

## BOOK REVIEW

**THIS LIFE: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom, by Martin Hägglund. New York, Anchor Books, 2019 (450 pp.)**

Addressed to both religious and secular audiences (p. 13), *This Life* offers a challenge to those who believe in eternal life and a proposal to those who continue to ask whether such exists after death. The author, Martin Hägglund, is convinced that although spiritual freedom is the goal of each life, but this must not be understood in the religious sense that we live a life in the here and now in preparation for a world (far more real) to come. Instead, we are to live with conviction and commitment to do something responsible as we spend our time together in this world. Death, human finitude, reminds us of our vulnerabilities, but at the same time it calls us to hold on to faith that something more can be done other than spending our time in fear.

But how are we to courageously live without the reward of heaven and more so the assurance of redemption? Without faith in eternal life, the invitation or challenge is to live in “secular faith.” In contradistinction to religious faith, *secular faith* puts emphasis on the importance of caring for our own lives and the lives of others. Whether there is heaven or hell, neither matter, life is worth living. In fact, by abandoning both heaven and hell, one expresses the greatest commitment – and thus the greatest act of faith – by believing that this life is worth living even without a post-human eschaton.

Precisely why (secular) faith is a truly human phenomenon; it is a practical commitment (p. 45). It leads us to a more profound commitment to the life we live (p. 30) more importantly in our struggles to transform the here and now without waiting for a New Jerusalem in a world out there. The author invokes Aristotle who argues that “even our most immediate emotions are intelligible only in terms of the beliefs to which we are committed” (p. 45). Life is meaningful because we believe that it has a value and a purpose. In fact, the reason why faith cannot be faith in something which is eternal is that eternity is an attempt “to absolve” us “from the pain of loss” (p. 47). While it may appear more hopeful to believe in a life after death, however, there is an element of alienation between the human person and “this life” if eternal life is used to anesthetize the suffering and loss that are genuine constitutions of human temporality. Precisely, being human means to “remain vulnerable to a pain that no strength can fully master” and it is not, and it should not be the goal of the human person to overcome this vulnerability but instead “recognize that it is an essential part of why our lives matter” (p. 49).

Secular faith, therefore, is both an “existential commitment” and a “necessary certainty” (p. 50). It animates both our “relation to what we want to protect” and that which we “aspire to achieve” (p. 51). Our commitments determine how we live and define “love” and “responsibility.” Christianity clearly teaches that we are to do good to the least of our brethren because doing so is part of a higher vocation that ultimately finds fullness in life eternal. However, do we really need to love others only because there is a God who calls us to do so? Is our responsibility to society (and say the environment or creation) something that matters only because there is a God (a creator) from whom all good things come (to borrow the words of one of the Eucharistic Prayers)?

On the contrary, and this is the author’s point, this is where Christianity (particularly Saint Augustine) falls short in truly understanding love in relation to faith. The Church Father who teaches us that the ultimate object of our love should be God and not the creatures of this world – epitomizes what is common an existential crisis among men: of not owning our lives and of running away from the pains and sufferings that are basically part of it. Citing Augustine, the author critiques how people prefer to turn “towards the eternity of God” so as not to be “fixed to sorrows” because “all things that are temporal will cease to be” (p. 85). But the attempt to console ourselves – of looking up to or searching for a higher being to love prevents us from owning our lives. The eternalization of love stops us from human-ly experiencing the consequences of our temporal commitments. For to truly love is to own “what you do” and “put yourself at stake” and thus “recognize in practice that” one’s life “depends on the fate” of one’s commitments (p. 94). Real love is best lived in the context of ownership of one’s life not because of God but because one feels responsible to commit to the persons and things that one cares. As the author puts it in the last part of the chapter on Responsibility: “[o]nly someone who is committed – only someone who is bound by something other than herself – can be responsible. Only someone who is committed can care. And only someone who is finite can be committed” (p. 170).

The need to commit vis-à-vis the finitude of human existence leads us to one of the book’s significant themes: spiritual freedom. One can’t make a commitment without spiritual freedom which is distinguished from natural freedom. The difference is “not a matter of metaphysical substance” (p. 176) but of the very practical difference which human beings exhibit in comparison to animals. The former therefore is something proper to human beings only. We are spiritually free when we “engage the question of what should I do with my time as a question” (p. 196). By engaging and answering this question the

human being commits, and by this it is meant that he or she makes a choice, that is, a self-giving that is concrete in the attention and value he or she gives to those who are worth the time. This however won't mean anything if there is an eternity beyond death. Death which is the horizon of finitude makes significant anything and everything within the latitude of temporality. Thus, death is the necessary horizon of life (p. 200); it renders "intelligible all necessary relations of ... life" (p. 200).

The author devotes the fifth chapter discussing "The Value of Our Finite Time." Using Marx's notion of species-being, which is the ability to engage our life-activity as a free activity, the author advances his position that it is only in our finiteness that we can lead a spiritual life. From Marx we learn that the goal of our struggles is not ultimately economic but humanistic (even though we fight for economic freedom this is only so because we need to address alienation that is veiled by oppressive structures and economic relations). Applied to the concept of labor, the German philosopher would say that "man is his labor" which means that who we are is not separable from what we do and how we do it. This concept or view however, presupposes that there is freedom – but one that can only be achieved if find ways to end the immanent contradictions that make us unfree. This leads us back to our author's emphasis on "commitment" which cannot but be achieved within the plane of our finitude. It is through a consciousness of our limited temporality, that "this life" is "our only life" that we can truly commit to our commitments; this, accordingly, is what unlocks Marx's problematic of "necessity and freedom" which are at the heart of capitalism and the very critique of religion (p. 221).

The chapter on Democratic Socialism (p. 270ff) continues the discussion on spiritual freedom. Necessarily, any discussion on freedom cannot end up as an individual enterprise as there is (always) a collective dimension. Human relations require that ideas, even the most profound, do not just end up as isolated or vacuous variables of life, but ultimately applied and tested in how well they can link and strengthen further the meaning that binds us all. In the socio-political sphere, therefore, we are responsible for the values that we promote. It is the kind of values that we depend on that determine the rise and fall of who we are as a people (in his words: neither God nor nature can justify the social order). But all these require freedom for we cannot promote the right values if we are not free. We cannot commit nor invite people to make commitments if they are not free. This is both an opportunity and a challenge because while, on the one hand, freedom allows us to navigate our existential options but, on the other hand, people may not navigate together in the same direction. But if, as Marx says, "Democracy is the solution to the riddle of every constitution" how will it serve as a vehicle of freedom where it is itself the

source of divergences? A reminder that is fitting for all of us is our “answerability to one another” (p. 270). This is where, and as the author argues, democracy and capitalism are not reconcilable because for democracy to be actual – people must be able to negotiate the form of their lives together, one which is not possible under capitalism where the purpose of our economic production is already decided (p. 271). Thus, in the later part of the chapter, it is argued that “democratic socialism seeks to provide the institutional, political, and material conditions for spiritual freedom” (p. 314). However, our world cannot align its values to such a kind of socio-political arrangement (and more so as a commitment) if people still believe that past “this life” is another life.

It is only through a realization and an embrace of the truth that beyond the here and now is nothing more that we can learn to value not only our finitude but also the limitedness of what has been given and gifted to us. The daily loss of time, therefore, should strengthen our resolve to do something with our world – contribute to helping people find their way out in the so many mazes of misery. There is no salvation, then, outside of space and time. As said clearly in the book’s introduction: “[a]n eternal life is not only unattainable but also undesirable, since it would eliminate the care and passion that animate my life” (p. 4). The language of solidarity can only be spoken if we first listen to the very good news that has long been announced but still disregarded: there is no life other than what we have!

As with any book, the reader need not agree with all that the author says. But Hägglund is one contemporary thinker who cannot just be dismissed because of his position. His take on Political Theology (in the last chapter), for example, deserves careful examination and critique, especially when he says that at the end of the day all forms of Political Theology are antidemocratic. Despite this, the book carries a strong message of hope and a serious reminder of that oft forgotten fact that death is the only possibility which is certain. The task of making this world and people’s lives better belongs to the living. Giving up our belief in an afterlife would make us embrace that “this life” is the only one in which we can invest all our dreams and hopes, our commitments.

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