

THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ATHEIST CONCEPTION OF LIFE

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Already in the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche demonstrated the necessity of distinguishing between two kinds of atheism, two ways of relating to what he called the death of God.¹ The essential difference between them can perhaps best be illustrated through a joke often recounted by Slavoj Žižek:

A man who believes himself to be a grain of seed is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a grain of seed but a man; however, when he is cured (convinced that he is not a grain of seed but a man) and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back, trembling and very scared—there is a chicken outside the door, and he is afraid it will eat him. “My dear fellow,” says his doctor, “you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man.” “Of course I know,” replies the patient, “but does the chicken?”²

Corresponding to God’s death in this joke is the simple fact that the hospital patient is not a grain of seed. The most common sort of atheism—that for which Nietzsche had nothing but scorn—comes to recognize God’s death only in an

¹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181–82.

² Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 351.

extremely limited way, namely, by coming to believe that a certain object, God, does not exist. An atheism worthy of the era Nietzsche hoped to inaugurate, however, would have to come to see that God's non-existence entails an entire metaphysics and calls for a systemic transformation of culture.³

When Paul Ricoeur wrote of "the religious significance of atheism,"⁴ he had reference to this second sort. Atheism becomes genuinely significant for Christian religiosity only when it fully recognizes the stakes of unbelief, only when it sees with real clarity that atheism does not so much announce freedom from religiosity as propose a monumental task of rebuilding Western culture and thought on the foundations of a novel ontology. Put another way, atheism becomes genuinely significant for Christian religiosity only when it fully recognizes Christian theism for what it actually is: an ontology, an ethics, an aesthetics—and all these as the historical foundations for Western civilization. Thus David Bentley Hart, in the course of criticizing the less-than-Nietzschean "New Atheists," can thank Nietzsche for at least having had "the good manners to despise Christianity, in large part, for what it actually was."⁵ Curiously, then, atheism becomes genuinely significant for Christian religiosity only when it takes as its principal enemies not theists or believers but atheists of the first or common sort.

³ See the helpful discussion of this point in Gilles Deleuze, "Nietzsche," in *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 71: "Did we kill God when we put man in his place and kept the most important thing, which is the place?" Or again, in Gilles Deleuze, "How Do We Recognize Structuralism?" in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 175: "The third consequence is that structuralism is inseparable from a new materialism, a new atheism, a new anti-humanism. For if the place is primary in relation to whatever occupies it, it certainly will not do to replace God with man in order to change the structure."

⁴ See Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969). Ricoeur's contribution to this book ("Religion, Atheism, and Faith") appears in a somewhat different form in Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 440–67.

⁵ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 6.

In the spirit of Ricoeur, I mean here to address the religious significance of the atheist conception of life. To the extent that, as Ricoeur says, “atheism does not exhaust itself in the negation and destruction of religion” but rather “clears the ground for a new faith, a faith for a postreligious age,”⁶ it might be asked how such a “new faith,” fully confronting atheist conceptions of what it means to live, would conceive of life as such. In asking and attempting preliminarily to answer this question, I will limit myself to confronting just two contemporary atheist philosophies of life—those laid out by Martin Hägglund and Alain Badiou. I draw on these two thinkers in particular because, fascinatingly, they seem to be fundamentally at odds with one another. Where what Hägglund calls “radical atheism” takes the mistake of common or vulgar atheism to be its *refusal of finitude*, Badiou’s “contemporary atheism” argues that common or vulgar atheism fails precisely because of its *commitment to finitude*.⁷ In what follows, I first summarize each of these two thinkers’ respective conceptions of life and then turn my attention to outlining what might be the significance of their atheisms for Christian thought.⁸

⁶ MacIntyre and Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, 60.

⁷ Hägglund gives the name of “radical atheism” to the project in the title of his important 2008 book on Derrida. See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008). Badiou speaks of “contemporary atheism” in Alain Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006), 29. Christopher Watkin, however, speaks of Badiou’s “difficult atheism.” See Christopher Watkin, *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Quentin Meillassoux* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

⁸ I might notice that the forms of “radical” and “contemporary” atheism I have selected for investigation here are those, specifically, that are less invested in the biological sciences—the sciences, that is, *of life*—than some other attempts at a second atheism. Thus, although it is Nietzsche who first identifies the need for a second atheism, and although he does so in the name, specifically, of life, I pass over Nietzsche and his most important philosophical heirs here—most notably, Gilles Deleuze. Similarly, I pass over Adrian Johnston’s important recent criticisms of both Badiou’s and Hägglund’s projects, criticisms made in the name of the biological sciences and with a focus on questions of theism and atheism. For these criticisms, see Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume One: The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 79–128; Adrian Johnston, “Life Terminable and Interminable: The Undead and the Afterlife of the Afterlife—A Friendly Disagreement with Martin Hägglund,” *The New Centennial Review* 9.1

FINITUDE AND IMMORTALITY: MARTIN HÄGGLUND

According to Martin Hägglund, theism is a question of a specifically *double* desire, “the desire for God *and* immortality,”⁹ and it is the orientation to immortality that ultimately lies at the heart of every theism. As he explains, “the common denominator for religions is . . . that they promote a notion of the unscathed—regardless of whether the unscathed is posited as transcendent or immanent and regardless of whether it is called God or something else.”¹⁰ The soul of theism is thus, he contends, the conviction that immortality is somehow more primordial, more essential, than mortality—in other words, the conviction that mortality is derivative from immortality, an abstraction from a more fundamental pure presence. Theism, then, according to Hägglund, is belief less in immortality’s *reality* than in its *primordially*. Of course, the common view of theism makes no such distinction between reality and primordially, tacitly assuming that, whatever commitments theism might have to belief in immortality, they are exhausted in conviction concerning its reality. The consequence is that, as Hägglund puts it, “in traditional atheism mortal being is still conceived as a lack of being that we desire to transcend.”¹¹ The sort of vulgar atheism against which it is necessary for a fully developed atheism to contend is one that, while it may be *materially atheistic* in that it denies the *reality* of immortality, remains *formally theistic* in that it affirms the desirability—and thus the *primordially*—of immortality.¹²

(Spring 2009): 147–89; and Adrian Johnston, “The True Thing Is the (W)hole: Freudian-Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Derridean Chronolibidinal Reading—Another Friendly Reply to Martin Hägglund,” *Derrida Today* 6.2 (2013): 146–68.

⁹ Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 1, emphasis added.

¹⁰ Martin Hägglund, “The Radical Evil of Deconstruction: A Reply to John Caputo,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11.2 (Spring 2011): 129.

Retrieved from <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/11.2/hagglund.pdf>, January 27, 2014.

¹¹ Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 1.

¹² In one instance at least, Hägglund has further divided traditional atheism into three distinct subcategories: melancholic atheism, pragmatic atheism, and therapeutic atheism. See Martin Hägglund, “The Challenge of Radical Atheism: A Response,” *The New Centennial Review* 99.1

It is thus not difficult to guess what Hägglund has in mind when he speaks of *radical* atheism. It is a question of dispensing not only with belief in immortality's reality, but also and more importantly with belief in its primordality or preferability. As Hägglund himself puts it: "Radical atheism . . . does not dispute the existence but rather the desirability of God and eternity."¹³ How, though, is the radical atheist to go about disputing the desirability of God and immortality—to go about "developing the logic of radical atheism"? According to Hägglund, the task is effectively to show that "the so-called desire for immortality dissimulates a desire for survival that precedes it and contradicts it from within."¹⁴ What is needed is, in short, a philosophical investigation that reveals the ways in which every desire for the unscathed deconstructs itself, having been built in the first place only and entirely from the elements of desire for strictly mortal survival. The development of such a logic is an unmistakably Derridean project, and Hägglund has generally staged his larger philosophical project as an exegesis of Derrida, focused on reclaiming him from theological interpreters. But although the project is cast as exegetical, as if it were principally an argument over textual interpretation and philosophical inheritance, Hägglund makes clear that the primary concern of his work is to present a radically atheist conception of life.

The key to Hägglund's strategy lies within the nature of time. To the extent that time is the principal condition for the possibility of life,¹⁵ the only way to undertake an effective deconstruction of the desire for immortality is to become fully clear about time. This, Hägglund contends, was accomplished in a striking way in Derrida's early writings on Husserl. According to Derrida, closely following Husserl's lectures *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, time unfolds according to the rhythm of the experience of traces—traces produced in an irretrievable past and destined for an indeterminate future. The

(2009): 228–29. Retrieved from <http://www.martinhagglund.se/images/stories/9.1.hagglund01.pdf>, January 29, 2014.

¹³ Hägglund, "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction," 134.

¹⁴ Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 1.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, 29: "the tracing of time is the condition for life in general."

human subject, confined to the present and so always and only dealing with such traces, is caught in the space of delay between past and future. This occupied space is thus, as Häggglund summarizes, “marked by the retentional awareness of being *too late* (in relation to what is no longer)” as well as by “the protentional awareness of being *too early* (in relation to what is not yet).”¹⁶ As noted, this account is one Derrida takes from Husserl, but Derrida, unlike Husserl, refuses to ground it in a more primordial absolute presence. For Derrida, the consequence of being both too late to comprehend what factually determines experience and too early to comprehend the total closure of experience is that one’s “self-relation is necessarily mediated across a temporal distance that prevents [her] from ever coinciding with [her]self.”¹⁷ Absent any transcendental ego, the subject in time experiences life as an unsettled tension between the immemorial and the unanticipatable.

Thus, for Derrida and therefore for Häggglund, life is irreparably mortal–mortal not only at its surface, but to its core. This is the logic of survival. Häggglund explains: “If something survives it is never present in itself; it is already marked by the destruction of a past that is no longer and remains for a future that is not yet.”¹⁸ And survival exhausts the concept of life as a temporal phenomenon, since “if the moment [of life] did not negate itself there would be no time, only a presence forever remaining the same.”¹⁹ Such a “presence forever remaining the same” would amount precisely to an immortality indistinguishable

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 70, emphases in original.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Häggglund carefully defends Derrida against critics who have suggested that Derrida misses the point of Husserl’s philosophy of time. See *ibid.*, 50–75. On Häggglund’s account, Derrida’s account of hetero-affection was meant in its original (mid-1960s) formulations to function as a critique Michel Henry’s interpretation of Husserl (particularly in *The Essence of Manifestation*). See *ibid.*, 216.

¹⁸ Robert King and Martin Häggglund, “Radical Atheism and ‘The Arche-Materiality of Time,’” *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry* 6.14 (Winter 2011): 62. Retrieved from <http://www.martinhaggglund.se/images/stories/InterviewHaggglund.pdf>, January 29, 2014.

¹⁹ Martin Häggglund, “Chronolibidinal Reading: Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis,” *The New Centennial Review* 9.1 (2009): 5.

from death, one that would in effect “annihilate the impure difference of life.”²⁰ Life *as such* is only experienced in genuine risk, only “by exposing it to a future that may erase it, but which also gives it the chance to live on.”²¹ Mortal life is the only life of which one can speak. And it is this conclusion, Hägglund claims, that makes his position *radically* atheist. Because the only possible sort of life is life that unfolds to the rhythm of time, and because time conditions life always and only in the form of mortal survival, it must be said that every apparent desire for immortality masks real desire for survival.²² As Hägglund summarily puts this point: “The desire to *live on* after death is not a desire for immortality, since to live on is to remain subjected to temporal finitude. This desire for survival cannot aim at transcending time, since the given time is the only chance for survival.”²³

To secure this last point, Hägglund turns not to Derrida, but to the Socrates of Plato’s *Symposium*. “Even though Socrates does not acknowledge it,” Hägglund explains, “the logic of his argument” for the idea that a certain lack of being orients human beings to the eternal and immortal is actually “incompatible with a metaphysical logic of lack.”²⁴ Socrates considers the case of a man who already has but nonetheless desires health, and he concludes that such a man’s desire is driven by his orientation to an unrealized ideal fullness of health he lacks even as he possesses a mortal measure of health. But, as Hägglund notes,

Socrates does not say that the man wants to transcend his condition of mortal health. On the contrary, he wants to *go on* being what he is. And since he is mortal, he wants to *live on* as mortal. . . . This desire for survival is incompatible with

²⁰ Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 29.

²¹ Hägglund, “The Radical Evil of Deconstruction,” 133.

²² This language of “appearance” and “reality” is reminiscent of psychoanalysis, and it is worth noting that Hägglund has in several places cast his project in terms of its relationship to psychoanalysis.

²³ Hägglund, “Chronolibidinal Reading,” 10, emphasis in original.

²⁴ Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 5.

the desire for immortality, since it wants to hold on to a life that is essentially mortal and inherently divided by time.²⁵

Socrates himself thus makes clear that desire to live forever can *only* be desire to live incessantly *as a mortal*. And the woman who serves as Socrates' source for wisdom confirms the point: "When Diotima sets out to prove her thesis that all creatures are driven by the 'passion for immortality,' she in fact shows that all creatures are driven by the passion for survival"; they seek "to have children, to be famous," and so on—mortal pursuits, all of them.²⁶ Every conceivable desire for immortality is, in the last analysis, a desire for mortality, a desire to go on living mortally.

Does Hägglund then simply suggest that one should accept one's finitude, should accept death? Fascinatingly, he explicitly denies that this is what follows from his arguments: "To affirm mortal life does not entail an acceptance of death. On the contrary, to affirm mortal life is to oppose death, to resist and defer it for as long as possible."²⁷ To affirm life is not to accept death, but to affirm the struggle to survive. Hägglund explains:

One cannot be cured from the fear of death and learn to "accept" finitude. As Derrida indicates . . . , *an acceptance of finitude would amount to a denial of finitude*. . . . If one accepted finitude, one would accept death and thus deny the attachment to the finite life that is extinguished in death. . . . On the contrary, the desire to keep a finite life amounts to a struggle against death. The desire to keep a finite life can never be reconciled with itself, since what it desires leads to death despite itself.²⁸

Taking comfort neither in a peace-inducing "acceptance" of death nor in a self-contradictory conviction concerning immortality, Hägglund contends that human beings seeking to live cannot avoid occupying a space in which "it [is] impossible for anything to be good in itself." Everything is contaminated by "the

²⁵ Ibid., emphases in original.

²⁶ Ibid., 6.

²⁷ Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 129.

²⁸ Ibid., 159, emphasis in original.

possibility of alteration and corruption from the first inception,"²⁹ and so *whatever* or *whomever* one loves is as irreparably mortal as oneself. In short, "happiness or any other state of being requires a process of *survival* that takes the time to live by postponing death."³⁰

If, then, one were to attempt to capture the essence of Hägglund's radical atheist conception of life in a single word, it would have to be a Derridean keyword: *survivance*. This word has been variously translated—sometimes as "survival," sometimes as "afterlife," often simply as "survivance"—but in light of Hägglund's work and in fidelity to Derrida's attention to diacritics, another possible translation might be offered here, one on which I will draw in the last part of this paper: "im/mortality." Hägglundian life is im/mortal; it is at once the incessant renewal of mortality and the definitive separation of immortality from itself. At the heart of every supposed desire for immortality is a certain inconsistency that deconstructs that desire, revealing that at its core is a certain love for mortal survival, a desire to go on living mortally for as long as possible—if not, perhaps, forever.

INFINITUDE AND ETERNAL LIFE: ALAIN BADIOU

Where Martin Hägglund speaks of radical atheism, of going to the root of disbelief, Alain Badiou speaks of "contemporary atheism," of a sort of disbelief that is peculiar to that era in which one can say, "the twentieth century has taken place."³¹ An irremediable historical element thus characterizes Badiou's attempt at a second atheism, something he himself notes in a comment on the importance of Nietzsche's call for a second atheism: "there is a complete difference between the theoretical formula, 'God does not exist,' and the

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁰ Hägglund, "The Challenge of Radical Atheism," 228, emphasis in original.

³¹ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), xiv.

historical or factual statement, ‘God is dead.’³² This is especially important for Badiou, since he argues for the importance of distinguishing among *three* deaths of God. The development of modernity in the West produced the first two deaths of God—the deaths of both Descartes’s God of *philosophical metaphysics* and Pascal’s God of *religious experience*.³³ These Gods are entirely dead: “It *has* happened. . . . God is finished. And religion is finished, too. As Jean-Luc Nancy has strongly stated, there is something irreversible here.”³⁴ But even with these Gods dead, according to Badiou, another God still breathes, and the death of this third (and presumably last) God—the death of Heidegger’s God of *poetic finitude*—remains in process.

A strictly *contemporary* atheism thus attends to the work of seeing the third death of God to completion. And, according to Badiou, the appropriate obsequies for Heidegger’s God have an unmistakably appropriate form: “It is . . . imperative,” he says, “so as to be serenely established in the irreversible element of God’s death, to finish up with the motif of finitude.”³⁵ But what sort of task weighs on those who would finish up with the motif of finitude? According to Badiou, the task is to ask a question about life—“What is it to live?”³⁶—and to provide an answer to this question by pursuing “a meditation, in the clearing of God’s death, on what must be thought in the word: ‘here.’”³⁷ Badiou clarifies:

Committed to the triple destitution of the gods, we, inhabitants of the Earth’s infinite sojourn, can assert that everything is here, always here, and that thought’s reserve lies in the thoroughly informed and firmly declared egalitarian platitude of what befalls us here. Here is the

³² Badiou, *Briefings on Existence*, 21.

³³ Badiou first introduced the several deaths of God in Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2006), 26–27. His fullest exposition of the deaths of God, however, and one that introduces a number of important nuances into his position, is to be found in Badiou, *Briefings on Existence*, 21–32.

³⁴ Badiou, *Briefings on Existence*, 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁶ See Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009), 507–14.

³⁷ Badiou, *Briefings on Existence*, 32, translation slightly modified.

place where truths come to be. Here we are infinite. Here nothing is promised to us, only to be faithful to what befalls us.³⁸

This impassioned “here,” the “here” of the fully-alive subject, has to be clarified through a lengthy reworking of Heidegger’s lifelong meditation on *Dasein*, “being-there.” The Badiouian “here” supplants or at least supplements “being-there,” the latter reduced to describing merely an impersonal world, the envelope of banal existence.³⁹

All this might be put more simply: Badiou argues for a crucial difference between existing and living. According to Badiou’s mathematical articulation of being and logical articulation of appearing, everything that exists exists *in* an actual world (in the *singular*), while everything that lives lives *across* actual worlds (in the *plural*). For that reason, life is for Badiou a question both of truth—that is, of what holds across *all* worlds—and of a kind of immortality—since death is reducible to passage into inexistence within *a particular* world.⁴⁰ Thus humans, at once animals (existents) and uniquely capable of orientation by trans-worldly truths (living things), are caught up in the dialectic between the “here” of genuine life and the “there” of mere existence. At the level of the individual person, according to Badiou, this dialectic takes the shape of “incorporation,” of allowing one’s animal existence to be drawn into the living production of a body of eternal truth.⁴¹ And because such production precariously unfolds in the wake of the vanished flash of a revelatory event, incorporation takes the shape of

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31, translation slightly modified.

³⁹ Badiou dedicates the whole of *Logics of Worlds* to the exposition of “being-there.”

⁴⁰ The question of truth is the main focus of both *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, and it promises to be the subject also of Badiou’s promised but as yet unwritten *Immanence of Truths*. On the latter, see Alain Badiou and Fabien Tarby, *Philosophy and the Event*, trans. Louise Burchill (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013), 105–18. For a short treatment of truth and the trans-worldly, see Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louise Burchill (Malden, MA: Polity, 2011). On death, see Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 267–70.

⁴¹ Badiou’s earliest formulation of this idea can be found in Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 40–52. A more formal and systematic exposition is in Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 449–503; and a mature but less formidable discussion is in Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, 83–90.

fidelity, of faithfulness to the trace of the event. The living subject, Badiou says, “realizes itself in the production of consequences, which is why it can be called faithful–faithful to [the trace of the event] and thus to that vanished event of which [the trace] is the trace. The product of this,” moreover, “is the new present which welcomes, point by point, the new truth.”⁴²

For Badiou as much as for Hägglund, then, life–*as* life–is a question of traces. But where for Hägglund, as for Derrida before him, traces are in themselves historical (equivocal witnesses of the immemorial past and indeterminate gestures toward the unanticipatable future), for Badiou a trace must be made historical. The trace of the event is for Badiou no more than the trace of inconsistency in an otherwise consistent order of things, the equivocal witness of the world’s essential instability. The Badiouian trace says nothing of the irretrievable past, and it augurs nothing for the unanticipatable future; it exhausts itself in marking a void or a point of indeterminacy in the otherwise fully determinate. Consequently, life is not, for Badiou as it is for Derrida, a question just of experiencing traces, but also and more especially of following out their implications. Badiouian life is the joyful work of invention and revision rather than the anxious work of mourning. And what has to be invented through a systematic revision of the world is truth.

Badiou insists that fidelity to evental traces, fidelity in pursuing the work of producing truth, is accompanied by the celebration of the eternal and enduring. In response to the question, “Is there renunciation when a truth seizes me?” Badiou says:

Certainly not, since this seizure manifests itself by unequalled intensities of existence. We can name them: in love, there is happiness; in science, there is joy . . . ; in politics, there is enthusiasm; and in art, there is pleasure. These “affects of truth,” at the same moment that they signal the entry of [an individual human animal] into a [faithful] subjective composition, render empty all considerations of

⁴² Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 53.

renunciation. Experience amply demonstrates the point, more than amply.⁴³

The sort of life worth affirming is thus, for Badiou, much more than survival. Indeed, Badiou claims that “it is impossible to say of a being that it is ‘mortal,’ if by this we understand that it is internally necessary for it to die. At most we can accept that death is possible for it, in the sense that an abrupt change in the function of appearing may befall it.”⁴⁴ Further, Badiou often quotes Spinoza’s statement that “a free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death.”⁴⁵ To give one’s life just to survival is to give up living in order just to exist, to limit one’s capacity to live across worlds in order just to survive as long as possible in only one world.⁴⁶

Badiou’s position on the irrelevance of death to life leads him to reject finitude completely. The sort of exultation that accompanies the incorporation of a particular human animal into the living body of a truth leaves room only for the affirmation of the infinite. Similarly, Badiou’s explicitly atheistic ontology asserts unapologetically that the infinite, rather than the finite, is what makes up the weave of being.

There is no God. Which also means: the [ontological] One is not. The multiple “without-one”—every multiple being in its turn nothing other than a multiple of multiples—is the

⁴³ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 53. I have inserted the word “faithful” into this quotation to bring the 1993 *Ethics* more directly into conformity with *Logics of Worlds*. In the immediate aftermath of *Being and Event*, Badiou limited the category of “subject” only to fidelity. In *Logics of Worlds*, however, Badiou has worked out a threefold typology of subjects, only one of which is the faithful subject. See Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 45–78; and Badiou’s own self-critique of his earlier formation in Badiou, *Ethics*, liii–lviii.

⁴⁴ Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 270.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* See also Alain Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, trans. David Macey (New York: Verso, 2009), 11.

⁴⁶ In a recent seminar, Badiou has begun rethinking his conception of death, although it remains to be seen where this rethinking will ultimately lead him. See his analysis of ecology as “the invention of a non-religious question of death” in Alain Badiou, *The Subject of Change: Lessons from the European Graduate School*, ed. Duane Rousselle (New York: Atropos Press, 2013), 5–9, 69–71.

law of being. . . . The infinite, as Pascal had already realized, is the banal reality of every situation, not the predicate of a transcendence. For the infinite, as Cantor demonstrated with the creation of set theory, is actually only the most general form of multiple-being. . . . Infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*.⁴⁷

Denying that the infinite lies in some inaccessible, unscathed beyond, but denying all the same that the finite is therefore all that is left to us, Badiou finds the infinite—the strictly mathematical infinite—operative absolutely everywhere. Every affirmation of finitude can thus only distract one from the possibility of living genuinely, from the possibility of being incorporated into the process of giving place to whatever eternally invariant forms might be invisibly at work in the play of appearances. To affirm finitude and thereby to confine one’s being to existence only within the supposedly consistent world of animal interaction is to give up on real life.

Life as incorporation into a process of truth’s production is thus the key to Badiou’s contemporary atheism. Anti-finitistic in nature, this gesture breaks with every reduction of human living to the world bounded by an individual’s death. For Badiou, finitude must be faithfully foregone through incorporation into the greater, trans-worldly task of giving eternal truths to circulate in the bounded realms of appearing. Pursuing truths, Badiou says, one “live[s] ‘as an immortal,’” a possibility that is, Badiou further says, “within the reach of anyone.”⁴⁸ Badiou’s conception of life might thus be said to be a philosophy of eternal life, where “eternal” serves as a qualitative rather than a quantitative predicate. To live, according to Badiou, is to give the eternal to appear in the world, to live as truth’s subject, and so to thrill in the existential intensity of creative production.

⁴⁷ Badiou, *Ethics*, 25, emphasis in original. See also Badiou, *Being and Event*, 150–60.

⁴⁸ Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, 14.

THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ATHEIST CONCEPTION OF LIFE

Martin Hägglund outlines a radical atheism, an atheism focused chiefly on contesting the very possibility of desiring any sort of life other than finite, mortal survival. Alain Badiou, for his part, outlines a contemporary atheism, an atheism dedicated to abandoning the pathos of finitude for the sort of life that accompanies the pursuit of the eternal. How might these atheisms serve religious thought? How might they, as Ricoeur suggests, clear the ground for a still deeper, because more fully aware, Christian faith? What do Hägglund's and Badiou's respective atheist ontologies make possible, specifically with respect to the Christian conception of life? More summarily put, what might a Christian thinking of life as such look like after Badiou and Hägglund?

These questions are difficult to answer, at the very least because Hägglund and Badiou appear to be deeply opposed. If atheism is fully radicalized, infinitude must be rejected and finitude embraced; but if atheism is rendered fully contemporary, finitude must be rejected and infinitude embraced. One might be tempted at this point simply to reject the incoherence of the demand to formulate a "second" atheism. Such a temptation should, however, be avoided. Hägglund's conclusion regarding the undesirability of actually living an immortal life excludes neither the possibility nor the desirability of experiencing the affects Badiou associates with joining in the trans-personal work of constructing a truth. And Badiou affirms that incorporation into an infinite truth procedure is accompanied by an affect that breaks with every pathos of finitude, but such incorporation in no way contests Hägglund's conclusion that the life of the individual can be experienced always and only as mortal survival. Despite appearances, then, I think Hägglund's and Badiou's reconceptualizations of life can be reconciled.⁴⁹ The im/mortality for which Hägglund ultimately argues is more doubled by than opposed to Badiouian eternal life, with mere survival,

⁴⁹ Badiou's recent interest in and expressed appreciation for Derrida's work may signal the possibility of such a reconciliation. See Alain Badiou, "Homage to Jacques Derrida," in Costas Douzinas, ed., *Adieu Derrida* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 34–46; and Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 125–44.

renewed at every moment, being drawn into what Badiou calls the “glorious body” of the uncompromisingly eternal.⁵⁰

Beginning, then, with Häggglund, how might a Christian thinker conceive of life in light of the arguments concerning im/mortality? Key to Häggglund’s thinking is his disentanglement of primordality and reality when it comes to human thinking about immortality. Where atheism traditionally contests only that immortality is *real*, radical atheism contests both that immortality is real *and that it is preferable to mortal survival*. But Häggglund’s disentanglement of these terms, taken alongside his careful argumentation concerning the impossibility of desiring unscathed life, might serve the Christian as much as the radical atheist. The Christian might dismiss the traditional atheist’s rejection of the *reality* of immortality while conceding to Häggglund the *undesirability* of immortality as traditionally conceived. Affirming that the soul will live on after death and that the resurrection of humanity will take place, the Christian might nonetheless confess that the sort of life that dawns with resurrection, if it can be called life at all, must be a kind of renewed im/mortality. The unending life to which Christ’s resurrection delivers one is perhaps no inert immortality dissolved in absolute presence, but rather an incessantly rehabilitated mortality not unlike the one lived in the present estate—with all its hopes and fantasies, sufferings and joys.

Of course, such a proposal is not immune to objections. Does it not obliterate the difference between life and afterlife? What could it mean to speak of an immortal afterlife that remains—or could remain—under the shadow of death? To begin to provide an adequate answer to such questions, though, I want to turn to the religious significance of Badiou’s atheist conception of life. How might a Christian thinker reconceptualize life in the light of Badiou’s claim that *real* life is to be found only in *incorporation into the glorious body of a truth*? It is not difficult or even inappropriate to hear in such language a rather straightforward borrowing from the Christian notion of communion, of participating in the sacraments in such a way that one is incorporated into the glorious body of

⁵⁰ Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, 12.

Christ.⁵¹ After all, Badiou finds a model for his thinking of truth in Pascal's claim that "the history of the Church should, properly speaking, be called the history of truth."⁵² True life is life lived in common, in communion, as one is incorporated into the eternal life of Christ—the life of him who presents himself as *the Truth*.⁵³ And to the extent that one enters into the common life of the body of Christ, one might be said to live—as Badiou himself puts it—as an immortal. It is only as one finds communion in producing a body of truth or, rather, finds communion in *the* body of *Truth* that one passes out from under the shadow of death.

Hägglund's radical atheism, in the end, problematizes the distinction between life and afterlife, pressing the Christian thinker to extend into immortality the mortalizing sway of death. Badiou's contemporary atheism problematizes the same distinction, albeit perhaps from the other side. What has traditionally been displaced into an eternal life only discoverable in an immortality beyond death, Badiou makes clear, must be experienced as much in mortal life as in (mortal) afterlife—if, that is, Christianity is to clear itself of the accusation of nihilism. Mortal survival as much immortal survival is called to the common life experienced by all incorporated into the body of Truth. For a Christian taking the Badiouian conception of life seriously, eternal life would be what is rewarded to the faithful here and now as much as after judgment. Just as im/mortality seeps from life into afterlife in Hägglund's account, eternal life seeps from afterlife into life in the Badiouian account. It is in light of this Badiouian point of clarification that the potential objections to an extension of death's sway into the immortal beyond can be answered. It is only those who remain faithful and

⁵¹ See Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, 140–41: "I like the great metaphors hailing from religion: Miracle, Grace, Salvation, Glorious Body, Conversion All in all I would rather be a revolutionary atheist cloaked in a religious vocabulary than a Western 'democrat'-cum-persecutor of Muslim men and women, disguised as a secular feminist."

⁵² See Badiou, *Being and Event*, 212–22. For a more recent and less approving discussion of Pascal, see Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 47–53.

⁵³ See L. S. Thornton, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1944), for a good analysis of these themes.

therefore remain incorporated into the body of Christ, *even in resurrection*, who escape the “second death,” the sort of death that, even in Christian scripture, still holds sway even in the afterlife.

It is thus the received doctrine of judgment that Hägglund’s and Badiou’s philosophical reconceptualizations of life jointly call upon the Christian to revise. Rather than viewing the final judgment as a moment of passage from the indeterminate to the determinate, it may be necessary to view it as *the moment in which it is announced that what one has been doing all along is what one will continue to do forever*. Perhaps the final judgment is reducible to the divine announcement that those who have hoped to survive only in order to embrace degrading lusts will be granted exactly what they have desired, and that those who have hoped to survive precisely so that they could join in communion with all those given to the construction of the body of Christ will be granted exactly what they have desired.

What may be at issue here, in the end, is the necessity of rereading with a new emphasis a classic Pauline text that says something about life. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul says the following: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” Perhaps the most common reading of the apostle’s words is that it echoes the pessimistic message of Second Baruch: “For if only this life exists which everyone possesses here, nothing could be more bitter than this.”⁵⁴ Recent commentators have attempted reinterpretations of Saint Paul’s words, pointing out that far more is at stake in their larger context than just the miseries of life. Without the resurrection, for instance, “(i) the gospel has no substance; (ii) faith is ineffective; (iii) the witnesses are liars; (iv) sin retains its destructive and damaging control; and (v) believers who have died are irretrievably lost.”⁵⁵ But perhaps it is possible—or even necessary—in light of what radical and contemporary atheist thinkers have to say about the nature of life as such to provide a rather *different* reinterpretation

⁵⁴ 2 Baruch 21:13, as translated by A. F. J. Klijn. See James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1:628.

⁵⁵ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1222.

of Saint Paul's words. They cannot mean—or can no longer mean—that mortal life is so deeply miserable that only eternal joy after death could redeem it. They must mean—or must come to mean—that *it would be most pitiable if the Christian cannot go on experiencing indefinitely, even after death, exactly what she experiences in life, namely, the incorporation of fragile life into the communal body of Christ.* Although perhaps only radicalized and contemporary atheisms make the point clear, it may be that the Christian call all along has been to love life enough to desire to go on living forever.

Whether radicalized or contemporized, atheism calls upon the Christian religion to dispense less with its belief in an afterlife as such than with its insistence on a sharp distinction between life and afterlife. If atheism makes faith possible, as Ricoeur suggests, and usually by forcing faith to be honest enough to be confessed faith rather than obscure knowledge, then radical atheism asks the believer to confess her faith in an afterlife irreducible to the eternal oblivion of death, and contemporary atheism asks the believer to confess her faith that beatitude, however indiscernible, inflects life here and now.