Wittgenstein
and Philosophy of Religion

Edited by Robert L. Arrington & Mark Addis

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Editors' introduction

Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief have had an influence quite disproportionate to their number. He wrote very little on the subject, and much that we have from him on the topic comes from brief collections of remarks, notes others made of his lectures, and records of snippets of thought. In his later period, there are primarily the 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*,' the 'Lectures on Religious Belief,' and occasional remarks in *Culture and Value*. Nevertheless, most anthologies in the philosophy of religion and many collections of essays designed for introductory philosophy courses will have sections on the Wittgensteinian approach to religion (usually referred to as a form of fideism). His thought in this area has also had an impact in cognate areas such as religious studies and theology.

In this volume our hope is to convey some of the excitement about Wittgenstein's later thought on religion. We want to show how stimulating and suggestive Wittgenstein's remarks can be—how they can lead to a totally new perspective on religious belief, to new ways of understanding specific topics such as creation and freedom of the will, and to a new focus for debating the issue of faith and reason. We also want to demonstrate how very controversial these remarks are. Wittgenstein scholars are not of a single mind regarding the significance of what Wittgenstein had to say on the subject, as will be readily apparent on reading several of the following essays. Moreover, some Wittgenstein scholars reject what appears to be the central philosophical message found in the few remarks on magic and religious belief—even while they accept what Wittgenstein has to say about language in other areas of discourse. And there are, of course, non-Wittgensteinians who forcefully repudiate the implications of his approach to religion.

John Hyman gets us off to a good start with a brief introduction to Wittgenstein's overall philosophy—both his early thought in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the later thought as found in *Philosophical Investigations*. After this survey and a brief treatment of the main themes in Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion, Hyman raises some questions about

the acceptability of Wittgenstein's remarks on religion. The doubts expressed in his questions will resonate with many philosophers.

Brian Clack's essay consists of an interpretation of Wittgenstein's thoughts on magic found in his 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*'. Clack's interpretation is at odds with the prevailing 'expressivist' interpretation of what Wittgenstein has to say on this topic. By extension, Clack can be read as challenging expressivism as a proper way of understanding Wittgenstein on religious belief in general.

The next essay—by Iakovos Vasiliou—also gives us a distinctive reading of Wittgenstein on religion. Vasiliou leads us to see the remarks on religious belief through the lenses of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. This approach has the virtue of demonstrating how Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion—brief and scattered as it is—is consistent with themes he developed at length in some of his last writings.

William Brenner turns to two of the topics that are standard in the philosophy of religion: creation and freedom of the will. He shows that although Wittgenstein explicitly rejected a cosmological conception of God as First Cause, his thoughts on causation and related topics allow us to develop a new understanding of what many religious believers mean when they speak of God as creator of the world and when they attribute free will to themselves. Brenner's essay demonstrates how Wittgenstein's often cryptic remarks can lead a thinker to new and imaginative ways of viewing the religious life.

The central notion of 'fideism'—the concept of faith—is given an extended discussion by Michael Hodges. He examines Kierkegaard's revolutionary thoughts on faith and the influence they exerted on Wittgenstein. But Hodges is also impressed with Nietzsche's genealogical approach to religion and the critical perspective on the religious life that this approach assumes. Thus Hodges is led to raise the question whether Wittgenstein's infamous *quietism*—his insistence that philosophy 'leaves everything as it is' and cannot serve as a higher epistemological authority—can be challenged. Hodges then envisages several ways in which one might try to gain a critical distance and grip on religious discourse and the religious life. He wants to know whether this can be done without violating some of Wittgenstein's central ideas.

Probably the most influential commentator on Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion—and an important philosopher in his own right within this area of philosophy—is D.Z.Phillips. Phillips is the person one normally associates with the fideistic interpretation of Wittgenstein. But his readings of Wittgenstein are controversial, and Mark Addis discusses many of the topics on which some Wittgenstein scholars would take issue with him and their reasons for doing so. Addis addresses some of the key notions operating in most commentaries on Wittgenstein's remarks on religion—the notions of language games and forms of life—and attempts to bring clarity to their meaning and application.

One of the most important positions in recent philosophy of religion is the

approach of what is called 'reformed epistemology'—a point of view closely associated with Alvin Plantinga. What is the relationship between Plantinga's ideas and those of Wittgenstein—and those of Wittgensteinians such as Phillips and Anthony Kenny? Paul Helm provides a guide to the similarities and the differences between these two influential interpretations of religious belief. He points to ways in which the one side has unfairly criticised the other, and he identifies in both approaches areas where clarity and persuasiveness are less than what one would hope for. And he tries to see how both sides line up with regard to today's realism/anti-realism debate in philosophy.

Alan Bailey begins his essay by pointing to some features of Wittgenstein's method, and he then proceeds to identify key elements of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion. Bailey is a critic of Wittgenstein's thought in this area. He gives numerous reasons for thinking that Wittgenstein has mischaracterised the nature and meaning of religious discourse. Bailey's essay draws on the work of contemporary philosophers who have studied the idea of attributing beliefs to others—Dennett, Davidson, and Stitch—and Bailey uses these studies in developing his own attack on Wittgenstein.

One of the best-known critics of Wittgenstein on religion is Kai Nielsen, whose 1970s article 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' contained a forceful rejection of much that Wittgenstein had to say on the topic. In his new essay for this volume, Nielsen expresses an appreciation of many aspects of the later Wittgenstein's thought, but he continues to argue against what seem to him to be the central messages coming from Wittgenstein with regard to religion. As he develops his interpretation of Wittgenstein on religion, Nielsen cites the work of two major Wittgenstein commentators, Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch. He utilizes some of Winch's thoughts to initiate his criticism of Wittgenstein, but he goes on to develop his own distinctive reasons for thinking Wittgenstein wrong, especially about Wittgenstein's quietism—his insistence that philosophy cannot provide a critical assessment of religious practices.

The book concludes with an essay by Robert Arrington in which he attempts to respond to some of the criticisms that are leveled against Wittgenstein on religion by some of the other contributors to the book. Arrington focuses on Wittgenstein's characterization of theology as grammar. He argues that this notion, developed and extended, reveals the weaknesses of many of the reasons given for thinking that Wittgenstein has mischaracterized religious discourse and for believing that Wittgenstein has unconvincingly insulated religious belief from rational criticism.

Reading Wittgenstein is a philosophical experience to be relished. It leads many readers to energetic counter-argument; it leads others to new ways of seeing things that bring intellectual satisfaction of the highest order. It is hoped that the essays in this book will prompt their readers to go to the Wittgenstein texts on religion themselves, again or for the first time, and to participate in the intellectual excitement that Wittgenstein generates in this area of his thought. And if the essays succeed in casting some light on these texts, they will completely fulfill their authors' present aims and ambitions.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations of titles of Wittgenstein's works cited in this volume

AWL	*Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1932–35* (from the Notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret McDonald), ed. Alice Ambrose (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).
BB	*Blue* and *Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).
BT	*The 'Big Typescript' (Ts 213):* a rearrangement, with modifications, written additions and deletions, of Ts 211, 1933.
CV	*Culture and Value,* ed. G.H.von Wright in collaboration with H.Nyman, trans. P.Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980); rev. edn ed. Alois Pichler (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
LC	*Wittgenstein: Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief,* ed. C.Barnett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966).
'LE'	'A Lecture on Ethics', in *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951,* ed.James Klagge and Alfred Nordman (Indianapolis and Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1993), pp. 36–44.
LFM	*Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, Cambridge 1939,* ed. C.Diamond (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1976).
NB	*Notebooks 1914–16,* ed. G.H.von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. G.E.M.Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961).
OC	*On Certainty,* ed. G.E.M.Anscombe and G.H.von Wright, trans. D.Paul and G.E.M.Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).
PG	*Philosophical Grammar,* ed. R.Rhees, trans. A.J.P.Kenny (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974).
PI	*Philosophical Investigations,* 3rd edn ed. and trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).
PO	*Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951,* ed. James C.Klagge and Alfred Nordman (Indianapolis and Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1993).
PR	*Philosophical Remarks,* ed. R.Rhees, trans. R.Hargreaves and R.White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975).
RF	*Remarks on Frazer's* Golden Bough, ed. R.Rhees (Doncaster: Brynmill Press, 1979).

'RF'   'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', in *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives,* ed. C.G.Luckhardt, trans. John Beversluis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979; Harvester Press, Hassocks, 1979; Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996); also in *Philosophical Occasions,* ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordman, trans. John Beversluis (rev.) (Indianapolis and Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1993).

RFM   *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics,* ed. G.H.von Wright, R.Rhees and G.E.M.Anscombe, trans. G.E.M. scombe, rev. edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

ROC   *Remarks on Colour,* ed. G.E.M.Anscombe, trans. Linda cAlister and Margarete Schättle (Oxford and Berkeley: Blackwell and University of California Press, 1977, 1978, 1979).

RPPI   *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology,* vol. I, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H.von Wright, trans. G.E.M Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

TLP   *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* trans. D.F.Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).

WWK   *Ludwig Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis,* shorthand notes recorded by F.Waismann, ed. B.F.McGuinness (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967). The English translation, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), matches the pagination of the original edition.

Z   *Zettel,* ed. G.E.M.Anscombe and G.H.von Wright, trans. G.E.M.Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967).

Nachlass All references to unpublished material follow von Wright's catalogue *Wittgenstein,* 35ff. They are by Ms or Ts number followed by a page number.

1 The gospel according to Wittgenstein

John Hyman

I

Wittgenstein's early philosophy was worked out in the six years or so following his arrival in Cambridge in 1911, and published in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1922. After a long hiatus, Wittgenstein took up philosophy again in 1929, and soon began to develop the ideas which were published after his death—first in the *Philosophical Investigations,* the masterpiece of his mature philosophy, and then in editions of various notebooks, drafts and collections of philosophical remarks. Both of these philosophies include highly original and influential views about the nature of religion. I shall discuss them in turn.

II

Wittgenstein said that the fundamental idea of the *Tractatus* is 'that the "logical constants" are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the *logic* of facts' (*TLP* 4.0312). Perhaps a simpler way of expressing this thought is to say that the *propositions* of logic are not descriptions. Frege had thought that the propositions of logic describe timeless relations between abstract objects; Russell had thought that they describe the most general features of the world. We arrive at the propositions of logic, according to Russell, by abstracting from the content of empirical propositions, and so the propositions of logic themselves describe the world we encounter in experience, but they do so in the most abstract and general terms.

Wittgenstein argued that Frege and Russell underestimated the difference between the propositions of logic and empirical propositions, because they agreed in thinking, or assuming, that however different these kinds of propositions may be, however different the kinds of things they say are, they still have this much in common, that they say *something*. Wittgenstein's own view was that the propositions of logic say nothing; they contain no information whatsoever; they are simply *tautologies:* 'For example, I know nothing about the weather when I know that it is either raining or not raining'; 'all the propositions of logic say the same thing, to wit nothing' (*TLP* 4.461, 5.43).

If logical propositions say nothing, what is it for a proposition to say *something*? The answer Wittgenstein gave in the *Tractatus* is one he later summarised as follows: 'The individual words of language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names' (*PI* §1). Accordingly, the sense of a sentence will depend on the meanings of the words which are combined in it, and the *way in which* they are combined. Just as the objects to which the individual words correspond can be combined or arranged in different ways, so can the words in a sentence; and the sense of the sentence will depend on what arrangement of objects it presents to us. Hence, if a proposition says anything at all, it says that such-and-such objects are arranged in such-and-such a way. The only thing we can do with words is to describe, or misdescribe, the facts.

Thus, according to the *Tractatus,* 'One name stands for one thing, another for another thing, and they are combined with one another. In this way the whole group—like a *tableau vivant*—presents a state of affairs' (*TLP* 4.0311). This is known as the *picture theory of meaning*. Words are combined in a sentence to form a *picture* or *model* of a possible state of affairs in the world. If the way that things are arranged corresponds to the way the words are combined, then the sentence is true; and if not, then it is false.

In his own Preface to the *Tractatus,* Wittgenstein said that 'the whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence' (*TLP,* p. 3). So far, I have commented on 'what can be said', as Wittgenstein himself did in the larger part of the *Tractatus.* But by doing so, I have broken the very rules which fix the limits of what can be said. For as soon as I try to explain how a sentence must be related to the state of affairs it represents, I try to do more with words than merely describe the facts (*TLP* 4.12).

This implication of Wittgenstein's doctrine, that philosophical propositions are themselves nonsensical, did not escape him. He states it explicitly at the end of the *Tractatus:*

> The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said…and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions…
>
> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)
>
> (*TLP* 6.53–4)

But it is not just philosophy that lies beyond the reach of language. Ethics, aesthetics, and whatever thoughts we might aspire to have about the meaning of life, or about God, all belong to what Wittgenstein calls 'the mystical'; and they are alike incapable of being put into words. Nothing which touches on

matters of value can be captured in words. Every human effort to address or even to articulate what Wittgenstein called 'the problems of life' must be in vain: 'When the answer cannot be put into words,' he says, 'neither can the question be put into words' (*TLP* 6.5).

If we accept Wittgenstein's austere conception of language, and its consequence that the ethical, aesthetic and religious aspects of human life— which he calls 'the mystical'—cannot be put into words, we may feel tempted to conclude that the importance we attach to aesthetic experience, to ethics and to religion is the result of an illusion. Alternatively, we may conclude that what can be put into words is paltry by comparison with what cannot. There is no doubt that Wittgenstein intends us to draw the latter conclusion. In fact, in a letter written in 1919 to a prospective publisher, Wittgenstein says that the *Tractatus* 'consists of two parts: of that which is under consideration here and of all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one.'[1] This cannot have been an encouragement; but it is a telling remark.

Still, it is difficult to know what place, if any, God and faith have in the system of the *Tractatus*. God is mentioned four times, but only the last of these comments has anything to do with religion. It is this: '*How* things are in the world is of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world' (*TLP* 6.432). The emphasis on the word 'in' is Wittgenstein's; and perhaps its significance is explained in the next remark but one: 'It is not *how things are in the world* that is mystical, but *that it exists*' (*TLP* 6.44). Thus, Wittgenstein may have wanted to intimate that God reveals himself in the fact that the world exists, the fact that 'there is what there is' (*NB,* p. 86)—though we must not forget that this is not strictly speaking a fact at all, and is therefore impossible to state.

We should not imagine that this is meant to be an argument for God's existence. It would be a strange argument indeed, if this had been what Wittgenstein intended—one with a nonsensical premise and a nonsensical conclusion. What may be intended, however, is that a religious attitude is an attitude towards the world *as a whole,* an attitude in which it isn't *how things happen to be in the world* that absorbs our attention, but *that it exists*. And a religious attitude can also be described as, in some sense, an acknowledgement of God, although of course it is an attitude which we must never attempt to articulate by *saying* that God exists: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (*TLP* 7).

This is what the *Tractatus* hints at; but a few remarks in Wittgenstein's notebooks, which he wrote in July 1916, when the Austrian Army in which he was serving was retreating across the Carpathian mountains and his life was in constant danger, are more explicit. They identify God with 'the meaning of life, i.e. meaning of the world', with fate and with the world itself (*NB,* pp. 73f.). However, the impression they convey most forcibly is that faith consists in the ability to see that life has a meaning; that this in turn consists in living in such a way 'that life stops being problematic', for 'the

solution to the problem of life is to be seen in the disappearance of this problem' (*NB*, p. 74; cf. *TLP* 6.521); and that living thus will enable one to achieve a sort of happiness—something perhaps akin to a Stoic calm—by detaching oneself from the uncontrollable contingencies of the world, and accepting it without fear. Wittgenstein incorporated some of these remarks into the *Tractatus;* and it seems that the rest continued to exert an influence on his thought, and remain, albeit with an altered emphasis, in the background of the *Tractatus*.

The *Tractatus* presents an austere view of human language, even a repressive one, for it denies the intelligibility of much of what we say, including everything which mattered most to Wittgenstein himself. This doctrine was the result of a brilliant, profound and subversive critique of Frege's and Russell's philosophy of logic. But the doctrine that religious truths are ineffable has an important place in the history of religious thought, and it is likely to appear plausible if one thinks that language cannot capture our profoundest feelings. Wittgenstein's upbringing led him to revere musical creativity, and it is possible that his love of music made him receptive to this thought. At any rate, the achievement of his early philosophy, so far as the philosophy of religion is concerned, was to have formulated the doctrine that religious truths are ineffable in terms which are clear and explicit precisely because they are founded on a theory of language.

III

In the 1930s, Wittgenstein's philosophy of language was dramatically transformed, and his earlier view of religion could not survive the transformation. He abandoned the doctrines that a proposition is a logical picture compounded out of names whose meanings are the things they stand for, and that the intelligible use of language always serves a single purpose—to describe the facts. He came to believe—on the contrary—that the meaning of a word is its use in the language; that words can be used for an indefinitely broad and heterogeneous range of purposes; and hence that the task of philosophy is not logical, but hermeneutical. Philosophy, he now contends, does not consist in logical analysis, but in the description of our various 'language-games'.

The term 'language-game' has excited controversy and caused some puzzlement; but a language-game is simply a human activity involving speech or writing, in which a distinctive range of concepts is employed. The word 'game' is there to remind us of three things: first, that these activities are guided and constrained by the rules we enunciate when we explain the meanings of words; second, that they are extremely varied and are not usefully seen as elaborations of a single theme, such as communicating information or producing beliefs; and third, that they take place and have significance only in the context of human forms of life and culture.

So, when the later Wittgenstein writes about religious belief, he continues