

KAI NIELSEN

## The challenge of Wittgenstein: An examination of his picture of religious belief

There are many who think that to raise questions of confirmation/disconfirmation in the context of talking about the meaning of religious utterances is to show an almost complete lack of comprehension of their actual role in our lives. It is, so the argument runs, to treat them too much like hypotheses and to model God-talk too much on scientific discourse. A sensitive understanding of God-talk in its living contexts will show that it has a logic of its own which is in its own proper order. Dogmas and doctrines should not be regarded as opinions or hypotheses. They have an entirely different logic, a radically different role in human discourse. All a philosopher can properly do is to characterize religious discourse, to display perspicuously its actual function or functions so as to relieve our perplexities about it. He, *qua* philosopher, can in no way legitimately criticize this whole mode of discourse or claim that it is unintelligible or incoherent, though he can, and often should, criticize what theologians or philosophers say about it. We learn, implicitly from Moore and directly from Wittgenstein, that in any mode of discourse the first-order discourse is all right as it is; it is only the second-order discourse – the talk about the talk – that is frequently in conceptual disarray. The philosopher's job is to cure this *malaise*, but the first-order discourse itself is simply his uncriticizable given. That pre-Wittgensteinian philosophers thought they could criticize it and that some post-Wittgensteinian neanderthals still think so only attests to their confusion.

It is this attitude toward religion and religious discourse that I call Wittgensteinian Fideism.<sup>1</sup> This approach – powerful as it is – seems to me profoundly misguided. I shall examine it and try to give grounds for my beliefs in the course of critically discussing Wittgenstein's lectures on religious belief from his *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*.<sup>2</sup>

### I

The first thing to be noted about what I have called Wittgenstein's 'Lectures on Religious Belief' is that they were not written by Wittgenstein himself. They are notes taken by Yorick Smythies at lectures given by Wittgenstein in 1938. Smythies does not vouch for their accuracy in every detail, for they are lecture notes and not dictations from Wittgenstein. They are, nonetheless, the most extended account available of Wittgenstein's remarks on religion. Here I shall supplement them by reference both to Wittgenstein's enigmatic comments on religion in his lecture on ethics given in Cambridge 'sometime between September, 1929 and December, 1930' and to G.E. Moore's paragraph on Wittgen-

stein's remarks about 'God' from his notes on Wittgenstein's lectures from 1930–3.<sup>3</sup> The latter corresponds very closely to Wittgenstein's remarks in his 1938 lectures. His 'A Lecture on Ethics,' however, still shows much more of the effect of the *Tractatus* than do either the 1938 lectures or the remarks Moore has recorded.

Smythies' notes have the elusiveness yet the penetration and the capacity to challenge which we have come to expect from Wittgenstein. Not for nothing has Iris Murdoch spoken of Wittgenstein's 'exasperating hints.' Wittgenstein's remarks here, assuming (as I shall assume) that we can take them as his, are just that. They are not extended, carefully wrought arguments, but brilliant *aperçus* that drive one to reflection and suggest a new way of viewing the matter, but hardly ever convince by the sheer force of argument.

Do Wittgenstein's own claims fit the peg 'Wittgensteinian Fideism'? To raise an even more important question, is what he says about religion true and does it help us in our attempt to grasp the truth about religion? A search for answers to these questions may appropriately begin with what I take to be a very central remark at the beginning of Part II of his 'Lectures on Religious Belief.'

The word 'God' is amongst the earliest learnt – pictures and catechisms, etc. But not the same consequences as with pictures of aunts. I wasn't shown (that which the picture pictured).

The word is used like a word representing a person. God sees, rewards, etc.

'Being shown all these things, did you understand what this word meant?' I'd say: 'Yes and No. I did learn what it didn't mean. I made myself understand. I could answer questions, understand questions when they were put in different ways – and in that sense could be said to understand.'<sup>4</sup>

It is evident that here Wittgenstein is talking about a plain man's concept of God. It is also evident that the understanding Wittgenstein acknowledges of 'God' is the kind of understanding that goes with the ability to employ the word 'God' correctly. As a fluent speaker of at least two languages used in Christendom, he has a grasp of the linguistic regularities of 'God' and 'Gott' and related terms. In that way he understands them; he made himself understand them and indeed was made to understand them. But it is significant that Wittgenstein also says 'no' about understanding such terms. This indicates that in an important sense he thinks he does not understand the concept of God. But why does Wittgenstein say that in a way he does *not* understand 'God'? Moreover what is involved in understanding 'God' and in understanding religious belief that is not involved in expressing more ordinary beliefs and in using other terms?

In a passage immediately after the one I have just quoted, Wittgenstein makes some remarks that indicate how idiosyncratic he takes religious discourse to be. Pushed in a certain direction, these claims could lead to the contention that we have in God-talk a *sui generis* mode of discourse that can be understood and appraised only in its own terms.

If the question arises as to the existence of a god or God, it plays an entirely different role to that of the existence of any person or object I ever heard of. One said, had to say, that one *believed* in the existence, and if one did not believe, this was regarded as something bad. Normally if I did not believe in the existence of something no one would think there was anything wrong in this.<sup>5</sup>

In the closing pages of his lectures Wittgenstein returns to his theme that religious talk is *sui generis*.<sup>6</sup> To say 'there is a God in heaven,' 'God created me and looks after me,' 'we might see one another after death' is not, Wittgenstein insists, simply to express our attitudes and to try to evoke like attitudes in others. Such a non-cognitivist approach does not do justice to the subtlety of the discourse. To say to a friend, on a parting that looks permanent, 'We might see one another after death' is not the same as saying 'I'm very fond of you.' But, Wittgenstein directly adds, 'it may not be the same as saying anything else. It says what it says. Why should you be able to substitute anything else?'<sup>7</sup>

After the passage quoted *in extenso* above, Wittgenstein goes on to point out, as he also pointed out in the first part of his lecture, that, quite apart from the *sui generis* claim, the word 'believe' in religious contexts has an extraordinary use. If a man says 'I believe in the Last Judgment,' 'believe' in such a context does the work of 'faith,' and not of 'suppose,' 'have an opinion,' 'opine,' or 'have evidence that.' There is and can be nothing tentative about it, as there is in the ordinary case, yet it is not used here 'as we generally use the word "know"'.<sup>8</sup>

Wittgenstein makes a further claim – and similar claims are stressed by Wittgensteinian Fideists – in asserting that 'whatever believing in God may be, it can't be believing in something we can test or find means of testing.'<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein parries the argument that this last remark of his is nonsense, since people as a matter of fact do cite as evidence religious experiences or say that they believe on evidence, by pointing out that someone *saying* he believes on evidence is not enough to carry conviction, for his belief about his belief or use of language may be mistaken. He needs to be able to show that he so uses 'God exists' that something actually could count as unsatisfactory or insufficient evidence for it. Consider, by way of analogy, other cases. Suppose a group of people have to stand in a ring, all hand in hand, and suppose *everyone* were to say he had seen one of his dead relatives on the other side of the ring. Suppose a sceptic were to ask everyone in the ring 'whom did you hold by the hand?' and suppose *everyone* were to say that he had held some living person by the hand and could state who it was. Now even if, after this fact was brought to light, they all continued to *say* they saw a dead relative on the other side of the ring and to *say* they had good evidence for believing they had seen a dead relative, we should rightly not take their say-so in such a circumstance. After all, everyone also maintained in the hearing of everyone else that he had held a living person by the hand in the ring. Similar things could be said for such statements as 'I saw my dead cousin' or 'dead undergraduate speaks' or 'Johnson sleeps faster than Nixon.' Even if someone were to maintain that he had had an extraordinary experience which confirmed such an alleged statement, it would be altogether

absurd to admit that he had any evidence for it at all. To speak of his alleged evidence as being insufficient, even grossly insufficient, would be as absurd as saying one had made a blunder in addition if one said '2 + 21 = 13.'

However, if someone were to utter something like 'you'll see your dead friend again,' Wittgenstein would *not* say that it must be the case or even typically is the case that such a person is being superstitious, but merely that 'such an utterance does not mean much to me at all; it's not a way that I would talk.' Similarly, if someone says 'I believe I shall see my dead friend again' or 'I believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost,' one is using 'believe' in an extraordinary way – a way which indicates that one's emotional reaction to the claim is crucial, but in which questions of evidence have no living role at all.

It is also crucial to note that when someone says 'I believe in the Last Judgment' and another opposes him by replying 'I don't,' it need not at all be the case that the person who says 'I don't' believes the opposite of the Last Judgment man, namely that there will not be such a thing. It is not like one man asserting 'I believe it will rain today' and another countering with 'I don't.' If the man saying 'I don't' to the Last Judgment man were a radical secularist (say someone with a positivist or Marxist orientation) he would be on what Wittgenstein calls an 'entirely different plane' from the believer and would, according to Wittgenstein, mean something altogether different in talking of belief and disbelief here than would the man who gives voice to such a religious belief.<sup>10</sup> Yet, paradoxically, 'the difference might not show up at all in any explanation of the meaning.'<sup>11</sup> For the religious man, it might be an unshakable belief, i.e., an unshakable conviction; but this would show itself not necessarily or even typically in what he offers as evidence – he may not even think about it in terms of evidence – but in how it regulates his life. He may, if he thinks here of evidence at all, regard his belief as so poorly established as an evidential claim as to be a scandal to the intellect, but still accept it without any question at all as a firm guide as to how he is to live his life. (Think here of Pascal or Kierkegaard.) The man who believes in the Last Judgment, on the one hand, and a man like Wittgenstein or Russell, on the other, may 'think differently, in a way,' say different things to themselves, 'have different pictures.' Be that as it may, Wittgenstein maintains it is wrong to say that they believe in opposite things and that they contradict each other.

If you ask me whether or not I believe in a Judgment Day, in the sense in which religious people have believed in it, I wouldn't say: 'no. I don't believe there will be such a thing.' It would seem to me utterly crazy to say this.

And then I give an explanation: 'I don't believe in ...,' but then the religious person never believes what I describe.

I can't say. I can't contradict that person.

In one sense, I understand all he says – the English words 'God,' 'separate,' etc.

I understand. I could say: 'I don't believe in this,' and this would be true, meaning I haven't got these thoughts or anything that hangs together with them. But not that I could contradict the thing.

You might say: 'Well, if you can't contradict him, that means you don't understand him. If you did understand him, then you might.' That again is Greek to me. My normal technique of language leaves me. I don't know whether to say they understand one another or not.<sup>12</sup>

Such controversies, Wittgenstein goes on to say, 'look quite different from normal controversies.' Reasoning has a different role here; such controversies are always inconclusive, and there is no point in talking about evidence here. It appears that Wittgenstein is denying that, when people believe or disbelieve in the Last Judgment or in God, they believe or disbelieve in empirical propositions, for which evidence is in principle relevant.<sup>13</sup> That is, such religious utterances are not used to make empirical statements. Wittgenstein tells us that if belief in some sort of Judgment Day were simply a prediction, 'belief in this happening wouldn't be at all a religious belief.'<sup>14</sup> A believer might be perfectly aware that the evidence against a belief in the Last Judgment is overwhelming but believe in it all the same. Belief here plays more the role of a directive or regulative concept. Coming to have such a belief amounts to having a conviction and making a decision concerning how to direct one's life and view the world.

This is why we speak of 'dogma' and 'faith' in such contexts rather than of 'hypothesis' or 'high probability' or 'knowing.' When it is said, for example, that Christianity rests on a historic basis, this is very misleading, for 'it doesn't rest on a historic basis in the sense that the ordinary belief in historic facts could serve as a foundation.'<sup>15</sup> Such religious beliefs 'are not treated as historical, empirical, propositions.'<sup>16</sup>

Should we, Wittgenstein asks, call religious people unreasonable? After all, they base their belief on 'evidence which taken in one way seems exceedingly flimsy.'<sup>17</sup> Wittgenstein wants very much to avoid the rebuke that 'unreasonable' implies. He remarks in his 'Lectures on Ethics' that he takes his hat off to such people and that he would not for his life ridicule them.<sup>18</sup> But he also has said that 'they are certainly not reasonable, that's obvious.'<sup>19</sup> But this is so because they do not, where they know what they are doing, 'treat this (that is, belief in something like the Last Judgment) as a matter of reasonability.'<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein, like Kierkegaard, believes that those theologians and philosophers who try to make religious belief a matter of being reasonable are being ludicrous. 'Not only is it not reasonable, but it doesn't pretend to be.'<sup>21</sup>

At this point Wittgenstein sounds a *Leitmotif* of Wittgensteinian Fideism. He rhetorically asks: 'Why shouldn't one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in a Last Judgment?' and he clearly implies that it perfectly well could.<sup>22</sup> Such a belief as a part of such a life would be perfectly in order, though he, Wittgenstein, does not play this language-game and does not understand it very well. In a sense he does not understand it at all, for he could not say 'yes' or

'no' or 'perhaps' or 'I'm not sure' to the statement that such an event will come to pass.<sup>23</sup> All the same, in an important sense he does understand what such talk means; he has been able to read the accounts. It is not like his not being able to understand a language – a language foreign to him that he hears in the street or sees written in a book or newspaper. Moreover he does not want to say that there is anything wrong or incoherent about such a form of language embedded in such a form of life. Rather he wants to say that an atheist or a man who reasons differently is in another system; his statements make different connections. No direct conflict is possible. Of any of these systems, religious or non-religious, we cannot justifiably assert of the central beliefs embedded in their forms of life that they are either mistaken or blunders or incoherent, for something is only a blunder, or mistaken, or incoherent 'in a particular system.' On remarks of this kind such Wittgensteinian Fideists as Winch, Phillips, and Malcolm build. But Wittgenstein, characteristically enough, leaves us with this jarring remark:

You could also say that where we are reasonable, they are not reasonable – meaning they don't use *reason* here.

If they do something very like one of our blunders, I would say, I don't know. It depends on further surroundings of it.

It is difficult to see, in cases in which it has all the appearances of trying to be reasonable.<sup>24</sup>

Moore's remarks about Wittgenstein in his notes on the 1930–3 lectures indicate that Wittgenstein stressed that 'God' is used in many grammatically different senses. Because of this many controversies about God were really pseudo-controversies that could be settled by one of the disputants pointing out, 'I'm not using the word in such a sense that you can say ...'<sup>25</sup> Moreover, where the issue is belief versus unbelief, the typical case is that of discovering that the disputants do not contradict each other, for their use of religious language is too different. If some 'people use "god" to mean something like a human being, then "God has four arms" and "God has two arms" will both have sense ...'<sup>26</sup> Moreover they will contradict each other since both statements cannot be true. But others, presumably most of us, use 'God' so that 'God has arms' is nonsense. When *such* people dispute with a man for whom 'God has two arms' is true or false, it is not the case that one can be said to say something false and the other something true, though at least one of them indeed claims to be saying something true-or-false. But vis-à-vis each other the two are in such different systems, play such different language-games, that it can only rightly be said that their beliefs are not comparable.

Taking into account the other things we have already noted about Wittgenstein, it is fair to say that he suggested another *Leitmotif* of Wittgensteinian Fideism: that there are many different forms of life with their characteristic forms of language. 'God' and cognate expressions are used differently in them and in some forms of life they are not used at all. Where the forms of life are

radically different, there is no possible philosophical or rational standpoint from which we could appraise them or justifiably judge one to be correct or true or to be more reasonable than another. Here, if we are aware of what we are doing, we can only speak in the first person and give voice to our commitments.<sup>27</sup>

## II

These remarks seem to establish Wittgenstein, at least ambivalently, as a Wittgensteinian Fideist. He also makes noteworthy remarks about pictures, God, and similes which, as I shall try to show in this section, culminate in a stress that could be used to support such a fideism. It is, however, important to note that Wittgenstein, unlike such a paradigmatic Wittgensteinian Fideist as D.Z. Phillips, nowhere claims that religious utterances can be either true or false, let alone have their own distinctive kind of truth.

Take such a statement as 'God created the world.' In trying to understand it, Wittgenstein asks us to reflect on Michelangelo making pictures of God creating the world, for, he claims, in 'general there is nothing which explains the meanings of words as well as a picture ...'<sup>28</sup> Vis-à-vis God creating the world, it is reasonable to expect that Michelangelo did as well as anyone would be likely to do in this respect. Here we have a picture of God creating Adam. But this must be taken in a very different way from a picture of Henry Moore making a bust or of a carpenter making a house. We must use Michelangelo's picture in a very different manner in order for it to be an instrument in teaching or learning how Jews and Christians characteristically use 'God.' Someone who catches on to this talk does not call the man in the queer blanket 'God.' This is not a portrait of God in the way a given portrait might be a portrait of Stalin or of Nixon. If we try to say, as some have said and as Wittgenstein himself says, that we can *only* express what we mean by 'God' by means of pictures, we are, Wittgenstein himself points out, caught up in something perplexing. I might show someone a picture of a certain fish he has never seen and thus teach him what I mean (and what is meant) by 'grayling.' Yet there is a technique which the person I am teaching must have mastered in order to be able to understand me – a technique of comparison between picture and fish. Moreover, to utilize such a technique here, graylings or fish very like graylings must have been available to someone at some time and we must know what it would be like for them to be available again. There must exist situations in which both picture and fish are or could be available to us to make the comparison. But with God, Wittgenstein points out, we are told there are only the pictures; God is never available to us so that we could compare him with our pictures. But then can they either be or fail to be pictures of *God*? We cannot say that X is a picture of ——— where we cannot say what it pictures! ('Abstract paintings,' pictures which are in no way representations, may be an exception. But in talking of 'picture' in this context, Wittgenstein had in mind something which in some way was a representation of something else.) Wittgenstein, however, does not draw what seems to be the inescapable conclusion,

i.e., that 'picture' is used incoherently in such religious contexts, but again takes the *sui generis* line of a Wittgensteinian Fideist: 'It is quite clear that the role of pictures of Biblical subjects and the role of the picture of God creating Adam are totally different ones.'<sup>29</sup>

In his lecture on ethics Wittgenstein takes a somewhat different, far more positivist line about God-talk and similes. He tells us that a 'certain characteristic misuse of our language runs through all ... religious expressions. All these expressions *seem, prima facie*, to be just similes.'<sup>30</sup> He tells us that 'when we speak of God and that he sees everything and when we kneel and pray to him all our terms and actions seem to be parts of a great and elaborate allegory which represents him as a human being of great power whose grace we try to win, etc., etc.'<sup>31</sup> All religious terms seem to be used as similes or allegorically. But to say there is and can be no non-allegorical or non-literal reading of 'God' or 'God created the world' or 'in the Last Judgment your sins will be weighed' gets us into difficulties comparable to saying we can only understand what it is to speak of God by means of pictures. Wittgenstein remarks that 'a simile must be the simile for something. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it.'<sup>32</sup> But again religious discourse is idiosyncratic. What at first seem to be similes actually function no more as similes than what we have called 'pictures of God' actually function as pictures of God. Consider 'God created the world' or 'God shall raise the quick and the dead.' Here, as soon as we try to drop what appear to be the similes, the metaphorical and allegorical remarks, and simply state the facts which stand behind these putative non-literal remarks, 'we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be mere nonsense.'<sup>33</sup>

Yet Wittgenstein says that certain experiences that go with religious claims seem 'to have in some sense an intrinsic absolute value.'<sup>34</sup> Yet he also, at least in 1929–30, wants, or wanted, to say that it is nonsense to say this. Furthermore, he wants or at least at one time wanted to claim that these 'nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their non-sensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just *to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language.'<sup>35</sup> In talking about religion we are, he asserts, thrusting against the limits of our language. Man has a deep urge to do so, but this is an urge doomed to frustration. There can be no knowledge of God; there can be no grasp of the ultimate meaning of life. Such a search is 'perfectly, absolutely hopeless.' Such thrusting against language, which is religious discourse, is, Wittgenstein concludes, only 'a tendency of the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and would not for my life ridicule it.'<sup>36</sup> The nonsensical remarks of religion, Wittgenstein told Waismann, are something which lie 'close to my heart.'<sup>37</sup>

We should recognize that there is a difference between Wittgenstein's 1938 lecture on religious belief and his 1929–30 lecture. The 1938 lecture is already moving – though ambivalently – in the direction of his *Philosophical Investiga-*



tions. In the lectures on religious belief the role of pictures and pictorial talk seems to be such that Wittgenstein has in effect abandoned the claim that for a non-literal utterance to be intelligible it must be at least in principle alternatively expressible in some literal way – that there must be, in other words, at least some partial literal paraphrase which will show what informational or conceptual content it has. From what he says in the lecture on religious belief, however, it is not at all evident how he thinks he has surmounted the difficulties raised in his lectures on ethics about such allegedly non-paraphrasable, non-literal utterances. There is no suggestion at all that such non-literal utterances are thought to express propositions, i.e., claims which could be true or false.

The general problem carried over from his lecture on ethics is that, while religious utterances appear to be *figurative*, there are very good reasons for believing that they actually do not even succeed in being figurative, for if they were really figurative they would also, at least in principle, be expressible in a non-figurative way. In his conversations with Waismann in 1930 Wittgenstein sounds almost like a Zen master when he tells us that even speech is not essential to religion and thus it is not crucial to religion whether religious utterances can be used to make, on the one hand, true or false statements or, on the other, nonsensical utterances. What is crucial here are the human attitudes and behaviour integral to religion.<sup>38</sup>

The remarks in the lecture on ethics about religious discourse being a misuse of language and about its being nonsense certainly fit neither with the general approach to language we find in the *Philosophical Investigations* nor with Wittgensteinian Fideism. Rather, as Rhees points out, they still go back too much to the view of the *Tractatus*. In his 1929–30 lecture Wittgenstein was still thinking of language as primarily descriptive and still operating with the belief that there is a single standard of intelligibility which is independent of any particular form of life or language-game. Such a criterion of intelligibility, he thought, underlies all languages and provides them with their fundamental criterion of intelligibility; expressible by logic, it is our key to what can be thought and said. However we have seen that in his lecture on religious belief he had already, though not with any very considerable clarity, proceeded beyond this view.

Wittgenstein later came to repudiate the views expressed in his lecture on ethics, and Wittgensteinian Fideists also repudiate them. Moreover there is no private meaning that religious language could have that would not be an integral part of the form of life in which such talk is embedded. And it could not be true, in Wittgenstein's later views, that the essence of religion could have nothing to do with speech. The very actions that are characteristically religious are so tied to the forms of language, which are embedded in or perhaps are constitutive of the forms of life, that there could be no understanding of religion at all, no religious behaviour even, without a grasp of religious language. The attempt in any way to pry them apart is senseless. We cannot, as the arch-Wittgensteinian Fideist D.Z. Phillips put it, 'have religion without religious discourse.'<sup>39</sup>

Still, much of what Wittgenstein had said about pictures, similes, and non-

sensicality can and would be interpreted by a Wittgensteinian Fideist – and I believe by the later Wittgenstein himself – as obliquely attesting to the *sui generis* character of religious discourse. God-talk must not be assimilated to any other kind of talk but must be understood in terms of its own logic. It is as complete as any other form of language or form of life or system of human communication. By such statements we are given to understand, as Rush Rhees well puts it, ‘that you fall into confusion if you try to provide a more ample and more perfect system for what may be said in it.’<sup>40</sup> To try to correct the person who plays this language-game by saying that he is playing the wrong language-game or an incoherent language-game too much under the influence of a certain picture or set of pictures would be, as Wittgenstein put it, ‘philosophically arrogant’; all one has a right to do *qua* philosopher is to characterize and clearly display the conventions that the language user, be he atheist or believer, wishes to draw.<sup>41</sup> Again we are back to Wittgenstein’s famous remark that philosophy leaves everything as it is.

These statements indicate that Wittgenstein in certain key respects became very much a Wittgensteinian Fideist. (The crucial respects in which he differs from Wittgensteinian Fideists are that he nowhere indicates that he thinks religious claims can be either true or false and that he regards it as a mistake to think of religious beliefs as being reasonable.) Do such fideist claims give us a true insight into religion, do they help us to come to know the truth about religion or – what is a logically prior question – to know what we are asking for when we ask for ‘the truth about religion’? I have already suggested that in certain respects they do: they teach us to attend to the first-order discourse in its live contexts; they warn us against trying to translate God-talk into some other kind of talk or against looking for some ‘transcendental logic’ that is the real logical form of God-talk. But I think there is also much to question and to criticize in Wittgenstein’s account. In particular his claims about the autonomy and uncriticizability of the forms of life need to be examined. We should look with a cold eye at the very notion of ‘a form of life.’ Does it become in Wittgenstein’s hands and in the hands of his followers an ill-defined term of art that leads us into the very kinds of conceptual confusion and philosophical evasion that Wittgenstein would have us avoid? Similar considerations apply to ‘language-game.’ What are we talking about here? And why should we accept the claim of conceptual sufficiency for all the forms of language? Indeed we must take as given the forms of language, but why exactly must we believe that such forms of language with their forms of life are beyond philosophical criticism? Why cannot a given language-game be incoherent or absurd or simply the carry-over of superstitious beliefs?

Wittgenstein, as I noted initially, does not in these lectures carefully argue for or clearly develop these fideistic claims as some of his followers did. In ‘Wittgensteinian Fideism,’ ‘God and the Forms of Life,’ and ‘Language and the Concept of God,’ I have examined many of these arguments. I wish here to inspect critically some of Wittgenstein’s claims that are not developed by Wittgensteinian Fideists.

## III

Wittgenstein stressed that such statements as that there is a God, that God created man in his image and likeness, and that there will be a Last Judgment are not empirically testable. Christianity claims to be a historical religion resting on a momentous historical fact, the Incarnation; but the central doctrinal statements of Christianity, he asserts, are not empirical propositions assessable in the way empirical statements about the past are assessable. If they were there could be a direct conflict between atheist and believer; but since they are not we must simply acknowledge that atheist and believer play different language-games.

This condition is criticizable on several grounds. It is not true that all believers always treat such beliefs as untestable. Consider the remarks of the twelfth-century poet Walther von der Vogelweide about the *Dies Irae*:

Sleepers, awake! that day draws near  
 on whose approach all Christendom and  
 Jew and heathen must in terror wait.  
 the signs are clear  
       whereby we can detect its coming,  
 even as the Word foretold.  
 the sun no longer shows its light,  
 perfidy spreads its seeds at night  
 on all the roads;  
 father is by his child betrayed  
 and brother lies to brother;  
 robed sanctity is fraudulent  
 that should make straight heaven's highway;  
 power mounts unchecked; justice before the court  
       of justice dwindles.  
 take heed! too long we've lain in slumber while  
       God's judgments wait.

He not only says that experiences confirm the imminence of the Last Judgment but shows what the confirmatory experiences are by describing empirically identifiable situations that would confirm it for him and for others with similar beliefs: in short, he offers us evidence for or against asserting that the Last Judgment is imminent. And for his time his claim is hardly atypical.

Wittgenstein could indeed object that Walther von der Vogelweide's *saying* he has evidence for the imminent occurrence of the Last Judgment does not establish that he does have evidence. Perhaps such people are like the people in the circle who claim that they have seen a dead relative? But Vogelweide surely seems to have described conditions under which it would be correct to predict that the Last Judgment is imminent. The burden of proof is on Wittgenstein to show that we have no idea of what would count as evidence for believing that the Last Judgment is imminent.

I would argue that Wittgenstein should have made the point, stressed by John Wisdom, that for more and more contemporary men religious beliefs, such as belief in the imminence of the Last Judgment, are no longer treated as experiential or experimental issues. Better still, Wittgenstein should have said that belief in the imminence of the Last Judgment, or indeed a belief in the Last Judgment itself, is only ambivalently treated as non-experiential. By this last remark I mean that in certain situations, most notably in situations of a non-theoretical sort, such beliefs seem unwittingly to be treated as experiential issues. Walther von der Vogelweide's attitude remains in the background. But in other situations they are not treated as testable claims. And where they are not testable, there are problems about what is being claimed which are not acknowledged by Wittgenstein.

We should not forget that Wittgenstein remains thoroughly perplexed by God-talk. He recognizes that religious utterances are not just the expressions of fundamental convictions but also *somehow* supposedly claims about what there is; they are, that is, both commissive and constative. But Wittgenstein is perplexed about what this comes to for God-talk. The key religious utterances we have in mind try – though Wittgenstein asserts they must fail – to 'go beyond the world'; they are supposedly assertions, yet they are not empirical propositions asserting that things stand thus and so and not otherwise. But how then can they be assertive of what there is – how could they possibly be true or false? And if they cannot be true or false how can they be assertions: how can they assert what there is? Wittgenstein, recall, unlike Wittgensteinian Fideists, never asserts that they are known to be true or false. Their logical status, for him, remains anomalous.

But, however anomalous their logical status, it is always quite evident that Wittgenstein does not treat them as assertions about how things are. Yet surely to deny that God made the world is an assertion about 'how things are,' is to 'sublime God-talk,' to give a perplexing discourse a new use, and not, as Wittgenstein would have us do, to elucidate the use it has. It may indeed be true of some believers that their use of 'God' has undergone such a sublimation and that this discourse has now become their first-order discourse. Think here of those believers who are taken up with Kierkegaard, Weil, and Buber. But if their claims are totally non-experiential, how on their use or on any non-anthropomorphic use can 'God made the world' or 'the Last Day of Judgment will come' or 'there is a God in heaven' be assertions – statements of fact? How can they be factual claims (claims about what there is) unless they are at least in principle testable? There are indeed many questions here. Perhaps, after all, there are 'untestable statements of fact,' but, at the very least, this is perplexing. Wittgenstein, making the claims he did, should have come to face these issues. They must be faced in any attempt to understand how, if at all, a religion such as Christianity or Judaism could be – though it is also surely more than this – a body of truths. Moreover, to say that I am being crudely empiricist here and that this crudeness vitiates my argument is just an evasion of the issue. The problem is much more complex than that and does not at all rest on 'logical

empiricist dogmas.' The gravamen of the argument is rather that, if key religious utterances are employed (as they purport to be) to make true or false statements of fact, then it must be the case that in some way they will be testable: they must have ascertainable truth-conditions. That is to say, if such utterances have a genuine constative force, there must be some understanding of what it would be like for them to be true or false. (I have tried in my *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* and in my *Scepticism* to show in some detail what is 'crudely empiricist' and what is not in such questions about intelligibility and truth-conditions. If a man says with serious intent that 'the Last Judgment is nigh,' this utterance, if it actually has a constative force, cannot simply express the utterer's intention to live in accord with a certain picture, where he has no idea at all what it is that the picture pictures.)

Wittgenstein recognized and stressed that 'God' has a use in the language, that God-talk for many people is bound up with their sense of the meaning (significance) of life and that religious beliefs are of great emotional and ethical significance to the believer. But beyond that he could make nothing of such talk. He did not try to construe it in a non-cognitive way, but he still thought that religious beliefs were not reasonable – in the sense of being rationally intelligible – and he heaped great scorn on those who tried to prove the reasonableness of Christianity. (Father Corbishley's *Religion is Reasonable* would, as did the writings of Father O'Hara, certainly have seemed to Wittgenstein an absurdity.) Religion is not to be reasoned about, but is simply to be lived or not lived; and whether one lives it or not is presumably dependent on what cultural circle one happens to be in or what one happens to commit oneself to. But these commitments, personally decisive as they may be, could on his own account only be arbitrary. That is to say, on his account there is and can be, objectively speaking, no ground for making one commitment rather than another.

Even if we grant Wittgenstein his point that Christian and Jew, Buddhist and Moslem, theist and atheist, do not directly contradict each other and are talking on different planes, it does not follow that they are all equally right or that no significant argument between them is possible. Euclidian and Lobatchevskian geometry do not conflict either, but there can be argument about which it is better to use for aerial navigation. There is room for argument in such a case about what framework to adopt even if there are no logical contradictions between statements in such different frameworks.

Only if we can show that 'reason,' 'reality,' and 'evidence' are systematically ambiguous and form-of-life dependent, and only if we can establish that any form of life is beyond the fringe of philosophical or rational criticism, can we have even a nearly adequate rationale for Wittgenstein's characteristic claims in his lectures on religious belief. Otherwise a counter that Wittgenstein would detest is quite apposite: it is a truism to say that we ought not to believe what is not reasonable. Religious belief is not reasonable. Therefore we ought to reject religious belief and people should stop being religious, e.g., stop being Jews, Christians, Moslems, and the like.

We need a convincing statement of Wittgensteinian Fideism to show that religious belief is not unreasonable if we can only come to understand it and accept it on its own terms. But can this be accomplished? Wittgenstein's own line of reasoning concerning religion would lead us to think that such a Wittgensteinian Fideistic defence would not hold, for he does not think that religious belief is reasonable.

However, when it is pointed out that religious belief is not reasonable, there remains the Kierkegaardian-Pascalian defence, to which Wittgenstein was also attracted, which would show that in the case of religious belief it is reasonable *all told* to believe something which from a purely intellectual point of view is unreasonable to believe in. The method in their madness is this. Without religious belief life is senseless, quite without significance, so that unless one can become a 'knight of faith' one cannot, if one is unblessed with being perceptive, avoid total despair and 'Sickness Unto Death.' Given this situation it is in the largest sense reasonable vis-à-vis religion to believe that which is unreasonable: one has the best of reasons for crucifying one's intellect vis-à-vis religious belief if only one can.

This familiar fideistic claim needs challenging. Why assume that without a belief in God life is intolerable? Many people in cultures other than our own have no conception of God or an 'after-life' and yet these cultures have been as integrated as ours, and within our culture there have been plenty of sceptics and atheists around for a long time who have not suffered sickness unto death and some of them have been very sensitive and perceptive human beings. Some, like Sartre, suffer from a need to believe in God, but by no means all are in such a predicament. Wittgenstein spoke for himself, and speaking for myself, giving voice to my own feelings, I can say that I honestly feel not the slightest need for religious belief. It is also evident that I am not alone in that feeling. I have no doubt that many people do indeed suffer from the Pascalian syndrome and, given their set of attitudes, would be miserable without a belief in God. But this reveals something about how *they* were brought up and nothing about the very condition of man. There is no good anthropological or psychological evidence for the belief that man must despair or remain basically unsatisfied until he can come to believe in God. We are not all hounded by the hound of heaven.

#### IV

Finally I want to draw attention to something rather special in Wittgenstein's remarks about religion. First, note that Wittgenstein, neither as a human being nor as a philosopher, engages in God-talk himself, though as a philosopher he quite appropriately talks about the talk about God. Only at the very end of his lecture on ethics, which he mingles confusedly with religion, does he speak for himself, give voice to his convictions. Here he feels we are 'beyond all argument.' But here, in accordance with what I said above, we can query this claim, for 'irrational convictions,' 'unjustified convictions,' 'extravagant convictions,' 'well-

founded convictions,' 'rational convictions,' even 'true convictions,' whatever may be their proper analysis, are neither misuses of language nor pleonastic. Moreover can Wittgenstein justify having the convictions he has concerning religion? Recall that while he does not engage in God-talk, he moralizes about religion and religious people. If he really believes, as *at one time* he did, that in speaking of God we are trying to go 'beyond the world' and that such talk is unintelligible (not just unintelligible to him but unintelligible *sans phrase*), why should he have such a respect for those who are religious and for those who give in to this tendency of the human mind?<sup>42</sup> Why not take a Nietzschean or Russellian attitude toward religion? Why take off your hat to someone who persists in believing (more accurately in claiming to believe) what, if Wittgenstein is right in his *above* claim, is demonstrably unintelligible? Why encourage people in this? Certainly one might respect religious believers for their integrity and, in some instances, for their battle to help men to overcome an excessive narcissism. But there are other ways of overcoming it, other ways of giving sense to human life. Why encourage a kind of ideology that rests on no foundation – that rests on something that is incoherent ('beyond significant language')? Why, it might be thought, encourage man in his infantilism?

Presumably Wittgenstein would think that the Hume-Russell type of response is a superficial, rationalistic one. (Note his remark here about Schlick's ethics.<sup>43</sup>) Perhaps he would claim that of Nietzsche's or Feuerbach's response as well. But why? What justification could he give for claiming that his own attitude was the deeper one? From his own theoretical remarks one would think that whatever conviction one gave voice to over such matters would be arbitrary.

Why believe that a man with Pascal's or James's attitudes has a deeper, profounder grasp or vision of life than a man with Feuerbach's or Freud's? It looks as if Wittgenstein's own commitment here is on his own showing – given his own theoretical commitments – an arbitrary one. Yet presumably Wittgenstein did not think, when he was responding as an agent, that it was arbitrary. In some way he thought his attitudes were the right ones. But why are they the right ones? Indeed, are they the right ones?

Some have thought that at such a level there can be no non-question-begging way of answering such questions. *Perhaps* this is so? It is surely convenient to make such an assumption, to halt inquiry at this point, but it is not evident that this assumption is justified and it certainly has not been shown to be justified.<sup>44</sup> It is too strong to claim that Wittgenstein was simply being irrational in taking off his hat to certain religious people, but his move at least here seems to be quite arbitrary. He clearly feels that religious people have deeper, more profound, somehow more appropriate attitudes toward life than have the Russells or the Schlicks of the world, but he has not given the slightest justification for that attitude. He has not at all shown that such an attitude is the appropriate attitude.<sup>45</sup>

Wittgenstein might respond, as Phillips does, that whether these attitudes are or are not the right ones is not a philosophical matter. Such an issue could never

be settled by philosophy. But to say 'it is not a philosophical matter' would be to engage in a persuasive definition of philosophy and this, in turn, would require justification. To say that philosophy could not settle such questions, or that no rational measures could settle them, would itself require philosophical justification, a philosophical justification which would have to come to rest on a full-blown acceptance and justification of the central theses of Wittgensteinian Fideism. However, even if we are led – through a persuasive definition of philosophy – to accept a characterization of philosophy that would lead us to the conclusion that philosophical reasoning cannot resolve such issues, it still remains the case that human ratiocination most certainly appears to be relevant to our beliefs and attitudes here. Whether or not we call such reasoning or argumentation 'philosophical' is a comparatively trivial issue. The point is that such issues are not beyond the scope of reason or at least have not been shown to be beyond the scope of reason. Argument, elucidation, and careful reflection remain relevant or, to put it more minimally, it has not been established that such ratiocination is irrelevant. There is no reason to think that we must just arbitrarily decide here, and that there can be no possibility of a reflective judgment concerning the justifiability or lack thereof of fundamental religious beliefs.

#### NOTES

- 1 See my 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' *Philosophy* (July 1967); 'Language and the Concept of God' *Question 2* (Jan. 1969); and 'God and the Forms of Life,' *Indian Review of Philosophy* 1, 1, (Jan. 1972).
- 2 Ludwig Wittgenstein *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford 1966); hereafter referred to as 'Lectures on Religious Belief.' For a discussion with a somewhat different thrust from my own see W.D. Hudson 'Some Remarks on Wittgenstein's Account of Religious Belief,' *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures* (1967–8).
- 3 Ludwig Wittgenstein 'A Lecture on Ethics,' *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), 3–12; and G.E. Moore *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1959).
- 4 Wittgenstein, 'Lectures on Religious Belief' 59
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Ibid 70–2
- 7 Ibid 71
- 8 Ibid 60
- 9 Ibid
- 10 Ibid 53
- 11 Ibid 54
- 12 Ibid 55
- 13 Ibid 56–7, 62. This is also the way D.Z. Phillips read him in his *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1970).
- 14 Ibid 56
- 15 Ibid 57
- 16 Ibid
- 17 Ibid 57–8
- 18 Wittgenstein 'Lecture on Ethics' 12



- 19 Wittgenstein 'Lectures on Religious Belief' 58  
 20 Ibid  
 21 Ibid  
 22 Ibid  
 23 Ibid  
 24 Ibid 59  
 25 Moore *Philosophical Papers* 312  
 26 Ibid  
 27 Recall in this connection what Wittgenstein said in his conversations with Schlick and Waismann: 'At the end of my lecture on ethics, I spoke in the first person. I believe that is quite essential. Here nothing more can be established. I can only appear as a person speaking for myself.' This is from Friedrich Waismann's notes from a conversation with Wittgenstein, 17 Dec. 1930. Friedrich Waismann 'Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein,' *The Philosophical Review* 74, 1 (Jan. 1965) 16. And also ponder in this context the remark about 'reason' he made to Rush Rhees: 'In considering a different system of ethics there may be a strong temptation to think that what seems to us to express the justification of an action must be what really justified it there, whereas the real reasons are the reasons that are given. These are the reasons for or against the action. "Reason" doesn't always mean the same thing ...' Rush Rhees 'Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics,' *The Philosophical Review* 74, 1 (Jan. 1965) 26.  
 28 Wittgenstein 'Lectures on Religious Belief' 63  
 29 Ibid  
 30 Wittgenstein 'Lecture on Ethics' 9  
 31 Ibid  
 32 Ibid 10  
 33 Ibid  
 34 Ibid  
 35 Ibid 11  
 36 Ibid 12  
 37 Ibid 16. It might be objected that I am forgetting here that 'nonsense' is used by Wittgenstein as a term of art. The expressions he is talking about here, it may be contended, are merely nonsensical in a technical way. But this doesn't mean that, in an ordinary sense of 'nonsense,' they are nonsensical. However Wittgenstein seems to mean, when talking about religious utterances, that they are nonsensical in a more ordinary way; they are not simply nonsensical in the way the propositions of his *Tractatus* are said to be nonsensical, for it is not the case with 'God created the heavens and the earth' that we have something that allegedly can be *shown*, but cannot be *said*. Rather we are here saying something that in an important sense is not understood. The doctrines of the *Tractatus* are such that we can weigh up their merits and demerits, but such religious utterances are utterly mystifying. See here George Pitcher *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1964) 154–7.  
 38 Waismann 'Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein' 16  
 39 D.Z. Phillips 'Philosophy, Theology and the Reality of God,' *Philosophical Quarterly* (Sept. 1963) 346.  
 40 Rush Rhees's remarks on Wittgenstein's 'Lecture on Ethics.' See *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965) 26.  
 41 Wittgenstein 'Lectures on Religious Belief' 72  
 42 There is a difference here between his 1938 lecture and his 1929–30 lecture. In the latter he is claiming that such beliefs are unintelligible. In the former he is saying that he can make little of them – they are not adequately intelligible to him – but that he is making no claims about 'unintelligibility in general.' It is this last claim, as the work

of Hughes, Phillips, and Cavell has made evident, which is a central tenet of Wittgensteinian Fideism. It is, however, the claim of the 1929–30 lecture that I am examining in the above passage in the text.

43 Wittgenstein 'Lecture on Ethics' 15

44 The exchange between Antony Flew and Donald Evans over 'the presumption of atheism' is instructive in this regard. See *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2, 1 (Winter 1972).

45 J.N. Findlay and J.O. Urmson have amply demonstrated that attitudes can indeed be justified or unjustified, rational or irrational. J.N. Findlay *Language, Mind and Value* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1963) 66–95, 165–81; and J.O. Urmson *The Emotive Theory of Ethics* (London: Hutchinson University Library 1968) 38–61.