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THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

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I shall limit myself to discussing the role of language in philosophy concerning religion (more specifically Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions) during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But it should not be forgotten that well before the linguistic turn with twentieth-century analytical philosophy, there was also concern with linguistic and conceptual issues. The astute and complicated discussion of predication concerning God during the Middle Ages is a prominent example. Moreover, there is a concentrated concern with language during much of the histories of world religions (Soskice 1984; 1997). But it is with the rise of analytic philosophy that such attention moves to center stage.

I shall start by discussing the verificationism that became central with the emergence of logical positivism, moving to the metaphysical realism that rose in reaction to verificationism, then turning to the Wittgensteinian reaction as an alternative to both of the above, and ending with the neo-pragmatist reaction to all this characteristic of Richard Rorty and Jeffrey Stout (Rorty 2002; Stout 2002).

Verificationism

Logical positivists (in some basic respects following David Hume) maintained that cognitively meaningful language is either analytic (true by definition or by what follows from a definition, e.g., 'Tadpoles are young frogs' or 'Tadpoles are frogs'), or factual (when they are construed as empirical and verifiable). There are, of course, expressive, evocative, and ceremonial uses of language, but sentences when they are not, or are not also descriptive uses of language, are not, according to them, cognitively meaningful and have no truth-conditions: they can tell us nothing about what is the case. All sentences that are neither analytic nor factual (i.e., empirical) are alleged to be devoid of cognitive significance.

Twentieth-century verificationists have been led to eschew both *decisive* verification and falsification. Plenty of perfectly meaningful scientific statements are not decisively verifiable and plenty are not decisively falsifiable. Moreover, some are neither decisively verifiable nor decisively falsifiable (e.g., 'Every substance has

some solvent'). But verificationists have moved to a weaker verifiability criterion, namely that for a sentence to be *factually* meaningful, it must be directly or indirectly confirmable or disconfirmable at least in principle (it must be logically possible to confirm or disconfirm it). This is an empirical *testability* criterion. Abstract physical laws are almost never – perhaps never – *directly* confirmable or disconfirmable. We can, of course, in an indirect way either give evidence for or against them showing in that indirect way they are confirmable or disconfirmable. But both direct and indirect confirmation or disconfirmation as a test for factual intelligibility is always fallible. Data may be variously interpreted; mistakes in observation can always be made; and inferences from observation to theories can always go awry.

Moreover, it is not obvious that even for de-anthropomorphized developed theistic beliefs that we can rule out some indirect confirmation or disconfirmation of them in principle. We may not have even the slightest idea of how to confirm or disconfirm 'God created the heavens and the earth,' 'God loves his creation,' or 'The providential order of God reigns in the world' (Nielsen 1982: 140–70). But that does not entail that they are notions that are not in some way in principle confirmable or disconfirmable, though the burden of proof is on the believer to indicate how this could be so.

The same is true for certain postulations of physics or biology. Moreover, it will be claimed that the very verifiability criterion (in any form) is self-refuting. 'That all meaningful statements are either analytic or empirically testable' is itself neither analytic nor empirically testable and thus should be rejected as cognitively meaningless on those very grounds. However, if we do not take testability as a general criterion of meaning but as a criterion of *factual* meaningfulness and regard, as Martin and I do, the criterion as a *proposal* justified on pragmatic grounds and not itself as a putative statement of fact, we get something that is not self-refuting and is more plausible (Nielsen 1982; Martin 1997). Proposals are not themselves analytic or empirical claims to truth or falsity any more than imperatives or questions are, but they, like them, can be pragmatically meaningful and have a point. However, theists can make their quite different proposals too: proposals which run against verificationism. But then the issue would shift to various social and moral as well as pragmatic considerations and cannot be settled from a consideration concerning intelligibility or meaningfulness.

Logical positivists typically, after accepting that, go on to claim that when we are talking about the facts we are talking *evidential empirical data*. 'Empirical fact' is taken by them to be a pleonasm. It will in turn be replied that this rests on pure unwitting stipulation on the empiricist's part and hardly fits with the way physics has developed: the fundamental particles of physics are not empirically identifiable data. A fact *au contraire* is just what a true proposition (or statement) states. It is not an event, process, or thing in the world (or 'out of the world'). Moreover, there are mathematical, logical, moral, legal, and normative political facts, none of which are baldly empirical data. Why then can't there be religious facts? It is just as important that we not reify (objectify) these facts so as to try to regard them as objects or entities (things) in the world or 'beyond the world' in some allegedly 'supernatural world.' If we do something like that (trying to treat them as 'non-natural facts'), then we get human projections rooted in illusion. But we do not have to, and should not, so reify.

However, in making positive assertions of whatever type, we are claiming that certain propositions are true. How we *establish* something to be true is often a difficult business and varies with the discourse we are engaging in and is sometimes very tenuous and inconclusive. It may in some instances even be altogether impossible. But the sense of 'true' in saying anything is true remains importantly unproblematic. A proposition (sentence, if you will) is true if what it says is so. But all such sayings that something is so do not even purport to be empirical sayings so (i.e., saying so need not be saying that something empirically identifiable is so). A proposition of whatever type expressed by an indicative sentence is either true or false (has a truth-value) when '*p*' (an indicative sentence) is used to assert *p*. When we take the quotation marks off '*p*,' we get *p*: '"2 + 2 = 4" is true if and only if 2 + 2 = 4'; '"Killing is wrong" is true if and only if killing is wrong'; '"If *p* then *p* or *q*" is true if and only if *p* then *p* or *q*'; '"Same sex marriage is illegal in the United States" is true if and only if same sex marriage is illegal in the United States'; '"Empires are evil" if and only if empires are evil'; and '"God created the heavens and the earth" is true if and only if God created the heavens and the earth.' If a fact is just what a true proposition (statement or sentence) states, then there are *all kinds of facts*: logical, mathematical, legal, moral, political, and religious. Truth is not an *epistemological* notion.

In speaking of the *meaning* (*use*) of 'true,' we are not speaking of how a truth claim is confirmed, warranted, established, or legitimized; we are not even necessarily asserting that it is establishable or legitimizable. It may even be verification-transcendent. To say something is true is to say that if it really is true, it is time-independent; if *p* is true it has always been true and will always be true (e.g., if there were rocks some places at the bottom of the Mississippi in 1592 then it was, is, and will always be true that there were rocks at the bottom of the Mississippi in 1592). In this way truth is time-independent – eternal, if you want to reify things. But this says nothing about how we confirm, establish, legitimatize, or in any way ascertain the truth of a proposition. That, unlike truth itself, is time- and domain-specific. *Taking* or establishing something to be true is always time-dependent and what we take to be true, no matter how carefully justified, how well warranted, or even ideally rationally acceptable, may always turn out to be false. That is just a matter of how we use 'true' and 'warrantedly assertable' and 'rationally acceptable.' It always makes sense to say 'rationally acceptable but still possibly false.' This is why I (along with many others) say that truth is not an epistemic notion. In one way truth is not very important for it is not a means of establishing anything (Rorty 1991: 126–50).

What is crucial in religion (as elsewhere) is how we *warrant* or *establish* (if we can warrant or establish) a religious claim to be true. Perhaps we cannot do so. Perhaps we can articulate neither truth-conditions nor assertability-conditions for religious claims. We have in effect seen above that indicative religious utterances have a truth-value. But it does not seem at least that they – more accurately the non-anthropomorphic ones – have either truth-conditions or assertability-conditions. But it remains the case, and trivially so, that 'God exists' is true if and only if God exists.

It will be said of empiricists and some pragmatists that they have a vanishingly poor conception of fact. But it will in turn be replied that that will be so only if we say

an 'empirical fact' is a pleonasm. But that for the above reasons is a mistake. To ask for 'the facts and only for the facts' (Charles Dickens's Mr Gradgrind to the contrary notwithstanding) *need* not be to ask for 'the empirical data' (or even 'the statistical data'). We have seen that this is not true; it is not even true that this is all that remains relevant for empiricism. Moreover, religious claims are not empirical claims. But then what kind of claims are they? Some religious utterances are analytic (e.g., 'God is eternal'). But not all of them are (e.g., 'There are eternal things,' 'There is eternal Being,' or 'God created the heavens and the earth'). There seems to be no way we could justify such putative claims. We certainly cannot empirically confirm them or, for that matter, disconfirm them.

Should we, perhaps, take them on faith, completely on trust? This is increasingly difficult for people with modern sensibilities, or does this just come to having empiricist prejudices? But is that just because of unexamined empiricist dogmas? Perhaps. But that is increasingly difficult to accept when we see that indicative religious utterances or at least the fundamental ones are without truth-conditions or assertability-conditions. It is very difficult, given that, to see what sense (if any) they have. And so the debate around verificationism and its implications goes around and around. And it should be added that we have touched on only some of the considerations that are crucial (see Putnam 2002; 2004).

Metaphysical realism in religion

Metaphysical realism (including theistic metaphysical realism) enters here with its revival of things away from the linguistic turn: away from a fixation on how language is used. It capitalizes on the type of considerations that we have raised in the last part of the previous section concerning what it means to speak of facts and the narrowness of empiricist treatments of 'fact.' Fact is a many-splendored thing.

The empiricist tradition took a fact to be something that corresponds to a sense impression (something that a sense impression depicts) or sometimes even more reductively (unconsciously flirting with linguistic idealism) to identifying a fact with what a sense impression or possible sense impression is. The verificationists (principally logical positivists), having taken the linguistic turn, expressed much the same thing as did the classical empiricists, only in linguistic terms. They spoke of an 'empiricist language' and of observation sentences and observation terms. However, they succumbed to criticisms of the type articulated in the previous section. By 1938 leading logical positivists, Rudolf Carnap and Carl Hempel, had completely abandoned verificationism for *individual statements* (sentences) or for meaningful scientific predicates. It was no longer held that a predicate to be factually meaningful must be either an observation predicate or reducible to an observation predicate. They came to realize that such terms as 'charge' and 'electron' do not enter physics through definitions or even reductions. Rather they are simply taken as *primitives* (Carnap 1938: 139–214; Putnam 2002). As Putnam put it, 'On the revised logical positivist criterion of cognitive significance, it is the system of *scientific statements as a whole* that has factual content' (2002: 23–4). It is no longer individual statements or predicates

allegedly confronting sense experience that must be testable but the whole of the scientific system.

Physics – for them, the veritable paradigm of the cognitively meaningful – was replete with theoretical terms: not only 'charge' and 'electron' but 'protons,' 'neutrons,' 'neutrinos,' 'quarks,' 'curved space-time,' and 'gravitational field.' That there are such entities is neither directly or indirectly testable nor observationally or operationally definable. But they are integral to present-day physics. Carnap and Hempel, followed by Quine, took such abstract and theoretical terms to be 'empirically meaningful' as long as *the system in which they occur as a whole* enables us to predict more successfully what we experience with them than we could without them.

Theistic metaphysical realists (as well as others) were quick to realize that if physics could utilize such abstract and theoretical terms, sometimes introduced as undefined primitives into a scientific system, there was no reason (or at least no apparent reason) that we could not have 'God' entering the category of cognitively meaningful terms as well as 'proton.' Judaism, Christianity, and Islam could introduce their (in positivist jargon) 'theoretical terms' as undefined primitives as well as physics. True, religion, unlike physics or biology, isn't in the prediction business but has different ends in view: different purposes. Religions are concerned with making sense of life and with providing guidance for how we should live our lives or, depending on the religion, with salvation or enlightenment. But why should this make a difference? Religion just has different purposes or ends in view. Both religion and science can introduce their central abstract terms into their systems in the same way. These terms can be *postulated* and taken as undefined primitives. Religion and science serve different purposes with diverse rationales. So why should only the scientific purposes be legitimate? Only the blindest scientistic-oriented philosopher would think that all purposes or even all rational or reasonable purposes are scientific.

However, it will be replied, religion – traditionally at least – has served *cosmological* purposes as well. And it is characteristically claimed by traditional religious people that without the cosmology, the meaning of life, ethical, salvation, and enlightenment functions of religious discourse would be quite groundless, indeed, not only that, but eviscerated. Religion, in effect, would be reduced to something like morality touched with emotion. So, it is claimed, the metaphysical realist side of religion is essential: religion, that is, makes *verification-transcendent* claims and postulates realities – entities, or Being if you will – which are not in any way empirically establishable and its claims are not *synthetic a priori* claims either. But physics does so as well; so why is it not legitimate for religion to do so?

It in turn will be responded that more and more contemporary people remain religious without that cosmology. The cosmological for them is just a bit of mythology that is really not important to their religious belief. We are justified, they claim, in accepting Judaism, Christianity, and Islam if they more than any other alternatives help us make sense of our lives and yield a better understanding, weak though it may remain, of how to order our lives. But this has repeatedly and powerfully been challenged by many utterly secular thinkers such as Hobbes, Mill, Feuerbach, Marx, and Dewey and, in our time, by Richard Rorty (1998; 2006). We can, perhaps, make

sense of our lives and morality more adequately in utterly secular terms (Nielsen 1996: 557–99; 2001: 56–76).

Religion backed up by metaphysical realism may not be vulnerable to verifica- tionist arguments, and metaphysical realists may be justified in setting aside the linguistic turn. But such metaphysical realists defending a religious point of view are challengeable, and deeply so, *normatively*; they and the religions they defend are challengeable for being something that does not answer to modern (or if you will postmodern) sensibilities. Have these secularists just been enculturated (brain- washed, to put it crudely) into the typical ways of construing or reacting to things of contemporary educated life? Is it (as has sometimes been said of liberalism) a form of cultural imperialism? Richard Rorty remarks, with reference to his exchange with Gianno Vattino concerning religion, that Vattino finds the whole issue between atheism and theism interesting while he (Rorty) finds it uninteresting. Rorty remarks, 'Considering that he [Vattino] was raised a Catholic and I was raised in no religion at all, this is not surprising' (Rorty 2003a: 144). Does finding personal significance in religion or not just come down to having been exposed to different forms of conditioning? Does rationality or reasonability or conceptual sophistication or careful moral thought and disciplined reflection have nothing to do with it (Rorty and Vattino 2004)?

The Wittgensteinian turn concerning religious discourse

Enter Wittgenstein's, or at least a putatively Wittgensteinian, way of looking at religion and religious discourse. Wittgenstein would have scorned the idea that he had a *philosophy* of language or a philosophy of anything else (including religion). He – or so he viewed himself – was not in the business of constructing either a philosophical system or a point of view. In this respect he was with Kierkegaard. Philosophy was for him an *activity* and his aims in engaging in it were largely conceptually therapeutic: to help, as he put it, the fly out of the fly-bottle.

However, he did attend carefully to our language as it was used in context and was remarkably finely attuned to it. For him philosophical nonsense emerged largely from not properly understanding the workings of our language, particularly when we reflect about it in specific contexts. He saw language as an activity; we play various and diverse language-games (characteristic things we do with words) for various purposes. None of these language-games has priority over others, and there is no super-language or cluster of basic language-games on which all others depend; there is no foundational base which gives the rest their legitimacy or insures their rationality. Wittgenstein utterly rejects such rationalism or foundationalism whether it is thought to be metaphysical or scientific. Such approaches do not attend to how language actually functions, but impose a picture on it. Our actual languages are constituted by language-games. These language-games are embedded in practices (ways of acting and being) that humans in a society characteristically engage in and that deeply form them. Forms of life – religions, science, and witchcraft in some societies (e.g., the Azande), views of the world and ethical stances – have embedded in them practices.

(On the pervasiveness of the belief in witchcraft in West Africa, see Appiah 2006: 35–55.)

Within a language-game there is typically justification and lack of justification, evidence and proof as well as mistaken and groundless opinion. But we can't say this for language-games, practices, and forms of life (modes of social life) themselves taken as a whole. We cannot, that is, intelligibly say of a language-game or practice (or a whole cluster of language-games or a form of life) that we have something that is justified or unjustified, something that is reasonable or unreasonable, something we have evidence for, proof for and the like. And we cannot say we lack any of these things either, for we do not understand what it would be like to have them. There is no coherent way even of saying they are reasonable or unreasonable. These appraisive terms have no grip here. There can be proof or justification *within* a practice – using the built-in norms of the practice – but not *of* them or *of* all the practices of a society taken together. This has led many philosophers (e.g., Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam) to think that Wittgenstein was a relativist (Putnam 1992: 168–79).

Beliefs, utterances, conceptions, concepts 'are only intelligible in the context of ways of living or modes of social life as such' (Winch 1995: 100–1). Science is one such mode, morality another, and religion still another or perhaps they are each distinctive clusters of language-games and practices *in* a form of life. 'Each,' Peter Winch tells us, 'has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself … [W]ithin science or religion actions can be logical or illogical,' rational or irrational, justified or lacking in justification, reasonable or unreasonable, worthy of acceptance or not (ibid.). There is, Winch has it, no bringing these clusters of practices constituting a mode of life themselves before 'the bar of reason' such that we could coherently say they are *true or false* or that religion as such a mode of social life is an illusion or is just a human projection.

Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism are themselves either forms of life or *in* forms of life (depending on how we take Wittgenstein). Still, religious language-games with their practices, along with other language-games, are not balkanized. How they are taken depends on their connections with other language-games. However, the religious language-games, as we have seen, still have their distinctive criteria and distinctive point. Standing outside all our religious practices, we cannot, it is claimed, reasonably assess them, for they are just there like our lives and they either mean something to us – have some importance to us – or they do not (Rhees 1997). Indeed, we cannot stand outside *all* practices and criticize anything; there is no practice-free perspective on anything (Nielsen and Phillips 2005). But using one practice or cluster of practices, we can sometimes relevantly criticize another practice or cluster of practices (ibid.).

However, from this Wittgensteinian point of view at least, there is no showing that they must have some significance for us. They are just there (to repeat) like our lives and they are either of significance for us or they are not, or we remain ambivalent about this. But there is no reason they *must* have significance or lack significance for us or that, if we are clearheaded, we must be ambivalent. For them to have significance for us or for us to reject the idea that they can have such significance, we must of

course have some *minimal understanding* of the use of religious terms or sentences. But for this it is enough for us, believers or not, to have grown up and been encultured in a social world that has a religious form of life. There is no showing they *must* or even should mean something to us (have some significance for us or value to us) if we are to be reasonable, not self-deceived or in bad faith.

This Wittgensteinian conception of things has generally been taken as bad news by both traditional theistic philosophers *and* by those naturalistically and secularly rooted. For it challenges root and branch how both of them conceive of things and of the common grounds of their disputes with one another. If we see religion as at all a *normative* issue, it challenges our respective stances. Moreover, it seems to give us grounds for setting aside the verificationist disputes between verificationists and their metaphysical realist opponents discussed in the previous section. (A useful introduction to these disputes includes the debates between Bertrand Russell and Frederick Copleston S. J., and between A. J. Ayer and Copleston: Russell and Copleston 1964; Ayer and Copleston 1957.)

I shall simply note two kinds of objection to such Wittgensteinianisms in religion, the second of which has to do more with the above characterization of it.

First kind

First, Anthony Kenny, someone well-versed in Wittgenstein, has remarked that Wittgenstein's influence on the philosophy of religion has been disastrous. The concept of language-games, he argued, and as we have seen, has a central place in Wittgenstein's thought concerning religion (as well as in everything else). But Kenny also remarks that 'the concept of language-game is an obscure and ambiguous one in Wittgenstein's writings: *in the hands of some of his religious admirers* it has become *a stonewall defense against any demand for a justification of belief in God*' (Kenny 1975: 245 my italics). Kenny goes on to add that one unfortunate effect of that is that it shuts down the very possibility of any fruitful dialogue between religious belief and critical philosophy.

Second, some early Wittgensteinian accounts of religion tended to see Wittgenstein as dividing his account of religious language-games from other language-games, but that was quickly seen to be neither a good Wittgenstein reading nor, quite independently of that, good philosophy (Nielsen and Phillips 2005). But once the various language-games and practices across the board were seen, an interconnected space was opened up to question their *individual* autonomy. There is, however, no way of either transcending all these interconnected practices and looking, *without benefit of a practice*, at the whole ensemble or assessing an individual practice as a whole, judging its reasonableness or coherence or rationality. Such notions are unintelligible. We can – and sometimes relevantly – criticize one practice by another one (e.g., the practice of religion criticizing ethics, science criticizing religion, ethics criticizing religion, science criticizing ethics and ethics critizing science). Often this has been done irrelevantly, as with, for example, 'Creation *science*' or religious opposition to Darwin, but it has been done relevantly as well.

Moreover, it is often important to juxtapose practices. Most fundamentally it is important, if we can, perspicuously to arrange them into a coherent whole. Wittgenstein has given us reason to be suspicious of that but no good reason to think it is impossible and, where reasonably possible, not desirable. We perhaps can get our various practices into a wide reflective equilibrium, and in that way put them into a coherent whole so that we would not see them as just a jumble (Nielsen 1996: 169–206). Our sense of 'reasonable' is contextual, but not so contextual as to be impossible for us to speak appropriately of the reasonability or lack thereof of one or another such putting of our practices together. We might, in the course of such putting together, sometimes modify a practice or even abandon one in light of its lack of fit with other practices; sometimes we may even abandon whole clusters of practices for not squaring with the ensemble of other practices, as in the case of some strata of some West African societies giving up belief in witches. This does not require us, or indeed enable us, to use one cluster of practices – say science – as a critical fulcrum with which to criticize and judge all the others. (That is a crucial error of scientism.)

But we perhaps can, by reflecting and using rather minimal common notions of what is reasonable, come to see how our various practices could best fit together. (Though the elements constitutive of reasonability will themselves be involved and it will be necessary to ask about their ethnocentricity and to see how they all fit together with the things of which they are said to be reasonable.) Our various practices with their forms of life are not just there to be accepted or rejected for no reason. In societies such as ours, we can – and perhaps should – ask if people can reasonably be religious or not and, if so, how and in which of the religions and even which sect. (Or is that simply a matter of where you happen to have been brought up?) Or can – I think improbably – religious belief and commitment float free of any doctrinal allegiance at all? But religious belief need not be, and should not be, like the first language one learns, just the result of a historical contingency simply drilled into us. It will be partly that – typically initially that – but it need not be *solely* so. In some parts of the world one can make, and often there one feels inwardly the pressure to make, such choices; where some of us are luckily enough situated, we can make it a matter of reflective, and hopefully of reasonable, choice and resolve, and thus we can choose with better or worse reasons and alignments of sentiments.

Third, in the Judaic-Christian-Islamic religions, the concept of God, while not being the sole important thing in these religions, is of central importance. If we, considering these religious strands, approach these matters in a Wittgensteinian way, we will attend to the use of 'God' in our religious language-games, and how this discourse functions in our religious practices. Religions – particularly Judaism and Islam – have (and not without reason) been reluctant to 'name God.' But to have faith in God, to be able to worship God, we have to have *some* understanding of who or what we are to worship or who or what we are to have faith in (Nielsen 1963; 1965). Indeed belief *in* God presupposes a belief *that*: a belief that God exists (Nielsen 1982: 92–100). Though the God of these religions is a mystery – a 'non-mysterious God,' clear to the light of reason, would not be the God of these faiths – God cannot be so

mysterious that we cannot understand 'God' at all, or we would not be able to believe in him, worship him, have faith in him.

But when we look at how we characterize God in our de-anthropomorphized religions (as all have come to be with their development), we find he is characterized inconsistently (incompatible predicates are attributed to him). God is said to be a pure spirit, a person without body or parts and to be an individual (a person – or a tri-personal unity, as within the Christian tradition). He is also said to be infinite and utterly transcendent to the world, yet someone who responds to our prayers (sometimes in ways that come as a shock to our expectations). However, even if we can make sense of a 'bodiless person' (some task in itself), we have a plain contradiction in speaking of 'an infinite individual' and of 'God who is utterly transcendent to the world and who sometimes responds to our prayers and thus in some way enters into the world.' We are not just (or perhaps not at all) speaking here of the God of the philosophers but the God of our sacred religious Scriptures, the God of the ordinary worshiper engaging in the religious language-games of his Jewish, Christian, or Islamic culture. It is not enough, as Wittgenstein would have it, to recognize this language-game is played and with that acknowledgment simply accept as in order that language-game.

Second kind

There is a kind of objection to the above Wittgensteinian account that has sometimes been made. It contends that, whatever its intrinsic merits or lack thereof, it is neither genuinely Wittgensteinian nor accurate of the Wittgensteinians who have extensively discussed religion from a Wittgensteinian point of view (Malcolm 1977; 1994; Bouwsma 1984; Phillips 1993; Winch 1994; Rhees 1997). This has been contested, in our extensive exchanges, by myself and D. Z. Phillips, and has in turn been defended by Phillips (Nielsen and Phillips 2005).

Wittgenstein wrote little directly on religion. The view given above in the text is my own and like any other, given the paucity of material, it is a reconstruction. It is closest, I believe, to those of the avowed Wittgensteinians Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch (Malcolm 1977; 1994; Winch 1994; 1995). But my concern is not that it is the most faithful interpretation of Wittgenstein, or even whether we could ascertain what that is, but with the fact that it is in itself a powerful, and perhaps compelling, account, in the spirit of Wittgenstein's views on philosophy, language, and of religion; and, it is plausibly arguable, the least vulnerable to secular critique. If we are concerned with how religious discourse functions in our lives, it is a crucial view with which to come to grips.

A neo-pragmatist turn on religious discourse

The view we are setting out here is reflected in Robert Brandon, Richard Rorty and Jeffrey Stout (Brandon 1994; Rorty 2002; Stout 2002). I shall utilize principally Rorty's way of articulating it. It is more explicitly historicist than Wittgensteinian views and

more clearly sets aside a *representationalist* view of language for an anti-representation-alist *coping* one: language is being viewed (including, of course, religious language) not as a tool for representation but as a tool for coping with various life situations into which we are thrown. Although Wittgenstein speaks of giving perspicuous representations of the workings of our language for particular purposes, he could as well be read, in spite of that, as generally taking a coping view. However, along with 'tool,' both 'representation' and 'coping' with respect to language are metaphorical. I think the pragmatists make a good case that generally 'coping' is a more useful metaphor than 'representing,' but it could be the case that in some situations 'representing' is a better metaphor than 'coping.' In any event, it is important to keep in mind that they, along with 'tool,' both are metaphors and that in some situations it may be worthwhile to ask what they are metaphors of.

Wittgenstein aside, let us look at this neo-pragmatist view. These pragmatists believe (as do Wittgensteinians) that philosophy, and indeed religion or even science, cannot rise above the relevant social practices of its time and judge their desirability by reference to something that is not itself an alternative social practice. They are with Hegel on this one. When asked, as Rorty puts it, '"Are these desirable norms?" or "Is this a good social practice?" all … [pragmatists] can do is ask [in turn] "by reference to what encompassing social practice are we supposed to judge desirability?" or, more usefully, "by comparison to the norms of what proposed alternative, to norms of what alternative social practice?"' (Rorty 2002: 74). We can have no sense of who we are and who we should strive to be that swings free of these social practices that constitute the way of life of which we are a part. There is, again as Rorty puts it, no 'goal of inquiry which is what it is apart from those practices, and [no] foreknowledge … which can help us decide which practices to have' (2002: 73). This is as true of religious practices and discourses and of atheist practices and discourses as any other. Rorty goes on to add, 'We should stop trying to put our discursive practices within a larger context, one which forms the background of all possible social practices' (2002: 73).

We can, of course, be reflective about our social practices but this consists in nothing more than contrasting them 'with alternative past or proposed practices' (2002: 75). (Here Rorty's account strengthens the Wittgensteinian account I gave.) This is what it is to hold in thought our time. There is no expert culture – philosophy or theology or religion or science – whose task is to determine 'the future direction of the conversation of Humankind' (ibid.). This just goes on, without direction, as various human beings in various conditions converse. And the more inclusive the group the better.

This is at a great distance from 'Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life' or from Aquinas, Maimonides, or Ibn Rushd (Averroes) as it is from Calvin, Luther, or Kierkegaard and almost equally from d'Holbach, Hume, Spinoza, and Nietzsche. It is even a considerable distance from Putnam's Third Enlightenment, the way of thinking developed by John Dewey (Putnam 2004: 96–108). Putnam and Kripke would again cry 'relativism.' Rorty would respond 'No! Only *historicism, contextualism* and a rejection of *Absolutism*' (Mendicta 2006: 126). He is trying to make clear what

it is firmly to come to accept our contingency, eschewing unequivocally the ambition of transcendence. Does any religion do so? Can any religion suitably interpreted do so? Religions have, of course, changed over time, Catholicism's claims about the 'Eternal Church' notwithstanding. Can they change so much as to eschew ambitions of transcendence? Should they do so? Would that mean the end of any religious point of view? But could religion come to an end? Would that be a good thing? Can we be non-evasive and eschew these questions?

See also Christianity (Chapter 6), Islam (Chapter 7), Ibn Sina/Avicenna (Chapter 10), Moses Maimonides/Rambam (Chapter 11), Thomas Aquinas (Chapter 12), David Hume (Chapter 15), Immanuel Kant (Chapter 16), Søren Kierkegaard (Chapter 17), Friedrich Nietzsche (Chapter 18), William James (Chapter 19), Mysticism among the world's religions (Chapter 26), Problems with the concept of God (Chapter 43), Problems with theistic arguments (Chapter 45), Science and the improbability of God (Chapter 46), The sociobiological account of religious belief (Chapter 47), Postmodern theology (Chapter 52), Theology and religious language (Chapter 53), Phenomenology of religion (Chapter 67), Religious naturalism (Chapter 68), Religious experience (Chapter 70), Religion and science (Chapter 71).

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