

Review of *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* by Martin Hägglund

Charles Murn  
Independent Scholar  
writing@cmurn.com

*Abstract:* Hägglund's vision for democratic socialism is critiqued for its religious overtones, failure to describe any way to operationalize it, and lack of consideration of the political opposition of it.

*Keywords:* spirituality, secularism, socialism, faith, labor

Martin Hägglund's big new book, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, brings back memories of Marxist tomes of the 1960s and 70s. For those unfamiliar with the genre, it generally provides a good statement of the arguments for democratic socialism. His book reads like good literature, which is not surprising given that he is a Yale professor of comparative literature.

However, his extensive use of religious rubrics falls into Bertrand Russell's naturalist critique of Marxism's similarities to Christianity. For example, the first half covers what Hägglund calls "secular faith." I see no reason to invent religious rhetoric for the concepts within his meaning for the phrase. Surprisingly, he criticizes Max Weber for reflecting religious concepts despite claiming to be value-neutral, while using the loaded term, "faith." Yet, the "faith" part is simply "the commitment to a life that is finite and dependent on the fragile recognition of others." In fact, the general substance of his "secular faith" corresponds to general principles of secular humanism and humanistic psychology set forth 50 to 100 years ago. Concepts like human values, accepting the unknown in life, and caring about other people echo established humanism, which lacks his quasi-religious rhetorical flourish. Hägglund sounds like yet another writer who thinks he has invented the principles of humanism, without reflecting the wisdom of the literature that is explicitly about humanism.

Hägglund's rubric of faith illustrates Russell's critique, such as it is. To Russell's "Yahweh = Dialectical Materialism," "The Messiah = Marx," and so on, we can now add "religious faith" = "secular faith." Indeed, Hägglund invites the analogy by himself directly comparing "religious faith" and his secular version.

Much like humanistic psychology, Hägglund advocates secular love and responsibility, things we all can agree on. His notion of secular faith is directed at the emotional level: it is a very impassioned call for living values not relying on some religion's pursuit of eternal life. Given the first several dictionary definitions of "faith" involve belief in a supreme being or some other higher power whose existence cannot be proven, his choice of terms is obfuscatory at best. What he is calling for, as does humanism, is valuing life for life's sake. Nothing like faith is needed for doing so.

From his call for secular faith, Hägglund launches a discussion of spiritual freedom as the goal of his vision of socialism. But this part of his effort is also that of someone who did not delve deeply enough into his subject matter before starting from scratch himself. Not surprisingly, his notion of "spiritual freedom" does not do nearly as good a job at elucidating the principles of self-actualization as the humanistic psychologists have done. Nonetheless, he muddies the water by using his own jargon paralleling well-established statements in the field of humanistic psychology. For example, he uses terms like "self-transformation," "self-determination," and "self-maintenance," but not "self-actualization," "the value-life," and "emotional blocks to creativity," which encompass all of those and more. That said, he does deliver a good statement of general reasons why most people should be free to pursue more of their creativity, potential, and dreams. In that way, Russell might make the equation, "spiritual freedom" = "heaven." Regardless, Hägglund never explains why "spiritual freedom" is a better term than those already in use, and he never explains what he thinks the "spirit" in "spiritual" might be. Given that he has elsewhere asserted a "radical atheism," I'd like to hear a convincing justification for his use of an adjective with religious connotations.

Hägglund's decidedly *democratic* socialism calls for free labor, defined as being able to engage in anything you want. It does not mean doing anything you want all the time, only that you can choose what you want to engage with during your free time. That requires freedom from the emotional stress of wage labor and the spare existence that often accompanies it. Being good at what you engage with is still his standard for that engagement, but all the systemic barriers to large parts of the population engaging with what they want to be engaged with will be removed.

Thus, one qualifying element of Hägglund's vision depends on reducing, for all, the socially necessary labor time, i.e., time needed society-wide to do things no one *will* do unless that is all they can get paid to do. Of course, the sustainability movement has advocated that principle for some time, also for environmental reasons. Hägglund thereby acknowledges that everyone will still have to do some labor they do not affirmatively want to do. After all, if everyone could do what they seriously want to engage in, who would collect the trash (other than those outliers who actually enjoy doing it)? Indeed, he acknowledges that freedom generally cannot consist of liberation from all undesired labor. But the fact that his socialism is intended to create the conditions for more time to engage in enjoyable productive activities shows that it really amounts to a goal of increasing *emotional* freedom. Calling it "emotional freedom" rather than "spiritual" would be more precise, naturalistic, and free of religious connotations.

Essentially, the idea of reducing necessary labor is central to maximizing each individual's time to engage in satisfying activities of one's choosing. Hägglund supports collectivism and a basic income, as well as technology and public policy that reduce the amount of necessary labor in society. The revolution he appears to be calling for is the radical reconfiguration of institutions and culture to be infused with the value of reducing necessary labor. As he says, his democratic socialism "requires a fundamental and practical reevaluation of the capitalist measure of value." Rather than redistribute the wealth generated by the pursuit of profit, which he calls social democracy, he calls for society to "measure ... our wealth in terms of socially available free time." He calls out anyone who doubts that the work would get done as having "lack of faith in our spiritual freedom." He wants a state in which everyone is gung ho for socialism, but does not explain how to achieve that important feature.

Likewise, Hägglund never describes how, politically, to change the terms of society's measure of wealth from money to free time. Under our current structure, maximizing free time minimizes the material well-being of all but the wealthy. He does not give any legislative or organizing plan for how a democratic socialist program for reduction of socially necessary labor might be achieved. Yet defeating the capitalist class in the political arena is absolutely essential to it.

Hägglund instead harkens back at Dr. Martin Luther King's platform in the last year or two of his life. King's Poor People's Campaign gets Hägglund's nod as the kind of social movement and call for change that could bring about what Hägglund propounds. Interestingly, Hägglund extols King's inclusion of the principle of equality in his platform. Yet Hägglund does not specifically talk about equality. Rather, Hägglund's discussion seems to assume that eliminating the barriers to freedom of engagement would usher in equality. He does not address the fact that social and cultural barriers to equality remain long after legal barriers are removed, as in the racism that was a key subject of King's life's work. Like his use of religious rubrics, Hägglund gives his own spin on King's religious rhetoric, suggesting that King was simply couching secular policy proposals in a religious terms. Nonetheless, Hägglund's insistent advocacy of policies to give relief to the working class is as timely now as Dr. King's own inspiring advocacy was in his time. But if he knew his humanist literature, he could rely on the words of humanists for advocating equality and self-actualization.