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Title of extract: **Aftermath**

Name of Author: **Clack, B.R.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion. Clack, B. R.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **Edinburgh University Press**

Pages scanned: **106 - 131**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Philosophy of Religion CSPH7023**

Name of Designated Person

authorising scanning:

E. L. Harris

Date authorised: 28.06.18.

Moodle/Powerpoint

AFTERMATH

5.1 SOMETHING INDECENT

M. O'C. Drury on one occasion remarked to Wittgenstein that he had been reading F. R. Tennant's *Philosophical Theology*, to which Wittgenstein responded: 'A title like that sounds to me as if it would be something indecent.'¹ What could have led Wittgenstein to say such a thing?

In part, this rather harsh judgement is a reaction to the idea that philosophy is the kind of thing that could be brought into the service of another discipline, so that theology might employ philosophy so as to refine, ground and justify the doctrines of the Christian religion. For Wittgenstein, philosophy can never be called upon to perform such an apologetic task, for its proper role is a clarificatory one. With regard to religion, the philosopher's task consists of assembling reminders of the actual usage of religious concepts within their natural home, rather than offering a theistic 'defence'. To act as such a defender of faith, as a spokesman for a religion, is thus to pervert the philosopher's calling: 'The philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That is what makes him into a philosopher' (Z §455). Moreover, philosophy is not the only victim of its marriage to theology, for the speculative disposition of the philosopher tends to lead to a misrepresentation of *religion*, which is transformed into a system of metaphysics. Hence his comment to Drury: 'The symbolism of Christianity is wonderful beyond words, but when people try to make a philosophical system out of it I find it disgusting.'² In the idea of philosophical theology, then, Wittgenstein saw a perversion of both philosophy and religion.

There is something else that Wittgenstein objects to, and this applies to the nature of philosophy of religion as habitually practised, regardless of whether it is undertaken in the name of faith. It is the attempt by philosophers to assess the rationality of religious belief, to seek that which would justify (or condemn) faith, that he finds particularly disagreeable. We can consider here three such ways of assessing religion. A first – dominant within the history of the philosophy of religion – focuses upon

the cogency of so-called proofs of the existence of God, arguments that would be sufficient to convince a non-believer that there really was a divine being, and that religion was, as a result, rational. Wittgenstein's verdict:

A proof of God's existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that what *believers* who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is give their 'belief' an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs. (CV 85)

The traditional arguments for the existence of God are seen, therefore, to be personal rationalisations of a belief which is itself not born of rational considerations.

A second, more recent, development within the philosophy of religion concedes that while it is true that no proof can establish with absolute certainty the existence of God, the task of the philosopher is to weigh up the evidence for and against the truth of (theistic) religion. This evidence comprises, on the one hand, such matters as the cumulative value of the theistic proofs (design, cosmological, moral, and so on), miraculous occurrences and religious experience. On the other hand, we have, say, the problem evil poses to religious belief, science's erosion of religion's plausibility, and the possibility that religion originates out of primitive humanity's feeling of helplessness. We then assess the balance of probabilities with an eye to answering this question: is theism more likely to be true than atheism? While J. L. Mackie³ says that on balance, the evidence makes it improbable that there is a God, Richard Swinburne concludes contrariwise:

On our total evidence *theism* is more probable than not . . . The experience of so many men in their moments of religious vision corroborates what nature and history shows to be quite likely – that there is a God who made and sustains man and the universe.⁴

This stress on probability is also to be found in Tennant, who, Drury told Wittgenstein, was fond of repeating Butler's aphorism, 'Probability is the guide of life.' Wittgenstein was contemptuous of that notion: 'Can you imagine St. Augustine saying that the existence of God was "highly probable"?'⁵ This comment shows how Wittgenstein sees a hiatus between the religious beliefs of the faithful and the rationalistic constructions of academic philosophers. For the faithful, belief in God is no tentatively held hypothesis; it is, rather, the rock on which their entire life stands.

This is partly why one would be reluctant to say: 'These people rigorously hold the opinion (or view) that there is a Last Judgement'. 'Opinion' sounds queer.

It is for this reason that different words are used: 'dogma', 'faith'.

We don't talk about hypothesis, or about high probability. (LC 57)

For Wittgenstein the kind of language that informs the work of philosophers in the mould of Mackie and Swinburne is alien to the nature and spirit of religion: it is a language adopted from debates within the natural sciences, and it distorts the character of faith.

It is easy to caricature the views of philosophers of religion intent on showing that belief in God is 'quite likely', for such an approach does indeed seem somewhat at variance with the language of faith as we find it, say, in the Bible. Phillips, for example, provides a humorous translation of Psalm 139 into the probabilistic language of philosophy of religion so as to show the absurdity of thinking of faith as tentative hypothesis-holding: 'Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, it is highly probable that thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold it is highly probable that thou art there also.'⁶ Droll though this may be, it would however be grossly unfair to suggest that philosophers such as Swinburne and Tennant have no idea of the commitment demanded by religious belief simply because they speak of hypotheses and probability. Nor are such philosophers unaware of the unease engendered by that kind of talk. For example, Basil Mitchell – who himself sees Christian theism as an explanatory, metaphysical system requiring justification – voices precisely these concerns when he writes that religion is not primarily a theoretical matter and that the believer is not at all concerned with testing his beliefs: 'His faith is not tentative, but unconditional.'⁷ Mitchell recognises that this fact poses a problem for anyone embarked on the project of justification: 'if systems of religious belief require and admit of rational justification, . . . they ought only to be accepted more or less provisionally; yet the religious believer characteristically gives whole-hearted assent to his beliefs'.⁸ To defend his project, he makes a pertinent connection between systems of religious and political belief. The idea of liberal democracy, for example, enters so deeply into the activities and attitudes of the ordinary Englishman, and is so much a part of his view of the world, that it would be misleading to say that he regards it as a hypothesis. Nevertheless, it 'does not follow that liberal democracy requires no theoretical justification',⁹ for one might wish to defend it against (for example) Marxist criticism.

This is not to endorse Mitchell's approach, but only to suggest that some Wittgensteinian criticisms are hasty and rhetorical. Philosophers of Mitchell's ilk are not denying the emotional nature of religious

belief, nor the passionate and committed manner in which, once accepted, religious belief is held. Nevertheless, such philosophers believe that in addition to, and underlying, its affective states religious belief comprises a theory which explains the nature of the universe better than any other competing hypothesis, and that it is precisely this explanatory power which acts as its justification. From such a view follows the impossibility of any *rapprochement* between these philosophers and those influenced by Wittgenstein.

It is, indeed, the conception of explanatory justification which constitutes the third of Wittgenstein's objections to the traditional project of philosophy of religion. If religion is held to make better sense of all the evidence, then it acts as some kind of theory, and, of course, part of the purpose of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* is to counter such a notion. Religious beliefs are there presented as being less like theories and more akin to expressions of value. Furthermore, these beliefs arise in a spontaneous, non-rational way, far different from the manner in which theories are elaborated, these latter arising from a cool and patient contemplation of the world. This is partly why Wittgenstein, in the 'Lectures on Religious Belief', wants to deny that religious belief is reasonable (but nor is it unreasonable, because that 'implies rebuke'):

I want to say: they don't treat this as a matter of reasonability.

Anyone who reads the Epistles will find it said: not only that it is not reasonable, but that it is folly.

Not only is it not reasonable, but it doesn't pretend to be. (LC 58)

The mistake made by philosophers of religion embarked on a justificatory project is that of envisaging religion as something which possesses explanatory power and which rests on intellectual foundations. According to Wittgenstein, neither of these things is the case. As we have previously seen, Wittgenstein's later conception of religion is one debarring any explanatory justification. Rather than some vast and ambitious hypothesis, religion is presented by Wittgenstein as something like a particular perspective on the world; a means of assessing life and of judging one's actions; a way of living.

In respect of this last factor, Wittgenstein begs comparison with Tolstoy. Tolstoy's influence on Wittgenstein was incalculable, and earlier we had cause to note Wittgenstein's love of *The Gospel in Brief*, a book which, he was wont to say, saved his life. Moreover, he contended that Tolstoy was one of only two European writers of recent times 'who really had something important to say about religion',¹⁰ the other of these writers being Dostoyevsky. It would be surprising, then, were we not to find precursors of Wittgensteinian themes in the religious writings of

Tolstoy. A first such harbinger is encountered in the essay 'What is Religion and of What Does its Essence Consist?' There, Tolstoy maintains that the essence of religion lies in the establishing of 'a relation to the immediate issues of life, a relation to the entire infinite universe in time and space, conceiving of it as a whole'.¹¹ The connections between these words and the mystical passages of the *Tractatus* barely require identification.

An even more striking parallel can be discerned when attention is turned to Tolstoy's 'Confession', in which he tells of his return to Christianity following a period of suicidal despair in which the threat of death and the apparent meaninglessness of life were everpresent in his mind. The questions obsessing him were familiar ones: 'why do I live? Why do I wish for anything, or do anything? Or expressed another way: is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?'¹² Failing to find answers in philosophy or other speculative knowledge, Tolstoy began to look for a solution in life, and in particular, in the lives, not of sophisticated people like himself who too suffered from anxiety, but of the enormous mass of simple, uneducated people. He was no longer looking for arguments, for 'only actions showing me that they had an understanding of life that did not make them afraid, as I was, of poverty, sickness and death might have convinced me',¹³ and indeed he found that the peasants worried less about death and accepted the privations of life without protest 'and with a calm and firm conviction that this is how it must be, that it cannot be otherwise and that all is for the good'.¹⁴ The conclusion to be drawn is that the problems of life are to be solved, not by philosophical contemplation, but by living in the right way; living, that is, 'in a way that will make what is problematic disappear' (CV 27). To repeat: this is not a matter for the speculative intelligence:

Having realized the errors in rational knowledge I found it easier to free myself from the temptation of futile theorizing. The conviction that knowledge of the truth can only be found in life stirred me to doubt the worth of my own way of life. The thing that saved me was that I managed to tear myself away from my exclusive existence and see the true life of the simple working people, and realize that this alone is genuine life. I realized that if I wanted to understand life and its meaning I had to live a genuine life and not that of a parasite.¹⁵

The life which Tolstoy discovered among the Russian peasantry was one in which the events of life (and death¹⁶) were accepted and not railed against. This could be the foundation of a religious life further augmented by the renunciation of comfort and by the Christian message of love, so that one cares little for one's own wants, focusing lovingly instead on the needs of others.

It is this notion – that Christianity consists in a manner of living which enables one to endure the sufferings of life; a manner of living characterised by love – that is uppermost in Wittgenstein's thoughts on the demands of religion:

Christianity is not a matter of saying a lot of prayers; in fact we are told not to do that. If you and I are to live religious lives, it mustn't be that we talk a lot about religion, but that our manner of life is different. It is my belief that only if you try to be helpful to other people will you in the end find your way to God.¹⁷

Indeed, the whole pattern of Tolstoy's 'Confession' can be seen in Wittgenstein's life: in the abandonment of his wealth and in his ascetic lifestyle; in his desire to extricate himself from the 'parasitic' profession of philosophy, such an activity as could never answer the deepest questions of existence; and in his desire for a simple life, the life of a gardener, a monk, or a school teacher. And all of that because of the same anguish which haunted Tolstoy, the fear of a pointless and wasted life, so achingly expressed in his correspondence with Engelmann: 'I ought to have done something positive with my life, to have become a star in the sky. Instead of which I remained stuck on earth, and now I am gradually fading out.'¹⁸

We seem to have come some way from the description of philosophical theology as 'indecent'. But if religion is a way of life, an adjustment to the world, then its truth will have been distorted if conceived otherwise, as an explanation of the workings and purpose of the cosmos: 'If Christianity is the truth then all the philosophy that is written about it is false' (CV 83).

This theme of the failure of the philosophical-cum-theological mentality to grasp the heart of Christianity can be discerned in a tale of Tolstoy's which was among Wittgenstein's favourites. In 'The Three Hermits', a voyaging bishop is intrigued by a fisherman's tale of three holy men who live on a secluded island, praying for salvation and who have been known to aid stranded seafarers, so he instructs the captain to steer the boat towards the island. Once ashore he speaks with its three old inhabitants and is amused by their ignorance of theology and by their primitive prayer, 'Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us!' For a whole day the Bishop instructs the hermits in the proper way to pray, teaching them the words of the Lord's Prayer, and this with some difficulty, for the old men struggle over words which they can neither pronounce nor remember. Nevertheless, by the time night arrives, they have mastered the prayer, and the Bishop leaves the island, satisfied that his instruction has refined the hermits' religious sensibility. As he sits on the boat, however, looking back towards the island, he is disturbed by the sight of something gleaming on the water and moving very fast in the

direction of the boat. Awe-struck, the Bishop sees that it is the three hermits, running upon the water as though it were dry land and beckoning the ship to stop.

Before the ship could be stopped, the hermits had reached it, and raising their heads, all three as with one voice, began to say:

'We have forgotten your teaching, servant of God. As long as we kept repeating it we remembered, but when we stopped saying it for a time, a word dropped out, and now it has all gone to pieces. We can remember nothing of it. Teach us again.'

The Bishop crossed himself, and leaning over the ship's side, said:

'Your own prayer will reach the Lord, men of God. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners.'¹⁹

The moral we may choose to extract from this tale is that it is a simple, dedicated life, rather than sophisticated doctrine and explanatory power, that constitutes genuine religion. Recall: 'one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life' (CV 53).

5.2 WITTGENSTEIN AND RADICAL THEOLOGY

In *The Will to Power* we read:

Christianity is still possible at any time. It is not tied to any of the impudent dogmas that have adorned themselves with its name: it requires neither the doctrine of a personal God, nor that of sin, nor that of immortality, nor that of redemption, nor that of faith; it has absolutely no need of metaphysics, and even less of asceticism, even less of a Christian 'natural science.' Christianity is a *way of life*, not a system of beliefs. It tells us how to act, not what we ought to believe.²⁰

One might be struck by affinities between Nietzsche's words and the account of Christianity we have seen presented by Wittgenstein. And many of our present-day radical theologians would also echo the sentiment that Christianity is still possible – and indeed preferable – after its metaphysical content has been rejected. Such theologians have elaborated what has become known as an 'anti-realist' or 'non-realist' understanding of religion, whereby religious language is not considered to refer to transcendent realities, but rather expresses human moral and spiritual ideals. It is because the idea of God can function as the focal point for human spiritual striving that Anthony Freeman can claim: 'I can still benefit from using God religiously, without believing in him as an objective and active supernatural person.'²¹ The value of the religious life lies, not in the worship of (non-existent) supernatural entities, but in the specific *language* of faith, in which inhere possibilities for a fulfilling human life.

There would appear to be some obvious parallels between the non-realist understanding of faith and the account of religion offered by Wittgenstein, and it is therefore no surprise that these radical theologians have seen in him an ally in their fight against religious realism, against, that is, the view that religion is concerned with an existent deity, to which its characteristic discourse is intended to refer. In his book *The Sea of Faith*, for example, Don Cupitt reads Wittgenstein's thought on religion as pure non-realism. As with his treatment of the language of metaphysics, Wittgenstein has dragged religious discourse down from a seemingly transcendent realm and placed it firmly within the human world, so that 'faith functions as a guidance-system. It provides us with a body of images, standards for self-assessment and goals that we can use as an itinerary to find our way through life.'²² While much of what we have hitherto considered does seem to confirm Cupitt's interpretation, we should nevertheless take a closer look at some of the central presuppositions of non-realist faith and see whether this most radical of theologies is as close to Wittgenstein's ideas as it at first sight appears.

It is first of all worth noting that Wittgenstein would forcefully deny being a 'non-realist', but not out of a desire to defend realism. On the contrary, he would see each theory as simply one side in an idling philosophical debate which takes us away from what is most crucial, namely understanding the role played by religious concepts in the lives of the faithful. Talk of either realism or non-realism removes us from the concrete situation and places us in the sterility of the seminar room. Consider some words from *Zettel* about a comparable controversy:

One man is a convinced realist, another a convinced idealist and teaches his children accordingly. In such an important matter as the existence or non-existence of the external world they don't want to teach their children anything wrong. (Z §413)

Will the children of the idealist be taught differently? Will part of their education regarding the meaning of words like 'chair' and 'house' involve being told that these objects have no existence outside of the mind? Of course not. In which case the difference becomes only 'one of battle cry' (Z §414). Similarly, should we expect the religious education given to the children of the non-realist to vary from that given to those of the realist? The same pictures, the same texts, will be employed for both sets of children, and hence this conflict too is purely one of empty battle cries.

While this may be correct with regard to Wittgenstein's philosophical project, it would be hard to deny that more binds him to the content of the non-realist's case than to that of the realist. If the difference between the

realist and the non-realist is over whether theological language refers to extra-mundane entities and events, then we can with certainty say at least this: that he is not a realist. Similarly with neo-Wittgensteinian analyses: Phillips, for example, says that 'God' is 'not the name of an individual; it does not refer to anything'.²³ It would be hard to imagine Cupitt at all disagreeing with that.

But what of other important elements of non-realist faith? Another noticeable feature is its radical anthropocentrism, whereby religion is a human creation and must therefore be the servant of human beings. The demands of autonomy lead Cupitt to a rejection of the realist understanding of God, for an objective deity would be 'spiritually oppressive'.²⁴ By internalising God, the believer can lose the debilitating sense of being subject to an all-powerful tyrant, and can assimilate the virtues formerly predicated of that being. The idea of immortality is similarly rejected on humanistic lines, for once we discard the poisonous idea of future happiness in a world beyond this one, we can start 'to actualize religious values in this world';²⁵ that is, make a heaven on earth. It is to be noted that in its thoughts on God and immortality, non-realist faith mirrors the humanism of Feuerbach, who felt both that it was necessary to reclaim those human attributes of which God was a reified projection, and that concentration on a future transcendent realm should give way to concrete social engagement in this life. The aim is

to transform theologians into anthropologists, lovers of God into lovers of man, candidates for the next world into citizens of this world, religious and political flunkies of heavenly monarchs and lords into self-reliant citizens of the earth.²⁶

That Promethean humanism which underlies non-realist faith also finds expression in some of Wittgenstein's most rebellious thoughts: 'If I thought of God as another being like myself, outside myself, only infinitely more powerful, then I would regard it as my duty to defy him'.²⁷ On the other hand, the sense of human self-reliance is more frequently contradicted by the strongest of misanthropies, and a complete disregard for social improvement. Witness the following characteristic anecdote:

When, in the 'twenties, Russell wanted to establish, or join, a 'World Organization for Peace and Freedom' or something similar, Wittgenstein rebuked him so severely, that Russell said to him: 'Well, I suppose *you* would rather establish a World Organization for War and Slavery', to which Wittgenstein passionately assented: 'Yes, rather that, rather that!'²⁸

It was his dark attitude towards human nature which doubtless contributed to the failure of Wittgenstein's Tolstoyan religious experiment.

Whereas Tolstoy could turn to the peasants with love and admiration, Wittgenstein could see only louts and brutes. Possessed of such an outlook, any talk of a humanist religion would surely be dismissed by him as nothing more than crass vapidness.

Moreover, the humanism of the non-realist leads to a tendency to judge and, if necessary, to jettison religious pictures which, for one reason or another, come to be regarded as unhelpful or offensive. Cupitt, for example, speaks of 'modernising Christianity and getting it up to date', a process which involves, among other things, ridding it of any sexist symbolism and ordaining women. What allows such modernisation to occur is the recognition that 'it was we who made our religious beliefs, it is we who are responsible for them, and it is up to us to put them right'.²⁹ In stark opposition to this stands Wittgenstein's idea that we must not 'pick and choose' when it comes to religion,³⁰ a theme effectively amplified by Phillips when he claims that such radical theological surgery runs counter to the true spirit of faith. When religious pictures are judged by ethical or political criteria, this results, he says, in

a curious reversal of the emphasis needed in religion, where the believer does not want to say that he measures these pictures and finds that they are all right or finds that they are wanting. On the contrary, the believers wish to claim that it isn't they who measure the pictures, since in a sense, the pictures measure them; they are the measure in terms of which they judge themselves. They do not judge the picture.³¹

Such sentiments close the door to any revision of Christian faith. If someone feels, say, that the symbolism of religion portrays women in a negative light, or that it is in some manner morally unsound, that person is, according to the Wittgensteinian, in the position of Job, challenging the righteousness of the Lord, and to whom the Lord responded: 'Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? . . . Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?'³² It is this conviction that the believer is not to question the ways of God as revealed in the tradition that leads Cupitt ultimately to lament the inherent conservatism of Wittgenstein's religious thinking. It certainly entails that Wittgenstein cannot straightforwardly be counted among the allies of radical theology.

Cupitt has, nevertheless, built upon something he believes to have found in Wittgenstein's work, namely the creative power of the *word*, so that (as Winch puts it) 'the concepts we have settle for us the form of experience we have of the world'.³³ It is undeniably an element of Wittgenstein's thinking that religious discourse makes possible certain experiences, certain views of the world. And Rhees has, for example,

highlighted a number of affinities between the language of religion and the language of love which illustrate this fact.³⁴ A person can only experience love, can only fall in love and be broken up by it, because he has been taught the *language* of love. Of course it would be possible for a person not acquainted with language to be sexually aroused by another. But that would be a matter of biological impulse only. To *experience love* it is necessary to have been schooled in the language of love, a language which makes this particular experience possible. Rhees says the same is true of religion: it is inconceivable that a person could worship God and desire salvation without having been taught the words 'God', 'worship', 'salvation', and their meaning and role within the religious life. And that means, of course, being trained in a particular way, being schooled in religious discourse. Once this vocabulary has been mastered, experiences, attitudes and feelings otherwise closed to a person are opened up.

Though such a view can be discerned in Wittgenstein (in his views, for example, on the Last Judgement and its effects upon the believer), Cupitt presses the idea a good deal harder, maintaining that there is no experience – indeed, no reality – *outside* of language. Such a position we might call 'linguistic idealism'. Cupitt not only advocates it in his own work, but claims furthermore that it is Wittgenstein's own doctrine, so that in his later philosophy we are taught to 'see that language is the creator of everything. In the beginning was the Word.'³⁵ But, on the contrary, Wittgenstein is less impressed by language's claim to be ultimate creator. For him, as we will now see, it is *action* which receives this appellation: 'Language – I want to say – is a refinement, "in the beginning was the deed"' (CV 31).

5.3 THE NATURAL HISTORY OF RELIGION

Wittgenstein's emphasis on the primacy of deed over deliberation emerges strongly when he considers the nature of pain-language, particularly first-person expressions (*Äusserungen*) of pain (such as 'My leg hurts,' 'I have a toothache,' 'I am in pain'), and the relation of this language to pain-behaviour (groaning, crying, screaming). One held by a Tractarian view of language might be inclined to say that the sentence 'I am in pain' functions as a description of an inner state: I observe that I am experiencing a certain sensation, and identify this sensation as one of pain; I then use language publicly to report to others that I am experiencing this sensation. There are, naturally, occasions on which 'I am in pain' does function as a description (my doctor asks me what the trouble is and I reply, 'I have a pain in my left arm'). Nevertheless, Wittgenstein wants to say that the language of pain does not originate (and does not always or

even primarily function) in such a fashion, as a calm description of an inner feeling. Rather:

Words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour. (PI §244)

Think of what happens as a child matures and learns to control its feelings: instead of crying, the child says 'It hurts.' The word 'pain' is learned, then, not as a description of certain sensations and behaviour, but, rather, as a replacement for the non-verbal expression of pain.

Note how pain-language is seen here as a piece of *behaviour*, again illustrating Wittgenstein's wish fully to locate language within activity. The sentence 'He is in pain' is similarly connected with behaviour, connected with helping, pitying, worrying. And this helping of which the language is a refinement is itself instinctual. We do not (at least as a rule) *infer* from someone's behaviour that that person is in pain ('I groan like that when my body hurts, so she too must be experiencing a similar pain'). No, reason does not come into play on such occasions: 'It is a help here to remember that it is a primitive reaction to tend, to treat, the part that hurts when someone else is in pain; and not merely when oneself is' (Z §540). Wittgenstein continues:

But what is the word 'primitive' meant to say here? Presumably that this sort of behaviour is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based on it, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought. (Z §541)

The term 'primitive reaction' is introduced to emphasise just how much human behaviour is instinctive and pre-rational in character, and to undermine the rationalistic prejudice that action is always the result of thought. So much of what we do – embracing those we love, comforting those in pain, flinching from danger, brushing an insect off our skin, and so on – is entirely instinctual and with no grounding in thought whatsoever. All of which, of course, coheres with Wittgenstein's stated desire 'to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination' (OC §475).

To this, one might wish to say, 'This is all very well with regard to matters of pain and tending, for these are largely emotional matters, rather than matters of reason. But what of the more rational elements of human life? Surely Wittgenstein cannot be saying that these are instinctive?' But Wittgenstein is saying precisely this. Very sophisticated forms of discourse are, he claims, based upon primitive reactions and are thus

related to instinctive action just as the language of pain is related to pre-rational expressive behaviour. Consider the language of causation. One may want to say that the concept of cause and effect stems from the observation of events, so that, for example, I see on a number of occasions stones hitting windows and infer that the breaking of the window is caused by the stone's impact. Wittgenstein's idea of the origination of the concept is far less rationalistic. Indeed, a child is no less adept than a philosopher in employing causal language: 'Calling something "the cause" is like pointing and saying: "He's to blame"' (CE 410). Understanding the nature of causality is as immediate as that. He says:

There is a reaction which can be called 'reacting to the cause'. — We also speak of 'tracing' the cause; a simple case would be, say, following a string to see who is pulling at it. If I then find him — how do I know that he, his pulling, is the cause of the string's moving? Do I establish this by a series of experiments? (CE 416)

The question is patently rhetorical. No such experiments are required, nor is any thinking called for at all. One immediately and instinctively recognises the cause. All subsequent sophisticated discussion of the concept of causation (say, the Aristotelian distinction between material, formal, efficient, and final cause) are elaborations of, and are grafted on to, the basic, animal instinct of 'reacting to the cause'. Without that primitive reaction (were we not the kind of animal inclined to react in such a way), then the later sophisticated talk would have no life and no intelligibility. Moreover, any sceptical doubts concerning causation (such as those famously voiced by Hume) are, for Wittgenstein, secondary to a more fundamental acceptance: 'The primitive form of the language-game is certainty, not uncertainty. For uncertainty could never lead to action' (CE 420).

In the cases we have considered — experience of pain, tending others, tracing a cause — there is no (natural) place for experiment or speculation. We just act; and with certainty, a certainty which has something 'animal' about it. It is only when we are in the grip of rationalistic prejudices that we fail to see how animalistic, how instinctual, are our basic ways of acting and thinking. We think these practices need to be intellectually grounded and justified, but when we observe the behaviour of animals — a spider spinning a web, a cat stalking a mouse — a realisation dawns of the intellectual groundlessness of those actions, and of our own:

The squirrel does not infer by induction that it is going to need stores next winter as well. And no more do we need a law of induction to justify our actions or our predictions. (OC §287)

Pre-rational action assumes, then, a centre-stage position in Wittgenstein's later thinking. We have already seen that he wants to characterise instinctual, animalistic certainty as a form of life (cf. OC §§358, 359), and in *Zettel* we encounter the striking contention that language is merely 'an extension of primitive behaviour. (For our *language-game* is behaviour.) (Instinct)' (Z §545).

This is such a pronounced aspect of Wittgenstein's later thinking that we should expect it to enter into his reflections on religious belief and practice, and indeed, as hinted earlier, the idea of the primitive reaction does feature prominently in his criticism of Frazer. But moreover, it may well be that this stress on instinctual reactions and shared forms of life provides us with the very key we require to understand Wittgenstein's account of religion, an account which, as we can now see, offers us the outline of a natural history of religion.

The term 'natural history' is, of course, one borrowed from biological science, and, as such, a 'natural history of religion' could be expected to perform analogous tasks. Just as the natural history of a plant might specify how it originates, how it develops, and the conditions in which it thrives and languishes, so too with a natural history of *religion*. Treating religion as some kind of organism, it would be shown how religion develops and what social and psychological conditions must prevail in order for religion to survive. And characteristically, a natural history of religion will attempt to locate the origins of religion, not in some divine revelation to which human beings respond (there we would have *super-natural* history), but in something more mundane. Religion will be seen to have an origin in nature, or, more specifically, in *human* nature.

All these themes are to the fore in Hume's *Natural History of Religion*, in which he attempts to isolate the earliest form of religion. Finding this in polytheism, Hume proceeds to ask how the belief in many gods could have arisen. It is, he says, impossible to imagine that such a system of belief could have arisen from a rational consideration of the world. Rather, it arises out of fear: 'the first ideas of religion arose not from a contemplation of the works of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind'.³⁶ The motivations underlying the genesis of religion, therefore, were nothing as elevated as the noble desire to serve and worship a sublime deity, for it was instead the desperate hope for happiness and survival, and the anguished fear of misery and death, that filled this role. So much of the natural world — drought, disease, natural disasters — imperiled the existence of our forebears. Ignorant of the true causes of those things which determined their fate, these helpless folk formed primitive notions of great powers lying behind the capricious

phenomena of nature, and, by a natural human tendency to anthropomorphism, personified these powers. Thus the gods were born of a most fearful and vulgar superstition. The emotional origination of religion thus asserted, Hume illustrates the development of polytheism into monotheism, a transformation which occurs when one favoured deity in the pantheon is elevated, to the eventual exclusion of all the rest who are subsequently forgotten. And finally, having isolated fear and ignorance as the authors of religion, it will be the case that religion will thrive best in such frightful conditions. By the same token, advancement in both comfort and knowledge should gnaw at religion's very roots.

It is easy to see how such a natural history might fit into a wider criticism of religion, for thus to locate the original form of religious belief will be to demonstrate how it arises from primitive conditions, from the childhood of the human species. Certainly part of Frazer's motivation in tracing religion back to its genesis was to provide another weapon for the atheist's arsenal. Frazer shares much with Hume, principally the conviction that the existence of religion can be attributed in no small part to human frailty. For Hume this frailty is fear in the face of nature; for Frazer it is a frailty of intellect, resulting in the primitive's elaboration of a barren philosophy of life. Both, moreover, trace the development of religion through history and await eagerly the time when religious superstition will finally be discarded. In Frazer in particular, this attitude is tied to a great faith in historical progress and the continuing enlightenment of the human mind by means of science. If enlightenment is the bedfellow of secularism, then religion must be the darkest sign of ignorance, standing in the way of happiness and intellectual fulfilment. It must therefore be rejected.

Stated thus, it may seem queer to suggest that Wittgenstein might himself be offering something akin to a natural history of religion. Is he not appalled by Frazer's attack on religion? Does he not oppose those who view religion as mistaken science? Did he not condemn as 'the stupid superstition of our time' (RFGB 6) the view that religion arose from ignorance of the causes of natural phenomena? Indeed he did. And yet what is perhaps most fruitful in Wittgenstein's thinking on religious matters are those ideas, nascent in the *Remarks on Frazer* and which can be supplemented by his talk of primitive reactions, which suggest, just as much as Hume had earlier done, that the origins and nature of religion must be attributed to human nature, that its roots lie in humanity's natural responsiveness to the world.

Wittgenstein's natural history starts by noting some elemental ritual actions which are the outcome, not of thought, but purely of instinct. Recall two examples considered earlier: beating a tree when angry, and

kissing a loved one's image. The intellectualist account of such actions – that they theoretically grounded – is vehemently denied by Wittgenstein. Such rituals are not founded on opinions,³⁷ but are instead instances of what we might choose to call 'pure act': actions performed before any operation of intellect is brought into play. What experimental reasoning, what intellectual manoeuvre, did I undertake before kissing my loved one's picture when my heart bled with want of her? None, obviously. No thinking enters into the elemental acts of ritual. They hence conform to the character of the primitive reaction as described in *Zettel*: pre-linguistic, pre-rational behaviour, which is 'the prototype of thinking and not the result of thought' (Z §541). These ritual actions are no aberration, for (as instinctual) they are somehow natural to human beings, an observation which leads Wittgenstein to describe man as 'a ceremonious animal' (RFGB 7).

Although these ritualistic primitive reactions emerge spontaneously from human nature, their particular shape arises from human beings' interaction with their natural environment, conspicuous features of which Wittgenstein highlights thus:

That a man's shadow, which looks like a man, or that his mirror image, or that rain, thunderstorms, the phases of the moon, the change of seasons, the likenesses and differences of animals to one another and to human beings, the phenomena of death, of birth and of sexual life, in short everything a man perceives year in, year out around him, connected together in any variety of ways – that all this should play a part in his thinking (his philosophy) and his practices, is obvious, or in other words this is what we really know and find interesting. (RFGB 6)

None of these things are in themselves particularly surprising, for they are so familiar to us. There is, therefore, no real justification for saying that primitive man was led to religious belief because he was continually shocked and stunned by the events of the world, which he tried (pathetically) to explain. Nevertheless, it is those things which perennially surround a person that will function as the focus for his ritual expressions. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this point. In his comments on Frazer's account of the ancient worship of trees, Wittgenstein highlights, not the process of reasoning which might have led to the divinisation of the oak tree, but rather the mode of living which might naturally give rise to that belief.

It was not a trivial reason, for really there can have been no *reason*, that prompted certain races of mankind to venerate the oak tree, but only the fact that they and the oak were united in a community of life, and therefore it was not by choice that they arose together, but rather like the flea and the dog. (If fleas developed a rite, it would be based on the dog.)³⁸

That a religious attitude towards the oak tree could arise will not be a surprise for anyone who has read Frazer's awe-inspiring description of the massive forests dominating the environment of ancient Europe, forests which would profoundly have influenced the life and thought of 'our rude ancestors who dwelt dispersed under the gloomy shadow or in the open glades and clearings of the forest'.³⁹ For Wittgenstein, it was the sense of dependence on, and life within, the great forests that gave rise to ritual expression in the form of tree worship. In the gloom of the forest the trees would have been the geographical and spiritual parameters of one's life. Nothing could be more natural than that these should have become the focus of the rituals and beliefs of a ceremonious animal.

For a second example, we can note Wittgenstein's response to Drury when the latter related his shock at encountering, in a temple in Egypt, a sexually explicit carving of the god Horus with an erect phallus, ejaculating into a bowl. Wittgenstein is puzzled as to why such a representation should cause alarm and surprise:

Why in the world shouldn't they have regarded with awe and reverence that act by which the human race is perpetuated? Not every religion has to have St. Augustine's attitude to sex. Why, even in our culture marriages are celebrated in a church; everyone present knows what is going to happen that night, but that doesn't prevent it being a religious ceremony.⁴⁰

Sex is such a prominent aspect of human life that it is perfectly natural for countless rites of passage to be focused upon it (witness the vast preponderance of rituals surrounding puberty, menstruation and wedlock). Along with birth and death, it is the most obvious focus for religious expression, and it is therefore no accident that christenings, marriages and funerals constitute the three most important ritual occasions in a person's life, marking their arrival in the world, their function within it, and their departure from it.

It is not human beings alone, of course, who experience the great trinity of birth, sex and death, nor do we alone interact with our natural environment. The lives of other animals are bounded in the same manner and yet it is only human beings who engage in ritual activity to mark that condition; it is only this ceremonious animal that has such ritualistic instincts, that reacts to images of people, mimics desired events, and so on.⁴¹ We might say, then, that ritual phenomena is a mode of our particular form of life, and that it is, therefore, something typical of human beings, something animal lying beyond justification or critique. Here we can see how the notion of a form of life enters into Wittgenstein's account of religion, though not as a means of characterising a religious person's way of life, nor yet as a way of protecting religion from outside attack. The form of life motif, rather, works alongside the idea of a primitive reaction so as to expose that the roots of religion reside

within human nature. To speak of a form of life in this context is to draw attention to those instinctive reactions which are further developed by culture into larger scale religious systems.

To see how this process of development might occur, we can return to the relation of language to pain-behaviour. The initial non-linguistic expression of pain is not the result of any intellectual operation, but is an instinctual primitive reaction. Once language has been grafted on to such expressions, a conceptual space is created within which a fuller articulation, development and indeed experiencing of pain can be effected. Similarly, further development of the primitive reaction of tending another brings about medical care, as well as great creative thought, such as the compassion-rooted moral philosophy of Schopenhauer. And here it is essential to be reminded that without the primitive reaction of tending, no hospitals would have been established, no ethical praise for mercy, for such thoughts and endeavours would be entirely alien to us. Hence Wittgenstein's desire to trace the origin of the language-game to 'a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop' (CV 31).

These notions are fully reiterated in Wittgenstein's analysis of religion. As we have seen, the reactions he focuses on are those elemental acts such as the instinctive destruction of an image, and as with the instinctive expression of pain, this primitive behaviour opens up a conceptual space in which a people's desires, fears and views of life can be formulated. That initial reaction, therefore, makes possible the development of a whole view of the world. What is impossible to imagine is that religion might have existed *without* those elemental actions, without that natural rituality. This is a point implicitly present in Wittgenstein's treatment of the doctrine of the Last Judgement. Certainly one is taught from an early age the picture of God judging one's actions at the end of time, and this picture itself gives rise to certain feelings within the believer. But the notion of a Last Judgement could never have come about without some prior feelings of responsibility, guilt and dread. Indeed, that eschatological doctrine is a product of those primitive reactions: 'Why shouldn't one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in a Last Judgement?' (LC 58). Norman Malcolm's reflections on the ontological argument reach a similar conclusion, when he suggests that the very idea of a merciful God could only have grown out of anterior feelings of guilt and hope for forgiveness. In such a fashion, quite sophisticated religious beliefs are to be understood by tracing them back to natural human feelings and actions, so that a religious system is precisely 'an extension of primitive behaviour' (Z §545), or, as Wittgenstein says in the *Remarks on Frazer*, 'only . . . a later extension of instinct'.⁴² Wittgenstein's natural history of religion thus focuses on the development of religion from its

roots in instinctive human behaviour, and shows, via the image of man as a ceremonious animal, that this primitive behaviour is definitive of humanity, filling as large a role in the natural history of human beings as does eating, drinking, procreation, playing games, singing, making art, and so on.

To connect religion so intimately with human nature brings with it not just a new perspective on religion. It has also the consequence of throwing light on what it is to be human. This illumination can be disquieting. What happens, for example, when we uncover instances of ritual killing, such as the Aztecs' mass sacrifices of children, or the burning of people during the fire-festivals which formerly occurred throughout Europe? If we think, as Frazer did, that religion is principally an attempt to understand and control the natural world, then we may be able to dismiss the abiding significance of such sacrifices, which may now be seen to belong simply to the errors of our forebears, and to have sprung 'from a mistaken theory of the solar system'.⁴³ The comfort of such a conclusion is not open to Wittgenstein. If religion springs from human nature, then human beings are that type of strange and sinister creature that burn people alive so as to mark special days. This may well provoke dismay about our natures, and such worries do not disappear simply because human sacrifice is no longer a feature of our culture. The readiness with which a nation may scapegoat a minority community, or even that the killing of animals may be undertaken for sporting pleasure, serves as a constant reminder of the violent propensities dormant within human nature. Now possessed of such unease, we may feel that burning an image of Guy Fawkes on 5 November is less frivolous than it had previously seemed: 'the fact that on certain days children burn a straw man could make us uneasy . . . Strange that they should celebrate by burning a *man*!' (RFGB 18). And even neglecting this undercurrent of violence, religion, as a manifestation of something quintessentially human, reveals to us something queer about the nature of us as a species. What can we make of the fact that we venerate certain images (and destroy others), that we hold certain days more significant than others, that we engage in peculiar rituals? Truly, we are a strange animal. Hence why Wittgenstein's thinking on religion rests ultimately on 'the thought of man and his past, . . . the strangeness of what I see in myself and in others, what I have seen and have heard' (RFGB 18).⁴⁴

5.4 ATHEISM

That Wittgenstein traces the roots of religion to instinctual impulses might lead some to suspect that he is engaged in a critical enterprise, in

the same way that Hume's denial of the rational grounding of faith leads him to a view of religion as little more than 'sick men's dreams'.⁴⁵ These suspicions may be compounded by the manner in which religion is seen to be a thoroughly human product, an expression of human nature rather than a relationship with transcendent realities: were man not a ceremonious animal, there would be no God. On the other hand, Wittgenstein's unswervingly respectful attitude does not suggest anti-religious frenzy, and if his emphasis on primitive reactions in religious concept-formation denies religion an intellectually respectable foundation, then, as we have seen, he denies the concept of causation such a foundation also, something which does not lead to an abandonment of the language of cause and effect. Similarly, religion is not singled out for attention when conceived as a product of our particular form of life. Mathematics, generally regarded as independent of whatever human beings might think or be capable of, is thoroughly humanised by Wittgenstein, who comes to see it as 'an anthropological phenomenon' (RFM 180): we could not engage in geometry were we, like other animals, unable to distinguish a triangle from a rectangle, while the mathematical use of negation is simply 'an ethnological fact – it's something to do with the way we live' (LFM 249). In this respect, then, Wittgenstein's later account of religion differs little in character from his treatment of all other concepts and activities, none of which emerge from reasoning (cf. OC §475) and all of which are products of the manner in which humans live, and the capabilities we possess.

It would, none the less, be somewhat perplexing were someone to accept all that Wittgenstein has to say about religion in his later period and yet still be able to continue in his or her faith, or that a person might be converted to Christianity having understood it in Wittgenstein's terms.⁴⁶ Once, that is, one had come to a recognition that Christianity is a set of admonishing pictures tied into a particular way of living, and once the fountainhead of religion is located in an instinctive way of reacting to the world, could one's faith in God feasibly remain intact? In other words, though Wittgenstein's attention to the depth grammar of religious discourse may well have revealed its true nature, does not a person's own belief depend for its continued life on an acceptance of the surface grammar of religion? Do not believers have to think that there is a God, that there will be an afterlife, that there have been miraculous occurrences, and so on, in order to engage in the religious life? As John Searle has remarked, 'You have to be a very *recherché* sort of religious intellectual to keep praying if you don't think there is any real God outside the language who is listening to your prayers.'⁴⁷ Our question now then is whether atheism is the inevitable consequence of an acceptance of Wittgenstein's approach to religious belief, and what kind of atheism this could be.

This matter can profitably be addressed by considering the character of Wittgenstein's personal religious position. We have already had cause to explore those passages from *Culture and Value* illustrating his inclination towards belief. Yet this inclination is of a somewhat idiosyncratic order, and appears to arise from traits of Wittgenstein's own distinctive character, rather than either bespeaking wholehearted commitment or describing a faith which others might plausibly decide to embrace. Hence, from Norman Malcolm's *Memoir*:

Wittgenstein did once say that he thought that he could understand the conception of God, in so far as it is involved in one's awareness of one's own sin and guilt. He added that he could *not* understand the conception of a *Creator*. I think that the ideas of Divine judgement, forgiveness, and redemption had some intelligibility for him, as being related in his mind to feelings of disgust with himself, an intense desire for purity, and a sense of the helplessness of human beings to make themselves better. But the notion of a being *making the world* had no intelligibility for him at all.⁴⁸

Similarly, Wittgenstein feels unable to call Jesus 'Lord', '*Because I do not believe that he will come to judge me; because that says nothing to me*' (CV 33). And then we have what is perhaps the most significant of his expressions of unbelief:

I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.⁴⁹

This comment encapsulates two determining features of Wittgenstein's approach to religious belief: first, the extent to which he was drawn with awe towards the religious view of the world; and second, his own inability fully to share in that perspective.

But why did he feel unable to believe? One possibility is perhaps contained in Wittgenstein's reflections on why he could not pray: 'I cannot kneel to pray because it's as though my knees were stiff. I am afraid of dissolution (of my own dissolution), should I become soft' (CV 56). To Malcolm, this suggests that Wittgenstein's lack of faith may have arisen from the completeness with which he engaged in the philosophical task, an engagement which he feared would be fatally disturbed were he to turn to the prayerful life of faith.⁵⁰ While that is an interesting thought, it does not fully convince, for Wittgenstein made many attempts precisely to extricate himself from the philosophical work which so tormented his mind. It seems therefore unlikely that it would have been a desire to continue with that work which would have resulted in his denial of faith. On the contrary, the religious life might have offered

the perfect way out. Consider now a very different possibility, arising from yet another of Drury's recollections:

We called round at my brother's architectural office in Bedford Circus . . . One of the assistant draughtsmen was designing an altar cross. Wittgenstein became quite agitated: 'I couldn't for the life of me design a cross in this age; I would rather go to hell than try and design a cross.'⁵¹

It may well be, then, that it was something about the character of 'this age' which constrained his religious impulses. Further attention to this may confirm our earlier suggestion that, far from Wittgenstein being the fideistic friend of religion hoped for by apologists and derided by Nielsen, the consequence of his later thought on religion is an unavoidable acceptance of atheism. In order to see why this is the case we need to focus upon two issues: Wittgenstein's view of religion as a product of human culture; and his pessimistic analysis of 'this age'.

We have already seen how Wittgenstein considers religion to have its roots in human nature, but he also sees it crucially as giving expression to, and glorifying, the values lying at the heart of a particular culture. This is a point well made in the *Remarks on Frazer*. Frazer has described the nature of a kingship in which a candidate for the title must kill the incumbent and will himself eventually be killed. Rather than uncovering the motives and beliefs which might have led to such a rule of succession, Wittgenstein stresses instead that this practice manifests a principle dear to that culture, that principle being 'the majesty of death' (RFGB 3). A nation of cowards could never hold such a value, and thus no such rule of succession would decide its kingship. Similarly, if a culture's members ceased to have any sense of responsibility for wrongdoing, the idea of a final judgement could never enter into their religious beliefs. The fate of religious belief is not unaffected, then, by the changes a culture might undergo; and if a culture dies, then its gods die with it. The position of religion is hence precarious, being at the mercy of the twists and turns of history and culture.

It is precisely here that Wittgenstein's stark cultural pessimism makes its uncomfortable presence felt on the very possibility of religious belief. To see why this should be so, we need to pay a little attention to the thought of one of the greatest influences on Wittgenstein's philosophy: Oswald Spengler. In *The Decline of the West*, Spengler offers a vision of history diametrically at odds with those progressive accounts (such as that offered by Hegel) which optimistically detect in history a movement away from ignorance and barbarism and towards ever-improving societal arrangement and intellectual achievement. Rejecting that view of one linear history, Spengler saw instead:

the drama of a *number* of mighty Cultures, each springing with primitive strength from the soil of a mother-region to which it remains firmly bound throughout its whole life-cycle; each stamping its material, its mankind, in *its own* image; each having *its own* idea, *its own* passions, *its own* life, will and feeling, *its own* death . . . Each Culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay, and never return.⁵²

A culture is here envisaged as an organism, and it can be analysed in an analogous fashion to the way the life-cycle of a plant can be described. If we observe the life of a flower, we see it first as a little shoot springing from its mother-soil; its bud appears, and it then blossoms before withering away into death. Likewise, says Spengler, a culture emerges energetically, and brings forth great art, music, poetry, metaphysical systems, *and its own religion*, before all possibilities of artistic creation disappear as it wilts, as our Western culture has, into materialism and triviality. Although religion is a mark of the vibrancy of a culture, it has for Spengler no life independent of it, and hence its destiny is to die. The possibility of belief is no longer open in an age such as ours, not even to those who mourn its passing. They must accept that the possibility for belief has vanished, for to do otherwise would be akin to the dying flower longing to bloom again:

The megalopolitan is irreligious; this is part of his being, a mark of his historical position. Bitterly as he may feel the inner emptiness and poverty, earnestly as he may long to be religious, it is out of his power to be so. All religiousness in the Megalopolis rests upon self-deception.⁵³

The lesson from Spengler is that the possibility of religious belief is determined by what is allowed and what is disallowed by a culture's stage of development. And given that we are living 'a late life',⁵⁴ given that our culture is in a state of decline, we have no option but to accept atheism.

Wittgenstein made no secret of his own indebtedness to Spengler (cf. CV 19), and it is remarkable just how much his thought is permeated with the motif of *decline*. In his preface to the *Investigations*, for example, he speaks of 'the darkness of this time' (PI p. viii); he considered the notion of scientific progress 'a delusion' and 'a trap' (CV 56); and a comparison between the great figures of our time (Russell, Freud and Einstein) and those of a previous era (Beethoven, Schubert and Chopin) led him distressedly to bewail 'the terrible degeneration that had come over the human spirit in the course of only a hundred years'.⁵⁵ More significantly for our purposes, however, Wittgenstein's perception of this decline led him to a re-evaluation of the philosophical enterprise. When he returned to Cambridge in 1929, Wittgenstein spent much time considering what the

proper role of philosophy should be, eventually arriving at the idea of a therapeutic technique aimed at removing confused metaphysical problems. Concerning this transformation of philosophy from a quasi-mystical and perhaps visionary subject into a method, he says:

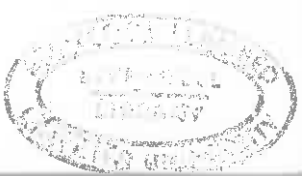
The nimbus of philosophy has been lost. For we now have a method of doing philosophy, and can speak of *skilful* philosophers . . . But once a method has been found the opportunities for the expression of personality are correspondingly restricted. The tendency of our age is to restrict such opportunities; this is characteristic of an age of declining culture or without culture. (WLL 21)

One is struck by the extent to which Wittgenstein's philosophical project meets the restrictions laid down by Spengler concerning what is and is not possible in an age of decline. Visionary metaphysics, art, poetry, are all debarred and technics elevated in their place.⁵⁶ Wittgenstein's transformation of philosophy into a method for destroying metaphysics seems, then, to have been enacted on Spenglerian advice. And if Wittgenstein's view of the nature of philosophy was dictated by his reading of Spengler, then it is not unlikely that he would have been of the opinion that religion too is at the mercy of culture's decline, and that faith was no longer a living option in 'the darkness of this time', a time in which science dominates and sends our wondering spirit to sleep (cf. CV 5).

The conclusions thus reached can only be unsettling for believers. We have already seen that it would be hard for Wittgenstein's later account of religion to be embraced by the faithful, and yet it is this historical undercurrent of his thinking, this intuition that religion is not possible in our time, which gives his account a distinctly atheistic character. This is not an atheism based on denying the existence of super-empirical realities (religion never was about that), nor is it the rebellious atheism of an Ivan Karamazov, nor yet is it the positivistic atheism of denying sense to religious propositions. It is, rather, a despairing, apocalyptic atheism that arises from Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion, the frustrated and bitter recognition that the passionate beauty of the religious life is no longer open to us. We are, of course, still ceremonious animals, so may continue to mark occasions with strange festivities and with ceremony, and yet the possibility of living one's life in relationship with God must be surrendered. And as stoic resignation has been seen to be definitive of faith, this final renunciation may itself be regarded as an act of the deepest piety.

NOTES

1. Wittgenstein, quoted in M. O'C. Drury, 'Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein', in Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 90.



2. Wittgenstein, in *ibid.*, p. 86.
3. See J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), especially pp. 251–3.
4. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 291.
5. Wittgenstein, quoted in Drury, 'Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein', p. 90.
6. D. Z. Phillips, *Faith after Foundationalism* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 10.
7. Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 99.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
10. Wittgenstein, quoted in Drury, 'Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein', p. 86.
11. Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 87.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
16. On Tolstoy's treatment of the acceptance of death, see his story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960).
17. Wittgenstein, quoted in Drury, 'Conversations with Wittgenstein', in Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 114.
18. Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 41 (letter dated 2 January 1921).
19. Leo Tolstoy, *Twenty-three Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), p. 181.
20. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1968), pp. 124–5.
21. Anthony Freeman, *God in Us* (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. 24.
22. Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (London: BBC Books, 1984), p. 225.
23. D. Z. Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), p. 148.
24. Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 8.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
26. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 23.
27. Wittgenstein, quoted in Drury, 'Conversations with Wittgenstein', p. 108.
28. Paul Engelmann, quoted in Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 211.
29. Don Cupitt, 'Anti-Realist Faith', in J. Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 54.
30. See Rush Rhees, 'Picking and Choosing', in D. Z. Phillips (ed.), *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 307–17.
31. D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 117–18.
32. Job 38:2,4 (King James Version).
33. Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 15. Note also Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*: 'the limits of language . . . mean the limits of my world' (TLP 5.62).
34. See Rush Rhees, 'Religion and Language', in *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy*, pp. 39–49.
35. Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, p. 220.

36. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 139.
37. 'The characteristic feature of primitive man, I believe, is that he does not act from *opinions* he holds about things' (RFGB 12).
38. Wittgenstein, 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', in C. G. Luckhardt (ed.), *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives* (Hassocks: The Harvester Press, 1979), pp. 72–3.
39. J. G. Frazer, *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, (London: Macmillan, 1911), vol. II, p. 350.
40. Wittgenstein, quoted in Drury, 'Conversations with Wittgenstein', p. 148.
41. Some might choose to take issue with this, detecting hints of ritual in the behaviour of non-human animals (see Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (London: Methuen, 1967), pp. 47–71). Such a discovery would not undermine Wittgenstein's thoughts, however, and would in fact serve only to bolster his idea of ritual as a primitive reaction originating in instinct.
42. Wittgenstein, 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', p. 80.
43. Frazer, *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, vol. I, p. 315.
44. There is insufficient space here for a full consideration of Wittgenstein's fascinating thoughts on human sacrifice as these emerge in his treatment of the Beltane festival, but see *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, pp. 13–18; Frank Cioffi, 'Wittgenstein and the Fire-Festivals', in *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 80–106; Brian R. Clack, *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 135–54.
45. Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, p. 184.
46. Wittgenstein's earlier account seems to me perfectly compatible with religious belief, for it suggests that lying beyond the mundane world is something 'higher', something ineffable, and that account therefore shares much with classic mysticism as defined by William James (see *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Fontana, 1960), pp. 367–8).
47. John Searle, conversation with Bryan Magee in the latter's *The Great Philosophers* (London: BBC Books, 1987), p. 345.
48. Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 59.
49. Wittgenstein, quoted in Drury, 'Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein', p. 79.
50. See Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 22.
51. Drury, 'Conversations with Wittgenstein', p. 134.
52. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1926), p. 21.
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 409–10.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
55. Wittgenstein, quoted in Drury, 'Conversations with Wittgenstein', p. 112.
56. See Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, p. 41.