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WITTGENSTEIN'S AND ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF
RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Section I

According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, religious beliefs do not purport to be statements of logical facts. The category of “truth, false or mechanical” which applies to statements of facts is not applicable to statements expressing religious beliefs. In his book *On Certainty* he says that the grounds of very few of our beliefs have ever been tested. Its grounds are not in themselves either true or false or grounded. He says,

If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true, nor yet false.¹

He further says that our religious beliefs are well-established, well-founded and properly grounded and these are not only accidental features but an essential feature of them. As he says,

But what men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters. At certain periods men find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable and vice-versa. But is there no objective character here? Very intelligent and well educated people believe in the story of creation in the Bible, while other hold it as proven false and the grounds of the latter are well known to the former.²

¹ L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, translated by Dennis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, New York and Evanston: J. & J. Harper Edition, 1968., 205, p. 33.

² *Ibid.*, 336, pp. 51–52.

One of the remarkable points which Wittgenstein made around 1937 is the belief in the resurrection of Christ. He says,

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. He is dead and decomposed. In that case he is a teacher like any other and can no longer help. So we have to content ourselves with wisdom and speculation. But if I am to REALLY saved,—what I need is certainty, not wisdom, dreams or speculations—and this certainty is faith. And faith is what is needed by my heart, my soul but not by my 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.”³

In one of the remarks made towards the end of his life in *Culture and Value*, he compared a religious believer with a tightrope walker. He says,

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.⁴

In the above metaphor given by Wittgenstein it is not an intellectual support. It comes from love, trust and faith in the sense of trust meaning “having faith in”.

Wittgenstein, after discussing the implicit nature of religious beliefs produces three elements that characterize religious belief:

- (1) Its precariousness (on a tightrope, on the edge of an abyss) and yet managing to maintain its hold, its equilibrium,
- (2) Its support: love, trust, belief and faith in the world of another; and
- (3) Certainty, unshakable, steadfast faith.

Out of the three, Wittgenstein was interested in the last characteristic and said that religious belief is not based on intellectual certitude but on love and trust. And yet it is held with all the psychological certainty with which we hold the truth of mathematics. It is a firm, steadfast and unshakable belief. The underlying reason behind is that if we love someone enough to trust his word, this trust, this belief in his word is unshakable. Only distrust or weakening of trust can shake it. We are certain of the truth of the mathematical proposition because of their intrinsic logical structure. Religious believers are certain of their belief in spite of their having no intrinsic logical cohesion and very little extrinsic support.

³ L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1953, p. 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Religious belief is a belief in God and as such is something more than the belief that God exists. Wittgenstein says,

Perhaps one could convince someone that God exists by means of a certain kind of upbringing by shaping his life in such and such a way. Life can educate one to a belief in God. And experiences too are what bring this about e.g. suffering of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows us an object, nor do they give rise to conjectures about him. Experiences, thoughts—life can force this concept on us. So perhaps it is similar to the concept ‘object’.⁵

Wittgenstein very categorically said that the existence of God cannot be proved. Any attempt to rationalize religious beliefs, dogma, theology, apologetic and such like will distort the language of religious beliefs. The religious point of view is how one answers the existential question, or how one sees the world.

As Wittgenstein says in *Culture and Value*:

God’s essence is supposed to guarantee his existence—What this really means is that what is here at issue is not the existence of something. Could not one actually say equally well that the essence of colour guarantees its existence? As opposed, say, to white elephant. Because all that really means is: I cannot explain what ‘colour’ is, what the word ‘colour’ means, except with the help of a colour sample. So in this case there is no such thing as explaining ‘what it would be like if colour were to exist’.⁶

Now we might say: there can be a description of what it would be like if there were gods on Olympus—but not: what it would be like if there were such a thing as ‘God’. And to say this is to determine the concept ‘God’ more precisely. How are we taught the word ‘God’? I cannot give a full grammatical description of it. But I can, as it were, make some contributions to such a description; I can say a good deal about it and perhaps in time assemble a sort of collection of examples.”⁷

He further says,

The way you use the word ‘God’ does not show who you mean but rather, what you mean.⁸

He raised the question whether, in relation to religion, the non-believer contradicts the believer when he says that he does not believe what the believer

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

believes. If one man contradicts another, they can be said to share a common understanding to be playing the same game. Consider the following example:

The man who says that the sun is 90 million miles away from the earth contradicts the man who says that the sun is only 20 million miles away from the earth. With the help of this example, what are we to say about the man who believes in God and the man who does not? Are they contradicting each other? Are two people, one of whom says there is a God and the other of whom says he does not believe in God, like two people disagree about the distance of the sun from earth? Wittgenstein shows that they are not. The main reason for the difference is that God's reality is not one of a kind; He is not a being among beings. The word 'God' is not the name of a thing. Thus, the reality of God cannot be assessed by a common measure which also applies to things other than God. But these are conclusions for which reasons can be given.

Wittgenstein did not like to talk about religious belief. In a reported conversation in Schlick's house on 17 December 1930, he asks: "Is talking essential to religion"? He replies:

I can well imagine a religion in which there are no doctrinal propositions in which thus 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 this itself is part of a religious act and not a theory.⁹

He was not concerned with the words or formulae we use but with the part they play in our religious life. Towards the end of his life, he put his views forcefully in some remarks. As he said,

It is true that we can compare a picture that is firmly rooted in us to a superstition; but it is equally true that we always eventually have to reach some ground, either a picture or something else, so that a picture which is at the root of all our thinking is to be respected and not treated as a superstition. If Christianity is the truth then all the philosophy that is written about it is false.¹⁰

In his lecture and Conversation he said whether we believe and what we believe must be judged not by reasoning or ordinary grounds for belief but by how we regulate our lives in accordance with what we claim to believe.

He is not concerned with the claims about the existence of God, the creation of the world or the creation and the nature of human soul. What he objects to is Father O'Hara's claim, as he sees it, that Christianity rests on historical basis.

⁹ C. Barrett, *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief*, Blackwell, 1991, p. 186.

¹⁰ *Culture and Value*, op. cit., p. 83.

He does not deny there is a historical basis for Christianity. What he says is that it does not afford sufficient evidence for Christian belief. Here we have a belief in historical facts different from a belief in ordinary historical facts. Even they are not treated as historical, empirical proposition.¹¹

The content of the lectures on religious belief can be organised under three headings:

(1) The Logical Distinctiveness of Religious Belief:

Wittgenstein remarks upon the fact that we learn to speak in a religious way very early in life. The word 'God' is amongst the earliest learnt. Although this word is used like a word representing a person, he says, "If the question arises as to the existence of God it plays an entirely different role to that of the existence of any person or object I ever heard of."

(2) Religious Belief as 'Using Pictures':

Religious believers might say that a man is not really dead, even though by ordinary criteria he is. That is to say they think of him as really alive even though he is what we all call dead. They speak of him as a disembodied spirit. What Wittgenstein wants to know is whether or not one can connect with these words. There is a 'technique of usage' for the word dead considered as 'a public instrument'. He suggests that pictures of God are not used like pictures of aunts. No one presents you with a picture of God.

(3) The Essential Difference between Believers and Unbelievers:

According to Wittgenstein, believers use the relevant pictures with the relevant connections; non-believers do not. Using a picture, if it is to serve as a definition of religious belief cannot, however, be simply a matter of accepting, or rejecting, logical implication of propositions such as 'God's eye sees everything'. Considering all of this, it is surely right to say that Wittgenstein's mature life was strongly marked by religious thought and feeling. He was more deeply religious than are many people who correctly regard themselves as religious believers. Wittgenstein had an intense desire for moral and spiritual purity. Of course I want to be perfect; he exclaimed. He judged himself to be neither a creative philosopher nor a religious person. But I can say with confidence that he knew the demands of religion. And certainly he was as qualified as any philosopher ever had been to understand what it might mean to see the problem of philosophy from a religious point of view.

¹¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett, Oxford: Blackwell, 1969, P. 57.

Regarding the religious belief in Islam, *Allah* says in chapter two of *The Quran*:

O ye who believe; believe in God and His apostle and the scriptures which He has send to his apostle and the scriptures which He sent to those before. Anyone who denies God, His angels, His books, His apostle and the day of Judgement has gone far, far astray. (4:136)

If your belief is by habit or birth the example of those you love or respect or admire make that belief more specific and special to yourself. We must not only have faith but realise that faith in our innermost being. The chief objects of our faith are God, His apostle, His revelations. To all these we must give a home in our hearts. The angels we do not see and realise as we realise God, who is nearer to us than the vehicle of our life blood, and the day of Judgement is for our future experience but we must not deny them or we cut off a part of our spiritual view.

The Islamic philosophy and religion is based upon the belief that *Allah* transmitted knowledge to Prophet Mohammad and other Prophets in the form of *The Quran* which is the formless word of God. *The Quran* is the sacred book of Islam which was revealed to the Prophet Mohammad by the angel Gabriel on various occasions from 610–632 B.C.

The Prophet from time to time had seen visions but his first experience of higher revelation was when he was alone in the cave of *Hira*. It is clearly mentioned in one of *Hadith* of the Prophet:

He (Gabriel) squeezed me and he squeezed me to such an extent that I was quite exhausted and this was repeated thrice.¹²

There are verses in *The Quran* which show that the collection of the book was a part of the Divine scheme. These verses:

Surely on us rests the collecting of it and the reciting of it. (75:17)

Though *The Quran* was revealed in portions yet it is a mistake to suppose that it remained for long in those fragmentary conditions. *The Quran* itself is clear on this point:

And those who reject our faith and say: why *The Quran* was not revealed to him all at once? (25:32)

¹² *Al-Bukhari*, Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Trans.), Kitab Bhavan, New Delhi, 1987, 1:1.

Three reasons are given in *The Quran* itself for its gradual revelation,

- (1) To strengthen thy heart.
- (2) Slow, well-arranged stages.
- (3) Questions put and answers given.

The basis of Muslim belief is Kalma (*shahadah*): *La ilaha- illallahu; Muham-madur-rasulu-llahi*, meaning, "There is no God but *Allah* and Prophet Muham-mad is the messenger of *Allah*." To have full faith in this statement is indispensable for a person to become Muslim. This statement is further included in the five pillars of Islam. The five pillars are as follows:

- (1) Kalma (*Shahadah*): It is a saying professing monotheism and accepting Muhammad as the messenger of *Allah*. When a person wishes to convert he should recite this affirmation and believe in it.
- (2) Daily prayer (*Salah*): It is a daily prayer of Islam. It consists of five-time prayers.
- (3) Charity (*Zakat*): It is the obligatory charity given by every Muslims to the poor which is 2.5% of their income. It is considered to be a personal responsibility for Muslims to ease economic hardship for others and eliminate inequality. The word *Zakat* means purification. Our wealth is purified by giving a proportion to those in need and to society in general. Like the pruning of plants, this cutting back balances and encourages new growth.
- (4) Fasting (*Sawm*) Fasting: Muslims observe fast every year during the month of Ramadan from dawn to dusk which is abstaining from drinking, eating and sexual relation with their spouse. It is not obligatory on those who are sick, elderly or on journey, women who are menstruating, pregnant and nursing. They make up an equal number of days later in the year if they are healthy and able. It is a method of self-purification and self-restraint. As *Allah* says in *The Quran*: "O you who believe, Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed to those before you that you may learn self-restraints." (2:183)
- (5) *Hajj* (Pilgrimage): It is an obligation to those who are physically and financially able to do so. Every year more than two million people go to 'Makkah' from all over the world to perform *Hajj*. They wear simple garments that strip away distinctions of caste, class and culture so that all stand equal before *Allah*.

Section II

In this section, I discuss the points of similarity between Wittgenstein's and Islamic concepts of religious beliefs. Some of the similarities between the two are as follows:

(1) In one conversation, Wittgenstein made these remarks: “Remember that Christianity is not a matter of saying a lot of prayer; in fact we are told not to do so. If you and I are to live a religious life it must not 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 you will in the end find your way to God.”¹³ What is being said is not that worships and prayers have no place in a religious life, but rather than that they are worthless if there is no amending one’s ways and one’s doings. Like many other beliefs, religious beliefs too are matters of heart and soul, love, trust and faith. Wittgenstein had an intense desire for moral and spiritual purity. The similar viewpoint is given by the most important contemporary Islamic philosopher, Mohammad Iqbal in the third part of his famous collection of Ghazal “*Bang-e-Dara*” which was published in 1924. One of his famous couplets from this collection reveals his viewpoint about this:

*Jo main sar ba sajda hua kabhi to zamin se aane lagi sada
Tera dil to hai sanam aashna tujhe kya milega namaz se.*¹⁴

The essence of this verse is that if your heart is not pure then there is no meaning in offering *namaz*. He says that when I did *Sajda* (one posture in *namaz*) then divine voice came and said that your heart is involved in materialistic world, your heart is *sanam aashna* (lover of worldly object), you will not get anything out of such type of prayer. Mohd Iqbal’s main contention is that in religious activities dualism will not work. If you are not pure at heart, your intention is not pure, then your prayer is not accepted in the sight of *Allah*.

(2) In *Culture and Value*. Wittgenstein very clearly says that religion is a matter of faith or belief. In religion, God and faith are treated as the culminating point of explanations. That is where explanations come to an end. Explanations are internal to a language-game. Outside the language-game or forms of life there are no explanations. The same concept that religion is a matter of faith or belief is repeated in *The Quran* and authentic *Hadith* of the Prophet which has already been discussed in chapter two of my thesis.

A person approaches Prophet and asks what faith is? He replies that faith is believe in *Allah*, in his angels, his books, his meetings, his messengers, in the resurrection and in the destiny.”¹⁵

¹³ N. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious point of View?* London: Routledge, 1993, P. 11.

¹⁴ Mohd. Iqbal, *Kulyat-e-Iqbal*, Educational Publishing House, Delhi, 2005, P. 281.

¹⁵ *Sahih Muslim*, Abdul Hamid Siddiqi (trans.), Kitab Bhavan, New Delhi, 2000, Vol. 1; Ch. 2; H. 6.

(3) Wittgenstein told his friend Drury, "If you and I are to live a religious life it must not be that we talk a lot about religion but that our manner of life is different." He added,

It is my belief that only if you try to be helpful to other people, you will in the end find your way to God.¹⁶

What he meant by this was not that all talk about religious practices, methods of worship has no place in religious life, rather what he meant was that all such talk is nonsense if there is no amending to one's ways and doings, or one's behaviour, in short one's mindset. It is our practice which determines whether we are religious or not.¹⁷ The same concept is used in Islam where the primary importance is given on the conduct (*Ekhlāq*) of a person. It is said that religion does not mean talking a lot about religion but religion consists in doing. Wittgenstein says that if you try to be helpful to others you will in the end find your way to God. The same concept is repeated in *The Quran* where *Allah* says:

By the token of time man is verily in a state of loss except those who have faith, righteous deeds, those who exhort people to truth and those who exhort people to patience and constancy. (103:1-3)

This verse (*sura*) clearly says that the faith is the armour which wards off the wounds of the material world and his righteous life is his positive contribution to the spiritual ascent. If a person lives only for himself he has not fulfilled his whole duty. Whatever good he has, especially in the moral and spiritual life, he must spread among his brethren, so that they may see the truth and stand by it in patient hope and unshakable constancy amidst all the storm and stress of outer life.

(4) According to Wittgenstein, religious belief is an absolute trust either in a book, in a being, in a Prophet, in a holy man, in a principle, in a doctrine, or all of them. Wittgenstein, by analyzing the concept of believing, says, "Believing means, submitting to an authority. Having once submitted to it, you cannot then, without rebelling against it, first call it in question and then once again find it convincing."¹⁸ The same concept is repeated in *The Quran* and authentic *Hadith* of Prophet. Regarding faith, *Allah* says in *The Quran*:

¹⁶ Rush, Rhees (ed.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollection*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981, p. 129.

¹⁷ Vohra, Ashok, *JICPR*, Vol. XXIV, P. 74.

¹⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, op. cit., p. 52.

O ye who believes, Believe in God and His apostle, and the scriptures which he has sent to his apostle and the scriptures which he has sent to those before Him. Anyone who denies God, His angels, His books, His apostle and the Day of Judgment, has gone far, far astray. (4:136)

Allah further says in *The Quran*:

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness to believe in *Allah*, the last day, the angels, the books and the Prophets. (2:177)

(5) According to Wittgenstein, religious belief is for the most part ‘a priori’ and based on faith and revelation and in it nothing can be proved. The same concept is repeated at so many places in *The Quran*. Examples of miracles in *The Quran* are the best examples of what does not depend on experience and based on faith. One example of this miracle is that *The Quran* was revealed to a person who was illiterate and this revelation was completed in parts in more than twenty two years time.

(6) According to Wittgenstein, religious belief is an unshakable commitment which guides a person’s entire life which is well-established, well-founded and properly grounded. He continues and says that religious belief is a way of life. The same concept is repeated in *The Quran* where it is repeated again and again that religious belief guides our entire life and not only the life after death. Religious belief is ethical as well as spiritual principle which guides our life in this world as well as the life after death, which is permanent life. As *Allah* says in *The Quran*:

Certainly we have created man in the best then we render him the lowest of the low except those who believe and do good, so there is a reward never to be cut off. (95:4-6)

(7) In 1948, towards the end of his life, Wittgenstein took the analogy of the tightrope walker and said,

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.¹⁹

He further continues that religious belief is a belief in God and as such is something more than the belief that God exists. The same concept is repeated in

¹⁹ C. Barrett, *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief*, op. cit., p. 182.

Islam where it is said that a person who is an honest religious believer will never do any wrong. He will follow whatever is said in *The Quran* and authentic *Hadith* of Prophet Mohammad. If he does not do so then he is not an honest religious believer. In Islam also, religious belief means that only having faith or belief in God is not sufficient but you have to follow some basic rituals which is 'Fard' in Islam i.e. *Kalma, Namaz, Saum, Zakat* and *Hajj*. If a person is not honest in following his 'Fard' duties, he is not a true Muslim.

(8) Being a devout Christian, Wittgenstein accepted the monotheistic view of God. God, in Christianity is recognised as the real creator of this world. The relation between God and the creator is that of master and servant. The concept of God is similar in Islam where it is said, God is one. The Islamic concept of God is called strict Monotheism. God, in Islam also is recognised as the real creator of this Universe. Regarding the relation between God and His creator it is said that:

We are nearer to him than his life-vein. (50:16)

It is further said:

We are nearer to it (the soul) than you. (56:85)

The idea that God is nearer to man than his own self only shows that the consciousness of the existence of God in the human soul is even clearer than the consciousness of its own existence.

(9) In his lecture on religious belief Wittgenstein threw these ideas together. "He supposed a person who believes in the Last Judgement and makes this his guidance for life. 'Whenever he does anything this is before his mind.' How are we to know whether this person believes in what he is saying, Wittgenstein asks. 'He has what you might call unshakable faith'." ²⁰ Those who believe in Jesus Christ and submit their lives to his lordship will enjoy eternal bliss in heaven, where there will be no sorrow or pain, no disease or death. The belief in Last Judgement in Islam is the last ground of religious belief. According to *The Quran*, death is not the end of a man's life. It only opens the door to another, a higher form of life. As *Allah* says in *The Quran*:

We have ordained death among you and we are not to be overcome, that we have changed your state and make you grow into what you know not. (56:60)

The life after death in Islam takes two forms; in the first is a life in paradise for those in whom the good exceeds the evil, and in the second is a life in Hell for those in whom the evil exceeds the good.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

(10) According to Wittgenstein, miracles are not evidence for religious belief. They are certainly not sufficient evidence, as is popularly thought. He therefore, concludes that neither the so-called proof for the existence of God is sufficient as a grounding of faith nor they are other argument or alleged evidence. The believers have reasons for their belief. For him they are overwhelming reasons. But they do not amount to anything remotely resembling scientific evidence. An essential feature of religious belief is that it is not grounded in rational argument. The same concept is repeated in Islamic philosophy where it is said that no rational argument can be given for the proof of miracles. The existence of God cannot be proved by any rational argument. It is only a matter of faith.

Summary

This paper is divided into two sections. In the first section I discuss the concept of religious beliefs according to Wittgenstein and Islam. In the second section of the paper I discuss the points of similarity between Islamic and Wittgenstein's concepts of religious beliefs.

Key words: Islam, Wittgenstein, religious belief, ethics

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