FINITUDE, ETERNITY, LOVE, THE GOOD & MARTIN HÄGGLUND'S *THIS LIFE*

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ABSTRACT: Martin Hägglund's *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (Knopf, 2019) is an important and insightful treatise on metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and political philosophy. It is also a trenchant critique of a religious orientation to the world. In this talk I reflect on Hägglund's account of value and our finitude, paying special attention to his criticism of one of his targets, the political theology of Martin Luther King, Jr. According to Hägglund, King's appeal to *God* when elaborating the need for justice would better be replaced by an appeal to our own communal norms. To defer to God is at best, a colourful way of depicting our own commitments, and at worst, an appeal to God's providence has no determinate content, but which nonetheless threatens to absolve us of the hard work of making justice in the here and now. ¶ I aim to show that while Hägglund's account is a salutary corrective to a pervasive kind of bad faith, the criticism goes only so far. Any identification of *God's justice* with our communal norms, or of *truth* with our best theory, is to mischaracterise the roles these concepts play for us. They function as *ideals* that direct our attention outside ourselves and beyond our own conceptions, in the same way that love takes us outside ourselves and orients us toward an other.

✣ *THIS LIFE: SECULAR FAITH & SPIRITUAL FREEDOM*

Two concepts play a central role in Hägglund's *This Life*. FINITUDE:

> *To be **finite** means primarily two things: to be dependent on others, and to live in relation to death. I am finite because I cannot maintain my life on my own, and because I will die. Likewise, the projects to which I am devoted are finite because they live only through the efforts of those who are committed to them and will cease to be if they are abandoned.* [TL, p. 4][1]

and, SECULAR FAITH:

> *The sense of finitude—the sense of the ultimate fragility of everything we care about—is at the heart of what I call **secular faith**. To have secular faith is to be devoted to a life that will end, to be dedicated to projects that can fail or break down.* [p. 5, 6]
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> *I call it secular faith because it is devoted to a form of life that is* bounded by time. *In accordance with the meaning of the Latin word* saecularis, *to have secular faith is to be dedicated to persons or projects that are 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.* [p. 6]

For MH, secular faith has a competitor: RELIGIOUS FAITH.

> *In contrast, the common denominator for* what I call ***religious forms of faith*** *is a devaluation of our finite lives as a lower form of being. All world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) hold that the highest form of existence or the most desirable form of life is eternal rather than finite. To be religious—or to adopt a religious perspective on life—is to regard our finitude as a lack, an illusion, or a fallen state of being.* [p. 6]

MH describes the life of *secular faith* in this way:

> *When we* own *our secular faith, we acknowledge that the* object *of our faith—our spiritual cause—is* dependent *on our practice of faith. The practice of faith is our practical identity (e.g., political activist) and the object of faith is our spiritual cause (e.g., our political cause).* [p. 373]

Religious faith and secular faith are in tension:

> *[W]hat I call religious faith* disowns *our secular faith. Religious faith takes the object of faith to be a god* [...] *that is* independent *of our practice of faith. Our spiritual cause is treated as though it were a being that commands and has power over us without being dependent on us. This is the type of faith that King espouses in his religious sermons.* [p. 373]

There are (at least) two different ways the notion of finitude as lack can be articulated.

FINITUDE-AS-ILLUSION: There is *no genuine loss* or *risk* for those whose life is meaningful, since God (or a right relationship with reality, etc.) has secured your eternal destiny; the sufferings of this contingent world are of no real significance. They are, at most, are *illusions* to be transcended. A finite life, on its own is *meaningless*. Life has meaning *only* if it is ongoing, or if this finite world is transcended.

FINITUDE-AS-INCLUSION: A finite life is *incomplete* on its own. A finite contingent life exists *inside* the infinite, and the contingencies of this world can only be properly understood in the enclosing context of the non-contingent. Finite life involves genuine loss and risk, and this finite life has value, but this value can only be properly understood by way of its relationship to a non-contingent infinite *other*, which is in some sense beyond us.

Conclusion 1: *FINITUDE-AS-ILLUSION and FINITUDE-AS-INCLUSION are two distinct ways in which the finitude of life can be understood in a religious orientation to the world.*

✣ HÄGGLUND'S CRITIQUE/ANALYSIS OF MLK

MH on *God*-talk in MLK's rhetoric and preaching:

> *In his role as a Christian preacher, King claims that "the universe is guided by a benign Intelligence whose infinite love embraces all mankind," namely, "the one eternal God" who has "strength to protect us" with his "unlimited resources" and on whose grace we depend.* [p. 373]

MH on MLK's religious epistemology:

> *[T]he supposed relation between God and our emancipation becomes incomprehensible. What we take to be evil and unjust can be part of*

[1] All citations in [brackets] are to *This Life* (Knopf 2019). *Abbreviations*: MH = Martin Hägglund; MLK = Martin Luther King, Jr.

> *God's "plan" or his unfathomable "purposes," which purportedly redeem what happens to us beyond anything we can understand. Moreover, if God is beyond our comprehension, his notion of goodness and justice can be completely at odds with our own. As King avows in one of his religious sermons, "I do not pretend to understand all of the ways of God or his particular timetable for grappling with evil."* [p. 373, 374]

MH's appeal to Hegel as a way to reinterpret God talk:

> *The command or the will of God only makes sense if we understand the term in a Hegelian way.* "God" is a name for the communal norms that we have legislated to ourselves and to which we hold ourselves. *When King invokes the will and the command of God in his political speeches, he is reminding us of what we are committed to in being committed to social freedom for all.* [p. 375]

So for MH, MLK's appeals to God are, best understood, underneath it all, appeals to what we[2] are committed to—our own self-legislated ideals.

- The Hegelian reinterpretation of religious vocabulary has its virtues.
- The reinterpretation has a different *modal* status than the original vocabulary.
- MLK's epistemic modesty is not to be confused with a severe apophaticism.

Conclusion 2: *The Hegelian reinterpretation of God-talk obscures the fallibility of our own commitments. To take God to be incomprehensible does not mean we cannot speak truly of God.*

✤ LOVE, THE LOVER & THE BELOVED

- The triad of *lover*, *beloved* and the lovers' *idea of the beloved*.
- The triad of *thinker*, *world* and the thinker's *view of the world*.
- The triad of activist, *God's justice*, and the *norms to which we commit ourselves*.
- To orient yourself toward the beloved (the world, or God's justice) is to be directed *outward*, while to talk of the *idea of the beloved* (*our theory of the world*, or *the norms to which we've bound ourselves*) remains self-involved.
- There are two different ways in which there is a *dependence* relation between *x* and the *idea of x*.

Conclusion 3: *While the Hegelian substitution does not work on its own, there is a two-way relationship between our conceptions and their targets. The beloved is* (ideally) *the source and norm of the idea of the beloved. The idea of the beloved orients the lover toward the beloved.*

✤ FACETS OF DEPENDENCE & INDEPENDENCE

- The case of the obsessive mathematician: when the *object* of our devotion does not depend on our action.
- The case of the religious believer, committed to social action out of devotion to God.
- This counts as *secular faith*, by the text of MH's definition.

Conclusion 4: MH's *kind of secular faith (which takes there to be value in a life bound by time, and contingent on goals that can fail) is consistent with a religious commitment to a God upon whom we depend, but who does not depend upon us, and with a concomitant commitment to work towards finite social ends that have value in themselves. Our finite, contingent lives have value, and the commitments we undertake can be sustained by faith in a God upon whom we depend.*

✤ REFERENCES

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[2] Space does not permit me to examine the scope of the "*we*" in such a claim. Is this *humanity* at its widest breadth? Or the African-American community at the core of MLK's movement? How are the boundaries of the political "we" to be understood?