

# The Lessons of Life: Wittgenstein, Religion and Analytic Philosophy\*

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## *Introduction*

Philosophy is as fashion-prone as any other human enterprise, and it is perhaps no surprise that Wittgenstein's influence has recently suffered something of an eclipse in the anglophone philosophical world. This may well be a natural 'rebound' reaction against the climate of that substantial chunk of the twentieth century when much of philosophy was dominated by his approach to the subject. It may also be a result of a certain cautious, academic tidy-mindedness, which is wary of work that is sweeping enough to resist neat dissection within the burgeoning technical specialisms of current 'mainstream' philosophy. Or, thirdly, it may be due to the rise of a scientistic vision of philosophy – the view that philosophers should 'either . . . adopt and emulate the method of successful sciences, or . . . operate in tandem with the sciences, as their abstract and reflective branch.'<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, who has a good claim to rank alongside Ludwig Wittgenstein as the most original philosophical (in the broad sense) thinker of the twentieth century, certainly seems to have suffered as much as Wittgenstein from all three of the damaging trends just noted: his methods are not such as to appeal to the devotees of modern experimental science as *the* model for human cognitive endeavour; his insights are wide enough in scope to resist narrow disciplinary boundaries; and his ideas have succeeded in infusing our intellectual culture for long enough to make many people want to turn the page and move on

Whatever the reasons, Wittgenstein, like Freud, figures far less in the current citation indexes of analytic philosophy than anyone even slightly acquainted with the extraordinary richness of his thought might have been led to expect. I ought to add, right here at the outset, that I count myself as one whose acquaintance with the Wittgensteinian corpus is by professional standards only a little more than slight. In a volume devoted to honouring a supremely accomplished Wittgenstein scholar, who has done more than anyone else to reveal the riches of his thought, I am all too conscious of my inadequate qualifications for the present task. My rashness can only be explained by my admiration for Peter Hacker's work and my awareness of how much I have learnt from him; I can also plead, by way of excuse for entering territory he knows so much better than I, the fact that Wittgenstein's views on religion have not, to my knowledge, been a topic to which he has devoted any systematic commentary.

Apart from the general eclipse I have already referred to, Wittgenstein has, in the particular case of his philosophy of religion (if that is not too grand a term for a scattered, if highly fertile, collection of remarks), suffered the additional fate of being subject to a hostile pincer movement from theistic philosophers on one flank and atheistic ones on the other. On the atheist side, opponents of theism, or those suspicious of its intellectual credentials, have been keen to close off a soggy 'non-cognitivist' escape-route which they have taken Wittgenstein to be offering to the

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Leiter, *The Future for Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. 2-3.

beleaguered believer – an escape route that would place Christian belief ‘beyond historical and scientific criticism’.<sup>2</sup> On the theist side, Christian analytic philosophers have in recent years wanted to defend the epistemic respectability of their religious beliefs head on.<sup>3</sup> They have done so, moreover, in a robustly realist mode: in reaction to the non-cognitivist line adopted by several admirers of Wittgenstein, most notably the late D. Z. Phillips, these theists have insisted that the religious believer must unapologetically be prepared to advance truth claims, rather than resting content with scrutiny of the internal structure of religious ‘language games’ or practices.<sup>4</sup>

So Wittgenstein’s influence on the philosophy of religion, along perhaps with his philosophical influence generally, appears for the moment to be on the wane. In this paper I shall nevertheless argue that his ideas, properly understood, would richly repay the continued attention of philosophers interested in religion.<sup>5</sup> I shall also suggest that it is important not to be put off by certain received interpretations of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion, which (I shall maintain) are mistaken, or at least fail to grasp important insights he has to offer about the nature of religious

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<sup>2</sup> Compare John Hyman: ‘[Wittgenstein’s] avowed aim ... is to explain how concepts such as sin, redemption, judgement, grace and atonement can have an indispensable place in an individual’s or a community’s way of life; and to show how we can resist assimilating the use of these concepts to hypotheses, predictions and theoretical explanations. But I suspect that behind this is ‘the great cry of “I would like to believe, but unfortunately I cannot”’, and an intense desire to place Christian faith beyond criticism, or rather, beyond the criticism that it depends on scientific errors and historical falsehoods—in other words, to protect a faith he himself was unable to share.’ (‘This Extraordinary Use of the Word “Believe”’, TS, p. 9).

<sup>3</sup> Classic examples are Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2004), and Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> D. Z. Phillips, inspired by Wittgenstein’s ideas about language games, often stressed that if we want to understand religious talk we should resist pontificating about the ‘reality’ of God, and instead address ourselves to the more modest task of clarifying the grammar of religious concepts. ‘Theological realism’, objected Phillips, ‘often indulges in philosophy by italics. We are told that we could not worship unless we believed that God *exists*. We are told that we cannot talk to God unless he is *there* to talk to. And so on. But nothing is achieved by italicising these words. The task of clarifying their grammar when they are used remains.’ (*Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan (1993) p. 35). Contrast the position taken by Christopher J. Insole in his *The Realist Hope* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), which is a sustained attack on anti-realism in the philosophy of religion (a position which my predecessor in the philosophy chair at Reading, the atheist philosopher A. G. N. Flew, used to refer to as ‘Swansea obscurantism’). For Insole, there is something fundamentally evasive about all attempts to duck the question of God’s reality. For however closely we investigate the internal structure of a particular language game, or a given system of epistemic beliefs and practices, there is a separate question about the truth of our beliefs. And truth, Insole insists, is determined by ‘what is the case’ or ‘the way things are’, independently of human cognition (pp. 1-2). It should, however, be noted in fairness to Phillips, that on his interpretation Wittgenstein is not saying that realism is a correct analysis of ordinary beliefs, and non-realism of religious beliefs. He is saying that *both* realism and non-realism are ‘idle talk’ (Phillips, p. 35).

<sup>5</sup> There exist very many such philosophers, covering a wide spectrum of believers, agnostics, sceptics and atheists. This perhaps (just) needs saying, in the light of the fact that a recent collection of state-of-the-art articles devoted to surveying the ‘important agendas for philosophy’s future’ has no room for a chapter concerned with religion, and indeed does not contain a single index entry under any of the headings ‘God’, ‘religion’, ‘faith’ or ‘spiritual’. (see Leiter, *The Future for Philosophy*, pp. 2-3.)

allegiance. For those who wish to defend the respectability of religious belief, Wittgenstein turns out on further examination to be a far more promising ally, philosophically speaking, than is generally supposed. As for those for whom (as was the case with Wittgenstein himself) religious faith is not a viable option, his ideas may at least help to illuminate the nature of the door which they take to be shut.

#### *Wittgenstein's position*

In a lucid summary of Wittgenstein's views on religion, Hans-Johann Glock identifies, it seems to me, three main strands running through the various surviving texts and notes. First, religious discourse is *autonomous*: it does not compete with science or technology, but 'constitutes a *sui generis* grammatical system'. Second, religious beliefs are given meaning and content via their role in the *practice or 'form of life' of the believer*. Third, religious language is *non-descriptive* and *non-cognitive*: 'religious statements do not describe any kind of reality, empirical or transcendent, and do not make any knowledge claims,' but instead have a purely expressive function.<sup>6</sup> I should like to postpone for the moment the third, non-cognitivist, aspect, since that is the most problematic, and begin by saying a few words about the first two features.

#### *Religion not a rival to science*

That religion involves a *sui-generis* form of discourse, not to be construed as competing with science, does indeed appear to be a consistent theme in Wittgenstein's thinking about religion. It is strikingly present, for example, in his 'Remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*' (GB). Wittgenstein believed the anthropologist James George Frazer had committed a fundamental error in his account of ritual practices, by construing them in scientific or rationalistic terms, as aimed at the production of certain effects.<sup>7</sup> Highly relevant here is the distinction made by Wittgenstein between *faith* and *superstition*. Superstition, unlike faith, 'springs from fear and is a sort of false science' (CV 82). Thus Wittgenstein would say, I think, that baptism of a child, if accompanied by the belief that this is an efficacious procedure for making the child's life more lucky or more successful, is mere superstition – a kind of primitive pseudo-technology. If we want to ensure the best opportunities for the child's health and success, we are far better off turning to the methods of science (for example modern medicine). But if the baptism is an act of joyful affirmation and thanksgiving for the new life – what Wittgenstein called a 'trusting' (*ein Vertrauen*, *ibid.*) – then it is a genuine manifestation of religious faith.

This distinction is an important one, because it partly disables a common attack mounted by atheist critics of religion, most famously by Freud, namely that religious behaviour characteristically stems from helplessness and the need for protection against natural threats – 'the majestic, cruel and inexorable powers of nature'.<sup>8</sup> Once that premise is granted, it would be a short step to conclude that religion is likely to become increasingly obsolete as science learns to alleviate those threats. The general line is prefigured in David Hume, who argues that what prompts

<sup>6</sup> H.-J. Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), s. v. 'religion'.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion of this, see Jacques Bouveresse, 'Wittgenstein's Critique of Frazer', *Ratio* 20:4 (December 2007), reprinted in J. Preston (ed.), *Wittgenstein and Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* [*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1929], in *The Penguin Freud Library* (hereafter 'PFL') (London: Penguin Books, 1985), Vol. 12, p. 195.

humans to turn to God is ‘the ordinary affections of human life’ such as the dread of misery and the terror of death.<sup>9</sup> The implication is the same as Freud’s: religion is an illusion born of helplessness and fear.<sup>10</sup>

No doubt many religious adherents have, over the ages, turned to ritual practices in a desperate attempt to avert disaster. But assimilating all religious behaviour to that pattern is surely a crude over-simplification. When St Paul encouraged his followers to bear adversity with the cry that ‘neither death nor life nor . . . any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God’ (Romans 8:38), he cannot have meant to advance the glib claim that a few well chosen prayers would keep us out of trouble. The Jewish scriptures, in which he was so well-versed, are packed with stories of terrible trials suffered by innocent believers, of heroic goodness often crushed by the forces of tyranny and oppression. So Paul’s point cannot be to advocate a slick piece of pseudo-technology, but must involve a rather more subtle understanding of the nature of faith.<sup>11</sup> The extraordinary remark in the Hebrew Bible ‘though he slay me, yet will I trust in him’ (Job 1:4) seems, in a similar way, to vindicate Wittgenstein’s distinction: the language looks much more like an expression of *Vertrauen* than an attempt at superstitious manipulation.<sup>12</sup> In short, those who dismiss religion as a primitive attempt to control a hostile world, now superseded by the more efficient methods of modern science, seem to be relying on a crude caricature of religion – one that may match the intentions of some religious practitioners, but which will not survive serious scrutiny of a great deal of mainstream religious discourse. This part of ‘Wittgensteinian apologetics’, then, seems to me still in very good shape.

### *The importance of praxis*

Let me now turn to the role of practices and forms of life in religious discourse. Wittgenstein’s emphasis on praxis is often interpreted as implying the following kind of claim: ‘religious belief should not be understood as assent to a doctrine or doctrines, but rather as involvement in a certain set of practices.’ But putting it this way runs together two points, which I think should be sharply distinguished. To deny

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<sup>9</sup> David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* [1757]. For further discussion of these Freudian and Humean themes, see Michael Palmer’s fascinating study *Freud and Jung on Religion* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that an ‘illusion’, in Freudian usage, is not necessarily erroneous. Freud at one point explicitly concedes this, distinguishing ‘illusion’ from ‘delusion’ (though his terminology is not always consistent). Cinderella may have the fantasy that a prince will come and marry her— and in a few cases it may actually happen. But Freud argues that it is characteristic of illusions in his sense that they are held without regard for rational justification; further, they characteristically stem from (indeed are generated by) the wishes or needs of the believer. And again the conclusion is all too clear: religion is something we need to grow out of. See Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* [*Die Zukunft einer Illusion*, 1927], *PFL* Vol. 12, p. 213. Cf. Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion*, Ch. 3.

<sup>11</sup> See further J. Cottingham, ‘What Difference Does It Make? The Nature and Significance of Religious Belief’, *Ratio* 20 (4), December 2006, and in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Meaning of Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 19ff.

<sup>12</sup> An riposte of a broadly Freudian kind would be to say that language like that of Paul or Job reflects massive self-deception, or a subconscious attempt at self-compensation in the face of misfortune and failure. Such deflationary ‘wishful thinking’ explanations cannot of course be dismissed out of hand, though it is a matter for legitimate scepticism whether they offer a sufficiently powerful mechanism to explain the trust and hope that seems to be reflected in such passages (many other scriptural and other examples could be given).

that assent to doctrines is involved in being religious takes us straight into the non-cognitivist camp. That may or may not be a tenable position, and it may or may not be Wittgenstein's position, but we have agreed to postpone discussion of this until later on. The Wittgensteinian emphasis on praxis may, however, be construed as neutral or silent on the cognitivist versus non-cognitivist issue, and directed instead at making the point that the meaning and content of religious beliefs cannot be understood in isolation from the practices and forms of life of the believer. That point seems to me a very plausible one.

Wittgenstein's interest in 'forms of life' (*Lebensformen*), was, I take it, in part a 'holistic' reaction against the atomistic approaches to meaning observable in his own earlier work (TLP) and also (in a different way) in some versions of the verificationism proposed by the logical positivists in the first half of the twentieth century. In a famous thought-experiment in his celebrated paper 'Elimination of Metaphysics', Rudolph Carnap took an imaginary isolated word ('teavy'), and had asked how it could possibly count as meaningful unless one was able to provide precise empirical criteria for its application; the implied interlocutor was supposedly driven to admit that without such criteria the concept of 'teaviness' must be discarded as a meaningless. Carnap then triumphantly proceeded to suggest that the same argument must apply to the term 'God'.<sup>13</sup>

The corrective that Wittgenstein (by implication) offers to such strategies is to insist that the speaking of language is 'part of an activity or of a form of life' (PI 23). Our language games are interwoven with a web of non-linguistic activities, and cannot be understood apart from the context that gives them life. These, I assume, are by now fairly uncontroversial points; and, again, they offer some solid ground for the religious apologist. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> analytic philosophers are often prone to use the 'fruit-juicer' method when approaching modes of thought of which they are sceptical: they require the clear liquid of a few propositions to be extracted for examination in isolation from what they take to be the irrelevant pulpy mush of context. Yet to demand an answer to the Yes/No question: 'Do you or do you not believe that *P*?', where *P* stands for a statement or series of statements in one of the Creeds, or some other doctrinal summary, often tells us surprisingly little about how a religious worldview informs someone's outlook. A juice extractor does not, as might at first be supposed, give us the true essence of a fruit; what it often delivers is a not very palatable drink plus a pulpy mess. Someone who has only tasted strawberries via the output of a juicer, and has firmly decided 'this is not for me', may turn out to have a radically impoverished grasp of what it is about the fruit that makes the strawberry lover so enthusiastic.

The point can be especially relevant when 'Do you or do you not?' questions are fired off by an external scrutineer in a misguided attempt to 'settle' what it is that the believer subscribes to. Consider for example 'Do you or do you not believe that the Bread is transubstantiated into the Body of Christ?', when asked 'externally' by someone who has heard of this Catholic doctrine about the Mass, and wants to sort out whether Bloggs 'really believes' it. The reason why either answer, positive or negative, will almost certainly be unenlightening is that questions involving this kind

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<sup>13</sup> Rudolf Carnap, 'The elimination of metaphysics through logical analysis of language' [*Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache*, 1932]. Trans. Arthur Pap, in A. J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism* (New York: Free Press, 1959), pp. 60–80.

<sup>14</sup> See J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 1, and Ch. 5 (on which the next two paragraphs draw).

of religious language are quite unlike scientific questions of the form ‘Do you or do you not believe that gold is soluble in hydrochloric acid?’ Even in the scientific case, of course, a good deal of contextual background is needed in order to understand the meaning of such a question. But in the religious case, the complications are multiplied because of the multi-layered nature of the discourse involved. Someone who is committed to a doctrine like the transubstantiation is almost certainly so committed because of the role that certain sorts of language about the Eucharist play in her religious praxis, and because her grasp of the language and liturgy of the Eucharist puts her in touch with multiple levels of rich significance, each of which resonates with powerful moral and spiritual aspects of her worldview.<sup>15</sup> Insisting on the question ‘But does the wine actually change into blood?’ *appears* to cut to the chase, eliminate evasion and ambiguity, and focus on what is ‘really’ believed. But in the context of a ‘cold’, no-nonsense question from an external scrutineer who is largely ignorant of the multiple levels of meaning just indicated, the ‘yes or no’ question functions like the strawberry juicer: isolating the propositional liquid from the contextual pulp does not make for a properly informed evaluation of the belief’s content. For the religious believer, ‘signs’ such as the bread and wine of the Eucharist<sup>16</sup> can function as, in William Wainwright’s phrase, ‘a medium for fuller, riper knowing’. Insistence on yes/no answers to literalistically construed questions is a way of mangling what lies at the core of this kind of knowing; it is a denial of the unique power such signs have to capture the mystery and complexity of our human experience of the world.<sup>17</sup>

These last few remarks take us beyond anything Wittgenstein himself ventures to discuss in connection with religion, but they are, I think, consistent with, and supported by, his persuasive thesis about the interweaving of language and practice. ‘It is characteristic of our language that the foundation out of which it grows consists in steady forms of life, regular activity. Its function is determined above all by the action which it accompanies’ (CE 404). Philosophical critics of religion are often prone to think they can evaluate religious claims on the basis of only a cursory grasp

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<sup>15</sup> A caveat: nothing here said here about symbols, and the importance of praxis need be taken to imply a retreat from a real and genuine truth claim. Of course, when questions like ‘But do the bread and wine *really* change?’ are put, the questioner is often insisting on having an answer to what they take to be the damaging question of whether there is any actual physical change – where ‘actual’ and ‘physical’ are taken to be more or less equivalent. Yet, as Michael Dummett has persuasively argued, it is a mistake ‘to conceive of metaphysical reality after the model of physical reality’ (‘The Intelligibility of Eucharistic Doctrine’, in W. J. Abraham and S. W. Holtzer (eds), *The Rationality of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 247. In the light of this kind of misunderstanding, those who give different answers to the kind of ‘yes/no’ question just described may more often than not turn out to be talking at cross purposes. This may be one way of interpreting the sense of Wittgenstein’s reported remark that those who disagree about whether there will be a last judgement are not in fact contradicting each other (LC 53).

<sup>16</sup> For the term ‘signs’ as used of the bread and wine of the Eucharist, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995, rev. 1997), §1333. For an interesting account of Aquinas’ view of the sacraments as a kind of sign, see Mark Jordan, ‘Theology and Philosophy’, in N. Kretzmann and E. Stump (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Ch. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Here I partly follow the phrasing of David Cooper, *Metaphor* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 219; the phrase ‘medium for a fully and riper knowing’ comes from William Wainwright (cited by Cooper, though with some reservations). Cf. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart* (Ithaca NYU: Cornell University Press, 1995).

of their meaning. It does not of course follow that a richer contextual examination of the practices that give life to religion will end up *vindicating* those claims; that question is left open. But without a proper grasp of meaning, which in turn requires a preparedness to investigate context and praxis, the evaluation of truth cannot even get off the ground. It seems to me that the quality of much contemporary philosophy of religion would be greatly improved if that lesson alone, profoundly Wittgensteinian in spirit, were thoroughly digested.

*'Wittgensteinian fideism'*

I turn now to the third of the three features commonly taken to be central to Wittgenstein's approach to religion, namely his supposed view that religion discourse does not make knowledge claims. On this view, religious language is non-cognitive – not descriptive of any supposed facts, but rather expressive of a certain commitment. This view, or elements of it, are often discussed under the label 'Wittgensteinian fideism',<sup>18</sup> though in fact 'fideism' is not a particularly helpful term, since it covers a spectrum of positions, which need to be disentangled if confusion is to be avoided.

The term 'fideism' was apparently first used by French Protestants in 1870s as a term of approval, but has since widely acquired a pejorative connotation (particularly among Catholic writers), as implying an over-reliance on faith at the expense of reason.<sup>19</sup> The classic account of the relationship between reason and faith was given by Thomas Aquinas, who maintained that the two are complementary. Some religious beliefs (for example, the existence of God) can, he argued, be established by 'natural reason', while other beliefs (including the 'revealed truths' of Christianity such as the Incarnation and the doctrine of the Trinity) cannot be reached by reason, but require faith. For Aquinas, there is a harmony between reason and faith, since both types of truth are worthy of our belief. Moreover, he taught that even the truths of natural reason may sometimes be accepted on faith – for example, by those who do not have the time or resources to follow the relevant arguments.<sup>20</sup>

Notice that there is nothing 'non-cognitivist' in any of this. Truths of faith are just as much truths as truths of reason; it is simply that the method of their acquisition may be different. Aquinas's emphasis on reason and faith as complementary is anticipated by Augustine and Anselm, though both these earlier thinkers take it that faith is in some sense prior to reason. The subtitle of Anselm's *Proslogion* is *fides quaerens intellectum* ('faith seeking understanding'). Anselm's starting point is his unquestioned belief in God, which he takes to be a pre-requisite for embarking on the meditation that will establish God's existence by rational reflection: *credo ut intelligam* ('I believe in order that I may understand': *Proslogion* [1077-8], Ch. 1). The Anselmian approach owes much to Augustine's reflections on the slogan *nisi credideris, non intelliges* – 'unless you have believed you will not understand' – (based on the inspired if questionable Septuagint rendering of a verse of Isaiah (7:9): *ean mê pisteusête, oude mê synête*).<sup>21</sup> Again, these early reflections on the importance

<sup>18</sup> As noted by Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, p. 320.

<sup>19</sup> For more on this, see Alistair Mason, 'Fideism', in A. Hastings, A. Mason and H. Pyper (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 240-1.

<sup>20</sup> *Summa contra Gentiles* [1260], I, 4.

<sup>21</sup> The rendering is questionable inasmuch as the original Hebrew may simply mean (as the New Revised Standard Version has it) 'If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.' For Augustine's reflections on the verse in question see *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* [AD 400], Book IV. For a critical exposition of the 'faith seeks understanding' programme in

of faith are fully compatible with a strictly cognitivist account of religious truth – and indeed both Augustine and Anselm do famously go on to offer rational arguments designed to establish and justify their beliefs in the existence of God.

Although it does not imply any retreat from cognitivism, the line taken by Augustine and Anselm, and indeed by Aquinas himself, does certainly admit that religious allegiance depends on more than the rational evaluation of truth claims, and to that extent their view of religious allegiance may all be said to have a ‘fideist’ component. In stressing the importance of faith (in Latin *fides*), they are stressing something over and above mere rational assent to a set of doctrines; for *fides*, like its Greek counterpart *pistis*, always connotes a stronger volitional component than simple assent – some further element of trust and commitment. As one moves towards more extreme forms of fideism, such as that of Søren Kierkegaard, the volitional element becomes stronger and stronger. ‘Faith does not need proof,’ asserted Kierkegaard in one of his famous purple passages, ‘indeed it must regard proof as its enemy.’<sup>22</sup> And he went on to insist that

Christianity is spirit, spirit is inwardness, inwardness is subjectivity, subjectivity is essential passion, and in its maximum an infinite, personal, passionate interest in one’s eternal happiness ... If I wish to preserve myself in faith, I must constantly be intent on holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly Wittgenstein had read Kierkegaard, and clearly he was strongly influenced by him.<sup>24</sup> He shares with Kierkegaard the view that passionate commitment is central to what makes someone religious. He thought, with Kierkegaard, that there was something ‘ludicrous’ in attempting to shore up the reasonableness of religious belief in the light of dispassionate scrutiny of the evidence (LC 58). But this in itself does not make him (or Kierkegaard for that matter) a non-cognitivist. One may maintain that Christianity involves passionately holding fast to *x*, and also that *x* cannot be rationally or objectively demonstrated; but this is quite compatible with holding that *x* is, or entails, a certain proposition or propositions, and that to be a Christian entails subscribing to the truth of those proposition(s). The upshot is that critics who wish to criticize Wittgenstein for advocating a non-cognitivist view of religion are not entitled to use the ‘Kierkegaardian’ flavour of many of his remarks as ammunition to support their hostile interpretation. And as for the general point that religious faith characteristically involves a willingness to trust, and to commit oneself in advance of rational scrutiny of arguments or detached evaluation of the evidence, if this is ‘fideism’, it is something that, with varying degrees of emphasis, may be found throughout Western philosophy of religion, from Augustine and Aquinas through Pascal down to Kierkegaard and William James.<sup>25</sup>

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Christian philosophical theology, see Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [Afsluttende Uvidenskabelig Efterskrift, 1846], trans. D. F. Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 31 (from Book I, Ch. 1)

<sup>23</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p.182 (from Book II, Part II, Ch. 2).

<sup>24</sup> See further J. Hyman, ‘This Extraordinary Use of the Word “Believe”.’

<sup>25</sup> Aquinas, the master architect of rational philosophical theology, wrote the famous line *praestet fides supplementum sensuum defectui* – ‘faith makes up the deficiency of the senses’ (from the hymn *Pange lingua* [1260]). Blaise Pascal is equally famous for his dictum *le coeur*



Indeed, it goes back to the very earliest times, to the story of the doubting apostle Thomas, whose eventual act of passionate commitment makes a mockery of his prior insistence that various empirical confirmatory tests would be needed to make him a believer.<sup>26</sup>

It is of course a separate question whether trust prior to evidence is an epistemically respectable procedure. Blaise Pascal famously urged us to make a religious commitment, and engage in religious forms of life, *in order* to generate belief in God – and hence in due course achieve salvation.<sup>27</sup> But whatever one makes of this recommendation, it does, I think, contain an underlying insight that does not depend on the somewhat quirky logic of Pascal's wager. For there are many areas of life where it is perfectly proper and sensible to make a commitment in advance of established belief, in the hope that evidence *further down the line* will emerge, which will retrospectively justify one's having made that commitment. Embarking on an intimate personal relationship is often like this – one takes the plunge and bestows one's trust without prior certification that the trust is justified. Not only is this possible, but often it is perfectly rational. For without the vulnerability and openness generated by such acts of trust, loving relationships would never develop in the first place. Cold insistence on prior assurance is the best way to close off the possibility of a relationship taking root; in Martha Nussbaum's telling phrase, it is a 'stratagem of flight'.<sup>28</sup> Willed commitment without scientific assessment of evidence, should not, then, be condemned as inherently irrational.

The upshot of our discussion in this section is that Wittgenstein's 'fideistic' emphasis on the importance of passionate commitment in religion emerges in much better shape than many of his critics are apt to suppose. It takes its place in a long tradition of Western religious thought that underlines the importance of trust and openness in the spiritual life. Moreover, it need not, in itself, imply a non-cognitivist view of religious discourse. And it is also worth noting that it harmonizes with one of Wittgenstein's most persuasive themes – the need to look at each domain of human discourse in its own terms, without trying to assimilate its rules and methods to those of modern science.<sup>29</sup>

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*a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point* – 'the heart has its reasons of which reason is quite unaware' (*Pensées* [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no 423). Compare no 424: *C'est le coeur qui sent Dieu et non la raison. Voilà ce que c'est que la foi* – 'It's the heart, not Reason, that senses God: that is what faith is'. See also William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Longmans Green, 1897), Ch. 1.

<sup>26</sup> According to the story, Thomas's eventual allegiance did not hinge on his ever, in the event, performing the test he had previously specified, namely 'putting his finger in the print of the nails' (John 20: 24-29).

<sup>27</sup> 'You want to cure yourself of unbelief, and you ask for remedies: learn from those who were hampered like you and who now wager all they possess. These are people who know the road you would like to follow; they are cured of the malady for which you seek a cure; so follow them and begin as they did — *by acting as if they believed*, by taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. In the natural course of events this in itself will make you believe, this will train you.' Pascal, *Pensées* no 418.

<sup>28</sup> Martha Nussbaum, 'Love's Knowledge' [1988], reprinted her book of the same title (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). For further discussion of this theme, see Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, Ch. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Bouveresse, 'Wittgenstein's Critique of Frazer,' *passim*.

*'Wittgensteinian expressivism'*

It is now time to look at some more troublesome Wittgensteinian texts on religion, so far ignored, which seem to point firmly in a non-cognitivist direction. The most striking example comes in *Culture and Value*:

it appears to me as though a religious belief could only be (something like) passionately committing oneself to a system of reference (CV 73).

The implication here seems to be that belief, in the normal sense of the term, namely assent to a proposition with a certain cognitive content, drops out of the picture completely in Wittgenstein's conception of religious faith; it reduces simply to the volitional act of committing oneself. This has called forth some pointed criticism. Hanjo Glock, for example, observes: 'a religious belief cannot simply amount to committing oneself to a religious life, since the belief will typically be part of the reason for making such a commitment.'<sup>30</sup> Similarly John Hyman: 'if I have and retain [this kind of] commitment, my belief that God exists will typically be among my *reasons* for doing so.'<sup>31</sup>

The 'typically' in both these formulations is presumably there to guard against the objection that one *can* make a commitment in the absence of a belief. This is certainly possible; as we have just seen, Pascal urged us to make commitments *in order* to generate a (not yet held) belief. Nevertheless, the point made by Glock, Hyman and others does succeed in pointing to a genuine worry. To say that a religious belief just *is* a commitment appears to sidestep the question of *justification* in a problematic way.<sup>32</sup> Commitments, though it may be psychologically possible to make them in the absence of prior beliefs, seem to presuppose, for their validity, the truth of the beliefs logically required by the nature of the commitment. If I commit myself to a loved one, or to God, my commitment will lose its justification if the object of my commitment turns out not to exist, or to be wholly unworthy of my commitment.

It has, however, been persuasively argued by Severin Schroeder that, contrary to the common reading of the key sentence in *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein is not proposing a *purely* expressivist construal of credal statements.<sup>33</sup> In saying that religious belief '*can only* be a passionate commitment', he may simply be underlining the *inescapability* of a passionate, volitional element; he need not be saying that what

<sup>30</sup> Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, p. 323.

<sup>31</sup> J. Hyman, 'The Gospel according to Wittgenstein', in R. Arrington (ed.), *Wittgenstein and Religious Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001.) p. 10. Compare also John Searle: 'When ordinary people pray it is because they think there is a God up there listening. But whether or not there is a God listening to their prayer isn't itself part of the language game. The reason people play the language game of religion is because they think there is something outside the language game that gives it a point.' J. Searle, 'Wittgenstein', in B. Magee, *The Great Philosophers* (London: BBC Books, 1987), p. 344-5.

<sup>32</sup> In a later paper, Hyman reformulates his earlier objection by distinguishing how religious beliefs are *formed* from how they are *justified*. His revised argument is that beliefs cannot be commitments, since the latter need to be justified by the former. ('This Extraordinary Use of the Word "Believe"', p. 7).

<sup>33</sup> S. Schroeder, 'The Tightrope Walker', *Ratio* Vol. XX no 4 (December 2007); reprinted in Preston (ed.), *Wittgenstein and Reason*. I am most grateful to Severin Schroeder, not just for what I have learnt from this and other writings of his, but also for kindly commenting on an earlier draft of the present paper, and providing many helpful comments and corrections.

is involved in the belief is *merely* the commitment – as if nothing else, no cognitive or doxastic elements, were entailed. On the question of phrasing and nuance, Schroeder seems to me clearly right. To say, for example, ‘this remark can only have been malicious’ does not imply that it was malicious *and nothing else*; it does not, for example rule out its being true, or self-interested, or timely, or funny. What is more, and quite apart from this, there are, as Schroeder points out, many passages where Wittgenstein makes it quite explicit that belief *is* involved in religious commitment. In the very next sentence following our key dictum, he goes on to say ‘Hence, although it is *belief*, it is a way of living, or a way of judging life’ (CV 73).<sup>34</sup> There is evidence, moreover, that Wittgenstein would have liked to commit himself to Christianity, but felt unable to make the commitment because he *could not bring himself to assent to the required beliefs* – for example a belief in the last judgment (CV 38).<sup>35</sup>

A further text often cited in favour of a non-cognitivist interpretation of Wittgenstein’s view of religious belief is his remark that the assertion (sc. in the ontological argument) that God’s essence guarantees his existence ‘really means ... that what is here at issue is not the existence of something [*daß es sich hier um eine Existenz nicht handelt*]’ (CV 82). It would be unwise, however, to read non-cognitivism into this, unless we propose to construe the most mainstream catholic theologian, Aquinas, as a non-cognitivist. For on the standard conception found in Aquinas, God is not an individual being at all, not an ‘entity’ alongside the other entities in the world, but is rather the source of all being.<sup>36</sup> In other words, it is not as if the theist’s inventory of the universe includes some extra item that is absent from the atheist’s list. So far from seeming outrageously non-cognitivist or anti-realist, Wittgenstein’s remark that in discussing God we are not dealing with *eine Existenz* would seem entirely unproblematic to many orthodox theologians.<sup>37</sup>

Belief in God must, to be sure, lie at the centre of any theistic worldview. But it is worth noting that many of the analytic philosophical critics of theism (and a good many supporters too) appear to have a crude and distorted picture of what this means. ‘May the Force be with you!’ say the characters in the film *Star Wars*, implying the Deity is a mysterious occult power who will assist the believer in achieving all sorts of successes. But much Christian theology is adamant in rejecting as idolatrous any conception of God as an active power within the universe. As the Dominican thinker Herbert McCabe put it, God is not a specific cause of events in the world: ‘a hurricane leaves its thumbprint on the world, but God does not leave any such thumbprint.’

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<sup>34</sup> It is sometimes difficult to render in English the precise nuances of sentences like these, since the German word *Glaube* covers both belief and faith – something that caused problems for my translator when I recently presented a paper in Berlin on the theme of ‘Idolatry, Faith and Belief’ (Katholische Akademie, in Association with Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, November 2006). I am grateful for the helpful comments received on that occasion, especially from Christoph Halbig and Martin Knechtges, which have helped me in my thinking about the present paper.

<sup>35</sup> This and other evidence is cited by Schroeder in ‘The Tightrope Walker’.

<sup>36</sup> God is ‘outside the realm of entities, as a cause that pours forth every entity in all its variant forms’ (*extra ordinem entium existens, velut causa quaedam profundens totum ens et omnes eius differentias*). *Commentary on Aristotle’s Peri Hermeneias* [*Sententiae super Peri Hermeneias*, 1270-71], I, 14. Quoted in B. Davies, *Aquinas* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 74. The divine simplicity, as Davies also explains, precludes talk of God as an individual (*Aquinas*, Ch. 7). See further J. Cottingham, ‘What Difference Does It Make?’

<sup>37</sup> See for example Herbert McCabe, *Faith Within Reason* (London: Continuum, 2006), *passim*.

Thus the famous argument from design turns out in McCabe's view to be 'silly', since you cannot pick out features of the world and proceed to attribute them to divine creation. What God does is to make the difference between existing and non-existing; and it is this 'elusive metaphysical notion' that is at the heart of true religious belief, not the simplistic and anthropomorphic notion of a cosmic designer: 'So far as the kind of world we have is concerned, the atheist and the theist will expect to see exactly the same features.'<sup>38</sup>

To those who prefer to dismiss religion from a safe distance, it may come as something of a surprise to see what practising theists such as McCabe actually say about God. There are many other examples. Blaise Pascal, a devoutly Christian philosopher, was quite blunt about our human inability to grasp either 'what God is or that he is'.<sup>39</sup> We might add, taking our cue from many writers in the long-standing 'apophatic' tradition of Christian thought,<sup>40</sup> that this does not have to be understood as merely an epistemic limitation, like our inability to grasp certain mysterious features of the cosmos such as the paradoxical nature of quantum particles. Rather it can be seen as an ontological barrier, stemming from the very being of God whose nature is beyond the furthest limit of our thought. The theologian Jean-Luc Marion, whose apophaticism is particularly radical, would even balk at the term 'ontological', since its normal connotations evoke the idea of the *nature* or *essence* of God. For Marion argues, in effect, that any attempt to determine the 'essence' or 'nature' of the ineffable God is simply a form of idolatry.<sup>41</sup> Anselm's celebrated

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<sup>38</sup> McCabe, *Faith Within Reason* pp. 75-6. Compare Wittgenstein's own comment: 'God does not reveal himself in the world . . . It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists' (TLP 6.432; 6.44). (I am grateful to Hanjo Glock for drawing my attention to this parallel.)

<sup>39</sup> 'If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since having neither parts nor limits he bears no relation to us. We are thus incapable of knowing either what he is or if he is.' Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Lafuma, no. 418.

<sup>40</sup> "Apophaticism" is the name of that theology which is done against the background of human ignorance of the nature of God. It is the doing of theology in the light of the statement of Thomas Aquinas . . . that "we do not know what kind of being God is" (*Summa theologiae* I, q12, a. 13 ad 1). It is the conception of theology not as a naïve pre-critical ignorance of God, but as a kind of acquired ignorance, a *docta ignorantia* as Nicolas of Suses called it in the fifteenth century. It is the conception of theology as a strategy and practice of unknowing, as the fourteenth century English mystic called it [in *The Cloud of Unknowing*], who, we might say invented the transitive verb-form 'to unknow' in order to describe theological knowledge in this deconstructive mode. Finally, "apophaticism" is the same as what the Latin tradition of Christian called the *via negativa*, the 'negative way'. . . Apophasis is a Greek neologism for the breakdown of speech, which in the face of the unknowability of God falls infinitely short of the mark.' Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> 'God cannot be seen, not only because nothing finite can bear his glory without perishing, but above all because a God that could be conceptually comprehended would no longer bear the title "God". It is not much to say that God remains God even if one is ignorant of his essence, his concept, and his presence— he remains God only on condition that this ignorance be established and admitted definitively, Every thing in the world gains by being known— but God who is not of the world, gains by not being known conceptually. The idolatry of the concept is the same as that of the gaze, imagining oneself to have attained God and to be capable of maintaining him under our gaze, like a thing of the world. And the Revelation of God consists first of all in cleaning the slate of this illusion and its blasphemy.' Jean-Luc Marion, 'In the Name', in J. D. Caputo and M. J. Scanlon (eds), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 34.

formulation is also highly significant here: God is not the ‘greatest conceivable being’, but is *id quo nihil maius cogitari potest* – ‘that than which nothing greater can be thought’. Like a necessarily receding horizon, God eludes the limits of our thought, so that any claim to bring him within the horizon of our human conceptions would be self-refuting: the purported achievement would be the best possible evidence that what had been brought within the horizon was not God, but a mere ‘god’ – an idol.

There is no space here to evaluate the coherence or otherwise of this kind of theology in which rational argument is intermingled with an acknowledgement of the mystical. For the present purpose, it will suffice to remember that Wittgenstein himself was clearly attracted in his early writings by what we have seen to be a fairly mainstream theological notion – the idea of religion as related to the domain of the ineffable (TLP 6.522).<sup>42</sup> So far from retreating to a flabby form of non-cognitivism, it seems to me likely that his later thinking about religion preserves the central idea that our language about God cannot be construed as having straightforward propositional content (in the *Tractatus* sense), or as asserting the existence of an item in the world. But none of this entails a radically non-realist conception of religious discourse; it is simply that we need to be careful to avoid assimilating the reality of God to the reality obtaining within the ‘world’ – the reality possessed by contingent things, or, in Wittgensteinian parlance, whatever happens to be ‘the case’. Being religious is not a matter of proposing explanatory hypotheses about the world of a scientific or quasi-scientific kind, but rather of passionate commitment to a certain system of reference, a certain framework for interpreting the world. But this goes beyond *mere* expressivism, since adopting the framework in question does imply belief in God. It is, moreover, a framework that it may be reasonable, or at least not unreasonable, to adopt. In the next and final section of this paper, I shall attempt to unpack the crucial claims in these last three sentences, which lead us to what I take to be the heart of Wittgenstein’s conception of religion,

#### *Religion as a framework of interpretation*

A religious person commits him or herself, according to Wittgenstein, ‘to a system of co-ordinates’ (*zu einem Koordinatensystem*). A variant reading has the more general phrase ‘a system of reference’ (*einem Bezugssystem*) (CV 73). What this means, according to John Hyman, is that the religious person makes a passionate commitment to the use of certain concepts. And just as, for example, the metric system cannot be verified, neither can a system or framework of religious concepts. ‘A system of co-ordinates is ... an intellectual apparatus we use to construct truths and falsehoods; it cannot itself be either true or false’<sup>43</sup> There is a parallel here with the case of ethics, of which Wittgenstein’s mature view appears to be that ‘to make [ethical judgments] is to adopt a certain framework of action and justification, which itself cannot be justified’.<sup>44</sup>

In so far as these observations may be taken to imply that Wittgenstein’s view of religion is a non-cognitivist one, it seems to me they may be misleading. It is perfectly true that a system of reference or a system of measurement (for example the metric system) cannot itself be called true or false in the sense that a given

<sup>42</sup> *Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische.* (‘There are indeed things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical’).

<sup>43</sup> Hyman, ‘This extraordinary use of the word “believe”’, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, s. v. ‘ethics’.

measurement within the system ('this stick is two meters long') may be true or false. The metric system does not itself belong in the complete set of true propositions expressing metric measurements; rather it is a framework that generates the possibility of such measurements. And it is also true that many advocates of the metric system are passionately committed to it. But none of this means that the metric system cannot be a perfectly valid and rationally defensible framework for dealing with the world. If we divide human language (somewhat artificially) into the cognitive and the affective, with the domain of rationally and epistemically justifiable modes of discourse on the one side, and mere arbitrary or entirely subjectively motivated expressions of emotion on the other, then the metric system, and the decision to adopt it, surely belong firmly in the former camp. To avoid misunderstanding, I should add that I do not mean here to challenge the general importance of the Wittgensteinian distinction between true or false statements within a system, and the structure of the system itself that makes such true or false statements possible. I simply wish to insert a caveat against the possible use of the label 'non-cognitive' in this context, if this is taken to imply that the adoption of a framework is something wholly arbitrary and beyond rational criticism or evaluation.

It is important to note in this connection that, as Hyman himself has pointed out, 'some systems are more useful, convenient and easy to understand and apply than others.'<sup>45</sup> This goes a good way to dispelling the otherwise damaging implication that to describe religious allegiance as commitment to a system of reference puts such commitment beyond rational evaluation. Moreover, there is, it seems to me, one further suggestive point about the comparison of religious faith to a 'reference system', which also pushes things in a more 'cognitivist' direction. Although a system of co-ordinates 'cannot itself be true or false' (as Hyman rightly notes), the adoption of such a system does nevertheless itself *presuppose* certain truths – for example, the actual reality of the standard posited by the system (the paradigm 'meter bar', or the properties of light in the more sophisticated redefined standard now used). In the same way, a religious 'system of reference' can be said to have cognitive implications (by presupposing that supreme creative reality without which the system would make no sense), as well as being, for those who adopt it, a valuable and rationally defensible way of making sense of human life (though 'rationally defensible here would not, as with the metrical case, be understood primarily in scientific and technological terms, but rather in moral and spiritual terms).

Wittgenstein's central insight, and it seems to me one with profound implications, is that the primary function of a religious outlook is to provide a framework for understanding and interpreting the world in which we find ourselves. The religious adherent confronts the same world as the atheist – a world of pain and suffering, a world of finitude and mortality, with all the fragility of goodness which that implies – and yet holds fast to a 'system of reference' which allows those potentially terrifying or depressing features to be viewed through the eyes of faith and hope. Does that phrase 'holds fast' imply a view of religion that tries to insulate it from all contact with evidence or argument? Certainly Wittgenstein dismissed the idea that something like the Resurrection could be established or refuted by appeal to a 'historic[al] basis in the sense that the ordinary belief in historic[al] facts could serve as a foundation' (LC 57).<sup>46</sup> I take Wittgenstein's underlying point here to be the

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<sup>45</sup> *The Gospel According to Wittgenstein*, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Winch's translation is slightly off target here (as indicated by my suggested addenda within square brackets). Compare the following piece of dialogue from that master of English

crucially important one that the role of evidence in religious commitment is entirely different from that which it occupies on the ‘Humean’ model – a dispassionate scrutiny of empirical probabilities based on past instances (the model which made Hume dryly observe that ‘the Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one.’).<sup>47</sup> The kind of evidence which, for the believer, supports faith is not evidence assessed from a detached standpoint, but experience that is available only as a result of certain inner transformations. Saying this does *not* imply some kind of subjectivism about religious truth; it merely makes the point that there may be some truths whose *accessibility conditions* include certain requirements as to the attitude of the subject.<sup>48</sup>

To introduce the idea of a special kind of evidence requiring the need for ‘inner transformation’ may look to some people like a fallback position – a hastily devised escape route for the beleaguered modern theist who has been forced by Humean and other Enlightenment critics of religion to abandon the straightforward factualism about, for example, the Resurrection that characterised the simpler, if more naïve, devout faith of the past. In a stimulating recent study, however, the theologian Sarah Coakley has convincingly shown that even if we go back to earliest times, to the New Testament narratives, we find the need for inner ‘epistemic transformation’ presented as a prerequisite for witnessing the Resurrection. The story in Matthew does not (as a modern spin doctor might perhaps do) enhance the dossier with overwhelming ‘objective’ evidence, but adds the telling phrase ‘but some doubted’ even in the very sentence that reports the Galilee appearance (Matthew 28:17). The narrative in John of the appearance in the locked room on the Sunday after Easter suggests that ‘some change in one’s normal demands for perceptual evidences’ were needed to recognize the risen body (John 20: 24-8). And the Emmaus story in Luke implies that ‘a narrowly noetic investigation would take one *nowhere* in this quest,’ and that ‘evidences of the heart ... could not be neglected if Christ-as-risen were to be apprehended’ (Luke 24: 28-35).<sup>49</sup>

In Wittgensteinian terms, we may say that these early disciples seized passionately upon a new framework of interpretation: what had seemed the total

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nuance, John Le Carré (the context is that the spymasters are trying to muzzle the press to damp down any scandal about the murder of one of their agents): ‘Yes, sir, an “extinct case of purely historic concern”, sir,’ Strickland went on into the telephone ... ‘Am I on target there Oliver?’. ‘*Historical*’, Lacon corrected him irritably. ‘Not *historic* concern. That’s the last thing we want.’ *Smiley’s People* (London: Pan Books, 1980), p. 45.

<sup>47</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* [1748], Section X.

<sup>48</sup> For more on the idea of ‘accessibility conditions’, see Cottingham, ‘What Difference Does It Make?’ Compare also Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, Ch. 7, sectn 4: ‘[S]uch experience does not qualify as ‘evidence’ in the sense that it is available for impartial assessment or repeatable experimentation. As in many areas of human existence, it evades such detached scrutiny, since it is the fruit of a living commitment. But that does not mean it can be dismissed as ‘merely subjective’. A lifetime of musical discipline may enable the committed musician to discern profundities and beauties of musical form that are in large part quite literally inaccessible to the novice; but that does not mean that they are mere idiosyncrasies of subjective feeling. On the contrary they are genuine responses to a transpersonal reality— it simply takes a lifetime of the appropriate *askesis* to acquire the capacity to appreciate them. And so it may be with spiritual experience’ (p. 138–9).

<sup>49</sup> Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). p. 140. Coakley’s discussion includes an insightful chapter on ‘Wittgenstein and Resurrection Epistemology’ to which I am indebted in this part of the paper.

failure of a horrible and humiliating execution was now perceived as the prelude to the triumphant proclamation of a message of hope. But does this kind of interpretive shift involve no cognitive change – no change in belief contents? This would surely be an implausible position, since the early disciples, and subsequent Christians, in adopting such a framework, surely *did* shift their beliefs: with the new framework went a return from despair to faith in God, and a belief that his power was manifested in the risen Christ. Wittgenstein was unable to embrace the framework, since, as he himself observed, he was unable to make the belief shift (CV 51). *But he did believe the belief shift could occur.* This is clearly shown by one of his most pregnant remarks: *Life can educate one to a belief in God* (CV 97).

*Coda: Life can educate one to a belief in God.*

Let me close with what seems to me a powerful example from Tolstoy of the phenomenon to which Wittgenstein pointed, of being ‘educated by life to a belief in God’. Konstantin Levin, husband in the relatively secure marriage portrayed in *Anna Karenina* as a counterpart to the eponymous heroine’s ill-fated one, has been waiting for his pregnant wife Kitty, who is long overdue, to give birth. After a troubled night, punctuated with a protracted argument triggered by his wife’s anxious jealousy (Levin has come in late after an evening drinking at his club, followed by a visit with friends to the house of the captivating but emotionally disturbed Anna), the labour suddenly begins. Levin is at once in torment.

‘Kostya, please don’t be frightened, it’s nothing. I’m not afraid at all,’ she said, seeing his frightened face, and she pressed his hand to her breast, then to her lips.

He hastily jumped out of bed, unaware of himself and not taking his eyes off her, put on his dressing gown ... Her flushed face, surrounded by soft hair coming from under her night-cap, shone with joy and resolution.

However little unnaturalness and conventionality there was in Kitty’s character generally, Levin was still struck by what was uncovered to him now, when all the veils were suddenly taken away and the very core of her soul shone in her eyes. And in that simplicity and nakedness she, the very one he loved, was still more visible. She looked at him and smiled, but suddenly her eyebrows twitched, she raised her head, and quickly going up to him, took his hand and pressed all of herself to him, so that he could feel her hot breath on him. She was suffering and seemed to be complaining to him of her suffering ...

‘I’m going to the doctor now. Do we need anything else. Shall I send for Dolly?’

‘Yes, yes, Go, go’, she said quickly, frowning and waving her hand at him.

He was going into the drawing room when he suddenly heard a pitiful, instantly fading moan from the bedroom. He stopped and for a long time could not understand.

‘Yes, it’s she,’ he said to himself and, clutching his head, he ran down the stairs.

‘Lord, have mercy, forgive us, help us!’, he repeated words that somehow suddenly came to his lips. And he, an unbeliever, repeated these words not just with his lips. Now, in that moment, he knew that neither all his doubts nor the impossibility he knew in himself of believing by means of reason, hindered him in



the least from addressing God. It all blew off his soul like dust. To whom was he to turn if not to Him in whose hands he felt himself, his soul and his love to be?<sup>50</sup>

All sorts of dismissive interpretations of this passage may occur to the sceptical mind. Perhaps Levin is so beside himself with anxiety that he goes against his better judgement and indulges in a superstitious ritual that he rationally knows can do no good.<sup>51</sup> But that deflationary reading will not survive serious scrutiny of the text and its full context. Levin has always loved Kitty, but previously in a fierce, possessive and somewhat controlling way that made him genuinely miserable when (earlier in the novel) he thought his suit would not be successful. At the start of the crucial episode of her confinement he has lapsed into a sort of complacency: the earlier torments of courtship are over, and Kitty is now his devoted wife, happily involved in her domestic pursuits and preparation for impending motherhood. But now Levin's perceptions undergo a radical shift. As the pangs of labour begin to shake her, and he is confronted with the mysterious process of childbirth, and the very real danger that process poses to her own life, he sees for the first time her true beauty and integrity. In that moment, his heart is opened to the mystery and fragility and wonder and terror of life and of love, and he begins to pray. His decision could never have been arrived at by cold scrutiny of the evidence; indeed, Levin knows in himself the 'impossibility in himself of believing by means of reason'. But only a religious framework is now adequate for interpreting the momentous truths to which his heart has now been opened. He prays to God, and repeats the words 'not just with his lips'. He believes.

It is important to underline that what Levin undergoes is not a 'religious experience' in the sense of a vision of angels or other supernatural influences, but rather a certain opening of the heart, and an associated heightening of moral awareness. Tolstoy, with great delicacy and a keen insight into the nature of the religious journey, resists the temptation to present the reader with a neat 'once for all' moment of change. Further anxieties, further intellectual agonizings, and further deepening of moral and emotional awareness, are needed in order to consolidate Levin's new-found faith. At the close of the novel he is able to declare to himself: 'This new feeling hasn't changed me, hasn't made me happy or suddenly enlightened, as I dreamed – just like the feeling for my son. Nor was there any surprise. And faith or not faith – I don't know what it is – but this feeling has entered into me just as imperceptibly through suffering and has firmly lodged itself in my soul.'<sup>52</sup> Life has educated him to a belief in God.

The moral, perhaps, for analytic philosophers and others who have agonized over the 'the great cry of "I would like to believe but unfortunately I cannot"' is that their problem can never be resolved in the study. By drawing on Wittgenstein's subtle analysis of religious allegiance, we have perhaps been able to see a little more clearly just why this should be so. Konstantin Levin was able to make the religious commitment, with its associated belief shift, partly because he had been inducted as a

<sup>50</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* [1873-7], Part VII, Ch. 13, transl. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (London: Penguin, 2001).

<sup>51</sup> Tolstoy, with typical honesty, shows Levin later in the novel raising just this doubt to himself. But he eventually dismisses the doubt as a piece of bad faith. 'He could not admit that he had known the truth then and was now mistaken ... because he cherished his state of soul of that time, and by admitting that it had been due to weakness he would have profaned those moments.' (*Anna Karenina*, p. 787; from Part VIII, Ch. 9).

<sup>52</sup> *Anna Karenina*, p. 817; from Part VIII Ch. 19.

child into forms of religious praxis which had made the framework he embraced accessible to him, and given it shape and significance. The other necessary condition for his conversion, also a form of education, was the ‘education’ provided by ‘life’ – the actual structure of the perception-changing experiences he underwent during his wife’s confinement and in the phase of his life that followed it. For Wittgenstein himself, things were not so easy: neither his upbringing nor the course of his life had quite equipped him to take such a step.<sup>53</sup> Given that, he may have been being unduly hard on himself in an enigmatic comment from a manuscript of 1937, which it is perhaps not too fanciful to see as a characteristically harsh self-judgment on his inability to enter the promised land that he had marked out with such clarity: ‘The edifice of your pride has to be dismantled. And that means frightful work’ (CV 30).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For Wittgenstein’s family background as a child, in a family of long-assimilated Jews, and the influence of his devoutly Catholic mother, see Fergus Kerr, *Work on Oneself* (Arlington, VA: Institute for the Psychological Sciences Press, 2008), Ch. 2: ‘Wittgenstein and Catholicism’.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Das Gebäude Deines Stolzes ist abzutragen. Und das gibt furchtbare Arbeit.’

I am most grateful to John Hyman and Hanjo Glock for perceptive comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Their reactions have been most encouraging, even though I know I have failed to convince them on certain points.