

Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Religious Belief

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1. Wittgenstein and Religious Belief

Contemporary philosophers of religion delimiting their field often distinguish between *belief in* and *belief that*, and then focus on the latter as more pertinent to a philosophical investigation of religious belief. The believer's relationship to a proposition, and the relationship between that proposition and reality is of primary concern. The epistemology of religious belief has thus tended to be approached as a species of justification theory; its task is to provide a satisfactory account of our acceptance or rejection of various religiously relevant propositions. It is against this background that some of the more well-known discussions of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion have taken place. Hence one much belabored question has been whether standards for the justification of religious belief can only be determined within the context of the language-game played by the community of religious believers; another has been whether religious beliefs are even the kind of thing open to justification, for it may be that the language in which they are framed is expressive rather than propositional.

While these are interesting issues, and one can see how various strategies and techniques employed by Wittgenstein in his later work gave rise to them, they seem curiously bloodless when held up against his terse, intensely passionate, writings on matters of religious belief. The reason for this, it seems to me, is that when Wittgenstein thinks about religious belief, he does so against a very different set of background concerns than most philosophers of religion bring to the table. That is, while mainline philosophy of religion is almost exclusively focused on *belief that*, Wittgenstein is more concerned with *belief in*. Hence the questions that disturb Wittgenstein have less to do with the epistemic status of religious belief than they do with the spiritual status of the religious believer, where what is crucial is *believing in* one's own redemption, passionately embracing a "system of coordinates" so as to radically reorient your life. (Wittgenstein 1998, 73e)

Wittgenstein often seems to write from the perspective of one who longs to believe in his redemption, but finds he cannot honestly lay claim to the status of a religious believer. The problem is not that his intellect rejects the *belief that* redemption of human persons is possible, for this, he writes, is "something that actually takes place in human life." (ibid., 32e) The problem is a matter of will, of finding within himself the capacity to passionately embrace his own redemption. "I cannot kneel to pray," he writes, "because it's as though my knees were stiff. I am afraid of dissolution (of my own dissolution) should I become soft." (ibid., 63e) Problems of this sort tend to be dismissed by philosophers of religion as beyond the reach of philosophy. Important as they may be, they are pastoral, spiritual, or psychological difficulties, not epistemological ones.

Wittgenstein would surely agree with this latter claim. Indeed, it could be argued that one of his most significant contributions to the epistemology of religious belief is to change the subject. He writes: "Religion says: *Do this!—Think like that!* but it cannot justify this and it only need try to do so to become repugnant; since for every reason it gives, there is a cogent counter-reason." (ibid., 34e). But even if Wittgenstein rejects the standard justificatory epis-

temological approach to religious belief, it does not follow that his concerns regarding religious belief lie outside the pale of philosophical concern, especially if we adopt his conception of philosophy as a collection of techniques designed to help us work our way through confusions that prevent us from getting on with our lives. The problem of overcoming an inability to believe in one's own redemption in the face of a great longing to do so, would certainly seem to qualify as a problem in knowing how to 'get on.' The following is a modest philosophical effort to dispel a few of the confusions surrounding *belief in*.

2. Wittgenstein and 'Apocalyptic Atheism'

Let us begin with the provocative comments with which Brian Clack concludes his helpful overview in *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion*. Elaborating on points similar to those made above, Clack writes that while "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...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." (Clack 1999, 109) In fleshing out his account of this way of living, Clack looks to Wittgenstein's 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*.' There we learn that a religious form of life has "its roots in instinctive human behavior...[and] this primitive behavior 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." (ibid., 123-124)

But how, if religion is rooted in instinct, can one experience an incapacity to passionately embrace a religious point of view? If we possess primitive instincts of this sort, shouldn't it come naturally to us to adopt a religious stance? As Clack is quick to point out, primitive instinct is only part of the story. Human instincts typically play out within the context of human communities, and cultural practices can be powerful inhibitors of instinct. If we are to understand how *belief in* could become a genuine problem for a person, we need to take into account culture as well as primitive instinct. Thus, when reflecting on the "two determining features of Wittgenstein's approach to religious belief: first, the extent to which he was drawn with awe toward the religious view of the world; and second, his own inability fully to share in that perspective," Clack suggests that it might be "something about the character of 'this age' which constrained his religious impulses." (ibid., 126-127)

To unpack this, Clack turns to Spengler, whose work, *The Decline of the West*, was clearly much on Wittgenstein's mind during the years when he was developing the ideas characteristic of his later thought. Spengler urges us to think of cultures as analogous to organisms. They spring forth from the soil of human instinct, are nourished by the life conditions of a particular time and place, flower into maturity in vibrant artistic, intellectual, and spiritual achievements, and then, their possibilities exhausted, wilt away. As Clack sees it, the relevant lesson Wittgenstein took 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." Given our current state of cultural decline, Clack concludes, Wittgenstein leaves us with "no option but to accept atheism." (ibid., 128) The atheism Clack has in mind, however, has very specific flavor. It is "not an atheism based on denying the existence of super-empirical realities...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...the possibility of living one's life in relationship with God must be surrendered." (ibid., 129)

As Clack notes, "The conclusions thus reached can only be unsettling for believers." (ibid.) This is especially so for those of us who have found Wittgenstein's comments on religious belief, puzzling and oracular as they might sometimes be, more encouraging than discouraging overall. But surprised as we may be to discover that taking those comments seriously means that an apocalyptic atheism is our only option, the notion that the serious pursuit of religious belief should end in some form of surrender should not surprise us, for the association between a religious attitude and an attitude of acquiescence is there from early on in Wittgenstein's thought. And so, "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." (ibid.)

3. An Alternative to Apocalyptic Atheism

As a way of putting together various strands of Wittgenstein's reflections on religion, factoring in other thinkers known to be influential in shaping those reflections, Clack's interpretation is a compelling one. And yet, while Wittgenstein is certainly critical of contemporary culture, contrasting its scientific cast unfavorably with the more religious cast of pre-modern cultures, his more personal comments on religious belief seem less concerned with obstacles posed by his culture than with obstacles arising from within himself. I suspect that Wittgenstein would reject Clack's the appeal to the cultural impossibility of *belief in* as letting him, and us, off too easily. In developing this point I turn to another philosopher who was surely as influential on Wittgenstein's thinking as Spengler, but whom Clack more or less relegates to the footnotes.

Kierkegaard offers an interesting counterpoint to Spengler, for he too thought of human history in terms of the rise and fall of cultures, each with its own peculiar character. And, again like Spengler, he took a dim view of the present age, finding its spirit antithetical to the spirit of religion. Religion calls each of us, as flesh and blood individuals, to make a passionate commitment. The spirit of our overly intellectualized, reflective age, on the other hand, operates in a realm of abstractions, leveling the ground of all particularity and difference in its preference for bloodless generalities. The resonance here with Wittgenstein's later philosophy is unmistakable, as is the shared pessimism about the likelihood that much can be done to relieve the darkness of these times. As Kierkegaard sees it, there is nothing any individual or collective can do to arrest the abstract process of leveling so characteristic of our age. It is "bound to continue, like a trade wind, and consume everything." (Kierkegaard 1962, 55-56)

All this may seem simply to strengthen the case for there being something about our age prohibiting religious belief, but Kierkegaard draws a different conclusion. The char-

acter of our age, far from ruling out religious belief, simply throws into starker contrast what such belief requires, namely, that each one of us, for ourselves and without expecting our culture to do the work for us, leap passionately into the arms of God. Here we have a leveling which places the same religious requirement before us all, and while the abstract leveling of our age can obscure the leveling involved in a religious point of view, there is no in principle impossibility in the passionately interested individual discovering the difference. For Kierkegaard, then, although the spirit of our age may bear a different relation to the spirit of religious belief than that of other ages, the task that faces the individual believer is a task of the same infinite difficulty whatever the historical era.

This, I think, is closer to a view Wittgenstein would endorse than the apocalyptic atheism proposed by Clack. Wittgenstein, sounding very much like Kierkegaard, writes that "The Christian religion is only for the one who needs infinite help, that is only for the one who suffers infinite distress. Someone to whom it is given in such distress to open his heart instead of contracting it, absorbs the remedy into his heart." (Wittgenstein 1998, 52e) There is nothing in this passage to suggest the impossibility of belief in the face of a recalcitrant culture. It does however, point us once again toward the problem of his own recalcitrance. The remedy for infinite distress is an open heart, and yet, Wittgenstein reflects, "The folds of my heart all the time tend to stick together & to open it I should need to keep tearing them apart." (ibid., 65e) The implication seems to be that this tearing apart is something he either cannot or will not undertake. For such a one is there then no remedy?

It is precisely in the face of this difficulty that Clack's apocalyptic atheism contains the seeds of an important insight. To get at this insight, let us turn once again to Kierkegaard, who usefully reminds us that our incapacity to will our salvation is precisely why a Socratic teacher whose skill lies in reminding us of our latent capacities cannot help. We need someone who can alter our capacities: a redeemer. We call him that, Kierkegaard writes, "for he redeems the learner from the captivity into which he has plunged himself, and no captivity is so terrible and so impossible to break, as that in which the individual keeps himself." (Kierkegaard 1967, 21) Wittgenstein mirrors this distinction between teacher and redeemer in his reflections on what inclines even him to believe in Christ's resurrection: "If he did not rise from the dead, then he decomposed in the grave like every human being...In that case he is a teacher, like any other & can no longer *help*..." The help that is required is the work of radical redemption, a re-making such that "*everything* is different and it is 'no wonder' if you can then do what now you cannot do." (Wittgenstein 1998, 39e)

This help, unfortunately, remains out of reach as long as one is determined to evade the need for redemption by holding tight instead to the notion that there is something within one's heart capable of bringing it about. Wittgenstein seems aware of something similar to this in his reflections, one Good Friday, on whether he should undertake a religious fast. He writes: "I want to do it if it comes from my heart and not because I was *commanded* to.' But this then is no obedience!...You don't *die* in this, after all...But I myself--I confess that I do not want to die off, even though I understand that it is higher." (Nordmann 2001, 168) Only if one is willing to die to who one is and what one wants, including one's desire to bring about one's own redemption, will one succeed in finally taking hold of that redemption. This is difficult for us not because our culture inhibits our instincts, but rather, because our most primitive instinct

is to avoid death in all its forms and it is precisely this instinct that needs to be radically overcome. In a very profound sense, then, Clack is correct that the act of final piety can only be a renunciation of the desire to take hold of one's redemption. But that is only because that desire can do nothing to bring it about, not because it cannot be brought about.

Wittgenstein once wrapped up a series of disparaging comments on Paul's Epistles by writing, "I want to ask--& may this be no blasphemy--: 'What would Christ perhaps have said to Paul?'" He went on, however, to add, "But a fair rejoinder to that would be: What business is that of yours? Look after making *yourself* more decent." (Wittgenstein 1998, 35e) This is a salutary warning regarding our reflections here, for, really, it is none of our business to speculate about Wittgenstein's spiritual condition. We have plenty to do in looking after ourselves. Even so, it is hard not to respond in some fashion to the things others say to us, and whatever else one makes of Wittgenstein's deathbed injunction to "Tell them I had a wonderful life," it is hard to hear it as the expression of a frustrated, bitter, renunciation. It sounds, rather, like an amazing note of grace.

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