

## Wittgenstein on Religion

This module has focused on a range of attempts to assess the rationality of religious belief: most of these attempts taking the form of purported arguments for the existence of God or some other dimension of religious belief, such as the survival of bodily death. In this final section of the module we will be looking briefly at a philosopher – Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) - who suggests that the way of thinking of religion that is embodied in these attempts is radically misconceived. You may recall the following reference to Wittgenstein at the end of the discussion of the ontological argument:

Malcolm's allusion to Wittgenstein implies a radically different type of philosophy of religion, which treats as its data all the human phenomena that express religious convictions: not merely what people say when required to give explicit statements of their beliefs, but their immediate and unconsidered ways of feeling, desiring and acting. Its task is primarily to understand those interlocking phenomena, rather than to assess them against the standards of empirical or scientific rationality.

I would like you now to read a little more about Wittgenstein's approach. This is an extract from *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion* by Brian R. Clack: it is enclosed as **Document 27**. Please now read the first part of this extract: pages 106-112.

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This extract will have given you some picture of Wittgenstein's character, and, closely connected with that, of his thinking about religion and the philosophy of religion. Wittgenstein, it is stressed, believes that philosophical attempts to provide proofs of the existence of God involve a radical misunderstanding of the character of religious belief. The misunderstanding lies in the idea that religious belief is fundamentally a *theory* about something that lies behind and explains the universe. According to Wittgenstein religion should, as Clack puts it, be understood as 'something like a particular perspective on the world' or (in the case, at least, of Christianity) as 'a manner of living which enables one to endure the sufferings of life; a manner of living characterised by love'.

In a series of notes now published under the title *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein expressed the matter like this:

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation. Instruction in a religious faith, therefore, would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description, of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience. And this combination would have to result in the pupil himself, of his own accord, passionately taking hold of the system of reference. (p 64)

Actually I should like to say that in this case too the *words* you utter or what you think as you utter them are not what matters, so much as the difference they make at various points in your life. (85)

Clack refers to a short work by Wittgenstein: *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*. This is not a text intended by Wittgenstein for publication, but simply notes that he made for himself on *The Golden Bough*: a book, published by Sir James Frazer in 1890, concerned with the origin and nature of ritual phenomena found in primitive cultures. Wittgenstein is highly critical of Frazer's understanding of these phenomena, suggesting that it involves what might be described as an intellectualist distortion. I would like you now to read a few pages of these *Remarks*. These are included as **Document 28**. While reading this extract you might pick out one or two brief passages that seem to you to articulate most clearly the essence of Wittgenstein's approach here.

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My choice of key passages would be these:

But it will never be plausible to say that mankind does all that out of sheer stupidity (119)

When, for example, he explains to us that the king must be killed in his prime, because the savages believe that otherwise his soul would not be kept fresh, all one can say is: where that practice and these views occur together, the practice does not spring from the view, but they are both just there. (119)

No *opinion* serves as the foundation for a religious symbol. (123)

Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of one's beloved. That is *obviously not* based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it *aims* at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied. (123)

One could almost say that man is a ceremonial animal. (129)

I will come back to some of these remarks in a moment. First I would like you to read another section from Clack's book, in which he discusses Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer*. This is the second half of **Document 27**: pages 118-124.

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I can imagine the following objection to some of the ways in which Clack, following Wittgenstein, speaks. Suppose that we accept that religious practices and belief have their origin, not in crude ('pre-scientific') theorising about the world, but in the kinds of 'primitive reactions' of which Wittgenstein and Clack speak. That, one might reply, has no implications for how we should think of religion as it is now. In

particular, it does not follow from the fact<sup>1</sup> that religion entered human life by a non-rational route that it is inappropriate for us to ask whether it is a rational enterprise. To take an analogy: it was, no doubt, completely natural in a pre-scientific era to believe that the Earth was flat; it was something accepted without any rational reflection on the matter. It does not follow that it is a confusion for *us* to reflect on the matter: asking whether there really are good grounds for the conviction that the Earth is flat.

This objection rests, I think, on a misunderstanding. While Wittgenstein does engage in conjectures about the origins of certain human practices and ways of thinking – including the phenomena of religion – his fundamental concern is to find the right way to characterise the place of these practices in our lives. He believes that philosophers have widely misunderstood the place of religion in human life: that they have widely misrepresented the *kind* of phenomenon that religion is. For they have supposed that the core of religion – that on which all other aspects of it hinge – is a certain theoretical conviction: that ‘God exists’. And so they have supposed that a central task of the philosopher investigating this dimension of human life is to examine the credentials of this conviction.

How could one doubt that a theoretical conviction – the conviction that ‘God exists’ – is the hinge around which every other aspect of religious life turns? It is, I think, helpful here to reflect on the way in which our taking a person’s words as a serious expression of religious belief may be dependent on what, in her life, surrounds those words. After all, it does not immediately follow from the fact that a person utters the words ‘I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth....’ that she *does* have the belief of which we would normally take those words to be an expression. Perhaps she means something different by those words from what others do (imagine, for example, that she is not a native English speaker, or that she is a young child); perhaps she is merely mouthing the words in a way such that they are, on her lips, almost empty of meaning; and so on. Now, in practice, we might resolve doubts of this kind by looking at what, in her life, surrounds the religious language that she employs: the practices of worship, the ways in which she endures suffering, the gratitude with which she accepts the good things that come to her, and so on.<sup>2</sup> If we take at face value such ways of resolving our doubts we will have reservations about the idea that the belief – the theoretical conviction – is what is fundamental: is that on which the surrounding practices rest. For, as we can put the point, without the ‘surrounding practices’ the words, for example, ‘I believe in God ....’ would not be an articulation of *that* belief.

We can approach this from a slightly different direction. Suppose that we start with the observation that people engage in these ‘strange’ practices: the practices, for example, involved in baptism, in participation in a Catholic mass, or, to take a less explicitly religious example, that of kissing a picture of a beloved. Now suppose that

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<sup>1</sup> If it is a fact. And, incidentally, does Wittgenstein really have the qualifications needed for speculation about the origins of religion in human life?

<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein makes points of this kind in connection with *all* areas of language. The points may, however, have particular force in relation to religious language in so far as the idea of a ‘merely theoretical conviction’ that there is a God who loves every one of us, and so on, is one of which it seems particularly difficult to make any sense.

we ask: why do people go in for this kind of thing? We might think (as Frazer clearly does) that the answer must be of the form: 'Because they suppose that these practices will have certain results that they desire'. And then it will seem clear to us that these practices rest on certain theoretical convictions: the conviction, perhaps, that kissing a picture will bring benefits to the beloved, or that there is a God who will reward us if we go through certain motions. The practices – the ways of living of which Wittgenstein makes so much – will, as I say, seem to us to *rest on* these convictions; and surely assessing the reasonableness of these convictions is an appropriate task for the philosopher.

In opposition to that, however, Wittgenstein suggests that it is quite wrong to suppose that these practices must *rest on* anything. We have a seriously impoverished view of human nature if we suppose that people would not go in for things of this kind if they did not, at some level, believe that their activities would have beneficial consequences. As Wittgenstein remarks of the inclination to kiss a picture of one's beloved: 'it *aims* at nothing at all'. And as he articulates his general comment on the various forms of activity that he discusses: 'man is a ceremonial animal'. We might add (though this is an additional, and perhaps more controversial, claim): we have a seriously *impoverishing* view of human life if we insist that people *should not* go in for any activities that cannot be reasonably expected to have beneficial consequences.

When we broaden our view of human nature - acknowledging the deep importance within human life of various activities that are not directed towards any goal - we open up the possibility of viewing quite differently the relation between, on the one hand, the words in which a person articulates her religious beliefs, and, on the other, the feelings and practices in which we see religious belief in her life. The verbal articulations of her belief - for example, 'I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth....' - are not the *fundamental* thing from which her general approach to life and the religious practices in which she participates flow. With our richer conception of human nature we do not *have to* assume that, in that sense, the belief is more fundamental than the practice. For we can acknowledge that people might go in for these things without the support of any theory - a theory involving, perhaps, a reference to 'supernatural forces' (for example, a god) - according to which the practices will have certain consequences that we desire.

This is not at all to deny that people really do believe in a God who loves every one of us and who sometimes acts in the world in the form of miracles, that people really do believe that each of us has an immortal soul, and so on. It is, rather, to make a comment on the relation between these beliefs and the practices in which they are embedded. To repeat one of the examples from Wittgenstein's discussion of Frazer:

When, for example, he explains to us that the king must be killed in his prime, because the savages believe that otherwise his soul would not be kept fresh, all one can say is: where that practice and these views occur together, the practice does not spring from the view, but they are both just there. (119)

We can add: we see *what* it is that they believe - we see how to take the strange words that they utter - by seeing 'the difference they make at various points in [their]

life' (C and V 85) As Wittgenstein remarks elsewhere: 'Practice gives the words their sense'.

Suppose that we abandon the idea that 'Coming to religious belief' is a matter of coming to a theoretical conviction from which huge changes in one's practices and feelings – changes that run right through one's life, colouring everything in it – flow. Suppose we think, instead, that 'coming to religious belief' itself *involves* such changes in one's life: certain verbal articulations – such as, 'I believe in God ...' – being just one aspect of these changes. That is to say, the changes in one's practices and feelings are an aspect of what it is to come to religious belief. In that case, one should, I believe begin to suspect that the kinds of argument for or against religious belief that have been so central to philosophical reflection on religion may completely miss the point. What I have in mind there relates to a comment that Wittgenstein makes in relation to these arguments: 'A proof of God's existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists.' (CV 85) Just as a proof that there is water on Mars, or that 35 times 17 is 595, is something by means of which one could convince oneself, or someone else, that these things are so. One who follows the proof will come to believe.<sup>3</sup> Now if, in the religious case, 'coming to believe' involves the kind of transformation in one's life of which Wittgenstein speaks the traditional philosophical proofs do not seem fitted to the task. A 'proof that God exists', if there could be such, would have to be something that, as we might put it, engages aspects of the individual other than her capacity for abstract intellectual theorising.

#### *Further reading*

The three main sources of remarks by Wittgenstein specifically about religion are:

- L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) [See especially pp 31-3, 64, 85-7]  
*Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966)  
*Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rhees, in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions 1912-51*, ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993)  
Brian R. Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999)  
Gareth Moore, *Believing in God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) [Especially chs 1-3]  
Peter Winch, 'Meaning and Religious Language', in his *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987)  
N. Malcolm, 'The Groundlessness of Belief', in his *Thought and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977)  
Kai Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', *Philosophy*, **42** (1967), pp 191-209  
D.Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) [See especially ch 5]

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<sup>3</sup> It should be added, of course, that not just *anything* that leads someone to a belief is a proof of what is believed. Some methods of bringing people to particular beliefs are entirely non-rational and so do not constitute 'proofs' of what is believed. It is, perhaps, a controversial question how far Wittgenstein leaves room for the idea of a 'proof of God's existence' or 'reasons for religious belief'. I believe, however, that nothing that has been said in this section of the module categorically rules out these possibilities.

D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993)  
Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (London: SPCK, 1997) [Especially ch 7]