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“NAMING THE DARKNESS,” SPIRITUAL VIOLENCE, AND RADICAL
INCOMPLETENESS:
RESITUATING A POLITICAL THEOLOGY

The Death of God theological movement of the mid-twentieth century serves as a productive starting place to consider spiritual violence in our time, or the forceful displacement of human relations in religious belief both as individuals and as a community. Spiritual violence is examined through a political reading of Simon Critchley’s mystical anarchy and Martin Hägglund’s democratic socialism, bridged together with Saul Newman’s anarchy within political theology. These ideas are then considered alongside Lissa McCullough’s generative twilight of a self-sacrificing axial God. Emerging from this analysis is the notion of a radical human incompleteness which can resituate a political theology beyond the traumas of religious mythology. The reason why Death of God theology is useful is because the political becomes possible in human incompleteness through the act of spiritual violence from God’s self-sacrifice. Political theology should reconsider a re-mythologization of religion with anarchical relations which freely consider radical incompleteness.¹

The Death of God and Political Theology

The Death of God phenomenon in the 1960’s was a theological movement whose deeper implications were never really *theological* in the strictest sense, but rather political.² As a discrete theological movement, the Death of God emerged from the rubble of the first half of the twentieth century which exposed a contemporary political sense of loss. The expression of that loss has taken many forms in the intervening years, but through it, we can today consider spiritual violence more clearly. *Spiritual violence*, as I am using it, is a forceful displacement of human relations in religious belief both as individuals and as a community. Spiritual violence is an act of human relationality because it clearly demarcates the disintegration of religious belief individuality and collectively. The Death of God movement helps to sharpen the lens of spiritual violence. I have no interest in attempting to reshape or reframe Death of God theology in whatever shape it is in today, but rather to use it as a starting place to examine the political connections in its expression of loss. In this case, *the political* is any relation between people which is public and visible, thereby visible in its normalization. This is not a contribution to the Death of God literature, but rather a reflection on spiritual violence in political theology as it relates to human relations in a contemporary feeling of loss.

¹ The author would like to thank Dr. Viktoria Strunk for providing helpful feedback.

² See, for example, John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) or Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009).

I want to argue that spiritual violence ultimately exposes human radical incompleteness. This incompleteness, when read through Simon Critchley's mystical anarchy and Martin Hägglund's democratic socialism, opens a path where Death of God is operationally a starting place to resituate the political through the transgressions of religious mythology.

Situating the Death of God and Its (Ir)Relevance Today

The rarity of academic theology spilling over into the public consciousness was that of the so-called Death of God movement in the mid-to-late 1960s.³ Though this theology was relatively short-lived, its antecedent radical theology of the imprisoned (late) Dietrich Bonhoeffer⁴ receives continued coverage.⁵ Yet, this movement did not disappear off the scene, though arguably it took on different forms in the later 20th century liberation theology⁶ and academic work by people like Mark C. Taylor.⁷ With the 2014 publication of *Resurrecting the Death of God*, Daniel Peterson and G. Michael Zbaraschuk gathered a host of scholars who are thinking through the death of God in its contemporary forms.⁸ Peterson's introduction provides, at least to my understanding, a helpful summary of death of God positions.⁹ For example, in summarizing Thomas J.J. Altizer's view, Peterson writes:

...Altizer sees "bad faith" as a desperate reaction against the pervasive nihilism that shrouds our contemporary experience. Instead of looking forward to a new disclosure of God *in the world* out of absolute nothingness, "bad faith" (as evident in Christian fundamentalism) denies the sacrificial self-emptying of God by focusing on what is now a shattered or vacated transcendence – just as orthodox Christianity has done over the course of nearly two thousand years. Unable to face the terrifying abyss of the Godhead, fundamentalist Christians avert their eyes out of fear and look up to an imaginary God in a heaven of their own making. Unfortunately, says Altizer, that heaven is empty...¹⁰

Just as the mid-60s thinkers were, themselves, born in the rubble of World War I and educationally reared in the destruction of the Holocaust, World War II, and the subsequent Cold War, the inheritors of the Death of God

³ "Is God Dead," *Time Magazine*, April 8, 1966.

⁴ I am referring specifically to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1971) and his notion of a "religionless Christianity."

⁵ See, for example, Martin Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁶ See, in particular, Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. by R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2001).

⁷ See, for example, Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) or Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁸ Daniel J. Peterson and G. Michael Zbaraschuk, *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influence, and Return of Radical Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014).

⁹ Daniel J. Peterson, "Introduction," in Daniel Peterson and G. Michael Zbaraschuk, *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influence, and Return of Radical Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 1-19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8. Italics original.

theology today are educationally reared in a world of post-9/11 global terrorism and pervasive digitalized surveillance. This is to say that the inescapable threads of destruction which run through Death of God theology today are really no different: scholars working in religious studies and Christian theology¹¹ simply cannot ignore violence in all its forms, including spiritual violence. It is also suggestive that future scholars will, themselves, bring the critiques of religion, belief, and God to bear on and in their world. Such is true, in particular, with religion and violence which pervasively finds outlets as diverse as terroristic attacks,¹² surveillance on religious groups,¹³ and state coercion toward minority groups.¹⁴

Peterson highlights Taylor's work in this area and his implicit dependence on Jacques Derrida.¹⁵ Taylor's critiques of Altizer are unfailingly Derridean ("metaphysics of presence").¹⁶ Yet, Peterson's summary of Taylor's work touches on an important point which is not fully worked out: "The divine Spirit is fully present in the 'eternal restlessness of becoming,' granting form to ever-changing constellations of being as configuration wholly within the temporal process. Nothing lies beyond our world."¹⁷ The latter phrasing bears more than a passing resemblance to Derrida's infamous "il n'y a pas de hors-texte."¹⁸ There is no outside context to God, then, save time and space and "process." Yet the "becoming" is key here because it transgresses the process. I seek to show why transgression pertains more to the *violence of becoming*, a spiritual violence, the birthing pains of a world not yet, but also a world which bears the marks of uniquely spiritual violence. This is not to typify violence in all of its forms, but rather to comment on a specific type of spiritual violence which transgresses God language as it likewise transgresses the political.

Derrida's transgression is taken up at length in Kevin Hart's *The Trespass of the Sign* insofar as

[Derrida] argues against God conceived, experienced, or used as mode of presence, though not against God as such. In Derrida's world, there may be a God, and this God may be full self-presence, or may be otherwise than presence... To say that God dies means for

¹¹ My distinction here is not meant to enter into domain-specific claims, but rather to acknowledge the foundations of the Death of God theology movement as being from within Christianity and its implications afterward, and today, for religious studies.

¹² See, for example, J.P. Larsson, *Understanding Religious Violence: Thinking Outside the Box on Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹³ See, for example, James T. Richardson and Thomas Robbins, "Monitoring and Surveillance of Religious Groups in the United States," in *The Oxford Handbook of Church and State in the United States*, ed. by Derek H. Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ See, for example, Jane Calderwood Norton, *Freedom of Religious Organizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) or Karen Murphy, *State Security Regimes and the Right to Freedom of Religion and Belief: Changes in Europe since 2001* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁵ Peterson, "Introduction," in Peterson and Zbaraschuk, *Resurrecting*, 9.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

Derrida no more than (and no less than) that God is unable to reveal himself in language.¹⁹

Becoming is not just part of the world, in all its various processes, but it *is* the world. It is the soon-but-not-yet both revealed and hidden in language. The transgression Peterson points to is highlighted in his question for the future of Death of God theology: "...what would it be like to imagine and construct a more sustained and comprehensive retrieval of radical theology, heralding its resurrection or second coming both for the present and for the future?"²⁰ This question does not go far enough because the '60s Death of God theology, itself, did not go far enough. If Death of God theology was borne out of abominable traumas of the Holocaust and two world wars, do our continued traumas map onto our language of God? Does the claim of the "overwhelming silence of God" warrant sufficient evidence to rethink notions of God in language?²¹

While many would locate the Death of God movement as a final gasp of theological air, Peterson reorients it as the starting place of "theological reflection" which would be more accurately called *religious courage* to "...name...the darkness, the feeling of loss, the sense of divine absence that perhaps many continue to feel - or fail to acknowledge - in our time."²²

To this end, I demonstrate how the political theology found in Simon Critchley's *The Faith of the Faithless* (2012), specifically the notion of "mystical anarchy," and Martin Hägglund's recent (2019) *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, specifically in the recalibration of Marxism in "democratic socialism," contribute something dialogically potent in developing the idea of radical incompleteness. Independently, Critchley and Hägglund present fascinating analyses, but read together,²³ they contribute something unique to the wider study of political theology as it relates to spiritual violence.²⁴

¹⁹ Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 290; 287.

²⁰ Peterson, "Introduction," in Peterson and Zbaraschuk, *Resurrecting*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Critchley and Hägglund share much in common: they operate with continental philosophy, occupy distinguished positions at elite American universities, and share an affinity for discussing religion from the stated position of atheism. Maybe it's an outworking of writing in similar space, but there is also profound disagreement between them. The purpose here is not to engage in the methodological discrepancies or differences in approaches to figures like Derrida. Rather, when narrowing the scope specifically to the approach of the state and its place in the theological discourse, there is productive difference which indicates some ways forward in the larger death of God milieu. See Jeremy Butman, "No exit for Derrida," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (October 9, 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/exit-derrida/#!>). It is also worth noting that Critchley favorably endorsed Hägglund's recent book, hence my remark that operating in the same intellectual space creates a complex relationship.

²⁴ It is also important to note that "political theology" here does incorporate some of the criticisms of Mikhail Bakunin and Carl Schmitt, at least as Critchley understands them, but the express purpose is to rethink a political theology in light of the death of the God movement. As we will see, naming the darkness is an act of political insurrection between "mystical anarchy" and "democratic socialism" and this has something specific to say to present and future notions of religious violence in the political.

Simon Critchley: A Political Theology of *Mystical Anarchy*

In order to unpack Critchley's concept of "mystical anarchy," we must first recognize his insistence that the modern democratic state exists as a reciprocal "fiction" which gathers its "legitimacy" through the mutual delusion of representatives believing that they are, in fact, representing the people and people believing their views are being represented in government.²⁵ Following Rousseau, Critchley highlights the religious aspect of representative government, or "...the self-binding of the general will...requir[ing]the ligature of *religio*."²⁶ There are mutual fictions here, too, because "the fiction of politics cannot be sustained without the fiction of civil theology."²⁷ Critchley calls the "exposure" of such fictions a "historical and analytical labor of demythologization" which carries implied moral implications due to what he calls a "supreme fiction" where people know they believe in fiction but still choose to believe.²⁸ I will shortly tie these concepts to his mystical anarchy, but it is worth noting that the underpinning of belief is also tied to human action, like work, which provides the moral foundation for why anarchy is so important here. For example, I'm not sure we can accurately thread together the moral backdrop without "demythologizing" Genesis 3:17 where Adam is condemned to a life of work. Just as representative government and wider religious belief operate on mutual, or even "supreme fictions," so too work operates in the register of believing humans are still reaping the punishments of disobedience.

The root of Critchley's mystical anarchy is found in the rejection of original sin. Whereas in the Abrahamic faiths original sin forms the backdrop to the state, and its ancillary mechanisms of enforcement, "[a]narchists believe in the essential goodness of the human being."²⁹ Critchley further traces Bakunin's thought here, particularly that "if human beings are essentially good, then it is the mechanisms of the state, religion, law, and the police that make them bad."³⁰ The state, via religious notions of sin and guilt, then creates a permanent loop where humans must be saved "from themselves."³¹ The rejection of original sin means the opening of freedom in "sinless union."³² Critchley proposes a radical shift in community, particularly relational dynamics, or "an infinitely demanding subjective ethics of responsibility"³³ which is developed from Lacan. This re-visioning of community is only possible once "...original sin has been overcome."³⁴ Transformative to human relationships, abandoning original sin would also

²⁵ Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless* (London: Verso, 2012), 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 89. Italics original.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

mean Schmitt's argument could also be overcome because politics would no longer be a "hideous surrogate for religious salvation."³⁵

Critchley pivots to an inner form of anarchy, one which is (following Gustav Landauer) "...the creation of new forms of life at a distance from the order of the state - which is the order of visibility - and cultivating largely invisible commonalities..."³⁶ An inner anarchy is one where resistance is fully and finally possible because it is the "cultivation of invisibility, opacity, anonymity, and resonance,"³⁷ where "...life [is] no longer exhausted by work, cowed by law and the police."³⁸ The operation of the state, then, is not only bodily control (i.e. the work of the police) but the imposition of human *work* in order to control and regulate citizenry in "political deism governed by the hidden and divine hand of the market."³⁹ The anarchy Critchley describes is the antithesis of work for the sake of state control because the work one does is, essentially, mystical self-annihilation (hence "mystical" anarchy). The first person, the ego/I which is anarchically free from being "cowed" is free *to be* annihilated rather than *to* annihilate through violence toward the other. Yet self-annihilation, and Critchley follows the medieval Christian mystics closely here, means one "...become[s] God. When I become nothing, I become God."⁴⁰ The logics of self-annihilation and "auto-theism"⁴¹ are not fully worked out, but what ties "mystical" and "anarchy" together is the outworking of an ethical demand realized when "...God is the first anarchist, calling us into a struggle with the mythic violence of law, the state, and politics by allowing us to glimpse the possibility of something that stands apart, an infinite demand that cannot be fulfilled, that divides the subjectivity that tries to follow it."⁴² For Critchley, this "infinite demand" is manifest, here and now in the lived life, as "[o]pposition to the fictions of state and government...not in the name of disorder, but of another principle of order: free organization, self-determination, collaboration, cooperation..."⁴³

Just as I am not sure our word "freedom" quite does justice to the ethic of "infinite demand" in the "mythic violence of law, the state, and politics," so too I am not sure "anarchy" can be fully couched within a political theology. The boundary transgressions here are important, though, even if they are not easily categorized much less implemented across a lived *realpolitik*. What ties together mystical anarchy understood to a political theology frame? We will return to this question, but for the moment it seems prudent to suggest a connection to death of God theology. If mystical anarchy is an interior process which is then operationalized in human freedom, in some capacity it functions as a critique to preserve one's integrity. It is a signifier of something amok in human governmentality and its spiritual freedoms which are stripped in the delusions of representative government. This is to say mystical anarchy points to the harrowing

³⁵ Ibid., 111.

³⁶ Ibid., 143-144.

³⁷ Ibid., 151.

³⁸ Ibid., 150.

³⁹ Ibid., 152.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 130. Italics original.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 220.

⁴³ Ibid., 232.

systems of control which emerge after God, in this instance the Death of God, where regulation bodies function for the regulation of bodies.⁴⁴ An appeal to divine sovereignty may have served to control many of the masses which are no under representative government, but the Death of God and mystical anarchy help to sound the alarm regarding new operations of bodily control. That is, the pivot of *infiltrational* power at the level of the state after the death of God functions as a new type of *annihilational sovereignty*: not one of the self, but of the mental body politic which turns the "mythic violence of law, the state, and politics" into the actualized violence in new systems of control.

Martin Hägglund: Democratic Socialism

A philosophy of finite human time is one way to read Martin Hägglund's recent *This Life* because time is of critical importance in his corpus to date.⁴⁵ His interpretation of Marx centers on "labor time" to realize the critiques of Marx: "the alienation of our labor, the exploitation of our time, the commodification of our lives, the necessity of unemployment, and the inherent tendency toward destructive economic crises."⁴⁶ Hägglund develops this critique with what he calls "democratic socialism," or a form of government after capitalism and after religion.⁴⁷

While the totality of Hägglund's democratic socialism is beyond the scope here, I seek to focus on some specific points he makes in relation to religion. Hägglund sees the state as being originary over the free individual, and this extends spiritually: "...there can be no spiritual life without some form of the state: some form of institutional organization of our life-activities governed by norms to which we have bound ourselves."⁴⁸ Hägglund supports reinterpreting religion through faith in the secular and social justice for its own sake,⁴⁹ just as he supports the "reinvent[ion]" of the state rather than some form of incoherent abolition of the state.⁵⁰ Hägglund's position, while potent in quarters where capitalism exposes the worst of societal abuses, is markedly and purposefully reformist: "To subordinate the state to society is to transform the state into an *actual* democracy."⁵¹

Hägglund locates the basis by which democratic socialism functions in what he calls "secular faith," or the "commitment to our shared, finite lives

⁴⁴ This has resonances with Foucault, of course, and the tie is purposeful. Though Critchley has admitted some disdain for Foucault (see Cliff Sosis, *What Is It Like to Be a Philosopher?* <http://www.whatisitliketobeaphilosopher.com/simon-critchley>), the connection between those doing the regulating what is regulated, both bodies of different types, is important.

⁴⁵ See, specifically, Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), and Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019).

⁴⁶ Hägglund, *This Life*, 33.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 330 - 332.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 266-267.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 268. Italics original.

as ends in themselves."⁵² Häggglund takes a cue from Marx in his criticism of both capitalism and religion as "self-alienation," or the devaluing of our time in less than meaningful work and religion which devalues time in its promise of "eternity."⁵³ Both capitalism and religion, Häggglund reiterates, "make us *disown* our lives, rather than enabling us to *own* the question of what we ought to do with our finite time."⁵⁴ Häggglund elevates time, specifically the time of a person's individual life, to the highest status yet, like religion and economics broadly construed, it is driven by human anxiety over finality and loss in death.⁵⁵ Thus, something becomes one's own, i.e. one's own life and efforts, when a person realizes what is "worth doing" and what is "worth prioritizing."⁵⁶ Such spiritual clarity must precede freedom of the individual and the individual's freedom in the state.

Häggglund concludes by making the point explicit: democratic socialism is only realized by the reformulation of religion into "secular faith." This is no mere humanism, or even a rosy view of human nature without the strictures of religion, but rather a reformation of freedom from both the state, understood as the purveyor and sustainer of capitalism, and of religion, understood as the institution which robs people of their finite lives with unrealistic hope: "To complete our emancipation, we ought to remove all remaining forms of political theology by removing any appeal to 'God' in favor of the explicit democratic recognition that what ultimately matters is our relations to one another."⁵⁷ Democratic socialism is, then, ultimately an embodiment of the anxieties necessary to recalibrate our views of time and its worth. The spiritual worth here, at least as I read Häggglund, is the freedom to create *action* in one's life, here and now, *in* life. There are political implications here, too, because individuals who are *actualized* are in a better position to "...recognize that our finitude is inseparable from our dignity and our care for one another."⁵⁸

Häggglund and Critchley: Re-Envisioning Religion and the State

Häggglund and Critchley are doing different things in their respective books, of course. Häggglund is not writing a political theology, but is rather dispensing with the theological in a recalibration of the political. Critchley, on the other hand, is doing something closer to an extended study of a type of political theology. However, between the two thinkers, there are some curious points of intersection and sharp division which are worth highlighting. The intent is to get closer to "naming the darkness" in our attempt to trace spiritual violence in the political.

Häggglund and Critchley share a skepticism of representative government in general and democracy in particular. They together question whether representative government actually expresses the wishes and collective will of the represented. A point of divergence is the role of sovereign power resulting from this skepticism. Where Häggglund subsumes sovereignty into

⁵² Ibid., 314.

⁵³ Ibid., 330.

⁵⁴ Ibid., Italics original.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 360.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 361.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 388.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 389.

the collective (i.e. democratic) will of the people pursuing social ends for the "common good,"⁵⁹ Critchley traces the "paradox" of sovereignty through the continued "fiction" of representative government.⁶⁰ The fictive is just as important in Hägglund because it must be overcome, just as in Critchley, because "[w]e demand a better society and we know that it depends on us."⁶¹ This is to say the *fictive* has some operational power to rethink the political not as abstraction, but as a motivational tool for individuals to wake up to "... 'God' [as]... the first anarchist, calling us into a struggle with the mythic violence of law, the state, and politics by allowing us to glimpse the possibility of something that stands apart, an infinite demand that cannot be fulfilled, that divide subjectivity that tries to follow it."⁶² The fictive, which not only undergirds representative government, also provides the route into the moral ("infinite demand" in Critchley⁶³ and "spiritual freedom" in Hägglund⁶⁴).

Such a moral route means no less than "absolute daring"⁶⁵ for Critchley, and it is informed by "sheer ethical overload" because one's own limited life means we - finite - are met with an infinite demand: "... we are doubly bound: both to follow the thumb-line of the divine commandment and to accept responsibility for choosing not to follow it."⁶⁶ For Hägglund, however, the stakes are clear: political theology must be overcome by a reshaping of human labor in one's finite time. For Hägglund, morality, freedom, and political theology meet the same end in one's finite resources and one's finite time of life. The embodiment of the ethical, at least in the tension between the individual and the state, is borne out in the impossibility of mystical anarchy for Critchley, but is rather reconfigured in the struggle for emancipation in Hägglund. Both thinkers put the (im)possibility of human freedom in relation to the state behind the ethical demand to act, albeit in different ways.

Hägglund and Critchley both work out human freedom in political terms, whether as a type of interior anarchy (Critchley) or as an expression of one's anxiety to find meaning in life's fleeting time (Hägglund). Yet, this connection is superficial. The spiritual violence I surface here is opposing in these two thinkers: for Critchley, the natural trajectory is exterior (the state) to interior (mystical anarchy) whereas for Hägglund the interior (anxiety) unfolds to the exterior (state emancipation). The differences in trajectory suggest how to frame spiritual violence in political theology, at least as far as these two thinkers are concerned. The movement from the exterior to the interior (Critchley) means reshaping our views of the order of life: "Opposition to the fictions of state and government is advanced not in the name of disorder, but of another principle of order: free organization, self-determination, self-determination, [and] collaboration..."⁶⁷ In contrast, the move from the interior to the exterior (Hägglund) is a reevaluation of human

⁵⁹ Ibid., 387.

⁶⁰ Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, 57.

⁶¹ Hägglund, *This Life*, 369.

⁶² Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, 220.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Hägglund, *This Life*, 356.

⁶⁵ Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, 153.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 220.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 232.

freedom because it is "...a new vision of democratic socialism that is committed to providing the material and spiritual conditions for each one of us to lead a free life, in mutual recognition of our dependence on one another."⁶⁸ Human freedom is, for both of them, the ends worth pursuing, though the "violence" done here is entirely spiritual because both entail ultimate risk, the cost of which has real consequences. For Critchley, human freedom is undertaken in the risk of reliance on human goodness whereas for Hägglund, such goodness flourishes in the risk of relying on the protections of effective government. At the heart of both thinkers is the notion of collaboration of free persons who undertake risk. This risk is underpinned by the threat of physical violence, whether that is through the use of surveillance (Critchley) or the tangibility of loss through meaninglessness (Hägglund). Both, too, contain spiritual risk because of the relations of persons to themselves and others. Governance and its attendant protocols form the surrogacy of risk in relationality.

Recent work by Saul Newman brings together these differing strands of Critchley's and Hägglund's respective arguments. Newman emphasizes "...an ethos of care for what exists"⁶⁹ very much the same way that Hägglund argues for the centrality of "our care for one another."⁷⁰ Similarly, in the same sentence no less, Newman details the role of "becoming" in "the possibility of a certain 're-enchantment' of the world"⁷¹ which has resonances with Critchley's interpretation of the connection between anarchy and the mystical: "...the creation of new forms of life at a distance from the order of the state - which is the order of visibility and cultivating largely invisible commonalities..."⁷² Newman's casting of political theology of "an expression of a desire for incarnation into a kind of transcendent political community, the sovereign state"⁷³ shows the asymmetry between Critchley and Hägglund: the act of governance, that of the prerogative of the sovereign state, opens anew the re-visioning of *theological* anarchy albeit in different ways. For Critchley, anarchy is related to the medieval mystic Marguerite Porete in the sense of "hacking"⁷⁴ away at one's self to meet an "infinite demand of love."⁷⁵ Newman echoes this point with the notion of anarchy being the power to change our own conditions by forming "parallel communities free from the inequalities, violence and domination that characterise broader society."⁷⁶ Yet, for Hägglund, the state is needed to realize human potential, so where would anarchy make sense? In Hägglund, the locus of freedom, i.e. of human flourishing, is not found *in* the state (even if the state is the *mechanism* by which human flourishing occurs), but is rather in the "conditions of spiritual life."⁷⁷ This is no mere replacement, but rather the relocation of

⁶⁸ Hägglund, *This Life*, 26. Italics removed.

⁶⁹ Saul Newman, *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), p. 158.

⁷⁰ Hägglund, *This Life*, 389.

⁷¹ Newman, *Political Theology*, 158.

⁷² Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, 143-144.

⁷³ Newman, *Political Theology*, 156.

⁷⁴ Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, 129.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁷⁶ Newman, *Political Theology*, 167.

⁷⁷ Hägglund, *This Life*, 365. This phrasing appears in Hägglund's critique of the reception of Hegel's Phenomenology, particularly in the notion of "absolute spirit."

human spirituality away from the ephemeral and vague into the concrete outworking of human activity in this life, protected by the government, and made manifest by mutual cooperation. Anarchy, then, is rewritten into the human experience of spirituality: by and through human flourishing, anarchy becomes the outward rejection of meaninglessness and adoption of freedom to live and work without coercion from outside influence.

Here, at the greatest point of divergence, a theological reconsidering of anarchy through Newman's "asceticism," or "practices of self-transformation,"⁷⁸ is where both Critchley and Hägglund converge in the most productive way: spiritual life's demands extend beyond the material and, thus, the govern-able, yet there an incompleteness which is at once threatened by governance protocols and is also liberated in the reaffiliation with others in meaningful relation. This is to say the key aspect of Critchley and Hägglund, which is conceptually illuminated by Newman, is human incompleteness, which is most acutely expressed in one's spiritual life. A political theology which considers the potency of anarchism locates a radical incompleteness in human vulnerability.⁷⁹ The relationship between human incompleteness and spiritual violence can be read through recent Death of God thinking.

I return to my earlier point adapted from Peterson's point about developing a radical theology insofar as the task of the theologian is less about God-speak than it is about "nam[ing] the darkness, the feeling of loss, the sense of divine absence."⁸⁰ Peterson here also sets out something of an agenda for theology in our time: to figure out "tools for working out a new kind of 'God/less' talk that takes the otherwise overwhelming silence of God into account as the starting point for theological reflection."⁸¹ Political theology, at least as construed above, is not so much one of those tools, but rather a set of models to unpack human incompleteness in its vulnerability. Mystical anarchy, then, is one of those models with which to reconfigure language to make cogency out of the "overwhelming silence of God."⁸² Spiritual violence, rewritten around this incompleteness, becomes another model for understanding "the feeling of loss, the sense of divine absence."⁸³ Anarchy, religiously understood as an act of reconfiguration in social relations to one another in communion away from the gaze of governance, becomes the tool.

⁷⁸ Newman, *Political Theology*, 166. Newman goes on: "...that enable us to modify our relations with others and with our immediate environment and to build different kinds of social organizations, which give us a greater degree of autonomy from state power." *Ibid.*, 166.

⁷⁹ Incompleteness is certainly not new to religious thinking. It has been expressed in many ways which include notions of *sin* in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam or karma in Hinduism and Buddhism. My emphasis on incompleteness, particularly as it is developed as a radical incompleteness, is to draw out the point of political vulnerability, or the ability to manipulate and control human behavior.

⁸⁰ Peterson, "Introduction," in Peterson and Zbaraschuk, *Resurrecting*, 16.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Glow of the Self-Sacrificing God

Lissa McCullough's work in the chapter, "Twilight of the Axial God," provides a way to think through human incompleteness through the spiritual violence I've traced so far in Critchley and Hägglund. In a divine entropy of sorts, McCullough describes how "we find ourselves having to assess, while participating in, the strange history of a self-evacuating God..."⁸⁴ The "comprehensive void"⁸⁵ that is left is not entirely black, an abyss, but rather a "sacrificial light."⁸⁶ Writing with a similar vernacular as the earlier Death of God theologian, Altizer, McCullough describes a regeneration of life after the "absolute sacrifice of God."⁸⁷ This assessment, concurrent with the twilight of the Axial God and our human history, is a political act because it requires participation in this history of a "self-evacuating" God.⁸⁸ McCullough stresses the changes underway in human history are "not at the level of personal belief but at the level of effective social organization"⁸⁹ which means that the political is re-written through the death of God, ultimately leading to a "system of alienation."⁹⁰

This "system" is not unfamiliar to humanity, of course. She emphasizes how ancient people "...bartered the terrors of freedom for the security of self-possession and fixed identity"⁹¹ which is to say ancient peoples, terrified of the natural world and the freedom within, constricted themselves with religious mythology to give themselves "identity." This is not a new analysis, of course, but it leads to her claim that the Death of God movement "inaugurates the final axial moment, the apotheosis of negation, in the wake of which a more generative, less reactive and reactionary basis for human thinking and acting..."⁹² This line of thinking follows Critchley's mystical anarchy in a peculiar way. The act of constricting, that of governance and its protocols, set into motion humanity's history which is now changing with the reaffirmation of freedom which is found from breaking loose from such ancient structures. This is to say that the Death of God, much like the freedom found in Critchley's mystical anarchy, provides a new way to think outside of the ancient constriction of religion and its political claims.

McCullough goes on to describe life after this axial moment, this final generative twilight as life that is "actual, not alienated...where the most sacred challenges - challenges evaded or deflected by religion as we have known it - still await our attention."⁹³ This call out of the slumbers of religion, relegated at best to a promised salvation and at worst to damnation, means facing forward the immense difficulties of this life. The

⁸⁴ Lissa McCullough, "Twilight of an Axial God" in Daniel Peterson and G. Michael Zbaraschuk, *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influence, and Return of Radical Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 179.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 180

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 183.

political distractions of life's ultimate meaning somehow being worked out after this life are repositioned here to the interconnectedness of all people living actual lives. Advocating for "...the immediate, local, real particularity of the actual world,"⁹⁴ Elsewhere, and more recently, McCullough spells out the political implications of such real living, yet in the Altizerian "atheism as an inevitable expression of faith itself": "Where atheism pervades it bespeaks an abiding presence and even *parousia* of God, and where faith pervades it embodies the kenotic dissolution of a God now fully incarnate, hence no longer God."⁹⁵ McCullough's political vision for actual life is similar to Hägglund's plea for human flourishing here and now, not cowed by unpaid promises or terrifying threats.

My mention of the political centers on the two connections I have made with McCullough's thought: the freedom of mystical anarchy in the death of God as a final sacrifice of God (i.e. Critchley) and the affirmation of this life to be lived, here and now, with the pressing concerns of this life (i.e. Hägglund). The former operates as a historical context while the latter pivots to a way to reconsider this life. Both are replete with human incompleteness. Freedom in mystical anarchy bears no way to consider how to *use* this freedom; in the utter sacrifice of the axial God, humanity finds itself in not a new world, but in a new position to resituate itself as ultimately free from the bonds of religion⁹⁶ into something entirely novel in the history of humanity. The opaque notions of how to use this new freedom, particularly when we think about how to resituate our place in the world, demonstrates our incompleteness in this world. The same is true, too, with the pressing concerns of this life, of this world, which has not gone away. Hägglund's and McCullough's thoughts, together in comparison, show us an ethical imperative of living this life as a form of interconnectedness. This interconnectedness, perhaps being thought out as a new form of society, means that we are, as individuals, incomplete. In our lived experiences together, as community, we begin to complete ourselves. We must take this ethical imperative and resituate ourselves within the web of interconnectedness, awash and in acceptance of our individual incompleteness. It is this fundamental human trait, our incompleteness, which serves as the means to rethink the political, the ultimate meaning of our lives, and the ability to resituate ourselves. However, we must return to the notion of spiritual violence in order to examine how it undergirds this resituating of the political.

Political Theology beyond the Death of God

All of this is to say, so far, that the political here becomes possible in human incompleteness through the act of self-sacrifice of God. This self-sacrifice is the ultimate act of spiritual violence on God's part, and yet, as McCullough indicates in her assessment of our time, we must live in this shadow, in this generative twilight. This is what I mean when I say that the Death of God, at least as it is formulated here, is the starting place for reconsidering the political. I want to argue that the reordering of human relationality means

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Lissa McCullough, "Apocalypticism as Political Theology," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 19, no. 1 (Winter 2019-2020): 170.

⁹⁶ Such is particularly the case when we consider one of the definitions of religion: to "rebind" as being akin to the re-bundling of sticks.

that, paradoxically, spiritual violence provides a way to examine religion without being under its spell, its spell of governance protocols and enforcement mechanisms. The void left in the Death of God is the chasm of generative power to real life, real human relationality, and a real political orientation. This is to say that if we take McCullough seriously, postaxial religion is not a dark abyss but rather a light we must pass through in order to realize the power of spiritual violence to recreate our relations with one another. If human relations are built on and carried out by formal and informal structures, the contrast between Critchley and Hägglund becomes ever more prescient: Critchley's spiritual anarchy is pitted against structures but Hägglund's democratic socialism creates new structures. The tension here demonstrates that social (de)structuring bears out our ethical commitments to one another. The Death of the Axial God in this way allows spiritual violence to bypass the worst excesses of religious terroristic violence and religious emotional violence. The spiritual violence of the ultimate self-sacrifice of God means the recreation of human (de)structuring of society. The naming of the darkness is, then, the resituating of the political within new human relations. The symbol which connects all of these ideas together is that of human incompleteness.

Conclusion: Re-Mythologizing Political Theology in Radical Incompleteness

Reading Critchley and Hägglund through McCullough's notion of a self-sacrificing axial God shows us how to position spiritual violence in the political. That is, we seek a resituating of human relations after this event, our starting place, to reorient the political and a political theology simultaneously. Human relations are reformed in this resituating from displacement and disorientation through mutual acceptance of humanity's incompleteness. But, this incompleteness is radical because it requires religious courage. That is, our radical incompleteness means our most profound vulnerability is written around human finitude and our religious stories, mythologies, which help us to make meaning of that finitude. But, our radical incompleteness is also our most profound creativity to develop new mythologies to compensate for that incompleteness.

Spiritual violence, the breakdown of our relations with one another in the contemporary world, must embrace this radical incompleteness in order to transgress the entrenched mythologies of the axial religions. This means that new political space is created in our desire to renegotiate religious mythologies. We return to the point above regarding the world *becoming* through new political contexts which are distinctly spiritual. What is becoming is an ethical freedom, written at the margins of our own internal and external capacities for resistance to governance and control, an anarchy that begins as a mystical experience and culminates in a reforming of our interconnected bonds. This is to say that naming the darkness refers most concretely to the traumas suffered in the dislocation of our human relations, which have been most fervently expressed in our religious stories. The binding function of religion, one of its most ancient definitions, though unbundled in the contemporary world, has the ability to once again rejoin people together in the collective renegotiation of religious narratives.

What and how the resituating of religious myths would look like in human society is beyond the scope here, but I conclude suggesting that such re-mythologization bears its most potent fruit in considering the rightful place of our anarchical, free, and gloriously incomplete relations with one another.