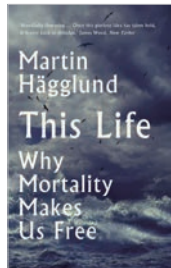


# Till the heavens be no more

A bold attempt at creating a new God-free faith plays some familiar tunes, discovers *Tanjil Rashid*



**This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free**  
by Martin Hägglund  
(Profile, £20)

Two years ago, I received the weirdest commission of my writing career. A wealthy couple wanted to celebrate their newborn baby but, as atheists, they didn't know how to go about it. The father had been raised Christian, but a christening would have imposed a religion on their child. The mother had been raised Muslim, but goat-sacrifice seemed a bit old fashioned. They were anxious to mark the occasion in a way that was both life-affirming and resolutely secular.

For their baby blessing, I was asked to find readings without references to God or any form of higher power. This ruled out not just Scripture but also much secular literature: canonical poetry on this theme reverberates with sacred echoes. More modern meditations on parenthood did occur to me. But Philip Larkin's "They fuck you up, your mum and dad..." was probably unsuitable.

I finally put together an order of service composed of wise, God-free texts. But the parents thought it still lacked a certain something. Eventually, they opted for a Buddhist blessing. Buddhism, they'd heard, was a religion without God. That was tolerable. They had even been recommended a lama, who in return for a donation to his monastery would fly in from Bhutan for the party at Claridge's. The lama's English wasn't great; I was supposed to write his sermon.

The question vexing the couple was, essentially, "why, and how, should an atheist revere life?" The same question animates Swedish secular philosopher Martin Hägglund's *This Life*, and its answer, like the couple's own solution, attempts to fulfil a spiritual need for those not drawn to traditional faith. But just as the couple had to appropriate Buddhist rituals, Hägglund also finds himself creating an imitation religion.

In most atheist polemics reason turns out to involve quite a lot of faith disguised in the clothes of science. Hägglund, by contrast, prefers to raid the closet of religion, dressing up his philosophy in religious garb. He mainly quotes Christian thinkers—Kierkegaard, Martin Luther King, Saints Augustine and Paul, CS Lewis—their writings reinterpreted in the light of what Hägglund calls his "secular faith." His creed rejects eternal life, embracing instead mortality, or "finitude." Life's finitude, "the apprehension that we will die," makes meaningful the question of what to do with our time on Earth, whereas religion, for Hägglund, encourages indifference to earthly existence.

Far from being opposed, though, these notions of secular and religious faith actually overlap. *This Life* argues that for religious people, "the highest form of existence is eternal rather than finite." But in Buddhism, this is actually reversed: the highest state is non-existence. Hägglund considers this a "timeless repose," analogous to heaven. But, as our jetset lama might have explained, unlike heaven, nirvana entails extinction of the self, much as atheists imagine death.

For Hägglund, eternal life is "the one thing that a secular form of life never will be able to promise." But some

impeccably secular visions promise precisely this. Advocates of transhumanism predict that we will exploit technology to become immortal. Believers in "the singularity" argue we'll merge with machines (as Philip Ball discusses on p56.) Fantasies of eternity have deep roots in secularism. In communist Russia, an "immortalisation commission" tried freezing Lenin's body so that it could someday be brought back to life, anticipating the cryogenics now practised in California. Such diehard materialists swear by bodily resurrection as fervently as any Christian.

Similarly, atheists don't have a monopoly on a hard-bitten acceptance of mortality. Vast numbers of the faithful give eternal life no credence whatsoever, including, according to a US survey, a majority of believing Jews. This is no modern innovation: it's there in the Bible's oldest texts. As the Book of Job testifies: "Man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? As the waters fail from the sea, and the flood decayeth and drieth up: So man lieth down, and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep."

## "Fantasies of eternity have deep roots in secularism"

These sublime verses, composed 2,500 years before *This Life*, foretell its core contentions: there is no immortal soul; death is irrevocable; our bodies, far from being resurrected, waste away to nothing. Here we have not only the sense of life's finitude, but the Earth's too. When Hägglund predicts, apocalyptically, that "the most fundamental example of finitude in our historical moment is the prospect that the Earth itself will be destroyed," he is repeating a primeval religious myth.

In many religious traditions, the central concept is not eternity, as Hägglund asserts, but immanence: divine manifestation in the material world. This is no theological obscurity. Its pre-eminence in eastern religion was known to Alexander Pope, whose *Essay on Man* praised the Indian "whose untutor'd mind / sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind." It is present, also, in western theology, most famously in Spinoza's equation of God with nature.

Such reverence for nature matters because Hägglund thinks religion inures people to the problem of climate change by training their minds on eternity: "From the religious point of view, the end of the world is ultimately not a tragedy." While true of religion's messianic streak, this ignores traditions of stewardship over the earth central to scripture. The Quran commands: "Do not go about the Earth corrupting it." Hägglund insists religious people only care about the environment to serve God, not as an end in itself, but that seems a rhetorical ▶



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distinction. Anyone planting a tree or saving a dolphin might understand his or her behaviour with reference to various myths, secular or religious. Their actions, though, have the same effect.

Our present environmental problems were, in fact, instigated by the industrial development of secular governments (the west from the 19th century, the USSR in the 20th and China in the 21st). Usurping the omnipotence of the God they had stopped believing in, these societies rejected constraints on growth and ravaged nature for the sake of economic progress. Forests were no longer enchanted, so they were chopped down. Formerly sacred rivers were defiled as sewers. “They who sunder themselves from God,” wrote Hegel, “blaspheme nature.” To believe nature can be blasphemed is surely to take our ecological heritage seriously.

## “Forests were no longer enchanted, so they were chopped down”

To be fair to the author, religious faith can indeed instil a sense of fatalism about this-worldly matters. From the Bible to Buddhist texts, Häggglund marshals much evidence of dogmatic contempt for life in the here and now. But religion has also voiced the virtues of his secular faith: living responsibly, caring for others. Recall the Golden Rule at the core of the Bible—“love thy neighbour as thyself”—which appears in similar forms in other religious works. With almost admirable impudence, Häggglund appropriates this principle. “Genuine care for others,” he writes, “must be based on secular faith.”

He doesn’t mean religious people are necessarily callous. He means their compassion for others in life, and mourning of others in death, expresses a fundamentally secular feeling for life’s transience that is at odds with their ostensible beliefs. This rebrands every act of compassion and every tremor before death, every soup kitchen and every funeral, as exemplars of secular faith, leaving religion to be represented only by illusory, self-denying death-fetishists.

Christian teaching is thus, for the author, reflected through the wayward lens of Kierkegaard, that magus of misanthropy, instead of theologians who found in the Gospels a call to justice on earth. Reading Martin Luther King’s political writings, Häggglund claims the civil rights leader’s message of equality is “better understood in terms of secular faith than in terms of the religious faith he officially espouses.” Or maybe we should take King at his word—those justly famous words. Maybe it’s Häggglund whose official secularism is better understood as a kind of religious faith.

In truth there is much common ground between secular and religious faith. Häggglund is calling for “attention to what’s immediately to be done, along with acceptance of long-term *finitude*.” (My emphasis.) But that statement is taken from Rowan Williams’s 2018 book *Being Human*. The former Archbishop of Canterbury would, likewise, surely instruct us “to be dependent on others and to live in relation to death.” That’s taken from *This Life*. Both lines could easily have appeared in the other’s book. Even the titles of the atheist polemic and Christian tract could have been swapped, since both books have the same sense of urgency about life before death.

Häggglund’s vision for the here-and-now is one of “democratic socialism” sketched in *This Life*’s final chapter. Trained in literary rather than political theory—his

**God is everywhere—even in atheism: *God the Father* by Victor Vasnetsov (1885)**

previous books were on Derrida and Proust—Hägglund is a gifted reader of texts, but a flawed reader of reality.

His most intriguing idea is that we should measure “our wealth in terms of socially available free time” (ie that leisure must replace money). Technology should be harnessed not for profit, but to minimise labour. In his ideal society, some work will have to be done but only by those who want to—for example, an architect who enjoys designing (presumably starkly brutalist) buildings. Undesirable work will be “qualitatively transformed” because we will recognise in, say, toilet-cleaning, “the common good” that enables “the possibilities of leading a free life.” But no one will be forced to participate who doesn’t want to and everyone will have free time to pursue their favourite activities.

This paradise sounds rather like the heaven Hägglund so vigorously disavows—and has a similar likelihood of ever existing. There would be enough volunteers to take up Hägglund’s Yale professorship, for sure, but perhaps not for the grinding labour that allows society to function properly. Working to earn money may be alienating, but less so than the state coercion inevitable in planned socialist economies. And can we really replace millennia-old notions of monetary wealth? We know that riches were measured in shekels 4,000 years ago, but never—as Hägglund proposes—in some vague notion of free time.

In this anticipation of a redemptive spiritual transformation for humanity, Hägglund’s secular faith betrays itself as one more variation on religious salvation, only it geographically relocates the Kingdom of Heaven to planet Earth. That may bring infernal possibilities closer, too—gulags and guillotines traditionally accompany such utopian politics.

But even if its so-called secular faith may be a more run-of-the-mill spirituality than the claims made for it, *This Life* still has many virtues. Erudite and provocative, it elaborates a philosophy to fill the spiritual lacunae in the lives of committed atheists pondering what our mortal existences are for. The young parents who hired me two years ago would do well to read it.

In the end I didn’t attend their baby blessing. If it went as planned, the father will have recited the Kipling I had selected, the mother the Christina Rossetti. The lama will have read out my semi-plagiarised prose about the wheel of life. The holy water of *trhuechu* will have been sprinkled over the baby. And this strange spectacle will have conferred on this family the comfort, the guidance, the pomp, which even the wholly secularised can find themselves desiring. For all its flaws, *This Life* bears witness to that great and very human thirst.

*Tanjil Rashid is a critic and translator*

## Unreliable comrades

Cold War writers—both communist and anti-communist—rarely toed the party line, says *DJ Taylor*



**Cold Warriors: Writers Who Waged the Literary Cold War**  
by Duncan White  
(Little, Brown, £25)

**H**astening through New York sometime in the late 1950s, the Marxist critic Isaac Deutscher was approached by a news-vendor, who pressed a paperback copy of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* into his hands: “You must read it sir. Then you will know why we must drop the atom bomb on the bolshies!” It is not known whether Deutscher bought the book. But this odd little vignette reveals something of the way in which the international power politics of the pre-Kennedy era were being played out literally at street level, the responses stirred in ordinary people and the tools—in this case a bestselling novel weaponised by the CIA—employed to shunt politics into the public imagination.

If newspaper headlines tend to suggest that the Cold War was a clash of binary opposites—democrat versus tyrant, liberty versus oppression, Eisenhower versus Khrushchev—then from the angle of cultural politics, the view was always that much more occluded: a matter of confusion and equivocation, often extending into downright duplicity. It was all very well signing up to be a Cold Warrior, to borrow the title of Duncan White’s compendious new book. What you next had to establish was whether your notional allies shared your views; what they might be concealing behind their ideological skirts; whether, in fact, they were your allies in the first place.

Post-war political memoirs are full of this kind of hoodwinking. Michael Foot, a young MP in the 1945 intake, used to say that the greatest difficulty facing a Labour

backbencher lay in working out precisely where some of your shiftier parliamentary colleagues stood. A left-wing yet democratic socialist? A Marxist masquerading as a moderate? A crypto-Stalinist? At the dawning of the Attlee government it was hard to tell. It has of course been alleged—by Oleg Gordievsky, a Russian agent working for the British—that Foot himself was in the pay of the KGB, something that Foot angrily denied. In much the same way, Orwell’s first biographer Bernard Crick once told me about a conversation he had around this time with the sister of the Labour MP Ian Mikardo. “Of course, Mik’s got two cards,” she confided, thereby revealing that her brother was secretly a member of the Communist Party as well as Labour.

Anthony Powell’s novel *Books Do Furnish a Room* (1971), set in the bitter winter of 1946-7, recreates Foot’s confusion in the person of the newly-elected Labour MP Kenneth Widmerpool. Ideologically, Widmerpool proves impossible to pin down. “From time to time I detect signs of fellow-travelling,” the novel’s journalist Lindsay Bagshaw observes. “Then I think I’m on the wrong tack entirely, he’s positively right-wing Labour. Again, you find him stringing along with the far, but anti-communist, left. You can’t help admiring the way he conceals his hand.” Bagshaw’s final judgment—one that might easily apply to several of the hand-concealing subjects of *Cold Warriors*—is that Widmerpool is “playing ball with the Comrades on the quiet for whatever he can get out of it, but trying to avoid the appearance of doing so.” ▶