

# Remarks on Béla Szabados's "After Religion? Reflections on Nielsen's Wittgenstein"<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

In an insightful, carefully argued, and beautifully written article, Béla Szabados gets me right—or, more accurately, largely right—both with respect to my underlying intent and to what I say about Wittgenstein. My critical comments will have to do more with what he does with this. However, I start with two small places where he gets me wrong: (1) I do not reject liberalism, though I do reject neo-liberalism and capitalism. But I am part of the tradition of social liberalism running from J. S. Mill to T. H. Green, to John Dewey and to John Rawls. I do not see my Marxianism as being in conflict with it; and (2) I never regarded Wittgenstein as an atheist and thus not as an atheist friend of fideism. It is also the case, and I acknowledged this, that in spite of his intense feeling for religion, he was not a religious believer.

Szabados catches well much of my underlying intent and hedgehoggish aims. I seek to articulate and defend a pervasive and thoroughgoing secularism. It is naturalistic, atheistic, humanistic, and critical. While aspiring to be analytical in my way of proceeding in philosophy and of viewing things, I also have the hedgehoggish aim to articulate and defend a naturalistic but non-scientistic worldview. This also includes what D. Z. Phillips sneeringly calls a philosophy of life. I also have a concept of *social critique* and employ it in my philosophizing. If such a worldview—or so I

argue—were accepted under conditions of modernity, there would be more human flourishing for more people and there would be less harm in the world than if we continue with our religious orientations.

I further argue that a Wittgensteinian way of regarding religion provides the strongest intellectual and human response to a secularism that goes all the way down. Like Wittgensteinians who concern themselves with religion, I have something between disdain and an ironical attitude toward the philosophy of religion business. I do not think it is up to much, *vis-à-vis* religion or anything else. I am not much concerned with whether I am in step or out of step with the dominant trends in the philosophy of religion or even of philosophy more generally. I have no concern to be either eclectic or particularly original. Like Peirce, I see philosophy as a cooperative activity. I see it, where it is properly pursued, as *fallibilist* and critically common-sensist. Trying to get a coherent view of the world, I take a lot of things from a diverse lot of philosophers and other critical intellectuals. I take what seems to me useful and insightful and leave the rest. This applies to Wittgenstein as much as to other philosophers. I deplore the attitude which in effect says that to criticize Wittgenstein is to show that you do not understand him. I do not see myself as a historian of philosophy or of the history of ideas. That would take a lot more detailed knowledge of these intellectuals than I have. I try to get the intellectual I am writing about right, but I am centrally concerned with certain things I glean from her writings that seem important to me. With these in mind, I try to see what I can learn from the author I am studying, including ways she might shift my judgements of importance and enable me to see things in a new light.

I will now say, trying to give a helpful background to my response to Szabados's account of "my Wittgenstein," something about things that have had importance for me on what I have come to think and how it has led me to where I am now, including my take on Wittgensteinianism and religion. This involves saying something—I hope not self-indulgently—about my intellectual history: about what moulded my contextualistic non-scientistic social naturalism.

There was the influence of the classical naturalists (particularly John Dewey and two exceptional students of his, Sidney Hook and Ernest Nagel, who became important pragmatist naturalists in their own right).

Like most graduate students of my generation, what was then the rising tide of analytical philosophy influenced me. First the logical positivists, then later G. E. Moore and ordinary-language philosophers such as Wisdom, Ryle, Austin, and Malcolm. Most fundamentally, Wittgenstein (whom initially I aligned too closely with the ordinary-language philosophers) became for a time the dominant philosopher in my life, with Winch and Waismann playing supporting roles. I should add, though, that it was

never the *Tractatus* but the later work of Wittgenstein that had such a powerful grip on me.

With this *mélange* as background, as I was finishing my dissertation and for a decade after, I worked intensely in moral philosophy. (Philosophizing about religion came as an accident of teaching and the students I taught. Moral philosophy by contrast was always close to my heart.) Certain moral philosophers, some of whom were philosophically related to the above-mentioned analytical philosophers, importantly influenced me, and in sometimes diverse, even conflicting, ways—e.g., Mackie and Toulmin—affected my thinking and writing about ethics. First there came Stevenson, Hare, Hägerström, Mackie, and later Toulmin, Hampshire, Kurt Baier, and then Rawls—increasingly Rawls. But certain things from philosophers other than Rawls (particularly Toulmin and Baier) continued to influence me along with the jarring influence of non-cognitivism and error theories (Nielsen 2001a and 2001b).

Later, and connected with the Vietnam War, Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, analytical Marxists (particularly G. A. Cohen and Andrew Levine) came to influence me. And again, rather jarringly, some of critical theory as well as Habermas captured my attention. I wanted to have my Wittgenstein, Dewey, and Marx too in a coherent and compelling package.

Later, much later, came the neo-pragmatists. Putnam and Rorty (particularly Rorty) and Donald Davidson (however he is classified) had a very considerable influence on me and he, rather late in the day, forced me to take Quine seriously in a way I had never done before. It did not cure me of my perhaps ignorant distrust of the philosophical use of logic and did not change my mind about scientism, but it did make me see how terribly important Quine is.

Intellectual history aside, what I have come to do with this considerable variety of philosophers that have come my way is to pick and choose from them as providing materials to use in forging my own views. The most dominant influences are Marx, the analytical Marxists, Dewey, Rawls, Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Davidson. I have upon occasion described myself as a Marxian, a pragmatist, and a therapeutic Wittgensteinian, and there is a certain amount of truth in all those characterizations—I would not disavow them and I see them and hope I have succeeded in making them fit into a coherent and instructive package. I am not so concerned with whether something comes out of this which is uniquely true and strikingly original. But I am concerned with whether we get something here which hangs coherently together for a time, which is warrantably assertable and helps us to make sense of our moral, political, and personal lives. I would like to do something to forge a coherent view of the world which would show us a way to answer more adequately to human needs and aspirations than does the cruel and exploitative moral wilderness we live in. Does that

leave me, as Anthony Kenny thinks, in solitude (Kenny 2002)? I do not know and, as I think he is thoroughly aware, do not much care. I do not give a damn about philosophical fashions and I have never cared about being anyone's disciple, though like everyone else I have my heroes. But most of all I would like to forge something that hangs together and makes sense of our lives, that is reflective and well argued and that can be reflectively endorsed or, if I cannot attain that, will help prod other people to get something better that will be reflectively endorsed for a time. Nothing importantly substantial gets endorsed for more time than that.

## 2. Responses to Béla Szabados

I spoke of something I call Wittgensteinian fideism. I never thought that all Wittgensteinians were fideists, though I thought of them as being in effect, if not in intention, fideist-friendly. Wittgenstein and certain Wittgensteinians (D. Z. Phillips, Norman Malcolm, Peter Winch, Rush Rhees, O. K. Bouwsma) all seem to me at least fideist-friendly.

What is fideism and what is the view I called Wittgensteinian fideism? A fideist of any stripe will hold that faith does not need the support of reason or philosophy or science; nor should it seek it. Reason cannot lead to faith or to first principles on which life and thought depend. Only the heart can lead to faith. There is, fideists claim, an infinite distance between faith and understanding. From unbelief to belief—to faith—there cannot be a reasoned transition but only a leap from a life lived in one way to a life lived in another. Both what Terence Penelhum calls moderate fideism (Pascal and Bayle) and radical fideism (Tertullian and Kierkegaard) denigrate reason “as a source of spiritual truth” (Penelhum 1997, p. 377). For religion we must rely on trust springing from the heart and not from the head. Faith is not a matter of assent to doctrines but a state of trust and commitment to God himself and not to a set or a cluster of propositions about him, or to the system of doctrinal strands of any religion. Szabados characterizes what I call Wittgensteinian fideism accurately, thus:

How does Wittgenstein become associated with this intimidating, if not scary, family [Tertullian, Pascal, Hamann, Kierkegaard]? Nielsen does so by invoking some characteristic thought manoeuvres of the *Philosophical Investigations* and then extending them to the religious sphere. One important theme in the later Wittgenstein is that there are many distinct forms of life with their associated language games and autonomous rationality. Another is that it is a mere prejudice of traditional philosophy to suppose that a single standard or model must apply to them all. Yet another is that philosophy must leave these forms of life as they are and cannot dictate to them. Indeed, Wittgenstein urges his readers, “what has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—forms of life.” . . . To apply this: Religion is an ancient and ongoing form of life, with its own distinctive language game, practices, and criteria. It can only be criticized internally

by someone who has a participant's understanding of this discourse. A philosopher's task is not to criticize or evaluate the religious language games and ways of life, but to describe them where appropriate, so as to remove "the bumps" that stand in the way of understanding their workings. (Szabados 2004, pp. 749-50)

Now we can see Nielsen's basis for classifying Wittgenstein as a fideist. The philosophical themes just sketched have a crucial affinity to the fideist thinkers in that they are protective of religion and seem to render it immune from criticism. The fideist thinker, including Wittgenstein, says: 'What philosophical/theological/scientific reason sees as irrational—absurd, paradoxical, or a matter of the heart—is really a distinct, autonomous, and coherent form of life that needs no external justification. Philosophical Reason, in its attempts to essentialize, homogenize, and reduce, has been blind to, and disrespectful of, difference. Thus Wittgenstein tries to make it clear that traditional philosophical/scientific justifications and criticisms of religion are really based on bad philosophy. Religion and faith do not need philosophical justification or apologetics: they stand on their own feet, as do other forms of life. (ibid., p. 750)

On this account, because there is no such thing as reason leading to faith, philosophy can provide no justification for belief in God or immortality or a commitment to or a grounding for religion; we have forms of life of which religion is one, but they are not something that can be judged reasonable or unreasonable or seen to be founded on some philosophical or any other propositions. Forms of life cannot be shown to be justified or unjustified. They are just there like our lives. There is no going over or under them to found them or justify them—the very notion makes no sense. "What has to be accepted," Wittgenstein famously said, "the given, is—so one could say—forms of life." Religion is one such form of life, "an ancient and ongoing form of life" with its own distinctive vocabularies, discourses, practices, and criteria of acceptability and rationality. There is no possibility of standing outside those language games and practices and judging their rationality or ascertaining whether they make claims which are true or indeed false. What we have to rely on is not reason but trust and faith. This sets Wittgenstein squarely in the fideist tradition.

Szabados asks, was Wittgenstein himself a fideist? In "Wittgensteinian Fideism" (1967), and up until *Naturalism and Religion* (2001c), I gave to understand that he was. Now I regard this, given one reading of "Wittgensteinian Fideism," as a mistake, for, after all, his passionate involvement with religion to the contrary notwithstanding, Wittgenstein was not himself a believer, and only a believer—or so until very recently I believed—can be a fideist. *What Wittgenstein was was an intense friend of fideism.* His portrait of religion, where religion was not superstition or a set of practices taken to be grounded in a metaphysical religiosity which, he had it, was both incoherent and undermining of faith, was a fideistic one. While

abjuring any appeal to philosophical foundations or natural theology or an appeal to rational intuitions—to, in short, reason—religion, Wittgenstein had it, was something that could be reflectively endorsed and accepted on faith by reasonable people aware of their terrible inadequacy and trying to make sense of their tangled lives. (In this sense it was closer to what Penelhum calls moderate fideism than radical fideism.) Nothing else, Wittgenstein thought, could do so for many people. Thus, he advocated fideism for those whose need for religion was great and who had difficulties in bringing themselves to bend their knees. Religion cannot and, even if it could, should not rest on any philosophical theology, metaphysics, or revealed theology. That would eviscerate it, turn it into some kind of theory instead of a living thing concerned with our coping with our lives and with our sensibilities concerning ourselves and others.

Szabados has conceptual difficulties with the notion of Wittgenstein or anyone else being a *friend* of Wittgensteinian fideism. You can be, he has it, a friend of people but not of an *ism*. But there are people who would like to believe in Christianity and sometimes even think they should believe but cannot (Dostoevsky's novels are full of them). They want that way of life to prevail; they support it and feel an affinity with it. But they cannot bend their knees. These things happen and perhaps reasonably so. It is perfectly in place to describe such people as unbelieving friends of Christianity. Moreover, where they think Christianity is most adequately protected by fideism, where they think Christianity is most adequately articulated by fideism, and, most particularly, when they think nothing else can give an adequate rationale for religion, it is quite in place to say that they are unbelieving friends of Christian fideism. You do not have to be a fideist to support fideism.

Szabados remarks that I have said that Wittgensteinian fideism is absurd and backs that up claiming I have compelling objections to it. I now regret that in 1967 I said that in certain ways an attractive conception of how to conceptualize religion was absurd. Certain things about Wittgensteinian fideism seem to me deeply right and that is why over the years I have so often returned to it. What I should have said, and what I think I intended in 1967, is that it has some absurd conclusions—conclusions which are at best false. And thus it should be, in ways compelling as it is, rejected.

What are these at least putative absurdities? If, as Wittgenstein gives to understand, we have correctly characterized Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, etc., then we must recognize, he has it, that these faiths, though not all particular forms or parts of them, are in order as they are. Thus, Christianity must be taken to be in order as it is, but not all forms of it, e.g., Christian Science. As D. Z. Phillips tirelessly calls to our attention, there can be internal criticisms of religions, or rather of certain forms they take, but no sound or even relevant fundamental criticisms of religion *per se*, not even fundamental criticisms of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, which con-

clude that these religions should be abandoned or that these religions rest on a mistake. If we have described them accurately—perspicuously displayed their language games—they can in no way be coherently or relevantly criticized. A form of life must just be accepted. There is no philosophical or any other intellectual or any other reasonable vantage point from which a form of life may be relevantly criticized. We neither have nor can come to have such a perch. Yet these religions, these forms of life, these language games, contain metaphysical propositions, and contain them *inescapably*; and, Wittgenstein has it, all metaphysical propositions are nonsensical. But, even so, on his account such forms of life must just be accepted as they stand and can in no way be criticized. Neither philosophically nor in any other way can we call forms of life into question as a whole, though some parts of them can be relevantly criticized.

But Wittgenstein is also giving us to understand that religion, given its inescapable metaphysical content, is in conflict with what can sensibly be believed since there are inexpugnable and central elements of religion that are the “houses of cards” that metaphysics—something that just goes with religion—is. Central claims of religion are so afflicted since they are inescapably metaphysical. But he cannot consistently say (a) that religion is inescapably metaphysical, (b) that all metaphysics is nonsense, and (c) that religious forms of life are in order just as they are. As much as Wittgenstein was influenced by Kierkegaard, he cannot be telling us (as Kierkegaard does) that we must just accept what we know is irrational and absurd. Such acceptance is absurd and fits badly with his claim that forms of life (any form of life) are in order just as they are. But if they involve metaphysical propositions that are inexcisable, they cannot, on Wittgenstein’s own view, be in order just as they are. Wittgenstein is chasing his own tail here, for we cannot accept what we do not understand because then we cannot say *what* it is that we are accepting (Nielsen 1963). Some of religion’s key claims—though the language is more familiar—are like “birds without any colour triangulate.” That is something we cannot accept for that is something of which we can make nothing. The difference between the metaphysical propositions—including, of course, religious ones—and “birds without any colour triangulate” is that the metaphysical propositions are *disguised* nonsense while “birds without any colour triangulate” is *evident* nonsense. But still we end up with absurdity on Wittgenstein’s own terms. If key religious propositions are nonsensical because they are metaphysical we get absurdity, and if they are not metaphysical we get absurdity as well for then we end up, to avoid taking key religious claims metaphysically, saying something which is so *reductive* that it cannot be accepted as a central part of those religions. (D. Z. Phillips, his beliefs about his beliefs to the contrary notwithstanding, exemplifies this.) Yet there are no other alternatives. Wittgensteinian fideism, as attractive as it may seem, is not false: it is incoherent. Yet it follows from Wittgenstein’s

own views that it is the only religious game in town. It cannot be metaphysical *and* make sense, but it cannot be reductive, and thus naturalistic, and at the same time be Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or any of the other great religions. All that can be done by way of response here is use religious-sounding words, as D. Z. Phillips does, with an atheistic content.

I turn now to Wittgenstein's alleged *philosophical* quietism. There is no room in *philosophy*, Wittgenstein has it, for critique of ideology, critique of forms of life, for cultural criticism, or for articulating a *Weltanschauung*. There is no way, at least philosophically, to assess a way of life. Has Wittgenstein provided a convincing rationale for that?

On his view, all we can do as philosophers is piecemeal, therapeutic conceptual elucidation or description, a description where we assemble reminders for a particular purpose, often to make it apparent that a bit of disguised nonsense is genuine, plain nonsense. Then we remind ourselves of how some of the language games of our forms of life are actually played. This is done not to gesture at a theory, but to break philosophical perplexity. I think this is one important thing that philosophers should do. But, *pace* Wittgenstein, that is not the *only* thing to be done. The Deweyian thing where philosophy is seen as criticism (sometimes as a criticism of criticisms) should also be done. After Wittgensteinian therapeutic analysis has been done, it is often the case that there is also room, and a need, for social criticism. Not all philosophical critique is or should be an exposure of nonsense. Critique or defence of Rawls's two principles of justice is not critique of nonsense. They can be coherent and even in ways forceful, but still be mistaken, and that that is so or not can, and needs to be, argued philosophically. Wittgenstein will (*must?*) say that that is not philosophy. But is that anything other than unmotivated stipulation? Remember, "philosophy" is not a name of a natural kind.

To say "Well, Wittgenstein is *philosophically* quietistic" is one way to respond. But this does not mean that he cannot, in various cases, make political, moral, and aesthetic criticisms. He just cannot make *philosophical* ones or ones which he would call "philosophical." But this is just the kind of stipulative arbitrariness about "philosophy" that I have been criticizing. Further, what is left for him to do is nothing like Dewey, Marx, Mill, Habermas, or even like Rawls does. When they make criticisms they are not in his sense "philosophical criticisms." Wittgenstein's seem at least to be *just straight moralizing*. What, that is, do his non-philosophical *Lebensphilosophie*-like remarks—remarks we find prominently in *Culture and Value*—come to, if not just straightforward moralizing? He makes enigmatic gurulike remarks about the darkness of our times. He makes religious remarks—see *Culture and Value*. He remarks about the shallowness of the Enlightenment and of scientism. But there are no arguments here or a sense of the need for evidence. There is no assembling of reminders for a particular purpose. There are just declamations or "wise sayings."



There is no use here of his brilliant therapeutic analyses or even attempts at perspicuous representations. Moreover, we have nothing even moderately systematic such as we find worked out in Mill, Dewey, or Rawls. He does not even regard their characteristic activities as philosophy. And when he makes comments on life and our times he just moralizes.

I think, to switch to something different, Szabados, and perhaps Phillips as well, would regard me as making Wittgenstein too much like a positivist as far as philosophy is concerned. Like Peter Winch, I think it is necessary to observe the distinction between Wittgenstein's own religious reflections and his philosophical comments on religious discourse. Szabados thinks that a mistake. I will return to that later. For me, by contrast—and as a bit of philosophy—criticisms of forms of life and social practices are possible and important as well. Moreover, in a historically and contextually rooted way, they can be and should be free of metaphysics. I view particular practices critically and try to see how things hang together (Nielsen 1987, 1991, 1995). My interest (or one of them) in what Wittgensteinian fideism—or, if you will, a Wittgensteinian portrait of religion—is to see if it makes (or gives us good reason to believe that) all such efforts are houses of cards, something deeply irrational.

### 3. Concepts, Religion, and Passionate Commitment

Szabados rightly says “[r]eligious feelings and reactions . . . do not swing loose from religious concepts, and therefore religious people experience and see their feelings and concerns to be decent human beings and to care about others in terms of their form of life and the associated doctrines and creeds” (2004, p. 753). The same thing holds for good deeds. Unless there is a credal and doctrinal religious framework, the concerns, feelings, and deeds are in substance actually secular.

Given this, when Wittgenstein takes the really crucial thing about religion to be a matter of a passionate ethical orientation to one's life, he cannot mean to be saying anything like religion is morality touched with emotion or, more crudely, that religion is really just ethics and being genuinely and non-evasively serious about moral matters. Why? Because a religious person's thinking and feeling about ethics is saturated with concepts which are distinctly religious, e.g., “sin,” “grace,” “God's will,” “gratitude to God's for one's life.” Religious language games are, of course, rooted in prereflective feelings and in instinctive/emotional reactions. But these emotions and reactions do not float free of religious concepts, concepts which shape them in a way distinct from the emotions and reactions of an utterly secular person. As is particularly obvious in his “Lecture on Ethics,” Wittgenstein has a distinctively religious conception of ethics (1993, pp. 37-45). A genuine ethics, he believes, must have at its core something categorical and unconditional. Kant tries for this but fails. Where Kant gets something with the look of unconditionality he has empty for-

mulae devoid of content. As Szabados remarks, Wittgenstein goes for “Do it because God commands it” because that “puts an end to a possibly interminable process of philosophical explanation and justification” (2004, p. 756). While the core of Wittgenstein’s religious orientation is ethical, it is an *ethico-religious* orientation suffused with distinctively religious concepts and placed in a religious context. There is no intention to reduce religious-talk and feeling to purely secular-talk that would be compatible with a naturalistic worldview.

It is here, as Szabados recognizes, where I claim that Wittgensteinian fideism has two crucial strands that are at odds with each other. Religions, on the one hand, are, as I have been at pains to point out, inescapably metaphysical. The Judeo-Christian-Islamic strand will serve as an illustration. For them, a belief in God is necessary and God is, as Alvin Plantinga puts it, “an almighty, all-knowing, wholly benevolent and loving immaterial person . . . who has created the world, created human beings in his own image, and continues to act in the world by way of providential care for his creatures” (Plantinga 1997, p. 383). This is plainly a metaphysical proposition, all right; some would say a crude one, but metaphysical all the same. Other philosophers and theologians use—or tend to use—more elusive language, some would say (perhaps not without point) evasive language, but they, as well as just plain folk and philosophers like Plantinga, end up somewhere or other in their descriptions of their religious faith, if it does not come to just a blur, making, wittingly or unwittingly, metaphysical claims. But Wittgenstein, as firmly and unequivocally as any positivist, rejects metaphysical claims—all metaphysical claims—taking them to be nonsensical. So a consistent Wittgensteinian should say that crucial framework propositions and beliefs of religions are nonsensical and, as such, are to be rejected. Yet as emphatically, Wittgenstein says that religions are forms of life and as such are all right as they are and are to be accepted like any other form of life.

If certain elements in religious forms of life are metaphysical *and we could isolate them from the others*, then we could perhaps excise the metaphysical ones and just keep those parts that are not metaphysical. If we could do that then we *might* be home free with such a Wittgensteinian account. It could then give a perspicuous representation of our religious language games without taking metaphysics into account. But that we cannot do. If, for example, we are Christians, we say things like “my Saviour lives and He will protect me.” And we do not, while remaining Christians, just take this as a metaphor. But to speak of our Saviour is to speak of God, and to speak of God, as the quotation from Plantinga attests, is to say something metaphysical (not *just* metaphysical, but metaphysical all the same). If, alternatively, as Wittgenstein does, we say that *to speak God is to speak of the meaning of life*, we are saying something which does not square with the use of language in religious language games. Religious

people might say “because of God life has meaning” or “without God life would have no meaning,” but “God is the meaning of life” is, for people who play these language games, incoherent. No such identity statement could be intended by a believer in God who understood what she was saying. God, so conceived, would be a purely secular reality and all atheists and agnostics, who were also caring persons, could be led gently into belief. To respond by saying “do not take the ‘is’ as the ‘is’ ‘of identity’” leaves “God is the meaning of life” too obscure to do anything with. Language here has gone on a holiday.

For Wittgenstein, religion is a form of life and what must be accepted are our forms of life. They, Wittgensteinians have it, stand in need of no justification, indeed they can have no justification; they are just to be accepted like our lives. And these forms of life have, as integral and inexcisable elements, metaphysical beliefs. But metaphysical beliefs—all metaphysical beliefs—are, Wittgenstein also has it, nonsensical, incoherent beliefs to be rejected and not, à la Stanley Cavell, something to be anguished over. So we have religions as forms of life which, according to Wittgenstein, are to be accepted, and we have the same forms of life which are to be rejected. The Wittgensteinian way of probing things religious commits us to incompatible beliefs.

Szabados sees the force of this, but he believes, sticking with a Wittgensteinian way of viewing things, that he has a way out. First he remarks, correctly, as does D. Z. Phillips, that religions change over time. Perhaps we have worked past theistic preoccupations so that our religious forms of life no longer have, as integral elements, metaphysical beliefs or dogmatic theological doctrines. Let us go at that by examining what Szabados says about doctrines.

Wittgenstein was no friend of the philosophy of religion, natural theology, revealed theology, of establishing religious truths through scientific investigation or through philosophical analysis, or anything like that. And in spite of his being taken by William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he would not take religious experience as providing evidence for the existence of God. And he would surely take no high *a priori* road—as in the ontological proof of the existence of God—though he might, like Norman Malcolm, take it as showing us something significant about the use of “God” (Malcolm 1963, pp. 141-62).<sup>2</sup> Religion and religious belief, for Wittgenstein, as we already have noted, must rest simply on faith, on trust.

With this attitude he was sharply critical of the doctrinal claims of religion, for example, the carefully worked out accounts of the Trinity, sin, atonement, providence, predestination, or petitionary prayer. He thought these theories rest in considerable part on bad philosophy and that attending to them would lead us away from faith rather than giving us some better understanding of it.

While acknowledging that that is in Wittgenstein, Szabados contends that where doctrines are *not* taken as *theories of any kind*, and certainly not as involving metaphysical beliefs of any kind, there is a modest place in Wittgenstein's account for doctrines taken in, what Szabados takes to be a very practical way. They can give us something of a framework so that Wittgensteinian fideism, or, if you will, Wittgenstein's account of religion, would not reduce to stark religious moralizing. We, in short (the claim goes), have religious doctrines without metaphysics or other forms of incoherence.

Szabados says that there is no textual evidence that Wittgenstein rejected religious doctrine in general. He rejected certain types of doctrine: doctrines that invoked theories. Szabados calls to our attention some doctrines that Wittgenstein took to be insightful and shows how Wittgenstein took a very pragmatic attitude toward them. There is, to take an example, reason to believe in Christ's resurrection, says Wittgenstein, for "[i]f he did not rise from the dead, then he decomposed in the grave like any other man. He is *dead and decomposed*. In that case he is a teacher like any other and can no longer *help*" (Szabados 2004, pp. 759-60; emphasis in original). We can see how someone would want there to be a resurrection showing the possibility of eternal life. But, it seems to me, Wittgenstein says things about the resurrection doctrine that would lead anyone, non-evasively reflecting on it, no matter how much he would like it to be so, to conclude it was irrational, magical, wishful thinking, and offensive to the very integrity of his thought and commitment. Wittgenstein says of predestination, to take another of Szabados's examples, that "it is not permissible for someone to assert it as a truth, unless he himself says it in torment. It simply isn't a theory. . . . It is less a theory than a sigh, or a cry" (*ibid.*, p. 760). But then, so understood, this is hardly a framework belief of Christianity. Indeed it is not a doctrine at all, but just an expression of an emotion, however heartfelt. We are at a considerable distance here from Calvin. Concerning hell, to move to another of Szabados's examples, Wittgenstein simply says, "In one day you can experience the horrors of hell; that is plenty of time" (*ibid.*). But this does not tell us much, to put it minimally, about what hell is. He is not at all like Dante. When one has a terrible, terrible day, one can say, and we understand what it means when it is said, "That day was pure hell!" But that is—or at least typically is—a purely secular remark; it gives us little or no understanding of the Christian doctrine of hell.

In fine, if we take "doctrine" in these *reduced* ways, in ways that are quite independent of the system of the doctrinal teachings of the Catholic Church or the Lutheran Church (for example), we get from doctrine taken in Wittgenstein's way no understanding of religion and nothing, except in the resurrection case, of something that is not purely secular. And in the resurrection case, as Wittgenstein describes it, we have dished up a superstition that would hardly match with the finely tuned religious and conceptual sensibilities we expect from Wittgenstein.

“Doctrineless religion” sounds like and is an oxymoron. If, even so, we persist in so seeing things—persuasively defining them as “religious”—then we get religion starkly reduced to morality, which is certainly not to describe the form of life religion is. And if we construe “doctrine” as flaccidly as Wittgenstein does, then we have nothing to provide a framework for religion, rhetoric aside, that does not reduce to ethics—not to a religio-ethics but to what in effect is a purely secular ethics of a crude kind. If instead we take doctrine in stronger, more theoretically articulated forms of our religions, then we get something that, if Wittgenstein is right, is, with its metaphysical trappings, nonsensical. And we are back in our bind. We, as good Wittgensteinians, are committed to taking our forms of life, including our religious forms of life, as given and perfectly in place as they are, but as good Wittgensteinians we are also committed to rejecting metaphysics as nonsense. Since religious forms of life have unexcisable metaphysical beliefs and concepts, we are just stuck, however much Wittgensteinians would like to cut free of it, with what Axel Hägerström called (only to scorn it) a *metaphysical religiosity*—which, if Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians are right, is nonsensical. This is not what they want, but this is what their account yields. This being so we cannot coherently say that all our forms of life are in order as they are and are just to be accepted as they are. We cannot say they are just there like our lives. Whether this is so of all forms of life, it is so of Jewish, Christian, or Islamic forms of life.

Szabados rightly says, as I have already noted, that in linking religion so tightly and so importantly to ethics Wittgenstein does not, in intention at least, collapse his account into a secular one, for the ethics he attends to and attests to is a religio-ethics. But this being so will not enable Wittgenstein to escape the bind characterized above. Szabados cites Wittgenstein as saying “What is Good is Divine too. That, strangely enough, sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural” (ibid., p. 756). Aside from its being a gnomic saying, and no doubt deliberately so, if this sums up Wittgenstein’s ethics it, like his appeal to what he construes as doctrine, appeals to notions which are not only obscure but very metaphysical. We are making claims about the supernatural and the divine and that we are told makes up what sums up his ethics. But this, on his own understanding of things, is nonsensical. The only sense I can make—and I think we can make—of those gnomic utterances are the following de-mythologized utterly secular platitudes: “What is good is also very important. Only something ethical can express the ethical.” I am confident that Wittgenstein meant—or wanted to mean—something more than that. But what more?

#### 4. On Generality and Particularity

I now want to address what Szabados says about my attitude toward generality and particularity. Szabados writes:

Nielsen is insufficiently sensitive to particularity, making universal, objective generalizations about what make us all flourish and what harms us all and makes us all diminished. This sounds like a kind of essentialism about needs, situations, and the problems that we face. [While Nielsen claims that] religion is bad for us, "because of the human harm it does, not just accidentally, but just in being what it is." [T]his does not sound like the kind of pragmatism that allows for differences of individual needs, circumstances, and modified traditions. It homogenizes the human condition and leaves little room for particularity. (2004, p. 764)

I think Szabados here creates a straw Nielsen. We (that is, all human beings), as I think David Braybrooke has well argued in his *Meeting Needs*, have certain general needs both physical and social (Braybrooke 1987; Nielsen 1989). On the physical side, rest and nourishment. Professional torturers know very well the effects of deprivation of sleep by forcing, for example, a person to stay in a small cell day after day with bright lights always on. And we know very well the effects of malnutrition on children in the Third World or, indeed, any place. And in the social domain there are universal needs as well. We all have needs, for example, for companionship, recognition, a sense of accomplishment, and a sense of self-identity. All of us have them; when these needs are not met, we wither. What is true, particularly for the social needs, is that the way they are met, the exact form they take, varies with the environment, the situation, the type of socialization people have, and to a degree even with the individual. We all need recognition, but what form it will take will vary extensively with persons and their situation and their culture. For some their need for recognition will be met by people noting and remarking on their fine clothes and their expensive new car. For others it will be met by their being made Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science and elected to the Royal Society. For others that will count for little. What really counts for them is people understanding and caring about their work, the state of the world about them, and caring about each other. (Some who care about their work will not care much about caring for each other.) We all need recognition, but the form it will take and our appraisal of those forms will vary extensively. The choice between universalism and contextualism in moral theory is a phony one. Any even remotely plausible account of morality must be both.

I claim that, if one is to be religious, then, standing where we are now in our history and culture, if we have been lucky enough (some might say unlucky enough) to have a reasonably good education, then, *if* we are religious, we should be fideists. Szabados responds to that by remarking that "[fideism] seems to be . . . a position, a theory in the philosophy of religion, in competition with other theories." He continues: "On this construal, I suspect that Wittgenstein would be neither a fideist nor a friend of fideism. This sort of fideism dictates to everyone!" (2004, p. 766).

There is some non-trivial sorting out of what needs to be said here and in doing this I will make two distinct points. First, Wittgenstein is famous for claiming that he puts forth no claims, articulates no theories or distinctive ideas. But this is plainly false. His remarks about private languages, avowals, forms of life, language games, truth, and certainty, if not full-blown theories (as they are not), are distinctive positions that he argues for and defends—brilliantly I think. So, in the same way—the brilliance aside—I assemble considerations put forward for fideism that constitute in the same or similar ways “a theory.” It seems evasive and arbitrary to deny that and to fall back—try to fall back—on some rather mysterious “no theory” or (even worse) “no claims” perspective. These theories or claims are not metaphysical, epistemological, or scientific theories or claims. They assemble reminders for a particular purpose but are no worse for all of that. They put forward theses to be queried and accepted or rejected or modified or set aside as too inchoate to be any of those things.

Second, there is the quite unconnected claim that fideism is being advocated for everyone. But I am making no such claim. I wrote *Naturalism and Religion* principally for intellectuals: people who have to some extent studied these matters and reflected on them. I am saying, particularly for people who have had the good fortune to have had a good scientific and philosophical education or even more generally a humanistic education, that, knowing what they know, or should know, if they do not wish to crucify their intellects, they should, to remain believers with integrity, be fideists. But this is a far cry from saying everyone should be a fideist or even that every believer should be a fideist. That would be an absurd position and I have never urged it. A person brought up in a Hutterite or Amish community, isolated from the intellectual currents of the world, or a Moslem brought up in an isolated community which is entirely Moslem, or a Catholic or Calvinist person living in communities where alternatives of a religious or non-religious orientation are next to non-existent, who believes not unreasonably what his elders tell him, should not—as I am sure Pascal would keenly realize—have fideism thrust on him. Suppose a farm boy—to make it more plausible, go back in time a hundred years—hears his parish priest in the little village where he goes to church say that God’s existence can be proved in such a way that any rational person uncorrupted by sin will accept it. And the priest, in a simplified manner, gives the five ways. The boy listens and they sound reasonable to him and he goes back to his plough and to his life on the farm. Szabados is right that it is mere aggressiveness and cruelty to try to instill either fideism or scepticism in him. His faith, on the one hand, if the likes of me are right, rests on illusions. But trying to instill fideism or scepticism in him will either pass like water over a duck’s back or cause him needless pain and anxiety. If fideists are right, by reasoning about these matters he will not be helped out. That is not the way to faith. So leave him alone with your

“proofs” and disputations. And, given his situation, how can the atheist be justified in trying to uproot his life? However, if, day after day as he labours under the open sky, he ruminates on what the priest told him and begins to have questions, a kind of inchoate and implicit doubt, that is another matter. That is the context for what *may* be the start of a long conversation that, if the boy is sufficiently reflective, intelligent, and determined, and if his chances for dialogue are good enough (perhaps he has a somewhat sceptical and open-minded priest in his parish), it may eventually lead him to fideism or even to unbelief. (I am not giving to understand these are the only places such ruminations can lead him.)

Szabados takes a passage from the *Koder Diaries* where, he takes it, Wittgenstein gives us something that is at once of biographical and of philosophical import. Wittgenstein says:

Let me confess this: After a very difficult day for me I kneeled during dinner today and prayed and suddenly said kneeling and praying and looking above: “There is no one here.” That made me feel at ease as if I had been enlightened in an important matter. But what it really means, I do not know yet. I feel relieved. But that does not mean, for example: I had previously been in error. . . . Now I often tell myself in doubtful times: “There is no one here” and look around. (Szabados 2004, p. 758)

Perhaps I have a tin ear or lack of religious sensibility—and what I am about to say seems to fly in the face of my great respect for and admiration for Wittgenstein—but his remark here seems to me a silly and shallow remark that makes religion sound more like superstition. It is not at all what I would expect from Wittgenstein. Kneeling in prayer after a very difficult day—that is fine. Even I, hardened old atheist that I am, could on a day of a certain kind of hell, for myself or for others, where I feel utterly powerless, feel the temptation to pray. So there is no trouble there. It is what Wittgenstein says he does when he prays that seems to me troublesome. He looks above and says to himself, “No one is here.” He feels at ease and recognizing no one is there feels that he has been enlightened. But what it means he does not know *yet*. But the “yet” gives to understand that down the road a bit he will or might come to know and because of this, he comes to tell himself in doubtful times “There is no one here” and then he looks around as if to confirm that no one is there. It seems that here we have childishness and superstition and not, as Szabados believes, a clarification of religious language or belief. I think that we see here—as a result of prior conditioning—how religious discourse and religious concepts impose themselves on experience. And here we have a very crudely anthropomorphic religious discourse. Think of sophisticated contemporary or near contemporary religious thinkers—Kierkegaard, Barth, Niebuhr, Tillich, or Bonhoeffer—could you imagine them thinking of prayer in that way? I do



not think so. I think of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein being in many things (though not all) closely aligned. But here they are very far apart.

### 5. The Withering Away of Religion

I turn now to a more general issue. Indeed, it is a great hedgehoggish issue. Szabados correctly records that I welcome the withering away of religion, seeing this withering away as conducive to human liberation and contributing to an enhancement of human flourishing. I am what Reinhold Niebuhr called a child of the Enlightenment, though, pragmatist and Wittgensteinian that I am, certainly not of the *rationalistic* Enlightenment, not even in a modulated Habermasian form. And, while I have hope for the future, I have no Whiggish or even Marxist optimism about the future. For Wittgenstein, by contrast, as again Szabados accurately remarks, there is a *mournfulness* about the disappearance of a religious culture and a premonition that we are with the withering of religion entering into a scientific technocratic wasteland. So who, if either of us, comes closer to telling it like it is? If there is nothing like telling it like it is, do we have something here about which nothing even remotely reliable can be said? Assuming, for starters, something can reasonably be said here about our situation and its potentialities—which is to assume a lot—let us run for a bit with this opposition between Wittgenstein and myself. First, important agreements:

- (1) We both agree we live in dark times though we may not agree (or very fully agree) about the sources of the darkness.
- (2) Far from the spirit of Enlightenment rationalism, I speak of our living in a moral wilderness and of our brave new world as being a horror. Wittgenstein would agree with the former, and probably with the latter as well.

But now the disagreement begins. I see the horror of our condition with 50,000 human beings starving to death each day as being rooted principally in capitalism, with religion *most* of the time playing a minor supporting role. Wittgenstein would say that all this evil is rooted in our very human condition as the sinful creatures that we are. Do not condemn, he would no doubt say, our institutions, economic or otherwise, but our beastly selves. I think, like Marx and Brecht, that if you are in a situation which is somewhat propitious, say Sweden or Iceland, rather than in a situation which is anything but that, say the Congo or Burma, it is much easier to be decent and you will tend to be more decent. I do not put much stock in talk of the human condition or the sinfulness or *inherent* meanness or cruelty of the human animal. It is also the case—perhaps because of their “cognitive deficits”—that religious societies do not provide what Freud called a sober education for their citizens in the way many rich sec-

ular societies do. (Compare the education in two rich societies, one secular and one very religious, namely, Sweden and Saudi Arabia, and the force of the idea of "a sober education" should come through.) I would trust the public educational system of Holland or Denmark far more than that of the United States or Pakistan. The educational system of the latter two make it very difficult for students going through those systems to gain an informed and critical view of either their or other religious systems or of the capitalist order of those societies and its role in the world. It is also difficult for those in Holland and Denmark, but not nearly as difficult.

I turn now to the massive harms that result from religion. I am not saying that of all forms of religion, of all religious people, or of the deepest and most reflective religious people. Quakerism and Unitarianism—religions that Whitehead quipped had one God at the most—are benign enough. If all religions were like those we would have none of the really extreme harms flowing from religions. And if all religious people were like Barth or Bonhoeffer or my friends Hendrik Hart and Hugo Meynell, we would have no such trouble. It is of the main traditions of actually existing Christianity, Judaism, and Islam of which I speak.

It is often the doctrines (something that just goes with being religious) and sticking with them no matter what that are the principal causes of the trouble. Think of the behaviour of the Catholic Church concerning AIDS because of their doctrines concerning the use of contraceptives. Think, to translate into the concrete, of their behaviour at the Cairo Conference—"Better let the AIDS rage than use contraceptives." Think also of the position of the Catholic Church toward abortion. A father rapes his teenage daughter and as a result the daughter gets pregnant. But still, on pain of committing another mortal sin, she must not terminate the pregnancy. Or think of the position of many churches on euthanasia. It is murder or suicide, we are told, which are categorically wrong. Many people wracked with incurable pain from diseases for which no cure is even in sight, longing, even in their most rational moments, to die must live on in a senseless life that is only a horror for them and those who love them. Or think of the sense of sin and guilt instilled by Calvinism and Lutheranism and of how deeply this can warp some peoples' lives and the amount of suffering to them and others that result from that. Think—to move to different types of cases—of the struggles over holy places between Moslems and Jews and between Moslems and Hindus and the lives these struggles have so senselessly taken. Or think of the settlement of Israel. For centuries Jews have been brutalized, principally by Christians, and this had its "apotheosis" with the technologically sophisticated murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis. Jews perfectly appropriately wanted a land of their own governed and protected by themselves where they could have a state of their own, but religion dictated that it had to be in a certain place, a place where others had lived for many centuries and was plainly their homeland.

Moslems were driven out of the area, often killed, or where they remained they became second-class citizens. Granted, Jews, for their own security and the possibility of their flourishing, needed a land of their own, but only religion dictated that it be the Holy Land. Given Christian guilt after the Second World War, a place in the world could have been found to establish the State of Israel without such a dispossession of people. And, moreover, why should Islamic people pay for Christian crimes? And it is not just in the West where such irrational and terrible things occur. Hindus massacred Moslems and are still massacring Moslems in the Indian subcontinent, and Moslems massacred Christians and are still massacring Christians in Pakistan and Indonesia. Turks in 1915 brutally massacred a million Christian Armenians and Moslems of different denominations slaughtered fellow Moslems urged on by their clergy in the war between Iran and Iraq where Iraq suffered some 250,000 casualties and Iran some 620,000 casualties. For centuries these "religions of love and compassion" have been resolutely, and sometimes gleefully, butchering each other in the name of the true faith. The harm done is immense.

In a world of secular humanists—children of the Enlightenment—there would be no more Jews and Gentiles, Jews and Moslems, Christians and Moslems, Hindus and Buddhists, but just people living together with equal status (Nielsen 1985). They no doubt would remain peoples organized in states and having a sense of being a people, having a certain nationality. There would, though belief would have passed, be a historical memory of these religions and of what it had meant to their ancestors, though the harms would be remembered too. But without religion—as was not the case in nation-building in Europe—there would be no chosen people or favoured *Volk*. Some prejudices no doubt would remain rooted in a sense of national identity (or other political/cultural identity), but it is reasonable to believe they would be much diminished and over time, with wealth and security and a good education, they might even entirely wither away. It is something for which we can at least hope and struggle.

I acknowledge that religion has its good sides too. We probably would be even more brutish than we are now if these religions had not come on the scene. But we plainly remain brutish enough. And, as I argue, particularly in Chapter 2 of *Naturalism and Religion*, we now have secular resources with which to shape a morality that escapes ethnocentric chauvinism and enables a human flourishing and a non-tribal sense of human solidarity that would exceed anything that our religions—diverse and conflicting as they are—have ever produced. I have none of Wittgenstein's mournfulness or even unease about the withering away of religion. I only wished there were more secure signs of its withering away. My Marxian conjecture is that we need more extensive, more secure, and more evenly distributed social wealth coupled with better educational systems before

we can get there. But note the Nordic countries and Holland are nudging us in that direction.

Be all of that as it may, not even Rawls's realistic utopia is around the corner and over such a hedgehoggish question reasonable people are going to disagree. Moreover, conventional wisdom at least has it that such a humanistic-egalitarian-secularism-all-the-way-down-response is superficial compared with really deep religious responses such as Kierkegaardian, Barthian, or Wittgensteinian fideist ones. I think (not unsurprisingly) that that response is *just* the conventional wisdom of the dominant religious culture. It is not something that has been rationally or reasonably vindicated. It is not clear that it is something that we should or even would reflectively endorse. Does Hamann cut more deeply over such matters than Hume, Kierkegaard than Nietzsche, Schliermacher than Feurbach, Rush Rhees than Axel Hägerström, or D. Z. Phillips than myself? I think it would be very difficult to establish such things and I doubt that there is, now at least, a non-partisan answer. But conventional wisdom rolls on its merry way churning out "its truth." The secular response, it gives us to understand, has to be the superficial one.

What needs to be recognized is that reasonable and thoughtful people will differ here. It *may* be the case that in trying to respond to such matters non-evasively we may get to the point where, as Wittgenstein puts it, it is essential to speak in the first person for nothing can be established (Wittgenstein 1993, pp. 27-45). We can here only be individuals speaking for ourselves. I agree with Wittgenstein, William James, and James Conant that *sometimes* we should do this, even in philosophy. We should in some circumstances make clear where we stand and why, without claiming that we speak for "universal reason" or even for an overlapping consensus of reasonable persons. James Conant has made the point that it is very difficult to decide when that is so, but sometimes it is so. Sometimes, even in philosophy, we must speak in the first person. That is a way of maintaining integrity of thought and action and of life more generally.

However, we should not give this, as *perhaps* Szabados suggests, a *decisionist* ring à la Sartre, Camus, Ayer, or Hare. We need not assume when we resort to this we are faced with *just* making a *decision* of principle: that we are simply deciding what first principles to commit ourselves to since nothing can be established (Falk 1986, pp. 248-60). If we go holist, as Quine, Rawls, Putnam, and Davidson do, we will not have such a strong sense that "nothing can be established here." We will not seek to establish first principles and then derive the rest, but, rather, we will try to justify our beliefs and convictions in terms of patterns of coherence seeking to get our beliefs into the widest reflective equilibrium we can for the time forge. Here, or at least not so obviously, where we reason holistically, we do not just reach a point where we have to make a decision, *just* speak in the first person and proclaim "Here I stand; I can do no other." Deliberation, argu-

ment, and conversation are always open. We will rely, if we are reasonable, to some considerable extent on consensus, but it must be an informed consensus rooted in undistorted discourse: discourse, that is attentive to making valid inferences, open to evidential claims, pursued in a fallibilistic spirit, and committed to following what the people discoursing honestly take to be the best argument or the best deliberation available at the time. We never get beyond such a historically rooted consensus achieved at a given time and place for a determinate people. What we reflectively endorse here is what it is best to believe at a given time and place. We never get beyond that. But that is historicism, not relativism.

We will only say that little can be established here if we are using a *deductivist* model of justification and brushing away fallibilism by insisting on certainty and unconditionality and ignoring how justification actually goes on in the stream of life (Rawls 1999, pp. 506-14).

## 6. Penultimate Remarks

So far, in spite of my recognition of the relevance and strength of Szabados's criticisms, I have been rather unyielding, I hope not out of pig-headedness. But if so, I can console myself with the fact that I am not the first or the last pig-headed philosopher. Perhaps it comes with the profession. However, in my penultimate response to Szabados I want to turn to two quite different important things Szabados does say concerning Wittgenstein. The first response on my part comes to an observation and the second concerns a reading of Wittgenstein about which I do not know what to say but concerning which I think it is important to say a lot.

First, the observation. What are we to make, Szabados remarks, of Wittgenstein's own acknowledgement of a religious/ethical sensibility as being something that is pervasive in all his work? Wittgenstein remarks, "I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view." I do not know what to make of this. I do not see how to take the *Philosophical Investigations* as pervasively and integrally having a religious/ethical dimension in that it engages in philosophical activity in a religious/ethical spirit. Wittgenstein is not at all like Alvin Plantinga or Richard Swinburne or even Nicholas Wolterstorff. Moreover, I do not think that he had anything like that in mind when he spoke of "seeing every problem from a religious point of view."

What I do understand here is that, with his attack on scientism and what he took to be the shallow and mistaken conceptions of both logical empiricism and rationalism, Wittgenstein was trying to unlock our consciousness and images of ourselves from any notion of there being a scientific philosophy (the self-image of much of analytic philosophy) and from what he took to be the pervasive materialism of our time. A materialism that was, of course, a physicalism but much more than that, for it also carried a cluster of beliefs and attitudes about how to live, about what was rational to do and to be. By showing, in his therapeutic manner, sci-

entistic notions to be houses of cards, he could, or so many Wittgensteinians believe, make possible for us the unfettered expression of religious attainments and of the living in good conscience of a religious life.

However, “seeing every problem from a religious point of view” seems at least to suggest something more, but I do not see *what that more is*, though I agree with Szabados that it needs to be studied. But perhaps there is nothing more there than what I have alluded to above? Without having thought about that very much, I think the best place to start in trying to get a purchase on what this is is with *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969; Nielsen 1991, pp. 91-122). But what finally would need to be done is to go through *Philosophical Investigations* point by point and see if it could be shown that the central things there—many on their face being very distant from religion—were really being discussed from a religious point of view. (But even there we would need a better understanding than I have of what we are looking for.) A healthy scepticism about that would not be unreasonable. Still, it is evident that Wittgenstein was a person intensely attuned to and preoccupied with religion. Compare him here to Quine or Husserl.

Nothing like this was part of my project in *Naturalism and Religion*, nor can I see why it should have been. I was concerned there to articulate and defend a thoroughly naturalistic but still non-scientistic worldview. I saw the work of Wittgenstein and of Wittgensteinians, such as Malcolm and Winch, as the strongest impediments, presenting the strongest challenge, to such a worldview. I looked at their work with an eye to that.

I turn now to an interesting and distinctive reading that Szabados gives of Wittgenstein. Szabados cites Wittgenstein writing in 1931 in his diary: “The movement of thought in my philosophizing should be rediscoverable also in the history of my mind, of its moral concepts and in the understanding of my situation.” Szabados then gives the following reading of this remark:

I read this passage as providing richer resources for exploring [Wittgenstein’s] works than have been officially allowed by analytical philosophy. Analytical philosophy is not notable for a deep sense of historical or cultural context, and it draws a very sharp distinction between the biographical and the philosophical. Hence, there is a scholarly convention of a strict hierarchy in approaching Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass*, which rightly privileges the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, but wrongly marginalizes the large quantity of other archival material available as merely of a biographical, cultural, or musical interest. (2004, pp. 757-58)

Szabados then goes on to remark:

Kai Nielsen seems to follow the conventional scholarly practice I noted above, as he concurs with Peter Winch that it is necessary to observe the distinction

between Wittgenstein's own religious reflections and his philosophical comments on religious discourse. . . . What Nielsen sometimes does, however, is transgressive of such a distinction, and he uses Wittgenstein's religious/ethical reflections to gain a better understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophical reflections on religion. This allows us to widen the importance of context in understanding the philosophical remarks by taking into account not only the cultural conditions, but also situating those remarks in Wittgenstein's biographical circumstances. . . . [This] is really nothing more than an extension of Wittgenstein's view that to understand what is meant we need to understand the circumstances in which it is said. (ibid., p. 759)

In some respects, no; and in some respects, yes. Yes in the sense that biographical resources can *sometimes* provide rich resources for understanding the philosophy of the person in question, yes in denying there is a *rigid* distinction between someone's own religious reflections and his philosophical comments on religious discourse. But no in affirming the following: that there is no *rigid* distinction does not mean there is *no* distinction. We do well to distinguish (a) between the following remarks *about* religious discourse: "The forms of language are the forms of life." "There is a distinctive religious form of life with its own distinctive discourse" (philosophical remarks about religion), and (b) the religious remark "Human beings are corrupted with sin; if they are aware of that they are utterly wretched." *Sometimes* the latter-type remarks can help us understand remarks of the former type. (Perhaps it goes the other way around as well.) And *sometimes* it is unclear which kind of remark a given remark is, e.g., "Religion is nothing more than the projection of one's emotions." But nothing but confusion will result if we do not distinguish these types of remarks, particularly in their paradigmatic occurrences.

A reading of Quine, Davidson, and Rorty, if not of Hegel and Dewey, will make us wary of sharp or rigid distinctions and dichotomies, but not of the occasional utility of making distinctions. Winch's point stands as an important one for us to make, and indeed important in understanding Wittgenstein. We do not want to mix up what is often clearly and importantly distinct, namely, religious remarks with remarks *about* religious discourse, which may or may not themselves be religious. As a *philosopher*, Wittgenstein was, when he thought about religion, primarily in the business of clarifying religious discourse *vis-à-vis* religion so as to free us from confusions about religion or showing how a bit of disguised nonsense was nonsense full stop. However, I would say *yes* again to Szabados's remark that biographical circumstances as well as cultural conditions are relevant to understanding religious talk. But they are not as important as he and some others seem to think. We are not, in doing philosophy, very interested, if interested at all, in an individual's religious idiolect or her particular religious preoccupations. We, in doing philosophy, are interested in

gaining a perspicuous representation of religious language games embedded as they are in forms of life. We, if we are thinking philosophically about religion, are not interested in—or at least not very interested in—“taking a serious look at the ways religious concepts work or do not work in Wittgenstein’s life, how they do or do not help him to cope,” but we are very interested in seeing—and seeing clearly—how they work or fail to work in the stream of life. Our interest (philosophically speaking) in Wittgenstein’s coping is ancillary to that. That the *Tractatus*, *Philosophical Investigations*, and *On Certainty* are privileged, in our attempts to try to understand and appraise Wittgenstein’s philosophy, is perfectly proper. For these purposes, diaries or material like *Culture and Value* are only of secondary interest. But that does not mean—and Szabados is right about that—that *sometimes* they are not of real philosophical interest.

### 7. On Good and Bad Metaphysics

Béla Szabados in his concluding remarks speaks of bad metaphysics and with such a remark gives to understand that there could be good metaphysics, or at least a middling metaphysics, that we could and perhaps should live with and perhaps even treat as a source of insight. But, for Wittgenstein, “bad metaphysics” is pleonastic. He (Rhees and Phillips to the contrary notwithstanding) was very different from Plato. He was more therapeutic than contemplative; he was certainly not philosophizing in a cool place. There was plenty of Carnapian scorn in him, sometimes directed at positivists themselves. Remember his remark in *The Big Typescript*: “A common sense person, when he reads earlier philosophers, thinks—quite rightly—‘Sheer nonsense.’ When he listens to me he thinks—rightly again—‘Nothing but stale truisms.’ That is how the image of philosophy has changed” (Kenny 1982, p. 22).<sup>3</sup>

### Notes

- 1 These remarks were originally remarks in response to Béla Szabados’s critique of my *Naturalism and Religion* (2001c) made at a symposium on that book at the Canadian Philosophical Association Meetings at the University of Toronto in May 2002.
- 2 Malcolm’s “Anselm’s Ontological Arguments” first appeared in the *Philosophical Review* in 1960. Running as it did against what was then the stream of analytical philosophy, it resulted in a barrage of scandalized articles setting out to refute it. They are listed by Malcolm in his *Knowledge and Certainty* (1963, p. 162) with the remark, “I do not know that it is possible to meet all objections; on the other hand, I do not know that it is impossible.” I have articulated and criticized Malcolm’s argument in my *Reason and Practice* (1971, pp. 156-71).
- 3 “So your work,” someone might say, “in moral, social, and political philosophy is all stale truisms and so is the work, on your view, following Wittgenstein, of John Rawls, Norman Daniels, T. M. Scanlon, Ronald Dworkin, and G. A. Cohen.”



It would be absurd to say that. Wittgenstein, in saying what I have quoted him as saying above—and saying it rightly, in my view—was, I take it, saying something directed at metaphysical philosophy, epistemology (at least as traditionally understood), the philosophy of mind, traditional ethical theory and philosophy of religion—traditional baggage of philosophy. There we find, again and again, language being stretched until we get something unintelligible. It is, as Wittgenstein put it, language gone on holiday. The therapy, say, with the word “cause,” is to bring the word back to its ordinary use in the contexts in which it has its home and to show clearly how it functions there. So we, to show this, give examples of such ordinary uses which, if deployed in non-philosophical contexts to make ordinary claims, would be stale truisms. That is the way conceptual therapy works. But all philosophy is not conceptual therapy nor should it be. This Wittgensteinian way of doing things is properly employed when we (normally unwittingly) get entangled in our own grammar and are led to say things which are incoherent. This is especially true in metaphysics, the philosophy of religion, and in epistemology. These reminders of how our language games are actually played are vital. But that is not the kind of activity that Rawls *et al.* are characteristically engaged in; nor is it what I am normally engaged in when I do political and social philosophy. Though my work—and I believe the work of Rawls *et al.* as well—depends on Wittgensteinian therapy to block the intrusion of metaphysical and epistemological excesses that interrupt and mystify the sober business of doing political and social philosophy, but such philosophy itself is not conceptual therapy. The Dewey thing, the Marx thing, and the Rawls thing are quite different from the Wittgensteinian thing, as they differ from each other, and are none the worse off for that. As always, remember “philosophy” is not the name of a natural kind.

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