity of what Patrick Murray, in “Marx, Berkeley, and Bad Abstractions” (2020), calls a “bad abstraction.” Since Murray, like Häggglund, is also writing in the tradition of Hegelian Marxism, it would be worthwhile, but too great a detour to take in this review, to see Murray’s argument through to the end, since Murray argues that “value” (in Marx’s theory of value) is the preeminent “bad abstraction” of capitalist society, and Marx’s theory of value figures prominently in Häggglund’s critique of capitalism as well, together with his call for a “reevaluation of value” (2019, 347) under democratic socialism.

Briefly, “bad abstractions” occur when what is distinguishable, but inseparable, is treated as if it were separable. Murray writes:

What is distinguishable may be separable; for example, I can separate a doorknob from the rest of the door, but I cannot do likewise for the color or shape of the door. . . . How do we tell when what is distinguishable is separable and when not? Phenomenological judgments, that is, experience-based judgments of necessity such as “it must have some particular shape and color” are required. The deep lesson from Berkeley, one that Marx took up, is that thinking requires both analysis and phenomenology. In Berkeley and Marx, criticism of abstract ideas belongs together with phenomenology: we need to draw distinctions (analysis) and we need to know when the distinguishable is separable and when not. (2020, 131)

Hägglund recognizes Murray's distinction without, however, explicitly calling out bad abstractions by name. He writes, concerning the Hegel that Murray also loves, "Hegel argues that the defining feature of spiritual life is the burial of the dead. By commemorating an individual through the act of burial, we recognize in practice that material and spiritual life are *inseparable* but *distinguishable*" (2019, 358, Hägglund's emphasis). "The act of burial is a *retrospective* recognition of material and spiritual life as distinguishable but inseparable" (2019, 359). Thus, Hägglund recognizes the inseparability of spiritual and material life, but he honors no such inseparability between time and eternity, since eternity as he construes it is nothing more than the empty placeholder of a religious faith whose withering away we should welcome. As to whether eternality can be so easily dispensed with, a cascade of questions rains down—metaphysical, epistemological, anthropological, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and ethical.

Early in his book, Hägglund's principal antagonist is another Hegel scholar, Charles Taylor, author of *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor argues for the indispensability of the eternal and laments its diminishment in a secular age. As Hägglund sees it, "The question is whether a religious notion of eternity is capable of addressing the experience of mourning and offering consolation. Taylor takes this for granted and laments the withdrawal of belief in eternal life" (2019, 56–57). Hägglund then runs through a series of choice quotations from Taylor: "love by its very nature calls for eternity" (2019, 57); we have an "irrepressible craving for eternity" (2019, 57); "[all] joy strives for eternity" (2019, 59); "[art] aspires to a certain kind of eternity" (2019, 59). This craving, striving, and aspiring is classically answered by "God's eternity," which "does not abolish time, but gathers it into an instant," in an often-cited "eternal now" (2019, 57). Hägglund rejoins that "Taylor's distinction has been made by many Christian thinkers, but it is specious" (2019, 57). "Far from gathering our experiences and allowing us to live on, an eternal now would deprive us of a past and a future. Our lifetime would be reduced to an instant and we would have no life to live." "To distinguish between eternity and living on is therefore decisive . . . Taylor's argument is based on a conflation, which makes it seem as though we aspire to a religious form of eternity when we aspire to secular forms of living on" (2019, 58).

However, this rejoinder to the Hegelian Taylor, which diminishes the dialectic of time and eternity to the vanishing point, itself rests on a confusion and a sleight of hand. The classical insight into an "eternal now" is an analogous way of expressing God's relation to time, not to our own temporal existence. It is precisely to the point that we do not live in an "eternal now." In a lengthy note, Hägglund argues that Taylor misinterprets Augustine's "phenomenology of time in book 11 of the *Confessions*," for whom our being in time is a "distension." "Contrary to Taylor's claim," he writes, "Augustine underlines the *disanalogy* between the way we retain our past in relation to the future and the way God reposes in his eternal presence" (2019, 396). Yet on the crucial point, Augustine fares no better in Hägglund's hands, inasmuch as Hägglund assigns the same position to Augustine as to Taylor concerning loss, death, grief, and mourning. Whether the author in question is Taylor, Lewis, Augustine, Kierkegaard, or King, the same pattern of questions will as easily slide off the laminated surface of Hägglund's bad abstraction, the nullity, emptiness, and meaninglessness of eternity as Hägglund proposes it.

Before demonstrating this point with greater textual precision, concerning a disjunctive rather than a dialectical approach to the dialectic of time and eternity, we can purchase a critical handle on Häggglund's argument at large by way of referring to the true hero of his narrative, the philosopher Hegel, the author of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>16</sup> Chapter VII.C is Hegel's chapter on "Manifest Religion," penultimate to the concluding Chapter VIII on "Absolute Knowing." Chapter VII.C is the chapter where Hegel considers the central Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, to which I will return again in the context of Häggglund's conclusion, interweaving King's final days in Memphis with Häggglund's interpretation of Hegel's turn from religious to secular faith.

In "Manifest Religion," Hegel writes, "The Unhappy Consciousness"—often taken to refer to Medieval Christianity—"exemplifies the tragic fate of mere would-be self-certainty, which would have itself exist in and for itself. And since it is self-certainty aware of losing every trace of essentialness, not to mention any claim to self-knowledge—of losing substance as well as self—its anguish is such as finds expression in the hard words 'God is dead'" (Hegel 2019, 375). A passage as difficult as this to decipher could be, and by Häggglund apparently is taken as evidence of Hegel's supposed atheism. Hegel continues:

Hence it could be said of spirit that, in having left behind the form of sheer substance and entered into existence as embodied in self-consciousness, it has (borrowing terms relevant to natural generation) an "actual mother" but an "implicit father." For its actual reality (its self-consciousness) and whatever lies latent within that reality as integral to its substance are both moments of spirit; by their mutual emergence and their turning into each other, they enable spirit to enter into existence as the unity of both. (2019, 377)

Between this paragraph and Hegel's return to the metaphor of natural generation in the third to the last paragraph of the chapter, there are at least six references to the eternal (eternal essence, eternal being, and what is "sheerly eternal . . . entering into the existential realm and directly into some manner of immediate presence" [2019, 385]) before Hegel concludes:

Just as the individual human being possessed of divinity has an implicitly existent father and a merely actual mother, so does humankind at large, possessed of divinity—this community—have for its father its own action and knowledge, but for its mother an "eternal love" that it merely *feels* but doesn't directly behold as an actual object. While such a community's reconciliation accordingly takes place in its heart, its conscious existence is still divided, its actual reality still riven. (2019, 394)

The final three paragraphs of "Manifest Religion" thereby set up the final problem that Hegel addresses in the *Phenomenology*, the problem of an "Absolute Knowing"; but in "Manifest

---

<sup>16</sup> In his notes, Häggglund cites the *Phenomenology* by numbered paragraphs. The English translation he cites is Terry Pinkard's, issued by Cambridge University Press in 2018, where the numbered paragraphs correspond to Miller's English translation (1977). In Miller's "The Revealed Religion," the numbered paragraphs run from 748 to 807. By contrast, I am using the translation of Peter Fuss and John Dobbins, from the University of Notre Dame Press in 2019. In their translation, "Manifest Religion" runs from 120 to 190. For the explanation of their alternative paragraph numbering, see their "Translators' Introduction," xvii-xix.



Religion,” something is gained for the human heart, so to speak, before it comes into full philosophical consciousness in the human head: a “reconciliation” that “takes place in its heart,” “its mother an ‘eternal love.’” The point here is not to engage in the further obscurities of Hegel interpretation, but to point out how in the hero’s text the dialectic of time and eternity, even on the dubious thesis of Hegel’s atheism, does not vanish into a nullity; how a consciousness still religious is nurtured by a mother’s eternal love; and how “eternal essence,” “eternal being,” and the eternal breaking into existence in “some manner of immediate presence” is otherwise than the bad abstraction that Häggglund turns it into and then makes it out to be.

Once we learn from his notes that Häggglund’s “book in progress” is a book on Heidegger (394, 409), we are situated just a stone’s throw away from Jean Hyppolite’s Heideggerian interpretation of Hegel in *Logic and Existence* (1997), a post-Christian, atheist “Hegel” whose deepest philosophical commitment, anticipating Heidegger’s, is to the philosophy of finitude. Whereas Feuerbach considered himself to be working out a critique of Hegelianism, however, Häggglund’s atheist, post-Christian, Heideggerian Hegel is enlisted into the cause of a secular faith. Interweaving his reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* with the last days of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis in his “Conclusion: Our Only Life,” Häggglund writes that “Hegel agrees with the general Enlightenment critique of religious faith, which maintains that there is no God” (2019, 354). Consequently, “Hegel’s understanding of faith is secular in [Häggglund’s] sense of the term,” a sense that precludes any qualitative notion of either the infinite or the eternal. “We can thus understand why Hegel gives such importance to the Christian notion of incarnation,” as opposed to “the religious understanding.” As if his ear were made of tin, he continues, “from a religious standpoint, the incarnation of God in mortal life is a secondary historical event” (2019, 357). This statement betrays what is really a massive failure in the book as a whole to grasp ahold of a Christian understanding of anything at all. (A secondary historical event? Really?) But such a total breakdown in understanding, prima facie, is worth emphasizing because it underscores what a believer can only take as the greatest offense, in the context of Häggglund’s long discussion of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* in his chapter on “Responsibility” (124-170). After his tendentious exegesis (or eisegesis) of Kierkegaard’s representation of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, obviously anticipating the sacrificial Christ, he writes, “What the Crucifixion reveals . . . is the emptiness of divine love. The reason God has abandoned his son is that he could never care about him in the first place. It makes no difference to God that his beloved son is tortured and put to death” (2019, 166–67). And just in case we may have missed the point, that is, “If you object that God would never command the killing of Isaac . . . God has nothing to teach you about moral responsibility, since he cannot even understand a moral problem. Indeed, God is completely irresponsible . . .” (2019, 170).

It should be clear by this point that something has gone badly wrong with Häggglund’s basic understanding of Christianity. Likewise, as a philosophical matter, it could be the case that he has placed a greater confidence in his interpretation of Hegel as an atheist than would be warranted by engaging other classic interpretations, such as, for example, Emil Fackenheim’s *The Religious Dimension in Hegel’s Thought* (1967) or Quentin Lauer’s *A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (1993) or Charles Taylor’s *Hegel* (1977) or even Marx’s critique of Hegel in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1964). Since contemporary Hegel

scholarship in the English language can only be called wild in the domain over which it ranges, neither Hägglund nor anyone else can be blamed for failing to be fully accountable to so vast a secondary literature, but what makes the relevant point something more than equally tendentious on my part is that the atheist and post-Christian reading of Hegel, interwoven with Hägglund's account of the final days of Dr. King, also mutilates Dr. King in such a way as to make him unrecognizable. This is not because "Today King's radical legacy is largely forgotten" (2019, 339). It is because Hägglund dislocates King's shoulder and then kneecaps him right at the vital joint. As Hägglund rightly observes, King reported that "Hegel was his favorite philosopher" (2019, 351); also, "throughout [King's] life he expressed his appreciation of Marx's analysis of systemic injustice" (2019, 339); and he was compelled by the democratic socialism that also compels Hägglund's basic argument (e.g., 2019, 346). But Hägglund is as tone-deaf to King as he is to the Paschal Mystery in precisely the dimension that matters most to the Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church and a founder and leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

We can contrast Hägglund's tone-deaf appropriation of King with Cornel West's, in "Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual: Martin Luther King, Jr." (1999), who is also a Christian minister as well as a democratic socialist with a high appreciation of Hegel and Marx. West writes that "there are four major sources in King's thought. The first—and most important—source was *the prophetic black church tradition* . . . The second consisted of a *prophetic liberal Christianity* . . . The third source was a *prophetic Gandhian method of nonviolent social change* . . . The last source was that of *prophetic American civil religion*, which fuses secular and sacred history and combines Christian themes of deliverance and salvation with political ideals of democracy, freedom and equality" (1999, 426). This last source, concerning the *fusion* of secular and sacred history, is just what Hägglund denies. Hägglund can be as equally critical of West as of King, of course, but his interpretation of King, by contrast with West's, is implausible. He writes that even though "[the] difference between the secular and the religious may seem to be a decisive difference between Marx and King," King's "notion of God plays no role in [his] political speeches" (2019, 350). Implausibly, he continues,

When King says that "God" has commanded us to help the poor to emancipate themselves—and that he is doing "God's will" in pursuing social freedom as an end in itself—King cannot be referring to the religious notion of an eternal God, since by his own admission he cannot determine the will of such a God. The command or the will of God only makes sense if we understand the terms in a Hegelian way. "God" is the name for the communal norms that we have legislated to ourselves . . . When King pursues the struggle for social freedom as an end in itself, he is therefore committed to a secular rather than a religious cause. (2019, 375)

Hägglund continues, "The turn toward secular freedom rather than religious salvation is brought to a head in King's final speech on April 3, 1968," in which King prophetically enunciates "the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee." For Hägglund, this is "the new Memphis—*rather than* the new Jerusalem." "The spiritual cause of democratic socialism can be sustained only through secular faith" (2019, 376). "King's vision of the promised land is not a vision of eternal life—not a

vision of the new Jerusalem—but a vision of what we the people can achieve, a vision of the new Memphis” (2019, 377).

Hägglund’s controversial reading of Hegel and his implausible interpretation of King both figure into West’s alternative reading of both figures. Like Hägglund, West also observes that Hegel was King’s “favorite philosopher” (1999, 429), but “not because King was convinced of the necessary developments of the *Weltgeist* put forward in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, but rather because Hegel held that ‘growth comes through struggle’—a view King was quite disposed to, given his formation in the black church” (429).

Furthermore, King’s preferred method of looking for partial truths in opposing positions, in rejecting extremes and affirming a creative synthesis of opposing views in a tension-ridden harmony is, on the surface, Hegelian. But it is, on a deeper level, rooted in the dialectical mediation of the dualistic character of the self (spirit/nature) and world (history/eternity)—a mediation both King (in an Afro-American context) and Hegel (in a German Lutheran context) inherited from Christian thought. The point is not that King did not learn much from Hegel, but rather that Hegel was a *supplement* to King’s black church influence. (429–30)

West puts his more judicious and plausible interpretation in the following way:

The theology of the black church was, for the most part, traditionally Augustinian with an African American difference. It accented the traditional Protestant Christian doctrines of divine majesty, sovereignty, mystery, sin and grace, forgiveness and love filtered through the black experience of oppression. This filtering linked God’s plan of salvation to black liberation—*inseparable though not identical* (emphasis added)—and bestowed upon black people a divine source for self-identity—for example, as children of God—that stood in stark contrast to the cultural perceptions and social roles imposed upon them by a racist American society.

This African American difference not only highlighted the dignity of a people (as unique individuals) denied such dignity in their surroundings, but also accented the strong universalist and egalitarian Christian *imago [Dei]* notion of all persons having equal value and significance in the eyes of God. In this way, the black church put forward perspectives that encouraged both individuality and community fellowship, personal morality and antiracist political engagement, a grace-centered piety and a stress on Christian good works. To put it crudely, the black church attempted to provide a theological route through the Scylla of a quietistic, priestly American Christianity that legitimated racism and the Charybdis of a secular (self-righteous) Promethean view that elevated human powers at the expense of divine grace and divine aid. (1999, 428)

“In this way,” West concludes, “the black church’s influence on King’s views is the most *primordial* and *decisive* source of his thought” (1999, 429). Whereas Hägglund has King forsaking

the “new Jerusalem” for the “new Memphis,” as if the one excluded the other, Häggglund’s “secular faith” excludes “religious faith” and actually depends on its cancellation.

I will conclude by starting again at the beginning. In a pattern that repeats itself with the same automaticity as his bad abstraction of the eternal, Häggglund gives us C.S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*, but not *Surprised by Joy*. He gives us Augustine’s account of the death of his unnamed friend in Book 4 of the *Confessions*, but not his account of the death of his mother Monica in Book 9; an Augustine who advises, “Love, . . . but be careful what you love” (2019, 79), but not an Augustine who advises, “Love and do what you will” (2023). He gives us Kierkegaard’s account of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac without giving us the context of the problems within which this account is situated; in which Abraham maintains his silence in the presence of Sarah his wife, Eliezer his servant, and Isaac his beloved son; in which the pseudonymous author Johannes de Silentio’s constant refrain is that he does not understand Abraham; and in which the “Eulogy on Abraham” begins:

If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting power that writhing in dark passions produced everything, be it significant or insignificant, if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair? If such were the situation, if there were no sacred bond that knit humankind together, if one generation emerged after another like forest foliage, if one generation succeeded another like the singing of birds in the forest, if a generation passed through the world as a ship through the sea, as wind through the desert, an unthinking and unproductive performance, if an eternal oblivion, perpetually hungry, lurked for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrench that away from it—how empty and devoid of consolation life would be! But precisely for that reason it is not so . . . .  
(Kierkegaard 1983, 15)

Whether it is C. S. Lewis, or Augustine, or Kierkegaard, Häggglund’s pattern is the same. Concerning Lewis’s grief over the death of Joy Davidman, he writes, “The commitment to his beloved that animates *A Grief Observed* is . . . at odds with Lewis’s commitment to God. As a longstanding reader of Christian theology, he is well aware that he is not supposed to love mortal beings as ends in themselves but only as means toward the love of God” (2019, 42). So it is that Häggglund thinks that the lesson Augustine learned from the death of his friend in Book 4 of the *Confessions* is that he should not have loved his friend as an end in himself, nor could Abraham, in his willing obedience to God’s command, love Isaac as an end in himself, nor could God the Heavenly Father love Jesus his only Son as an end in himself, nor could any one of us love one another as ends in ourselves if our love were imbued with religious faith and a hope for eternal life.

This pattern of reasoning is so unrecognizably distant from what we actually know of the lives of Lewis, Augustine, Kierkegaard, and King as to make Christianity itself unrecognizable. Because this misrecognition is necessary to Häggglund’s argument, however, the bad abstraction of eternity, one cannot help but conclude that this is the kind of book that would be persuasive only to the already persuaded. No longstanding reader of Christian theology would recognize the gospel in Häggglund’s *This Life*.

## Religion and its Cultured Despisers: Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paul Tillich, the Social Gospel, and the Religious Dimension of Secular Faith

Theodore Grey Dedon

### Sensing and Tasting the Infinite

Friedrich Schleiermacher, at the turn of the nineteenth century, reflected on the fact that religion was in decline. To him, the cultured or educated in his society were turning, on mass, away from religion and, in many cases, despised it. To religion's "cultured despisers," as Schleiermacher famously called them, he mounted a defense as to what religion is and why it mattered—something, he said, that was graspable most readily through human imagination (1996, 18–19). Religion, according to Schleiermacher, is not deductive, but instead is inductive and descriptive. Religion was discernable to its cultured despisers as something which validated status quo power structures, rested on irrational superstition, and partially held humanity back in what Immanuel Kant famously described as its self-incurred childlike state.

Religion, contra its despisers, was something for Schleiermacher that was integral for developing the whole human person, arising out of the heart—never appearing in a pure state; or at least never being communicable purely in human language (1996, 21).<sup>17</sup> It was, as he even more famously put it, a feeling of absolute dependence; something which allows for humans to intuit the infinite through a sense and taste for it (1996, 22, 39, 46, 57, 68, 100).<sup>18</sup> Intuition of this sort, he believed, comes from the divine source—namely God—and helps individuals situate themselves as parts of the whole, and this intuition of the divine is an individual phenomenon. He cautioned people from creating religious systems that imposed themselves on the universe. Religion, better understood, is the "causal nexus" that looks at the relation of every part to the greater whole, looking to understand how the finite relates to and oscillates with the infinite. In this way, only religion as Schleiermacher sees it gives way to a true system, as it is "immediate and true for itself," dealing with the immediacy of *Gefühl* for an individual.

Against systems, Schleiermacher gives the illustration of the "infinite dimension of sensible intuition" of a starry sky—something that one can indeed impose images onto but is only to the detriment of seeing the thing as it is (Lamm 1996, 63–64). For example, one can imagine a constellation, but that constellation is not so because it was drawn that way, it is so only because we imagined it and imposed it onto the fullness of the night's sky. In this way, one should let go of childish images that create sensuous or relatable patterns and let the mystery of the cosmic structure exist as something to be intuited and experienced. Against *systems* as full expressions of reality rendered infinite, he cautions both the believer and the

---

<sup>17</sup> Schleiermacher believes that religious concepts can be "thinkable" and from this a concept can be formed and then spoken or argued about. But it does not start as language, and religion is not purely linguistic, even though it has linguistic elements. Religion, he says, "never appears in a pure state," and he analogizes that point to the natural environment, which provides us through nature, "no primal element" to experience as its product.

<sup>18</sup> On this, Schleiermacher says "everything finite exists only through the determination of its limits, which must, as it were, 'be cut out' out of the infinite" (1996, 24). And regarding intuition along with feeling, he claims that contra action and thinking, the former are religion's "essence" (1996, 22).

cultured despisers from being lost in our finitude (1996, 13). With systems attempting to frame the infinite itself, one is left lost, you might say, in the particulars contra the universal or the parts contra the whole codified in human language or traditions. Schleiermacher was responding, while initially taking a swipe at those who rejected religious sentiment whole cloth, against those whose systems closed it down. He opposed any concocted frameworks that limited reality as such by making the claim that their system solved the great mystery of life, the universe, and everything.

What was needed, against this “mania for systems,” was an embrace of eternity—an aim at mystical union with the divine and communion with our fellow humans in community (1996, 32, 54). It is through our imagination that we can intuit things infinite, beyond our limitations, if only as a glimpse and for a moment. But it is not just in our mere glimpse of the infinite that human beings are called to find meaning and develop our religious sense, Schleiermacher suggests. Our sense and taste for the infinite is, as it were, bound to our finitude—to our mortality—and that is why community is ultimately so important. Human finitude is something to be cultivated, even celebrated, as it is through that finitude we can further grasp what the infinite is by negation. In all human action, he argues, be it moral, philosophical, or artistic, we strive towards virtuosity—and virtuosity explicitly, in this understanding, ought to be aimed at perfecting to the best of our abilities our finite qualities and our finite experience. Virtue, aimed at perfecting finite life—*this life*—is life’s very melody, reflecting the infinite (1996, 47–48). And without religion, not defined as one religious tradition or another but constituting a sense and taste for things ultimate, ultimate concerns, and indeed *God* most ultimate, life’s melody, he says, is only in an individual’s tone—not part of the cosmic symphony. It is out of communion, to use Martin Luther King’s phrase, with the beloved community, or, to use Maximus the Confessor’s phrase, with the Cosmic Liturgy.

### The Religious Dimension of Secular Faith

Schleiermacher’s warning about a mania for systems and the growth of religion’s cultured despisers still rings true in our day. There is neither a shortage of texts providing maps of meaning nor is there a shortage of texts skeptical, even hostile towards religion itself. But, justified as some hostility may be against religious belief and traditions, there is often a great gulf of misunderstanding. A defense of tradition and religious belief often mounted against religion’s cultured despisers, still today, is they often do not know what they speak of and misrepresent the tradition. Speaking in memes or stereotypes, these cultured despisers miss the mark from their understanding of God to their representation of theological thought. Martin Hägglund, different from most, is not doing that. His text *This Life* makes many excellent points regarding religious belief and its consequences, but despite that, makes a critical error. That error, discussed in the introduction above, is a misunderstanding of the relationship between the spiritual (religious/eternal/infinite) and the temporal (secular/historical/finite) orders basic to much of Christian theology. But it would be a misrepresentation of Hägglund himself, however, if his own understanding of the divine was not grounded here more clearly. Rather than dismissing traditions fully, Hägglund’s (2021) immanent critique of religion shows “God,” and therefore the “special object,” of faith is best understood as a normative name for the good. Following G.W.F. Hegel, religious traditions

hold *social practice*, including their shared set of norms constituting the good, as having primacy. The divine is nothing other than a form of social life in this framing.

Hägglund's secular notion of the divine negates the idea of an eternal and salvific God. It does this, he believes, in order to "preserve and fulfill the commitment to building a life of mutual trust" (2021). It is from this point that Hägglund seeks to reinterpret Martin Luther King, Jr. (and ostensibly anyone similar) as being better understood in secular terms. King's *living* faith, a faith implicit in his practice and commitment to emancipation, is more sensible than as a *secular* rather than religious faith. Hägglund grounds the notion that King's was a secular faith as evidenced by the fact that a huge portion of his writings, his sermons, his speeches, and his general activism was concerned primarily with things *here* rather than *hereafter*. This is reasonable if one takes Hegel's notion as sufficient in itself. In that framing, what Hägglund says makes sense. But from many perspectives throughout the Christian tradition, it is a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between the spiritual and temporal orders. Hägglund may, and indeed seems to, reject that relationship as valid or even useful, but grounding these commitments as secular rather than religious does not account for their proper ordering. The spiritual order, not *social practice*, has primacy (Maritain 2020). The divine, the spiritual order itself, *is more* than social practice.

Paul Tillich, someone upon whom Hägglund leans for his understanding of religious faith, explains this well. Seven years after *Dynamics of Faith* (1956), Tillich develops some of these positions in the shorter, but more precise *Morality and Beyond* (1963). Much as Hägglund asserted, Tillich makes the claim that the gospel is concerned with "the message of reconciliation and reunion with God as the Ground and Aim of our being," but outlines the multitudinous problems with how that is perceived (1963, 13). Attending to the notion that theological ethics, and ethics in general, is an "element of systematic theology," Tillich addresses the problem of secular ethics obliterating its religious dimension. Because many institutions within Christianity—and it seems reasonable to think he means many traditions outside of it—have turned to what he calls "graceless moralism," it is "understandable that people . . . turn to secular ethics" (1963, 14). When they turn to secular ethics, however, people are left wanting, finding little more than some logical analysis of ethical theories, and then fall into "cynical relativism" or "totalitarian absolutism." Can there even be, Tillich wondered, something which points beyond these limited positions, towards something *more* ultimate, grounding ethical theory and moral action?

To understand what a moral imperative is, Tillich discerns three functions of the human spirit. "Morality is," Tillich wrote, "the constitution of the bearer of the spirit, the centered person; culture points to the creativity of the spirit and also to the totality of its creations; and religion is the self-transcendence of the spirit toward what is ultimate and unconditioned in being and meaning" (1963, 18). This self-transcendence is not—against Hägglund's discussion of religion often leaving one resigned from the world in a state of flight or quietude—an individual endeavor. This function of the human spirit, a religious one specifically, is the thing that grounds a human's imperative to be and act moral. Rather than a self-oriented or resigned vantage point, Tillich says definitively, "the moral imperative is the command to become what one potentially is, a *person* within a community of persons" (1963, 19).

Humans, to this moral imperative, have a “dual relationship” to the world. Humans, in the limit of their own experience, can become persons in as much as a human is a fully centered self (not self-centered) and has a self to face the world they are in. This self that one has, however, is *separated*—not only from other human beings, but also from the ground and source of their being a self at all. Thus, as “a centered self and individual,” a human may respond in knowledge and action from stimuli in the world to which he properly belongs but is not fully a part of (Tillich 1963, 19). Humans, given that they can choose to neglect this moral imperative, can act against it—surrendering themselves to the disintegrating forces which result in further separation both from community and from God. Regarding this world humans are a part of, Tillich makes it clear that we indeed have a sense of it; we know the world is real and can sense its many parts and comprehend, though in a limited fashion, that it has a whole. This is the *cosmos* as such. Humans, unlike other animals, have more than a mere space to live in; we can sense our environment, its limitations, and therefore the *cosmos* as something more than the world we inhabit currently. Humans can, Tillich says, “transcend it in any direction, in imagination, thought and action (e.g., social utopias or ontological concepts or space exploration)” (1963, 19).

Hägglund, to Tillich’s understanding of the world and humanity’s place in it, still would surely situate this all within the realm of the secular. And he would, from his secular notion of the divine, be right to do this. Being able to transcend our environment, or sense our own limitations, is precisely what makes the fragile state of humanity so worth protecting. The sheer *loss* of human life and sociality is what, to Hägglund, grounds the possibility of a truer and deeper love than even what Augustine described theologically (Hägglund 2019, 72–74, 78, 84). It is the life of a person one loves, a *particular person* one loves, that makes such a loss so challenging and worth protecting. But Tillich asks us, given the moral imperative he lays out, to consider life and love beyond the particular. He says, “man never encounters *this* tree only as *this* tree, but also as *tree*, one of many trees . . .” (1963, 20).<sup>19</sup> Humanity’s essential freedom is in that one can sense the particular *in* the universal and the universal *in* the particular, having a much better grasp on their limits and the relationship of the parts to the whole without ever losing sight of the parts in the first place. This, to Tillich, is what grounds the notion that the moral imperative makes a demand on humans to “become actually what one is essentially and therefore potentially” (1963, 20). One’s true being is not the mere connection they have with one person they love or their individual ego-self; it is, *instead*, that their being is the being of a

---

<sup>19</sup> Schleiermacher also makes this point. In *Spinozistisches System*, Schleiermacher says of the principle of inherency, that “there has to be an Infinite, within which everything finite exists.” Schleiermacher attempts to draw parallels with Baruch Spinoza’s infinite substance and Immanuel Kant’s noumena but ultimately settles on a sort of replacement wherein he modifies both of the two for his own organic monism. To explain how he viewed this system, and especially how it was a modification of Spinoza and Kant, he uses the metaphor of a tree. The universe, “represented by a tree, is comprised of infinitely many things and of an infinite succession of these things. This fluctuation of becoming in the tree continues on to infinity; there is no cause outside of the tree,” Julia Lamm says of this metaphor used by Schleiermacher. The concept to gain from this metaphor is to understand that for Schleiermacher, the parts are known through the whole and the parts are whole in themselves. There is a sense of the *Many and the One* in a tension which oscillates back and forth allowing for the reality which actually exists to paint a much bigger picture than any one part specifically. As with any branch on a tree, it would be only in relation to the tree itself, but also as a branch in itself—so to illustrate with the tree, Schleiermacher makes use of that image to explain that tension (see Lamm 1996, 26–32).



person in a community of persons. To Tillich, contra Hägglund's understanding of how religion makes demands on the world, "a moral act is not an act in obedience to an external law, human or divine" (1963, 20). It is, instead, the inner law of what makes humanity as such the driving force behind moral action. An antimoral act, therefore, is precisely the thing which contradicts self-realization of any given human person—which puts Tillich very much in line with Hägglund's sense of spiritual freedom.

Still, however, this does not make Tillich's claims religious explicitly. It is in the negation of moral action, the neglect of one's imperative, that Tillich senses the religious dimension at play. To Tillich, much like Schleiermacher, humans have a *sense* of the infinite by virtue of their finitude. Tillich says, "the only limit is man's own finitude. But no one can actually establish this limit" (1963, 36). We have, because of this awareness of a limit at all, an ability to *affirm* or *negate* ourselves on a personal level. It is in our sense of infinity that we understand that humanity, at least in some way, belongs to it. This is how humanity exists at the intersection of the spiritual and temporal, not in one or the other exclusively. To Tillich, indeed, it comes to the "doctrine of the infinite value of every human soul in the view of the Eternal" (1963, 24). Each individual, affirming or denying their personhood, has a soul; each individual, affirming or denying their personhood, by their very nature has a sense and taste for the infinite by possessing it. This, of course, is dogmatic; it is not provable. But the possession of a soul is a dogma surely believed by Martin Luther King no matter his commitment to social practice.

By possessing souls, Tillich holds, we have a conscience. The conscience, in his framing, is the channel through which the moral imperative is experienced. To him, it is not *merely* religious, but it has an explicitly religious dimension. Beyond just faith, "the fundamental concept of religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, by an infinite interest, by something one takes unconditionally seriously" (1963, 30). And this is the premise on which he grounds the moral imperative to become a human person in a community of persons. Detached from a traditional creedal sense of what religion is institutionally, one is left with what he called "graceless moralism." When taking the religious to mean something more than graceless moralism, we are called to move beyond limits—towards things *more* ultimate. He says, "if the moral imperative were derived from religion in the traditional sense of the word, secular ethics would have to sever any ties with religion, for it rejects direct dependence on any particular religion" (1963, 30). This is, it seems, what Hägglund is doing, at least in part, critiquing belief in eternity and grounding the divine in the secular. But Tillich contends that if "the religious element is intrinsic to the moral imperative, no conflict is necessary" (1963, 30). Secular faith, of the sort Hägglund desires, can be found *within* religious faith grounding the moral imperative. That moral imperative, it seems, is precisely the same sort that underpins the likes of Martin Luther King and so many others that Hägglund insists are more concerned with things in *this life* rather than animated by anything beyond it. The religious and secular are interconnected, even if one asserts the primacy of the spiritual.

### Spirituality for Social Engagement

The problem at the heart of Hägglund's text is this fundamental contention with tradition. The spiritual, according to many historical theologies, has primacy over the temporal. Grounding the spiritual in the temporal, sensible in ways, is not acceptable if one *believes* in eternity. Thus, for Hägglund's proposal to have the purchase he desires, it is wise to reconsider

wherein exclusivist language—rooted in cultured despol of religion—holds it back. Where it would have greater insight, and perhaps greater influence, is if *he* wrote against the cultured despisers, rather than alongside and for them. As an example, Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign, an icon for Hägglund's secular-divine social practice, is still around today. Not run by atheists, secularists, or indifferentists, it is still as it was in his time, run by clergy with religious faith. Revs. Liz Theoharris and William Barber, II, still ground social commitments in the gospel, but it does not, as Hägglund suggests, seem to be best understood in secular terms. The Social Gospel movement, a movement intertwined with the ambition of emancipation through abolition, has always been about bridging the gap between heaven and earth. Spiritual primacy makes temporal demands, for these types. Had Hägglund made it clear this was a sensible, coherent framework for these thinkers, rather than better understood as something else entirely, he would not have faced such criticism.

Walter Rauschenbusch, an American social activist at the turn of the twentieth century, explicitly linked personal salvation to ideal social ordering in his concept of social sin. To him, any doctrine of salvation must be kept closely interrelated with a concept of sin. His goal in linking them was ambitious. Their linkage would result in "set[ting] forth the necessity and the possibility of redeeming the historical life of humanity from the social wrongs which now pervade it and which act as temptations and incitements to evil and as forces of resistance to powers of redemption." The Social Gospel, as he called it, is chiefly interested in "those manifestations of sin and redemption which lie beyond the individual soul" (Haight, Pach, and Kaminski 2023, 25). Again, as has been so often the case, this is a communal effort, but not *merely* social practice. Remedying the social wrongs that redeem the historical life of humanity is not a different motivation from Hägglund, even if Rauschenbusch's language is explicitly Christian whereas his would be secular.

This linguistic difference ought not to be a divide, but instead a bridge. Attending to precisely this gap between the rhetoric of biblical or theological language with socialist concerns, Rauschenbusch lamented much in the same way as Schleiermacher a century before him. The socialist movement, to Rauschenbusch, represented the Kingdom of God "with God left out." On how the Social Gospel movement synthesized these two strands, Gary Dorrien said that "despite their antireligious posture, the socialists had become the keepers of the biblical dream that society could be organized for the sake of all its people" (1990, 26). Rauschenbusch determined that even though socialists took this antireligious posture very often, their movement had become *more Christian* than many churches, given their aim of fraternity. This project of Brotherhood—of making a fraternity of human beings on earth—was to Rauschenbusch a recovery of the vision laid out in biblical texts. Dorrien noted that for Rauschenbusch, "while heaven *is* heaven, it must also come to earth; while it begins in the depths of human hearts, it is not meant to stay there . . ." (1990, 26). The Kingdom, utilizing biblical language, was for Rauschenbusch the "sum of all divine and righteous forces on earth" (see Rauschenbusch 1984, 71–74; Dorrien 1990, 26–27).

For Rauschenbusch and so many others before and after him, not alien at all to Hägglund's project, it is interesting to see historical traps reemerge. Where there is no doubt Christians and other believers in the eternal utilize theological or scriptural language to benefit the status quo, there are many alternatives which have in the past and will again in the future emerge to counter them. Rauschenbusch, as well as many of those influenced by the Social

Gospel, argued precisely for an increase in economic and political democracy, articulating that without dispersing ownership of capital there would be no freedom in any social order (Dorrien 1990, 47). These positions, rather than being in error or misguided or misrepresented as secular and not religious are, instead, allies. The ecumenical path must be wide—aimed not at proselytism, but conversion.

Paul Tillich, addressing the economic problem for the social question, described his contemporary situation as one *devoid* of spirituality for social engagement. In *The Religious Situation*, Tillich's first commercial success, he built upon Max Weber's thesis on the spirit of capitalism. In an unrelenting drive to provide the most consumers with the most commodities, Tillich said of capitalism that it "seeks to arouse and satisfy ever increasing demands without raising the question as to the meaning of the process which claims the service of all the spiritual and physical human abilities" (1956, 47–48). To Tillich, going further than Weber, this was spiritually deracinating. The economic regime was in his mind one which rationalized selfishness as "there is no trace of self transcendence, of the hallowing of existence[;] the forms of the life-process have become completely independent of the source of life and its meaning" (1956, 48). Well before his flight to the United States following the rise of National Socialism in Germany, Tillich was making the case that the two movements, socialist and Christian, could find common cause. On this, Dorrien notes that Tillich's belief was that "a transfigured, prophetic Protestantism could forge an alliance with the proletarian movement, based on the common presuppositions that the human situation is perverted and that history is driven by conflict and greed" (1990, 63). Even Tillich is falling into the same trap as Hägglund, limiting his attempt at bridge-making with economic progressivism to Protestantism rather than all people of goodwill.

It is precisely in this sort of language, exclusivist or not, that Dorrien believes figures like Rauschenbusch, Tillich, and many others offer much to the contemporary liberationist project. Hägglund's text, for example, is the sort which would have benefitted as much, perhaps even more, should it have offered a bridge to secular thinkers explaining the religious dimension of secular faith for many religious believers making common progressive cause. Before the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s, where Hägglund situates the best of secular faith in the modern world, the Black Church in the United States was laying the theological ground. In what Gary Dorrien calls the New Abolition, there was a deep fusion of the historic struggle for liberation from slavery with the contemporary Social Gospel movement. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., born in 1865 and a contemporary of Walter Rauschenbusch, often spoke of the need for a synthesis between progressive politics and theology. Powell's sermons are further evidence of the religious dimension of secular faith, lived out in Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign decades later. King, certainly formed by Powell's tradition much more than any other, would almost certainly share the same commitments. Powell's sermons spoke not about getting men into heaven, but "heaven into men," and not keeping men out of hell, but getting "hell out of man." He said, "when you get a man into heaven, he is not worth anything more to his family and the world; but when you get heaven into him, you have done a great deal for Christ and humanity" (1939, 98–99; Dorrien 2015, 430–31). Through the primacy of the spiritual, for these Social Gospellers, you can change the world.

The world, in this tradition, is not forgotten. One has *faith in the world*. One has what Hägglund calls *secular faith*. But one is not bound to that limitation, looking only at things of

this world and in this life. The two are intertwined and it is through our engagement *in the world* and *in this life* that we are spiritually animated for social change. After all, we are, from this perspective, spiritual beings in possession of a soul. Powell, at the turn of the twentieth century, contended precisely with Hägglund's fundamental critique of a belief in eternity. Even, one might say, Hägglund's point about eternity relegating us to the status quo is partially defended by Powell but pushed further still. In *The Significance of the Hour*, a sermon-turned-pamphlet distributed at a revival, Powell says at length:

The majority of men do not care a lollipop about church doctrines, they are looking for practical application of the Spirit of Jesus in the everyday life of our members. . . . While we have fought over useless creeds, the doors of hell have been crowded with those whom we should have saved. Acquaintance with church creeds does not save men. This is the most damaging mistake the church and clergy have made. (1939, 107)

The fundamental concern for Powell in this sermon and pamphlet was not an overconcern with eternity. It was the opposite. It was about saving the world, in light of eternal concerns, as “the hour of the world's redemption from sin” was at hand for people *in this life* (Dorrien 2015, 430–31). Not in maintaining the status quo, not in resigning from worldly concerns in faith or religiosity, but the hour was at hand, borne in spirituality lived out for social engagement. This is precisely the sort of commitment at the *base* of the long struggle for freedom from all forms of slavery, both in the Abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century and the New Abolition which would grow into the struggle for civil and human rights in the twentieth. This contrasts explicitly with Hägglund's understanding of what religion is in the first place. Religious faith, according to Hägglund, has a different motivational structure from secular faith. Secular faith, unlike its religious counterpart, maintains *concern* as part of what one strives for (2019, 77). Very clearly, to Powell and to many others like him, being concerned is what one strives for; resting in peace with God is something more ultimate. They are not exclusive. Rather, religious faith strengthens, animates, and sustains said *concern*. That *is* the religious dimension of secular faith.

Going back to Tillich's point about secular and religious ethics, religious faith and secular faith do not need to be separated. Should we accept their full separation, then surely faith in things worldly needs to be grounded outside of religious commitments. Should we reject this separation, it is more useful to recover their distinction and recognize their difference. For many religious people, religious faith grounds their secular concerns regarding themselves, their families, and their communities. The moral imperative, driving humans to become persons in a community of persons, requires faith in the world. There is a deep need for faith in the world because spiritual authority has made it clear, in traditions, institutions, scriptures, and the deeper sense of an inner commandment to become whole, that the world is the environment in which this actually happens. Separating the two may be useful for some, but alien for most.

The very foundation of spirituality aimed at social engagement “must include a dimension of concern for and engagement in life in the world” (Haight, Pach, and Kaminski 2023, 136). Social engagement, rooted in spirituality, takes place in the arena of *this life in this world*. Rejecting that logic will only make it more likely that those who continue to connect the two,

rather than separate them, have a monopoly on the social outcomes which defend the status quo. Hägglund's critique of religion is useful in as much as it serves not as a model, but a reminder. It is a reminder in a sense for religious people, animated by their ultimate concerns, to recognize their capacity for transforming the world based on their spiritual commitments. Socially engaged spirituality, maximizing our freedom as persons in a community of persons, may well contribute to the outcomes desired by Hägglund. Insisting that a belief in eternity is undesirable or in error, maintaining a need for separation between the spiritual and temporal, may prove to do just the opposite of what Hägglund wants. Religion's cultured despisers continuously, whether in the nineteenth, twentieth, or now twenty-first centuries, make this mistake.

Hägglund finishes his text by saying his program demonstrates that we can emancipate ourselves from the bonds of the contemporary social order, but it will take political will. We can "overcome and move forward—not toward the new Jerusalem but toward the new Memphis, the new Los Angeles, the new Chicago, the new New Haven, and the new New York" (2019, 389). This can only be done, he concludes, "if we grasp that everything is at stake in what we do with our finite time together." Humanity only has, he says, "a chance to make it a reality if we help one another to own our only life." The problem with his text is demonstrated very clearly in this sentiment. For many religious people, building the New Jerusalem *is* building the new Chicago or Memphis. These are not puritanical or colonial start-ups for the religious believer, but social transformations of the actually existing cities and communities we already have. To get there, he maintains it will require both political action but also theoretical reflection, general strikes and rational arguments. All of this, fine as it is, has rarely leveled society without the fervor which comes animated by spirituality for social engagement.

To Hägglund, "all forms of political theology are antidemocratic," as they assume a higher authority—a spiritual authority—above "we the people" (2019, 388). But if one recognizes that this point of order is not the case, a whole new world of possibility is open and available for the taking. When one reflects on the life they own, the life they live, the community they are a part of, and the world they inhabit, they will see how quickly it passes. Fragile, yes, finite as well, but ultimately consequential in light of things even more ultimate and consequential still. What one does in this world and in this life reverberates through time—reflected in eternity. Yet, as Tillich says, we never encounter this or that tree as something apart from *trees*. The same is true of our lives. The same is true of life itself. My mortal life is one among others, called to become a person in a community of persons. For religion's cultured despisers, rejecting that notion altogether, they miss a grand tradition fit for common cause. Rauschenbusch put it well, proclaiming, "yet we must seek [the common good] with faith . . . at best there is always but an approximation to a perfect social order. The Kingdom of God is always but coming. But every approximation is worthwhile" (1907, 420–21). Do you know what that is worth? Imagine it—and we will make Heaven a place on Earth!

### Bibliography

- Allen, Woody. 1989. *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Orion Pictures, feature film.
- Augustine. 2023. "Homily 7 on the First Epistle of John." <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170207.htm>.

- Chappel, James. 2019. "Democracy Without God." *Boston Review of Books*. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/james-g-chappel-martin-hagglund/>.
- Cone, James. 1980. *The Black Church and Marxism: What Do They Have to Say to Each Other?* New York: Institute for Democratic Socialism.
- Davidson, Donald. 2004. "The Objectivity of Values." In *The Problems of Rationality*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Dorrien, Gary. 1990. *Reconstructing the Common Good: Theology and the Social Order*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2015. *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2019. *Social Democracy in the Making: Political & Religious Roots of European Socialism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Epicurus. 2012. "Letter to Menoeceus." In *The Art of Happiness*, trans. George K. Strodach. London: Penguin Books.
- Hägglund, Martin. 2011. "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction: A Reply to John Caputo." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11, 2:126–50.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2019. *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. New York: Anchor.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2021. "Marx, Hegel, and the Critique of Religion: A Response." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/marx-hegel-and-the-critique-of-religion-a-response/>.
- Hebblethwaite, Peter. 1977. *The Christian-Marxist Dialogue: Beginnings, Present Status, and Beyond*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Haight, Roger, Alfred Pach, and Avila Kaminski, eds. 2023. *Spiritualities for Social Engagement: Walter Rauschenbusch and Dorothy Day*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 2019. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Peter Fuss and John Dobbins. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2010. *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, rev. trans. Dennis J. Schmidt. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hume, David. 1985. *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller. Indianapolis: LibertyClassics.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1983. *Fear and Trembling*. In *Fear and Trembling/Repetition, Kierkegaard's Writings*, Volume 6. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lamm, Julia. 1996. *The Living God: Schleiermacher's Theological Appropriation of Spinoza*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2014. "Schleiermacher's Spirituality: An Introduction." In *Christmas Dialogue, The Second Speech, and Other Selections*. Mahwah: Paulist.

- Maritain, Jacques. 2020. *The Primacy of the Spiritual: On the Things That Are Not Caesar's*. Providence: CLUNY Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1978. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition, ed. Robert Tucker. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- McGovern, Arthur. 1980. *Marxism: An American Christian Perspective*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Murray, Patrick. 2016. *The Mismeasure of Wealth*. Leiden: Brill.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2020. "Marx, Berkeley, and Bad Abstraction." In *Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory*, ed. Angel Oliva, Antonio Oliva, and Ivan Novara, 129–49. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Murray, Patrick, and Jeanne Schuler. 2023. *False Moves in Philosophy and Social Theory: Losing Public Purpose*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 1990. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Postone, Moishe. 1978. "Necessity, Labor, and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism." *Social Research* 45 (4):739–88.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Powell Sr., Adam Clayton. 1939. *Palestine and Saints in Caesar's Household*. New York: Richard B. Smith.
- Rauschenbusch, Walter. 1907. *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. New York: Hodder & Stoughton/Macmillan.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1912. *Christianizing the Social Order*. New York: Macmillan.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1917. *Theology for the Social Gospel*. New York: Macmillan.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1984. *Selected Writings*, ed. Winthrop Hudson. New York: Paulist.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. 1992. "On Freedom (1790-1792)." In *Schleiermacher: Studies-and-Translations*, Vol. 9. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, ed. Richard Crouter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2014. "Brief Presentation of the Spinozistic System." In *A Facing-Page Translation from German into English of Friedrich Schleiermacher's Kurze Darstellung des Spinozistischen Systems and Spinozismus*, trans. Patrick D. Dinsmore. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich, and Julia A. Lamm. 2014. *Schleiermacher: Christmas Dialogue, the Second Speech, and Other Selections*. Mahwah: Paulist.
- Seneca. 1969. *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell. London: Penguin.

- Tillich, Paul. 1954. *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1956. *The Religious Situation*. Cleveland: Meridian.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1963. *Morality and Beyond*. New York: Harper & Row.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1977. *The Socialist Decision*. New York: Harper & Row.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2009. *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: HarperOne.
- West, Cornell. 1999. "Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual: Martin Luther King, Jr." In *The Cornell West Reader*, 425–34. New York: Civitas.
- Williams, Bernard. 1972. *Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wood, Allen W. 1981. *Karl Marx*. London: Routledge.