CHAPTER THREE

WITTGENSTEIN: CONTOURS OF DEPTH GRAMMAR

I won’t refuse to talk to you about God or about religion
And woe to those who say nothing concerning Thee
just because the chatterboxes talk a lot of nonsense.¹

***

What do I know about God and the purpose of life?..
Something about the world is problematic, which we call its meaning …
To pray is to think about the meaning of life …
To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning…²

              Ludwig Wittgenstein

Introduction

In the foregoing chapter, I made an attempt to elucidate the
hermeneutic character of understanding and meaning in religious language

¹ This was, according to Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein’s response to M.O’C. Drury on being
told that G.E. Moore had nothing to say on the philosophy of religion. The second and
third lines of Wittgenstein’s response are a quote from Saint Augustine’s Confessions -
Press, p.104.

with reference to the first philosopher of the ‘trinitarian ladder’, that is, Ādi Śaṅkara. I did this by elucidating the hermeneutic contours of the mahāvākyā ‘tat tvam asi’ within the horizon of Ādi Śaṅkara’s central philosophical and religious motif, that is, brahma-jijnāsā. In this chapter, my aim is to engage the second philosopher of the ‘trinitarian ladder’, that is, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) in order to elucidate the phenomenon of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language.

**Interpreting Wittgenstein: The Problematic of Hermeneutic Multiplism**

It is common knowledge that Wittgenstein has not given us any systematic philosophical treatment of the phenomenon called religion. Instead what we have is laconically brief sayings, comments and remarks on religion scattered in his works. And they are amenable to different and sometimes conflicting interpretations. The problem becomes all the more complex when one takes a cursory look at the extant literature on Wittgenstein. For, it throws up the challenge of what I call hermeneutic ‘multiplism’. By hermeneutic multiplism, I mean the possible and actual multiple interpretations of a given text – by ‘text’ what is meant is any object of interpretation - and the resultant tension between some contending interpretations is looked at from the angle of opposition and not exclusivity.
And multiplism does accommodate more than one interpretation. But in appropriating a given interpretation of a given text as desirable, the criteria used are multivalent values like reasonableness, appropriateness or aptness.\(^3\) The availability of the multiple interpretations of Wittgenstein – which may be called ‘the problem of many Wittgensteins’ - which, one encounters in the literature on Wittgenstein can be briefly indicated as follows.

At first, one has to grapple with the problem of identifying the early or the ‘first Wittgenstein’, the later or the ‘second Wittgenstein’ and now what has come to be known as the ‘third Wittgenstein’. This problem can be seen in the right perspective if one were to place it in the matrix of what is called the ‘continuity thesis.’ Philosophers like Anthony Kenny who subscribe to ‘the continuity thesis’ maintain that though the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* can justifiably be regarded as the early and later works of Wittgenstein, it is incorrect to hold that they represent two wholly dissimilar

and disconnected philosophies. Rather there are many connections between the earlier and later work and even they share some common assumptions.\(^4\)

Contrary to this view, most philosophers speak of two distinctive phases in the evolution of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. They assign the *Tractatus* to the early or the ‘first Wittgenstein’ and the *Philosophical Investigations* is considered to be the work of the later or the ‘second Wittgenstein.’ In the horizon of current scholarship, some philosophers object to this conceptual periodization and arbitrary historicization of Wittgenstein’s thought and claim that it is based on a mistaken reading of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Further they claim that Part II of the *Investigations* belongs to the ‘third Wittgenstein’. This idea of the ‘third Wittgenstein’ has been vigorously advanced by philosopher Daniele Moyal-Sharrock, and is supported by the writings of G.H. von Wright and P.M.S. Hacker.\(^5\)


Further, some other thinkers like Stanley Cavell, John Mcdowell, Martin Stone, Alice Crary, and Cora Diamond have made a strong case for what has come to be known as the ‘New Wittgenstein.’ They consider Wittgenstein’s work as a unified whole but characterised by the consistent lack of any ideology. And they emphasise the therapeutic approach in Wittgenstein’s philosophical enterprise. These philosophers focus on the methodological unity and not the thematic unity in Wittgenstein’s philosophical works. For they claim that the corpus of Wittgenstein’s works offers significant continuity but not thematic unity. In this important sense, these philosophers challenge the very idea of a decisive break in Wittgenstein’s mode of philosophizing between the Tractatus and his later writings. Though there is no homogeneity in the claims of these philosophers, some common points emerge from their writings. In the words of Alice Crary:


…they agree in suggesting that Wittgenstein’s primary aim in philosophy is … a therapeutic one. [They] have in common an understanding of Wittgenstein as aspiring, not to advance metaphysical theories, but rather to help us work ourselves out of confusions we become entangled in when philosophizing. More specifically, they agree in representing him as tracing the sources of our philosophical confusions to our tendency … to think that we need to survey language from an external point of view.\(^7\)

A known dissenter of this unorthodox interpretation of Wittgenstein is P. M. S. Hacker.\(^8\) Responding to these contemporary unorthodox interpretations of Wittgenstein, Hacker remarks that such an approach is the most curious way of engaging a great work of an author and of dismissing the philosophical insights that it contains. Further he qualifies this approach as

---

\(^7\) See Alice Crary “Introduction” in Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds.) *The New Wittgenstein*, p.1.

‘deconstructive’ interpretation and finds that the logic of this new approach is self-contradictory:

In so far as ‘deconstruction’ subscribes to the hermeneutic principle that an author never says what he means or means what he says, this epithet seems eminently suitable to characterize many of the tactical moves of the proponents of this interpretation in disregarding what Wittgenstein actually wrote and said about what he had written.⁹

My aim here is not to adjudicate between these multiple interpretations of Wittgenstein, so as to determine which one is more appropriate or apt. For that would be beyond the scope of the present discussion.

The problem of ‘many Wittgensteins’ becomes all the more intriguing in the domain of Wittgenstein’s engagement with religion. As I have already noted, Wittgenstein does not provide us with a systematic study of the phenomenon of religion. This does not mean that he was indifferent to the reality of religion. On the contrary, his later works are sprinkled with

laconically brief sayings and conceptually pregnant remarks embodying his deep interest in religion. A paradigmatic case in point is his thought provoking and spontaneous response to M. O’C. Drury on hearing that G.E. Moore had nothing to say on the philosophy of religion. Wittgenstein said to Drury: “I won’t refuse to talk to you about religion.” And more significantly Wittgenstein chose to preface this remark with the celebrated quote from Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*: “And woe to those who say nothing concerning Thee, just because the chatterboxes talk a lot of nonsense.”¹⁰ More importantly, in the *Tractatus Notebooks*, he writes:

> What do I know about God and the purpose of life? … something about the world is problematic, which we call its meaning …to pray is to think about the meaning of life …to believe in God means to see that life has a meaning …¹¹

Further, Wittgenstein is said to have confided in his friend Parak: “I’d most like to be a priest, but when I’m a teacher I can read the Gospel with the

Another important remark which embodies Wittgenstein’s deep interest in religion is that he viewed his entire philosophical work analogous to a deeply religious act which is free from any sense of vanity. In his own words:

I have had a letter from an old friend in Austria, a priest. In it he says he hopes my work will go well, if it should be God’s will. Now that is all I want: if it should be God’s will. Bach wrote on the title page of his *Orgelbeuchlein*, ‘To the Glory of the most high God, and that my neighbour maybe benefited thereby’. This is what I would have liked to say about my work.\[13\]

Such remarks and sayings of Wittgenstein have been the object of multiple and even contradictory interpretations by Wittgensteinians. To understand the problem, I shall indicate briefly a couple of such interpretations.

The classic case is the intellectually engaging debate between Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch on the significance of the reported saying


of Wittgenstein: “I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.”\textsuperscript{14} Norman Malcolm interprets it in this way:

Wittgenstein did much religious thinking: but religious thoughts do not figure in his detailed treatments of the philosophical problems. It would seem, therefore, that when he spoke of seeing those problems ‘from a religious point of view’, he did not mean that he conceived of them as religious problems, but instead that there was a similarity, or similarities, between his conception of philosophy and something that is characteristic of religious thinking.\textsuperscript{15}

Thinking along this line of interpretation, Malcolm develops four analogies to show the link between Wittgenstein’s philosophical outlook and a religious view of the world. Malcolm goes on to say:

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 94.

The first analogy pertains to the concept of explanation: how it reaches a limit, and when pressed further loses its sense. A second analogy is the following: … Wittgenstein said that sometimes he ‘wondered at the existence of the world’, and that he thought that this was the experience of ‘seeing the world as a miracle’. Religious writers often speak of ‘the miracle of God’s world’. …A third analogy is the following: religious emotion, thinking, practice, are an expression of the conviction that something is basically wrong with human beings. …There is a kind of moral and spiritual illness that possesses us, even when we think we are healthy. …This is how a genuinely religious person thinks and feels about himself. …The fourth analogy is the following: Wittgenstein’s conception of religious belief attached no value to intellectual proofs of God’s existence, and very little value to theological formulations in general.16

In response to Malcolm, Peter Winch offers a vigorous and emphatic dissenting note on the above interpretation given by Malcolm regarding the ‘the religious view’ of Wittgenstein. The main points of Peter Winch’s

criticism can be summarised as follows. First, Malcolm mistakenly takes the phrase *every problem* in the saying of Wittgenstein to be *philosophical problems*. This for Peter Winch is a misleading interpretation of Wittgenstein’s saying. Second, Malcolm makes the mistake of ascribing to Wittgenstein the exclusion of philosophical problems from other non-philosophical problems. Third, Peter Winch contends that given the obsessively precise way Wittgenstein expressed himself, Wittgenstein actually did not speak to Drury of seeing an analogy between philosophical problems and religious problems. Peter Winch then concludes that it is a mistake to say that for Wittgenstein philosophical problems were analogous to religious questions. Though I am inclined to go along with the general interpretative framework of Malcolm, my intention here is not to adjudicate between these two ‘Wittgensteins’ but rather to emphasise the problem of hermeneutic multiplism.

Another engaging debate in deciphering the relation between Wittgenstein and religion manifests itself in the writings of Wittgensteinians like D.Z. Phillips and Stephen Mulhall. The Welsh philosopher D.Z. Phillips has developed what has come to be known as’ the contemplative philosophy
of religion’ in the Wittgensteinian tradition as against ‘metaphysical’ or ‘philosophical’ theism which stands as the dominant paradigm or school in the philosophy of religion in the Anglo-American world. According to Phillips, the aim of the contemplative philosophy of religion is to do conceptual justice to all varieties of religious life and to give a perspicuous representation of it. And more importantly, the contemplative philosophy of religion seeks not to represent religious life as mere building blocks for abstract metaphysical theories. Stephen Mulhall disputes the contemplative reading of Wittgenstein and says that Phillips makes the mistake of privileging a particular way of reading Wittgenstein over other ways. Mulhall, taking recourse to Phillips, speaks of the three inter-related ways of reading Wittgenstein and contends that one cannot arbitrarily privilege one reading over other ways of reading. Mulhall interrogates the ‘contemplative Wittgenstein’ of Phillips in this way:


In Phillips’ view, the contemplative Wittgenstein is not only, as it were, the true Wittgenstein…it is also a conception of philosophizing after Wittgenstein that returns the subject to one of its perennial, and certainly to one of its originating concerns. …To put the matter in the terms provided by the epigraph to Phillip’s book: When Wittgenstein tells us that ‘My ideal is certain coolness. A Temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them’, exactly what temperature does he think is appropriate to any properly philosophical contemplation of these passions?\(^{20}\)

Again, my aim here is not to adjudicate between these two interpretations, rather to emphasise the character of hermeneutic multiplism in reading Wittgenstein.

From the foregoing discussion one should not conclude that one has to grope in the dark to decipher the sense and significance of

Wittgenstein’s sayings on religion. As noted earlier, it is true that Wittgenstein’s published work is too fragmentary to provide clear answers to the complex issue of religious belief and language. But one can come up with, if tread carefully, what I call the hermeneutic contours of the ‘depth grammar’ of religious language in Wittgenstein. And these contours have to be drawn carefully on the mosaic of what Wittgenstein has said on the reality of religious language. In fact, Wittgenstein himself in one of his celebrated sayings compared religious thinking with the precarious act of tightrope walking. Further he employs the metaphor of ‘walking on nothing but air’ to picture religious thinking. In his own words:

An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it.  

Such an attempt is not philosophically easy, for Wittgenstein further says that “… if you want to stay within the religious sphere you must struggle.”

Before I intend to show the possibility of tightrope walking in religious thinking by deciphering the ‘depth grammar’ of religious language, I want to make a prefatory note on the problematic of faith and reason. For, this would enhance our understanding of the Wittgensteinian conception of the depth grammar as the key to the problem of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language.

**The Problematic of Faith and Reason**

Any serious philosophical inquiry into religion and religious language has to take note of the problematic between faith and reason. A cursory look at the web of religio-philosophical reflections both in the Indic

---


and the Abrahamic traditions would show that any hermeneutic enterprise aimed at elucidating religious utterances involve many issues that are ontological, epistemological and semantic in nature. It is generally presumed that religious utterances make truth claims about a reality that exists independently of one’s beliefs, attitudes and conceptual schemes. The question that arises here is our ontological commitment to such realities in our attempt to understand these religious utterances. This leads one to the vexed question of religious realism and non-realism (anti-realism). As John Hick has contended “the debate between the realist and non-realist understandings of religious language exposes the most fundamental of all issues in the philosophy of religion today.” Further Roger Trigg says that if one examines the texture of the perennial problems in the classical philosophy of religion, then the fulcrum is that of the unresolved hiatus between the realist and the anti-realist. In his own words: “realism and its opponent involve the most basic of all philosophical disputes. How can we

characterise the nature of reality, and what is its connection with our understanding?”

Another instantiation of this deeply entrenched problematic of faith and reason is the cluster of difficulties that stem from the view that there are no sufficient grounds to suppose that religious statements are true. That is to say that we have no effective way of determining their truth-value. For Clifford, “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” In sharp contrast to this, Tertullian, a second century prominent Christian thinker, advanced the dictum “I believe, because it is absurd.” A similar parallel can be drawn between the passionate saying of Saint Augustine (354-430), the first great Christian philosopher: *credo ut intelligam* that means ‘I believe, that I may understand’. For Saint Anselm (1033-1109), ‘the Father of Scholasticism’,

---


what is important is *Fides quaerens intellectum* meaning, ‘faith seeking understanding’.\(^{28}\) In the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) one is led to investigate the a priori conditions of the possibility of our experience of an objective world by critiquing traditional metaphysics, natural theology and the arguments for God’s existence. For Kant it is impossible for human reason to attain speculative knowledge of God, hence it is not necessary to demonstrate the existence of God. Elsewhere he says that in matters of God, freedom and immortality it is necessary to sublate knowledge in order to make room for faith.\(^{29}\) Søren Kierkegaard (1813-


\(^{29}\) In the 2nd edition of *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant wrote: “…even the assumption … of God, freedom and immortality is not permissible unless at the same time speculative reason be deprived of its pretensions to transcendent insight. For in order to arrive at such insight it must make use of principles which, in fact, extend only to objects of possible experience, and which, if also applied to what cannot be an object of experience, always really change this into an appearance, thus rendering all practical extension of pure reason impossible. I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.”- Immanuel Kant (1973) *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, 10th reprint of the 2\(^{nd}\) corrected Impression, London, The Macmillan Press Ltd., B xxx. See also Allen Wood (2005) *Kant*, Malden, Blackwell Publishing, pp. 180ff.
1855), the famous Danish religious thinker, argued that rational argument is not only far removed from faith but is also incompatible with faith. For faith requires a leap, a risk. Given that faith is a multifaceted attitude having affective, behavioural and cognitive components, the contentious issue is the place of rationality, justification and knowledge in interpreting religious utterances.

**The Particularity of Religious Language**

In the context of our engagement with Wittgenstein, these questions can be seen as connected to the nature and significance of religious language and religious understanding within the domain of human linguistic activity. Wittgenstein resolves this perceived binary of faith and reason by showing the rootedness of religion in its natural habitat of religious use of language. A glance at the scattered remarks and comments on religion in the works of Wittgenstein would reveal that Wittgenstein was intent upon showing that religious utterances must be understood as moves within a distinctive system of thought and language. Otherwise they make no sense at all. He also

---

painstakingly shows the importance of the functional component in religious language and says that in religion we ‘use a picture.’ Explaining further, one can safely say that Wittgenstein does three things here. First, he emphatically shows the context-sensitivity and the logical distinctiveness of religious belief; second, he repeatedly points out that religious beliefs are indicative of ‘using a picture’; and third, he proclaims that there exists a world of difference between religious believers and unbelievers.\(^{31}\)

Wittgenstein in a significant move anchors the problematic of faith and reason in the very womb of human linguistic activity. And in a very important sense he sheds new light on the many problems discussed above. For him faith and reason are not mere philosophically unattractive dry notions to be discussed and argued about in an armchair fashion. Rather one has to discover the umbilical cord that exists between the employment of religious concepts and the given labyrinth of language, life and world. Here it is important to note that Wittgenstein is not alone in entertaining such a conception of religious language. One does find its resonance in Kierkegaard

and surprisingly in Nietzsche. The following excerpts will show this striking parallel.

Wittgenstein writes:

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. …I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life. (Or the direction of your life.)

Kierkegaard observes pointedly:

Christianity is not a doctrine. …Christianity is a message about existence. …If Christianity (precisely because it is not a doctrine) is not reduplicated in the life of the person expounding it, then he does not expound Christianity, for Christianity is a message about

32 Wittgenstein (1980) Culture and Value, 28e, 53e.
living and can only be expounded by being realized in men’s lives.\textsuperscript{33}

And surprisingly Nietzsche notes:

It is false to the point of absurdity to see in a ‘belief’, perchance the belief in a redemption through Christ, the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian: only Christian practice, a life such as he who dies on the cross lived, is Christian… Not a belief but a doing, above all a not-doing of many things, a different being … States of consciousness, beliefs of any kind, holding something true for example … are a matter of complete indifference. … To reduce being a Christian, Christianness, to a holding something to be true, to a mere phenomenality

of consciousness, means to negate Christianness.\textsuperscript{34}

Most significantly, all the above quotes can be seen as an in-depth understanding of the sayings of Jesus, which I believe, form the heart of Christian religion. For in the \textit{Gospels} Jesus says:

\begin{quote}
Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then I will declare to them,’ I never knew you; depart from me, you evil-doers.’\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

And again, more importantly,

\begin{quote}
‘Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’, and not do what I tell you?’\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[34] Nietzsche, \textit{The Anti-Christ}, #39.
\end{footnotes}
Here parenthetically I wish to take note of what William James (1842-1910), in a sense pre-figuring Wittgenstein, had to say in this connection. On his view what is of utmost importance is not so much the dogma and the external forms of religion but rather the phenomenon of the ‘religious experience’ itself. Critiquing the systematic theologians as the ‘closet-naturalists of the deity’ he says:

What keeps religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of concatenated adjectives, and something different from faculties of theology and their professors. All these things are after-effects, secondary accretions upon those phenomena of vital conversation with the unseen divine … [that take place] in the lives of humble private men.37

Wittgenstein brings out the particularity of religious language in this way:

I can well imagine a religion in which there are no doctrinal propositions, in which there is no talking. Obviously the essence of religion cannot have anything to do with the fact that there is talking, or rather; when people talk, then this itself is part of a religious act and not a theory. Thus it also does not matter at all if the words used are true or false or nonsense.\textsuperscript{38}

Another important dimension of religious language according to Wittgenstein is that it is a \textit{sui generis} form of discourse, needing no justification from other domains of discourse. What he implies is that religious discourse is autonomous in character. That means it is not in the nature of religious discourse to correspond or not to correspond to the so-called essence of reality. This idea of Wittgenstein becomes very clear in his critique of the theist who takes great care to construct theoretical arguments

for theistic belief as well as the atheist who disowns religious belief for the lack of rational justification. In his conversation with Drury he remarks:

…[Both the theist and the atheist] have encouraged the idea that a philosophical justification for religious belief is necessary for those beliefs to be given any credence. Both the atheist, who scorns religion because he has found no evidence for its tenets, and the believer who attempts to prove the existence of God, have fallen victim to the ‘other’- the idol-worship of the scientific style of thinking. Religious beliefs are not analogous to scientific theories, and should not be accepted or rejected using the same evidential criteria.\(^{39}\)

Further, this particularity of religious language and the hermeneutic character of its understanding and meaning become very clear when one attempts to decipher the ‘depth grammar’ of religious belief.

The Grammar of Religious Belief

To my mind the most significant clue that Wittgenstein provides regarding the nature of religious language and belief is this cryptic statement found in his *Philosophical Investigations*: “Essence is expressed in grammar. …Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)”\[^{40}\] It is laconically brief, pointedly sharp and forms the bedrock of, what one might call, the hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language in Wittgenstein. Here, Wittgenstein is referring to what I call the depth-grammam and its significance in the realm of religious discourse. The ‘surface grammar’ refers to the obvious syntactic features of the sentence and the words of which it is composed. In other words it indicates the sentence-structure. In contrast, the ‘depth grammar’ describes the overall use of the relevant expression by surveying its combination possibilities and impossibilities, the circumstances of its use and of its consequences. The emphasis here is on the combinational possibilities of words, seeing propositions as different moves in the language-game, and

taking note of their different logical relations and articulations.\textsuperscript{41} And philosophical reflections go off the track when the focus is only on the surface grammar of the words. In his \textit{Philosophical Grammar} Wittgenstein makes an effort to philosophically tie-up the notions of ‘depth grammar’, ‘meaning’ ‘explanation’ in the mosaic of language-games in this way:

I want to say: the place of a word in grammar is its meaning. But I might also say: the meaning of a word is what the explanation of its meaning explains. …The explanation of the meaning explains the use of the word. The use of a word in the language is its meaning. Grammar describes the use of words in the language. … Grammar is the account books of language. They must show the actual transactions of language…\textsuperscript{42}


In this effort at philosophical tie-up, Wittgenstein is very careful to emphasise the praxis of linguistic activity and the way language meshes with human life. Again in his *Philosophical Grammar*, he forcefully makes this point:

> Is meaning then really only the use of a word? Isn’t it the way this use meshes with our life? But isn’t it its use a part of our life?… [And what] constitutes understanding [of linguistic expressions is] the feeling “in one’s own breast”, the living experience of the expressions. They must mesh with my own life. Well, language does connect up with my own life. And what is called “language” is something made up of heterogeneous elements and the way it meshes with life is infinitely various.\(^{43}\)

In another work, namely *Zettel*, Wittgenstein pointedly remarks: “How words are understood is not told by words alone. (Theology.)”\(^{44}\)

Such an understanding of the depth-grammar of linguistic activity in human life helps one to understand why, unlike his teacher Russell, Wittgenstein was able to cultivate a sympathetic understanding towards the religious outpourings of the human spirit. Perhaps for the last time when they met as friends in Innsbruck, it is reported that sharp differences came into the fore in their philosophical ideas. And Russell qualifies them as ‘religious’. Further Russell notes that Wittgenstein was ‘at the height of his mystic ardour’.\(^{45}\) My aim here is not to compare and contrast Wittgenstein’s religious earnestness with that of Russell’s atheist acerbity. Rather what I want is to take note of the struggle of a great philosopher –or ‘a truth-seeker’ as Wittgenstein liked to call himself\(^{46}\)- to remain passionately committed to both philosophy and religion at the same time! As I understand, he was at

---


\(^{46}\) “Call me a truth-seeker and I will be satisfied”- This was the response of Wittgenstein when his sister Helen Salzer called him a great philosopher- See Ray Monk (1991) *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*, p. 3.
home with both the rigour of logical theory and the demands of religious understanding.

Further Wittgenstein attempts to show the depth grammar of religious belief in this way:

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence though it is a belief, it’s really a way of assessing life. It’s passionately seizing hold of this interpretation.\(^{47}\)

**Hermeneutic Intimacy of Meaning, Use and Understanding**

The foregoing discussion on the depth grammar of religious belief would help one to briefly indicate the contours of the hermeneutic intimacy of meaning, use and understanding in Wittgenstein. In the *Tractatus*, the early Wittgenstein subscribed to the view that the meaning of the word is the

\(^{47}\) Wittgenstein (1980) *Culture and Value*, 64e.
object it stands for: “The name means the object. The object is its meaning”.

But in Philosophical Investigations, the later Wittgenstein presents this idea as having its roots in the Augustinian picture of language, which meant that the individual words in language name objects and further sentences are combinations of such names. As we have seen above, Wittgenstein nullifies the temptation to understand meaning in this way by invoking the grammar of religious use of language. In one of the best-known sayings of Wittgenstein, the identity of meaning and use is affirmed in this way:

For a large class of cases - though not for all - in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be explained thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer.

---

50 Ibid., #43.
Further, he goes on to qualify this identity of meaning and use in this way:

The concept ‘meaning’ will serve to distinguish those linguistic formations that might be called capricious from those that are essential, inherent in the very purpose of language. …So are there essential and non-essential differences among the uses of words? The distinction does not appear until we begin to talk about the purpose of a word.\(^{51}\)

As Bede Rundle has rightly pointed out, the important thing to note here is that if the meaning of a word is determined by its use, then we the humans are not to grope in the dark about the meaning of words. Because the use is something we humans can master and further the meaning can be shared by the members of a given community. In this sense the meaning determined is not something that is hidden from us forever.\(^{52}\)


\(^{52}\) Bede Rundle (2001) “Meaning and Understanding”, p. 103.
The other important constituent element of this hermeneutic intimacy is the phenomenon of understanding. With reference to religious language, as Karl-Otto Apel has insightfully noted, Wittgenstein comes very close to the Wilhelm Dilthey’s significant distinction of understanding (verstehen) in cultural sciences from that of explanation (erklärung) in natural sciences.\(^{53}\) Wittgenstein shows the different uses of the concept ‘understanding’ in human linguistic activity and he emphasises the difference between the uses of words in one sentence from that of another. He says: “Different interpretation must correspond to different applications”.\(^{54}\) And he describes the difference between understanding the meaning of words which embody a given religious belief and understanding someone who holds a particular religious belief. For example, with regard to the use of word ‘God’, he says that the pictures of God are different from the


\(^{54}\) Wittgenstein (1980) \textit{Culture and Value}, 40e.
use of other pictures like that of one’s relatives. Further he says: “religious similes can be said to move on the edge of an abyss.”

An important conception that sheds light on the hermeneutic intimacy of meaning, use and understanding in Wittgenstein is that of “language-game’. The term ‘language-game’ is the result of Wittgenstein’s application of the game analogy to language as a whole. The underlying idea is that the use of language is an activity. In the words of Wittgenstein:

The term language-game is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity or a form of life … [A language-game is a] whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven.

The underlying idea is that our linguistic activities are interwoven with and embedded in our human practices that are non-linguistic in nature. It is this matrix of language-game that gives flesh and blood to religious belief.

55 Ibid., 29e.
This conception becomes very clear when one engages Wittgenstein’s elucidation of the Christian beliefs and practices.

**Elucidation of Christian Beliefs and Practices**

It is against the backdrop of these hermeneutic contours of the intimacy of meaning, use and understanding that one has to come to grip with the persuasive way in which Wittgenstein goes on to comment on some of the beliefs and practices that are central to Christianity. Here I should take note of the fact that though Wittgenstein was baptised into the Catholic faith and was given a Catholic burial he was never a practising Catholic Christian in the traditional sense of the term. But what is of utmost importance is that he had lived a devoutly religious life in the truest sense of the word. And at one point in his life he had even toyed with the idea of becoming a monk in a monastery! To my mind the fulcrum of his religious life was his deep conviction and faith in ‘the God who in my bosom dwells’. Hence he repeatedly exhorts God to help him not to ‘lose himself’. And he had the grip on the ‘soul of religion’ when he said:

Religion is, as it were, the calm bottom of the sea at its deepest point, which remains calm
however high the waves on the surface may be.

…Wisdom is passionless. But faith by contrast is what Kierkegaard calls a *passion*.\(^5\)

Such an intense understanding of the domain of the ‘religious life’ in Wittgenstein becomes very clear when one finds that one of the few books that captivated him all through his life was Tolstoy’s (1828-1910) *Gospel in Brief*. This book had tremendous influence up on him and he carried it wherever he went. And it is said that he knew the whole book by heart and hence his friends called him ‘the man with the Gospels’. He had read the work of Nietzsche (1844-1900), *The Anti-Christ*. This, according to Ray Monk, did not shake the foundation of Tolstoyan Christianity that he had come to embrace. Instead it further cemented his Christian faith. Thus for Wittgenstein “Christianity is indeed the only *sure* way to happiness” because in the words and figure of Christ it provides an example, an attitude to life that makes sufferings bearable for the human person. But here one should note that for Wittgenstein, the recurring theme is that the essence of religion consists in feelings and practices rather than giving intellectual assent to

certain beliefs and well-defined dogmas. Faith is basically the celebration of the journey of the spirit and one’s mind is not to be fettered by the dogmas of the institutionalised religions. In the words of Wittgenstein:

The effect of making men think in accordance with dogmas…these dogmas completely control…the expression of all opinions. People will live under an absolute, palpable tyranny, though without being able to say they are not free. I think the Catholic Church does something rather like this. For dogma is expressed in the form of an assertion, and is unshakeable…it’s almost as though someone were to attach a weight to your foot to restrict your freedom of movement.

---

58 Ray Monk (1991) *Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*, pp. 116 and 123. As I have noted earlier, similar idea is also to be found in Kierkegaard (1813-55), Nietzsche (1844-1900) and William James (1842-1910).

From this, I don’t think one should construe that Wittgenstein was dead against dogmas concerning religious beliefs and practices. His effort is to indicate how one is to interpret the meaning of a given dogma not as something of a device that controls the thinking of the religious believer. But rather it is to be seen as a picture that points to the religious way of thinking. Wittgenstein himself makes this idea clear when he discusses two very important dogmas of Catholic Christianity. They are the dogmas of the Virgin Birth and the Holy Eucharist. For Wittgenstein, they are religious gesticulations and not to be taken as intellectual doctrines aimed at rational justification of the Catholic faith. In his own words:

I believe that every human being has two human parents; but Catholics believe that Jesus only had a human mother. And other people might believe that there are human beings with no parents, and give no credence to all the contrary evidence. Catholics believe as well that in certain circumstances a wafer completely changes its nature, and at the same time all evidence proves the contrary. And so if
Moore said “I know that this is wine and not blood”, Catholics would contradict him.\textsuperscript{60}

That means, for Wittgenstein, what is important is the Christian religious experience and its description human beings engage in, the actual religious lives people lead, rather than the precise formulation of doctrines. He touches up on the very life-breath of Christian religion in this way:

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For ‘consciousness of sin’ is a real event and so are despair and salvation through faith. …Christianity offers us a …narrative and says: now believe! …believe, through thick and thin, which you can do only as the result of a life. Make a \textit{quite different} place in your life for it.\textsuperscript{61}


\textsuperscript{61} Wittgenstein (1980) \textit{Culture and Value}, 28e and 32e.
Such an understanding gives us a clue why Wittgenstein views the four so-called canonical Gospels of Christianity not as ‘historical narratives’ or a theory constituting ‘universal truths of reason’. Rather they are faith-narratives which engender the very logic of certainty in the life of a believer. In the words of Wittgenstein:

The historical accounts in the Gospels might, historically speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this: not, however, because it concerns ‘universal truths of reason’! Rather, because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief. The message (the Gospel) is seized on by men believingly (i.e. lovingly). That is the certainty characterizing this particular acceptance-ast-true, not something else.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 32e. The four canonical Gospels are: \textit{The Gospel according to Matthew}, \textit{The Gospel according to Mark}, \textit{The Gospel according to Luke}, and \textit{The Gospel according to John}. And if one were to see a sort of hierarchical significance of the texts in the \textit{New Testament}, certainly the four canonical Gospels enjoy the primary status among other texts.
This explains why Wittgenstein critiques a certain Father O’Hara who in his effort to make the religious beliefs, for example the Last Judgement, look reasonable, hopelessly turns them into scientific hypotheses. On Wittgenstein’s view this is a foolish act of Father O’Hara. For the best scientific evidence counts nothing before a religious belief. And there is a serious failure on the part of Father O’Hara in understanding the peculiarity of religious thinking and deciphering its connections in the web of human life. In attempting at the scientific reasons for religious beliefs, on Wittgenstein’s view, a man is cheating on himself: he is ridiculous because he believes, and grounds his belief on weak reasons! In the case of Father O’Hara, Wittgenstein says there is no religious belief at all; instead what we have is all superstition. Father O’Hara misses the whole point that religious belief rests up on an entirely different kind of reasoning.63

In his Lectures on Religious Belief64 Wittgenstein takes a close look at two very important tenets of Christianity: the ‘Last Judgement’ and ‘Resurrection’. Wittgenstein treats them as religious similes and notes that they tend to move on the edge of an abyss. Here his concern is not so much

64 Ibid., pp. 53ff.
the doctrinal aspects of these two articles of faith. Rather he draws the attention of the readers to the fact that when we come to an island we find varieties of beliefs. And those beliefs that we are inclined to call religious make entirely different connections in our life. And it might look like a blunder if they are placed in some other belief systems of our life. And the ground of such unshakeable religious beliefs is not so much the reasoning or the appeal to some other device, rather the regulatory effect they have on one’s life. That is why Wittgenstein says that a non-believer cannot contradict a believer as in the case of the ‘Last Judgement’, because they are situated in two very different language-games, and use very different pictures. And this, for Wittgenstein, is a ‘grammatical’ remark. And it can only be verified by the consequences one does or one does not draw, that is, the very act of living or not living a religious life.

It is very remarkable to note that Wittgenstein the ‘truth-seeker’ makes some very significant remark on ‘Resurrection’, the very core of Christian faith. And this appears to be very much his own confession of the


faith in the risen Christ and captures the very spirit of the Christian faith in
the lives of people. In his own words:

What inclines even me to believe in Christ’s Resurrection? It is as though I play with the thought. – If he did not rise from the dead, then he decomposed in the grave like any other man. …In that case he is a teacher like any other and can no longer help. …But if I am to be REALLY saved, - what I need is certainty – not wisdom, dreams or speculation – and this certainty is faith. And faith is faith in what is needed by my heart, my soul, not any speculative intelligence. For it is my soul with its passions, as it were with its flesh and blood, that has to be saved, not my abstract mind. Perhaps we can say: Only love can believe the Resurrection. Or: It is love that believes the Resurrection. We might say: Redeeming love believes even in the Resurrection; holds fast even to the Resurrection.67

Further Wittgenstein compares the one who believes in the Resurrection with that person who no longer rests his weight on the earth but rather

suspends himself from heaven. And for him most importantly *everything* will be different and he is able to do things, which he could not do earlier.\(^{68}\)

At this juncture it is significant to note that this interpretation of Wittgenstein comes very close to the way in which a believer understands the doctrine of Resurrection. This becomes very evident in the celebrated story of ‘Three Hermits’ narrated by Tolstoy which became the favourite religious narrative for Wittgenstein. For Wittgenstein notes, “My favourite is the story of the three hermits who could only pray, ‘You are three, we are three, have mercy upon us’”.\(^ {69}\) This illustrative story is woven around the matrix of the celebrated prayer ‘Our Father’ and the dogma of the ‘Holy Trinity’ in Christianity. In this cautionary tale, a Bishop sets out in a ship to meet with three hermits who live together on an island and were reputed to be holy men. On visiting them the Bishop finds that the only prayer they pray every day is, ‘You are three, we are three, have mercy up on us!’ Being amused at their prayer, the Bishop says:

\(^{68}\) *Ibid.*

You have evidently heard something about the Holy Trinity,’ said he. But you do not pray aright. You have won my affection, godly men. I see you wish to please the Lord, but you do not know how to serve him. That is not the way to pray; but listen to me, and I will teach you.\footnote{Leo Tolstoy (1960) “Three Hermits” in Leo Tolstoy, Twenty-three Tales, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 198.}

The Bishop makes strenuous efforts to teach the three hermits the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ by getting them to repeat after him time and again. After ensuring that they have learned it by heart, the Bishop takes leave of them. That night, when the ship in which the Bishop was sailing was far off from the land, the three hermits are seen running on the water. And they cry out to the Bishop:

‘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."\(^7^1\)

**The Problematic of Fideism, Relativism and Apocalyptic Atheism**

So far my attempt has been to analyse the philosophical practice of Wittgenstein to decipher the hermeneutic meaning and understanding in religious language. This does not mean that such a practice is free from philosophically pertinent problems and issues. Two such complex issues relevant to our discussion are Wittgensteinian fideism and apocalyptic atheism. Though a detailed analysis of these issues would be beyond the given scope of the present discussion, I shall present a couple of comments on these significant issues.

It was Kai Nielsen who introduced the term ‘Wittgensteinian fideism’ while responding to the remarks made by some eminent thinkers such as Peter Winch, Norman Malcolm, Peter Geach, Stanley Cavell, Robert Coburn, R. F. Holland and D. Z. Phillips. Fideism is a term that has origin in its Latin root, *fides* meaning faith. The central idea is that faith is autonomous and even contrary to reason in matters of religious faith. Employing this conceptual and logical binary of faith and reason, Kai

\(^7^1\) *Ibid.*, p. 201.
Nielsen brings into focus the opposition between practice and doctrine in this way:

The distinctive domains of discourse (e.g. science, religion, morality) *initially* give us our criteria of reasonability, justifiability distinctive to each domain of discourse, but domains are not unconnected and the form of life that is there with their practices can, and should be appealed to where some practice or practices in one domain of discourse fits or fit badly with another. … This is what Wittgensteinian Fideism does not allow with its conception of incommensurable domains determining what constitutes a rational authority unique to each domain of discourse. … We need not, that is, be stuck with just saying that these are our practices and these are the language-games we play, this is where we stand, this is what we do around here, these are the rules we have and we can do no other.\(^7\)

The overall framework of Nielsen’s argument implies the binary or the false dichotomy between ‘practice’ and ‘belief’ or between ‘living a certain way’ and ‘believing certain things’. As I have already noted earlier, as I understand, Wittgenstein does not uphold such a conceptual binary in religious belief. What Wittgenstein did in emphasising the distinctive nature of religious discourse from other types of discourse was to therapeutically cleanse the human mind of the temptation to consider the scientific discourse as the only worthwhile paradigm of understanding human life. In this sense, to my mind, Nielsen is misinterpreting Wittgenstein here.\footnote{For a detailed discussion on this problem, see Genia Schönbaumsfeld (2007) “Worlds or Words Apart? Wittgenstein on Understanding Religious Language”, \textit{Ratio} (New Series), Vol. XX, No. 4, p. 424. See also Vibha Chaturvedi (2002) \textit{Wittgenstein’s Fideism}, pp. 143-158.} Secondly, the autonomous character of the domains of discourse does not necessarily imply that domains are necessarily incommensurable.

Closely linked to fideism is the notion of relativism. Can we say that the employment of Wittgensteinian notions such as depth grammar and language-games in interpreting religious discourse logically ends up in a sort of
of relativism? What about the universal truth claims found in a given religious tradition? In my readings I found that one author who has discussed this problem in detail while being sympathetic to the spirit of Wittgenstein’s writings is Cyril Barrett. Barrett notes:

Given the variety of language-games based on a corresponding variety of forms of life, and given also that these language-games and forms of life appear to be mutually exclusive ..., it would not be surprising for someone to conclude that Wittgenstein was committed to some kind of relativism. …The question is: what form of relativism, if any, is he committed to by his notions of language-games and forms of life?  

Barrett rules out any kind of extreme relativism implying radical incommensurability in Wittgenstein’s later writings. Instead, he speaks of moderate relativism which is built into the very nature of religious discourse

---

and ethical theory. Barrett elucidates the phenomenon of ‘moderate relativism’ in this way:

To be ethically or religiously committed we must say something like: suicide, voluntary euthanasia and genetic engineering on human embryos are morally permissible; or that they are not. And we must say this absolutely. It makes no moral sense to say of a particular case; ‘Maybe it is all right or maybe it isn’t’. ...Similarly with judgments of religious belief. Either we believe or we do not. There is no room for ‘maybe’, ‘perhaps’, ‘probably’, ‘possibly’ or ‘it is very likely’ if we are talking about the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and redemptive power of Jesus Christ, or the Day of Judgement. We either believe absolutely or not at all.\textsuperscript{75}

To my mind, one can safely ascribe this kind of moderate relativism to Wittgenstein. At the same time, it is significant to note that this kind of moderate relativism takes into account the phenomenon of flexibility,

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 162.
fluidity and revisable nature of religious beliefs. As Barrett pointedly concludes:

> While everyone is to some extent locked into a conceptual system, the key has not been thrown away. It is always possible, if sometimes difficult, to adopt a new ethical or religious system. That was Wittgenstein’s view.\(^{76}\)

Another related notion which authors like John V. Canfield and Brian Clark have ascribed to Wittgenstein in his engagement with the domain of religious discourse is what has come to be known as ‘apocalyptic atheism’.\(^{77}\)

Having made the theoretical postulate that atheism is the inevitable consequence of accepting Wittgenstein’s approach to religious belief, Brian Clark has no option but to choose the kind of atheism that would fit into the conceptual framework of Wittgenstein. He notes:


…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. Moreover, it would … 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.\textsuperscript{78}

To my mind, Clark’s interpretive stance on Wittgenstein’s engagement with religion is mistaken. For the notion of ‘apocalyptic atheism’ is built on the conceptual and logical binary of realism and anti-realism in religious language. I have already discussed this vexed problem and concluded that Wittgenstein deflates the problem of religious realism and anti-realism by placing the religious use of language in the matrix of language, life and world. If so, one can justifiably claim that Wittgenstein has nullified the very basis of apocalyptic atheism. Further, as Tim Labron has conclusively shown, the ascription of ‘apocalyptic atheism’ to Wittgenstein is a mistaken enterprise. Instead, he suggests that the Wittgensteinian paradigm in

\textsuperscript{78} Brain R. Clark (1999) \textit{An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Religion}, p. 129.
engaging religious belief is analogous to the Hebraic view of religion which is celebratory of the hermeneutic intimacy between word and deed.\textsuperscript{79}

**Concluding Remarks**

I have tried to show in the above discussion the availability of the hermeneutic contours of the depth grammar of the religious belief in Wittgenstein. The fulcrum of these contours is not the logico-conceptual binary of faith and reason which is divorced from the stream of life. Rather it is the anchoring of faith and reason in the matrix of language, life and world. And I prefaced my investigation by making an effort to understand the problem of ‘many Wittgensteins’ and I discussed it in the backdrop of ‘hermeneutic multiplism’. In particular I dwelt at length on the contra-distinguishing interpretive stance taken by Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch regarding the ‘religious point of view’ of Wittgenstein. Related to this, I also pointed out the attempt of D. Z. Phillips to construct a ‘contemplative philosophy of religion’ after Wittgenstein. Anchoring the religious use of language in the matrix of language, life and world, I showed the specificity of religious language by analysing some of the remarks

Wittgenstein has made on Christian religion and its practices. The point that emerged here was that to appreciate the nature of religious language, one needs to capture the’ depth grammar of language’. This will show, according to Wittgenstein, the life-regulating influence religion has on people. Critiquing the ascription of fideism, extreme relativism and apocalyptic atheism to Wittgenstein, I showed that these are views based on a wrong interpretive stance taken on Wittgenstein. For in Wittgenstein, one encounters the hermeneutic intimacy of meaning, use and understanding. This comes to the fore, as I showed, when one comprehends the significance of the contours of depth grammar of the domain of the ‘religious’. I would not hesitate to say that much of what Wittgenstein has said on religious belief and practices rings true in the religious lives of the people. But to comprehend it intellectually in the Wittgensteinian mode is an extremely uphill task. Perhaps that is what Wittgenstein had in mind when he made this celebrated remark:

An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the
slenderest imaginable. And yet it is possible to walk on it.\textsuperscript{80}

Now, after having climbed up the second step of ‘the trinitarian ladder’ by making an attempt at the Wittgensteinian tightrope walking, I move on to the third step of the ‘trinitarian ladder’, that is, Jacques Derrida.

\textsuperscript{80} Wittgenstein (1980) \textit{Culture and Value}, p. 73e.