

‘Everybody would agree’ – A novel Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy of religion

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Abstract:

In this article, a novel Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy of religion is presented which uses autobiographical exposition as a way of clarifying religious concepts. After analyzing what Wittgenstein is trying to accomplish in his philosophical approach, Wittgenstein’s type of grammatical inquiry into concept formation is applied to religion in this very straightforward manner. How a child learns to use religious concepts and how people check whether the child is using these concepts correctly, reminds us of the actual role these concepts play in our discourses. In the third and fourth sections, the Wittgensteinian investigation of concept formation into religion conducted in this article is used to establish that the two common criticisms, namely that a Wittgensteinian approach fails to acknowledge that for believers God is real and that religious conflicts exist, are misplaced. It is shown that a Wittgensteinian approach in philosophy of religion merits renewed attention.

Keywords:

Ludwig Wittgenstein – philosophy of religion – grammar – concept formation – religious realities – religious conflict

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein portrays an innovative conception of philosophy that deserves to be applied within philosophy of religion in a more direct way than it has been so far. ‘Philosophy just puts everything before us,’ Wittgenstein proposes (2009[1953]: #126). ‘The work of the philosopher consists in marshalling recollections for a particular purpose’ (#127). The philosopher should not present anything new or surprising in itself, but merely remind himself and other philosophers of what is right before their eyes. Philosophy is ‘what is possible before all new discoveries and inventions’ (#126). Therefore, ‘if someone were to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everybody would agree to them’ (#128). Everybody would agree because philosophy simply reminds us of how words are used in ordinary life.

In this article, I will show how this approach to philosophy might prove useful within the philosophy of religion. We need to remind ourselves of how a child learns to speak religious language and by what criteria it is judged whether he or she has understood it. Gridlocked debates about the reality of God or the nature of religious conflicts will dissolve once we recall how religious language is used within its natural setting.

Ludwig Wittgenstein reminded us again and again how words are used, which criteria are applied, or how concepts are learned by a child. He did not provide sociological evidence for these claims since they were not intended to be sociological claims. He wanted to remind his readers of what they know already. Similarly, the experiences described in this article are not intended to apply to a particular group, for they are not sociological claims either. Paying attention to how religious concepts are formed clarifies what speaking of God and spirits and so on comes to. As will be shown in this article, collecting these in themselves unsurprising reminders provides a promising novel approach within philosophy of religion.

For example, this approach addresses two common sets of criticisms of Wittgensteinian approaches in an indirect but effective manner. It has often been questioned whether Wittgensteinian approaches within the philosophy of religion acknowledge the full reality gods, miracles, and spirits have for believers. According to a particular interpretation of Wittgenstein's work, religion for Wittgenstein does not even intend to say anything about reality: 'religious statements do not describe any kind of reality, empirical or transcendent, and do not make any knowledge claims' (Glock 1996: #religion). It has even been concluded that according to a Wittgensteinian approach in philosophy of religion, 'Christianity (as well as other religious traditions) has practically no epistemic content' (Gomulka 2015: 172).

Similarly, doubts have been raised about whether Wittgensteinian approaches can do justice to the obvious fact that there are many conflicts and disagreements concerning religious matters. It is 'a common objection that Wittgenstein [or Wittgensteinians] fails to reflect accurately what religious believers are doing' (Ferreira 2001: 443). Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is taken to claim that atheists 'fail to contradict religious beliefs' (Law 2016: 1186).

Even though Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion claim to acknowledge that for believers God exists; their critics continue to accuse them of not taking this seriously. Even though Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion claim to elucidate what religious conflicts amount to; their critics take them to deny the existence of religious conflicts. To understand what is going on here and what the novel Wittgensteinian approach in philosophy of religion presented in this article involves, we will start with clarifying Wittgenstein's main concern in philosophy in general.

1. A Wittgensteinian approach in philosophy

Modern philosophy is often taken to have started with René Descartes. Descartes defined human beings as thinking substances over against the material world. An unsolvable puzzle results: how we can know the world? The emerging sciences seemed to show that we do know the world, but if we are so radically separated from it, how is that possible?

Wittgenstein entered the philosophical tradition at a time when logic had become the focal point as a potential bridge between us and the world. In his early work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein proposed that our language must somehow mirror the world, or at least, the logical structure of relationships between different basic elements in both must be similar. The harmony between these two sets of relationships we call 'truth', and that is how we can know the world.

In his later philosophy, for example in his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein's perspective has turned around completely: he no longer wants to understand something like the essence of language or the general form of language, but now he focuses on language as it is used in the actual flow of life. In a notebook, Wittgenstein remarks: 'We are told that primitive tribes believe they are descended from an animal – e.g. from a snake. We wonder, How can they believe that? – We ought to ask, How *do* they believe that?' (in Rhees 1997: 87). Wittgenstein no longer asks with Descartes 'How *can* we know the world?', but now he asks: 'How *do* we know the world?' He does neither answer Descartes' question nor prove it wrong, but he approaches the subject matter from a different angle, an angle from which Descartes' question is no longer relevant.

Wittgenstein said about his later philosophical approach: 'Its advantage is that if you believe, say, Spinoza or Kant, this interferes with what you believe in religion; but if you believe me, nothing of the sort' (in Anscombe 1954: 373). For Spinoza, God and nature are one and the same thing. Kant proposes a religion that operates within the boundaries of ethics alone. Wittgenstein claims that such far-reaching consequences do not follow from his conception of philosophy. He remarks about his philosophical approach: 'My ideal is a certain coolness. A

temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them' (1998: 4e). He merely describes practices, claiming to 'leave everything as it is' (2009[1953]: #124). As quoted above, 'if someone were to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everybody would agree to them' (#128).

Wittgenstein calls his kind of inquiry a grammatical one: in describing how a word is used in the language he investigates the grammar of the word. He distinguishes between surface grammar and depth grammar. For example, on the surface, the statement 'thinking takes place in my head' looks like 'there is tea in this pot', but both phrases are used in very different ways. Wittgenstein notes that many philosophical puzzles are caused by confusing surface grammar and depth grammar, for example by assuming that 'thinking' must be a process that takes place at a particular location because of the misleading surface grammar analogy with the tea in the pot. Instead of assuming that the two statements must similarly mirror reality, we need to remind ourselves of how we actually use an expression such as 'thinking takes place in my head.' We have to clarify the grammar of these expressions, rather than look for how they mirror reality. Not every statement is used as a picture of reality. The use in a particular context determines the meaning of a statement.

Some interpreters take Wittgenstein to aim at tabulating the grammar of all philosophically relevant words: how do we use these words and in which contexts (cf. Hacker 2012)? One could build a rulebook for how these concepts are used. This method would probably prove to be not very effective: it might not help very much to tell a philosopher that he or she is using a particular word in a way that is not allowed according to your rulebook. The project of tabulating grammar does not seem to fit very well with Wittgenstein's own philosophical practice either, which seems to be much more piecemeal and ad hoc (cf. Moyal-Sharock 2013). Wittgenstein assembles reminders to which everybody would agree. He wants to change other philosophers' perspectives rather than propose a different answer to their questions.

Wittgenstein experiments with different tools to investigate grammar. Sometimes he presents simpler and clearer language games as objects of comparison (cf. Citron 2012), and sometimes he imagines how things would be if our rules or circumstances were slightly different. Another important method for determining the grammar of a particular concept that Wittgenstein proposes is to look at how we learned to use this concept as a child and how we check whether someone has learned to use the concept correctly. This is what Marie McGinn describes as Wittgenstein's dual approach: 'we are directed to look at differences in the kind of instruction or training that a child receives with different kinds of words. We're also asked to reflect on the criteria by which we judge whether a child has understood a word he is being taught to use' (2001: 654). This is the method I will use in this article. I will elaborate on how talk of God plays a role in the life of a child growing up within a Christian childhood as an example of how religious concepts are formed.

It is important to contrast this kind of investigation into concept formation from two other kinds that have been used by Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion. H.O. Mounce focuses on concept formation in a broad evolutionary context: how did *humankind* develop linguistic practices? He describes how these practices grow based on our prior instinctive ways of relating to reality (1997: 220; cf. Weston 2009: 110).

D.Z. Phillips, on the other hand, often describes concept formation at an individual level but for grown-ups. In his article 'God and Concept-Formation', for example, Phillips illustrates 'the forms concept-formation takes where the notion of God is concerned' by showing how the disappointment with earthly goodness and love can come to be expressed by speaking of a different kind of goodness and love (2000: 211).

Yet, this is not how one learns to speak of God as a child. In this article, I propose that a valid way to understand the Wittgensteinian approach in philosophy of religion is to pay

attention to how a child learns a word and by what criteria it is judged whether he or she has understood the word. In the rest of this article, I will apply this particular kind of grammatical investigation into religion and argue that this application shows that the common criticisms of Wittgensteinian approaches in philosophy of religion mentioned above are missing the point.

2. Concept formation in religion

Instead of asking how we *can* know God, Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion asks how we *do* know God. This kind of investigation clarifies what is meant by ‘knowing’ in connection to religion, which is something very different from ‘knowing’ in matters of science. Here, I want to focus on concept formation in the individual’s life by elaborating how I myself learned to use religious concepts as a child and how it was determined whether I had understood these concepts correctly.

I was brought up in a ‘middle of the road’ Christian family in the Netherlands. Religious concepts were an ordinary part of daily life, and they must have been among the first concepts that I learned to use. I learned to speak of God as a person. I learned to recognize images of God in the children’s Bible, but I was not surprised to find that he did not come to visit us as my uncles did, or that we never encountered him in town. From early on, it was clear to me that God was not an ordinary person.

I learned to thank God for the meals that we had. It was an expression of gratitude like thanking a person, but also clearly different. If I thanked John for the food and it turns out to have been Pete who prepared it, I was wrong to have thanked John. In thanking God for a meal, God was never like that, on a par or in competition with others. Nor was God thanked for a particular action of his which he could have chosen not to do. I was taught that God should be thanked for the food anyhow, not as some kind of prediction or estimation of whether he was involved in this particular meal. Thanking God works differently.

In some cases, I learned to thank God for those aspects of an occurrence that cannot be accounted for by anyone or anything else. God was referred to as a kind of rest-category. When the cat climbed the Christmas tree, my mother might exclaim, ‘Thank God, the Christmas tree did not fall over.’ Someone might say this was luck; in our religious context, we might also thank God for this.

Now, my father might respond, ‘Don’t thank God, because *I* made sure that the Christmas tree could not fall over.’ Just like something is no longer called ‘luck’ if a cause is found for the occurrence, so one might stop thanking God if someone else is found to be responsible. However, in the context where I grew up, this did not contradict thanking God for the occurrence in a different way nonetheless. We might have prayed: ‘Thank you, God, for giving our father the foresight to ensure that the Christmas tree could not fall over.’ The way I learned to thank God, is that God should be thanked for everything in general, and in particular for those occurrences for which no one else is responsible.

We find this same pattern in many other contexts in which I learned to speak of God as well. I was taught that God sees everything, but I was especially reminded of this fact when things were discussed which other people, like parents or teachers, might miss. Even in those cases, I was told to behave properly or decently, for God sees everything. This includes what parents and teachers see as well, but it is, in particular, relevant in those cases that remain otherwise unseen (and therefore unpunished).

God comforts you and is always there for you, I was taught. Again, this was particularly important in those cases where there was not someone else around to comfort me. When Wittgenstein, during his break from philosophy, was a primary school teacher, he once accompanied children on a school trip. It is told that he noticed that some of the children were frightened, and he would go from one to the other asking them, ‘Are you afraid? Well, then,

you must only think about God.’ God is the one who can help you in particular when nobody else can.

God is to be thanked anyhow, and in particular when no one else seems to be responsible for a particular event. He sees everything, especially when no one else sees something. He comforts when no one else comforts, and so on.

Many things in life can be explained or predicted or controlled, and many things cannot. God was spoken of especially in connection with the latter (for a further discussion of how spiritual categories like God relate to explanations, predictions, and ways of control, see Kroesbergen 2019: 47-58). Why did this particular person fall ill at this particular time? It was God’s will, it would sometimes be said. This does not mean that the speaker had found out anything in particular about God’s plans or intentions. It made no sense to say we check whether something went according to God’s plan, since everything, by definition, was according to God’s plan. Saying of a particular event that this event was God’s will, was acknowledging something that was assumed in general anyhow: everything was God’s will, so, obviously, this as well.

We do not know what will happen, but it is in God’s hands, it was sometimes said. This was a form of accepting whatever may happen. Everything is in God’s hands, so this future event that we cannot predict or control as well. Saying it is in God’s hands, is a way to let go of futile attempts to predict or control what will happen. Everyone and everything is in God’s hands, and so he will be invoked especially in those cases that cannot be explained, predicted, or controlled otherwise.

I learned to speak of God especially where no other responsible party is available. Referring to God does not mean that we have discovered that he is behind this particular event. He is behind everything, so obviously behind this unexplainable event as well. I learned to speak of God as a way of acknowledging that something is beyond my powers of explanation, prediction, and control.

Often when I faced a difficult decision, I was told to do what God wants me to do. Sometimes invoking God in this way was merely lending more weight to a particular piece of advice. The person who spoke to me of God considered one possible action as more kind, loving, honest, etcetera, and tried to convince me using God’s name.

At other times, telling me to do what God wants me to do was a way to encourage me to do some soul searching. There is no one clear way to follow; different arguments and different people point me in different directions, and now I have to decide which way to go. Finding out what God wants me to do in this connection, means finding out what I have to do, no matter what (for a further elaboration of this point, see Kroesbergen 2021: 84-89). I can investigate the benefits of every option, I can solicit advice from different people that matter to me, I can consider what would make me the happiest, but the final decision is said to lie beyond all that: it is what God wants me to do. Speaking of God’s plan for my life in this context means speaking of something that goes beyond all strategic considerations.

If someone told me, ‘My father wants me to do this’, it made sense to ask, ‘And what do you want?’ If someone told me, ‘God wants me to do this’, then it did not make sense to ask such a question. Telling me that God wants him to do this, means that he is going to do this (or, at least, try to do this). Discovering what God’s plan for one’s life is, is inseparable from deciding what to do.

A final aspect of how I was taught to speak of God that I want to mention is that God was always worthy of worship and praise. ‘Worship’ was exclusively reserved for God. When it was used for other people or things, this was in a secondary, derived sense of the word, and it was considered to be wrong since worship belongs to God alone. ‘Praise’ was wider applicable, but the way it was used concerning God was different from the way it was used in other contexts. Other people and things were praised for particular good actions or

characteristics, in the case of God praise was always applicable, no matter what. Even if the general tone of a prayer to God was informed by anger, confusion, or not understanding why God had allowed something to happen, still it would be considered proper to start the prayer by praising God. Often particular things were mentioned for which God was praised, but unlike for ordinary people, the praise for God did not depend upon those positive actions. It was never questioned whether he was worthy of worship or praise, this was considered to be part of who he was. Speaking of God or to God meant speaking of someone worthy of worship and praise, no matter what. It is part of the grammar of speaking of God that is brought out when we pay attention to concept formation in religion.

What does follow from this, concerning what is meant by religious realities and conflicts?

3. Religious realities and conflicts

Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion and their critics claim to acknowledge that for believers God exists and that there are many conflicts about religious issues. Yet, the Wittgensteinian approach in philosophy of religion is often dismissed as not taking these facts seriously. If, in line with Wittgenstein's general approach in philosophy, we pay attention to concept formation in religion as we have done in the previous section, what do religious realities and conflicts look like?

Let us start with the existence of God. We might compare the use of the concept of God with the background paint in a painting. Imagine an artist who produces the image of a landscape: first he paints the entire canvas blue, then he starts to paint trees, houses, mountains, and clouds on top of that. In the end, we know that there is still blue paint everywhere but we see it, especially where there are no other objects present. In the same way, God is spoken of, on the one hand, as responsible for everything, the explanation for everything, but, on the other hand, I was taught to refer to him especially when no other explanation, watchman or comforter is present. I learned to say that, for example, my father is watching in the context of knowing he is not always watching. I learned to consider someone praiseworthy if he or she has done something out of the ordinary. With God, however, I knew beforehand that he is watching and praiseworthy – this is part of how I learned to speak of God. Just like the background paint is everywhere, but we see it where no other objects are around, so God is everywhere but I learned that in referring to him I could also acknowledge that no other person or explanation is available. With other people, I can check whether they are watching or are praiseworthy, I can give reasons why I think that they are, but not so with God. God is watching, comforting, praiseworthy, and so on, by definition. It belongs to how this concept is used, to the grammar of God.

If you say 'Pete is in control,' there are rules and criteria for when this statement is true. Similarly, if you say 'Pete is not married,' there are rules and criteria for when this statement is true. When you say 'a bachelor is not married,' this is true by definition. It is not so much a statement as a rule for how to use the concept 'bachelor'. If you get worried because it turns out Pete is not in control after all, and neither Mary and John are, then you might be reassured by 'Don't worry, God is in control.' When you say 'God is in control,' this is true by definition. It is not so much a statement as a rule for how to use the concept 'God'. In some ways, this is like rules for other concepts, in other ways not. If you look for a partner, but it turns out that everyone you fancy is already married, then you might be reassured by 'Don't worry, Mark and John are not married.' It would, however, be odd to say 'Don't worry, a bachelor is not married.'

In some ways, 'God is in control' is like 'a bachelor is not married': it is a rule and, therefore, true by definition. In other ways, 'God is in control' is like 'Pete is not married': it is a statement about reality and not merely about rules, therefore, it can be comforting. On the one

hand, it has the absolute quality of a rule: it makes no sense to doubt it. On the other hand, it is experienced as a statement about the world, the realm of the relative. Yet, even when it is a statement within the world, it is only comforting because it is not doubted. 'God is in control' comforts in a more profound way than 'your good friend is in control.'

If we look at how I learned to speak of God as a child and how it was checked whether I had learned to speak of God correctly, we see that God's presence, his plan, his worthiness of worship, his being in control, and so on, were never questioned. It was always there, like background paint in a painting. Questioning this would have amounted to not having learned to speak of God correctly. If with Wittgenstein, we leave to be the question of how we can know God, and we investigate how I learned to do know God, then we see that people know God in a way that questioning his reality does not make sense. I may question whether my father should be thanked for the Christmas tree not falling over, or whether my father is in control in some area of my life, but questioning whether God should be thanked or whether he is in control does not make sense.

But is God real, someone might still ask. I have learned to speak in such a way that God is real by definition, others have learned this as well but abandoned this way of speaking later on in life, still, others have never learned to speak in this way. But, irrespective of what people believe and how they have learned to speak, is there this extra entity named God?

In the way in which I have described how I individually as a child learned to speak of God, it makes no sense to ask that question. Of all kinds of entities it makes sense to ask this question: will your mother be there to comfort you when you are hurt? Will your teacher see you doing something wrong? People may believe that they are or that they are not or they may change their mind about it. People can give reasons for why they believe what they believe in these cases, but not with God. God is there, God comforts, God watches, and so on by definition. I did learn to discuss whether or not the teacher will be there, but not whether God will be there.

This goes both ways: for people who abandoned or never acquired this way of speaking, there is no proper context to discuss God's existence or presence either. They can debate the presence or absence of their mother or teacher in quite the same way as I do, but they cannot give reasons for God not being there, for within their way of speaking it makes no sense for God to exist.

Renowned atheist Bertrand Russell wrote that once for three days he had thought that the ontological proof of the existence of God was valid (cf. Ruhr and Tessin 1995: 371). Whatever he may have said about God during those three days will have had very little to do with the way I learned to speak of God that I described above. For example, the proofs for God's existence that I may come to believe in would always be less certain than God who for me is the basis for reality, whereas the reality of Russell's God is derived from such proof.

For a believer, questioning God does not make sense; for a non-believer considering him does not make sense. This may sound like a sweeping statement that not everybody would agree upon. Yet, as a *grammatical* statement, I would argue that this is, in fact, precisely the kind of philosophical statement that cannot be debated because everybody would agree to it.

There are believers in God who find themselves questioning their faith or arguing with God. They may wrestle with God, get angry with him, and they may even turn to philosophy or theology in search of rational arguments to support their waning belief in God. Likewise, many non-believers experience a kind of faith envy, who frequently feel drawn to faith but find themselves unable to fully commit themselves (for an elaborate discussion of the philosophical importance of this position, see Kroesbergen 2021). Both the faith that these believers find themselves doubting, however, and the faith that non-believers find themselves envying, is this kind of faith where for a believer questioning God does not make sense. This is a description of the kind of faith that is at stake in such cases.

The fact that this is the kind of faith that is at stake is the kind of reminder asked for here. 'For a believer questioning God does not make sense; for a non-believer considering him does not make sense,' is what is assumed in the positions of both the doubting believer and the envious non-believer. It is assumed 'before all new discoveries and inventions' and it is the kind of thesis that 'would never be possible to debate [...], because everybody would agree to [it],' as Wittgenstein described the result of philosophical investigations (2009[1953]: #126, 128).

A non-believer cannot 'consider' or 'try to prove' the God I learned to speak of as a child since this particular concept 'God' just happens not to come in at the right place in life when it is taken to be something that can be 'considered' or 'proven' by someone. In the way I learned to speak of God, considering whether something is God's will or whether God should be praised would show that I had not yet properly learned to speak of God. Therefore, a non-believer who considers or contradicts the existence of God is not yet engaging with the God I learned to speak of. Like as a child I would have been considered to have not yet understood how to speak of God, so this unbeliever does not yet manage to speak of God.

The crude binary distinction between belief and unbelief is part of the grammar of belief. In everyday life, people may flip-flop between both positions, but unlike in other kinds of language, grammatically there are no positions in-between here. Wittgenstein compares this to debating whether there is a German airplane overhead or not. If one would say 'yes' and the other would say 'possibly', one would say their respective intellectual positions are fairly near. Concerning religious topics like the Last Judgment, this would be different: if one says 'yes, there will be a Last Judgment' and the other says 'possibly' there would be an enormous gulf between them, Wittgenstein observes (1966: 53). The relationship between belief and unbelief is comparable to what Slavoj Žižek argues about divorce: 'Divorce always has a retroactive scope: it does not only mean that marriage is now annulled but something more radical – a marriage should be annulled because it never was a true marriage' (2014: 108). For a believer, questioning God does not make sense and could never have made sense, even when he was a non-believer, for a non-believer considering God does not make sense and could never have made sense, even when she was still a believer (for a further discussion of how Žižek's point about marriage applies to faith, see Kroesbergen 2021: 84-89). As long as one is a believer, even if one has many doubts, these fall within the religious framework or grammar described in the previous section. As long as one is a non-believer, however, much one may envy faith, this envy falls outside of this grammar. This may sound like a sweeping statement, but it is intended as the kind of philosophical thesis Wittgenstein speaks of which cannot be debated because everybody would agree to it. It follows directly from the unsurprising account of concept formation in religion in the previous section.

We may speak of religious realities and conflicts, yet, the nature of these realities and conflicts shows itself to be very particular if we pay attention to the grammar of religious language by investigating its concept formation. Lack of clarity concerning this particular nature is probably the reason for the recurring misunderstandings between Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion and their critics. In the final section, I return to Wittgenstein himself to elucidate these misunderstandings further.

4. Wittgenstein on religion

Wittgenstein himself does not give many examples concerning religion (for a discussion of his personal engagement with religion and its implications, see Kroesbergen 2021: 33-52). In *On Certainty*, he says: 'Isn't this altogether like the way one can instruct a child to believe in a God, or that none exists, and it will accordingly be able to produce apparently telling grounds for the one or the other?' (1969: #107). For Wittgenstein, religion is merely a case where what

he wants to bring out concerning other cases, is already clear to everyone. In religion, one person believes in God and cannot doubt him; for another one, it is unimaginable that someone like God would exist. If you are brought up in one way or the other, your entire world and system of reasoning look different.

Wittgenstein uses the example of religion to show that, for us, it may be clear that the world has existed a long time already and that that object is a tree, but we could have been brought up differently. We do not *know* these things in some absolute way; it is simply the case that within our practices these statements happen not to be doubted. This 'knowledge of the world' is not some basic certainty upon which we can build absolute truth, but within our practices, these statements are held fast by all the other things we say. They do not represent a kind of super-knowledge. We could have been brought up differently, just like we could have been brought up as a believer or as non-believer respectively.

One may question whether we should thank John or Pete, but the question of whether God should be thanked does not appear. I learned to 'prove' that God should be thanked by excluding other candidates for receiving thanks and that is enough. I do not need to prove positively that it was God. If I were to try to do so, I fail to speak of God. I would not yet have learned to speak properly of God. To speak of God, or Jesus is to speak of him this way. Likewise, it makes no sense to ask whether God is real or to debate this, not because the matter has been solved, but because there is no context within which such a discussion can take place. Atheists do neither contradict religion nor fail to contradict religion, since, if we pay attention to the concept formation within religion, we see that contradicting does not make sense concerning central religious statement like that God is in control or is worthy of worship, let alone concerning the statement that God exists.

This situation is not unique to religion. Some people do and some do not believe that there is something like 'great music' rather than merely pleasant or unpleasant music. Some people believe in love or a Mr. Right and some don't; people who see beauty in nature and those who don't. People are aware of the other group and can convert from one group to the other, but there is no neutral context within which to discuss who is 'right'. Instead of asking 'Does great music really exist?' or 'Does God really exist?', we should ask: when people ask these questions, what is it they want to know?

Maybe they used to speak of God, but they are not sure they can do so any longer. Or they never used to speak of God, but they enviously consider those who do. Or people might ask 'Does God really exist?' in a more rhetorical way: they know the answer one way or the other well in advance. In all of these cases, the question is personal, it concerns someone's commitment. There is no neutral context to discuss these kinds of questions. The reality of God is not something that can be discussed, neither by a believer like me, for I learned to speak of God as the basis of my reality, nor by the unbeliever, for considering this God as a serious option would be to consider conversion to a different way of speaking, a different form of life.

Stephen Satris presents it as a weak point that from a Wittgensteinian interpretation of religion it follows that 'if we read in the newspaper that the fiery end of life on Earth is predicted, we would be well advised to see what sort of group is saying this: if it is a scientific group: there may be grounds for criticism – but if it is a religious group, there seem to be no grounds' (2014: 26). I would say this is not a weakness but a fair assessment of the situation: it would indeed be wise to pay attention to who is predicting the end of the Earth. To not do so would be to act like the philosopher Wittgenstein refers to who says 'This is a tree' while sitting next to it. In ordinary life, everybody knows that a prediction of the end of the world means something different if it is presented by a scientist or by a religious leader. The meaning of the prediction is in the use. With a scientist, one may enter into a discussion, whereas one may not approve of the religious prediction, but this would hardly lead to something like a discussion.

Non-believers may consider the prediction of the religious group ridiculous or delusional. It is hard to see how a proper discussion between these non-believers and the religious group could ensue. As a fellow believer, I may think this group is completely misguided in their ideas about God, and I may come closer to providing arguments that are recognizable as arguments by this religious group, but still, the following debate would look very different from a scientific debate. Since religious realities generally happen not to be discussed – either they are believed or they are not believed – religious conflicts cannot be conflicts in an ordinary sense either. Religious conflicts are not instances of a disagreement in opinions, but they show a difference in form of life. It is important not to speak of a ‘disagreement in form of life’ as Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion Mikel Burley does in an attempt to accommodate critics of the Wittgensteinian approach.

Burley uses Wittgenstein’s example of belief in the Last Judgement from his *Lectures on Religious Belief* to explain what he means by ‘disagreement in form of life’. In these *Lectures*, however, Wittgenstein explicates how a difference in form of life or grammar, is *not* a disagreement, but a *difference*: ‘Suppose someone is ill and he says: ‘This is a punishment,’ and I say: ‘If I’m ill, I don’t think of punishment at all.’ If you say: ‘Do you believe the opposite?’ – you can call it believing the opposite, but it is entirely different from what we would normally call believing the opposite. I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have different pictures’ (1966: 55). It is not ‘believing the opposite,’ but a difference. And Wittgenstein concludes: ‘I can’t contradict that person’ (1966: 55). Likewise, there are, indeed, deep differences between people across grammatical boundaries: people think differently, they say different things to themselves, they have different pictures, yet it makes no sense to speak of a disagreement here, not in any normal sense. There is no such thing as a ‘disagreement in form of life’ or ‘disagreement in grammar’ that is given by the role that the concept ‘form of life’ plays in Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Wittgenstein, in investigating what we do with language, highlights the distinction between language in use and grammar, the part of the language that we do not question or discuss. Disagreements are part of the language in use and they are disagreements in opinions and beliefs.

Mikel Burley discusses Victoria Harrison’s example of what they both take to be a ‘disagreement in form of life’: a Christian who says that Jesus is the Son of God and a Muslim who says that he isn’t (2019: 291). However, ‘Jesus is the Son of God’ is a statement that belongs to the grammar of the Christian faith. ‘Jesus is the Son of God’ is, on the one hand, a rule of speech and as such it does make as little sense to say it as saying ‘This is a hand’, except as part of the instruction into this form of life. On the other hand, like ‘God is in control’, ‘Jesus is the Son of God’ does have another use or force as well, which is not the use or force of expressing an opinion. The Christian who says this expresses his adherence to Christianity. A Muslim may understand the full meaning of ‘Jesus is the Son of God,’ as Burley points out (2019: 293). He may have observed the Christian instruction in using the name ‘Jesus’ up close, but by saying that Jesus is not the Son of God, the Muslim is not disagreeing, rather, he is showing that he is not committed to Christianity.

To say that, strictly speaking, Christians and Muslims cannot disagree with each other about the divinity of Christ may sound counterintuitive and not something everybody would agree upon. Yet, first, it follows from the non-controversial description of concept formation within religion in the second section of this paper and, second, it fits many common facts about discussions between Christians and Muslims. While Christians and Muslims may agree to disagree about the divinity of Christ, they hardly ever feel addressed by arguments the other offers. Both sides often feel the other is talking past them. This shows the divinity of Christ occupies a very different place in both grammars and, therefore, it could more adequately be considered as two different concepts. The divinity of Christ acknowledged by the Christian is not the same thing as the divinity of Christ denied by the Muslim. If someone changes positions

concerning the divinity of Christ this would generally be considered conversion or apostasy rather than the outcome of a rational argument. One is no longer using the same kind of arguments and reference points, but one has changed from being Christian to being Muslim or vice versa. These common observations that everybody would agree upon represent the full force of the statement that Christians and Muslims cannot disagree with each other about the divinity of Christ. The difference between Christians and Muslims concerning the divinity of Christ (or the Trinity, the legitimacy of the Qur'an, and so on) is too big to speak of a disagreement – the concepts themselves have a different meaning given the different context in which they are used.

Without explaining or deducing anything, if we look at everything before us, we see that 'Jesus is the Son of God' and 'Jesus is not the Son of God' are not statements that can be discussed, for there is no context within which they can be discussed. These statements belong to the very context within which discussions can take place, that is, in Wittgensteinian concepts, the grammar. To understand what it means to say 'Jesus is the Son of God' or 'Jesus is not the Son of God' it is crucial to pay attention to the distinction between beliefs or opinions and the grammar or form of life which makes the expression of these beliefs possible.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show how reminding oneself of how a child learns to speak of God makes many philosophical puzzles disappear, just like Wittgenstein intended his philosophical approach to do. Wittgenstein replaced Descartes' question 'How *can* we know the world?' with 'How *do* we know the world?' Thereby he side-lined many fruitless discussions in philosophy that required explanations like: 'This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy'. Philosophy of religion would do good in following this lead by replacing the question 'How *can* we know God?' with 'How *do* we know God?' beginning with how a child individually learns to speak of God or not to speak of God.

Repetitive debates about whether Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion acknowledges that for believers God exists or that religious disagreements exist have accompanied the Wittgensteinian approach in philosophy of religion from the beginning. If, however, we can agree on how a child individually learns to speak of God, these debates become irrelevant. We see how 'God is in control' or 'Jesus is the Son of God' is learned as something that is simply not questioned within the religious form of life. One could say that religious statements are considered to be true by believers, but what this truth comes to is shown in the role that is played by religious concepts.

This is not some strange fact about reality or God. Neither is what has been presented here a theory about religion or about how criticisms are internal to a standard and that standards themselves cannot be criticized. It is not a theory at all. It is merely reminding us of how particular concepts within religion are used. The conclusions I have drawn follow naturally from reminding ourselves of how Christians learn to speak of God. God happens to be unquestionably real for a Christian, and he happens to be not even a possibility for an unbeliever. This is what defines being a Christian or being an unbeliever, even for those who flip-flop between the two positions. The only way from one linguistic context to the other is conversion or loss of faith. Reminding ourselves of such unsurprising facts does not tell us anything about reality or God, but it prevents us from entering futile and repetitive debates in philosophy of religion about whether for believers God is really real and whether religious conflicts exist.

Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion has been dismissed as not taking the language of faith seriously enough, by those sympathetic to religion, by her critics, and by those who claim neutrality in this respect. Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion has been accused of failing to

acknowledge that for believers God is real and that religious conflicts exist. The Wittgensteinian investigation of concept formation into religion conducted in this article, however, shows that these criticisms are misguided. Therefore, the Wittgenstein approach in philosophy of religion at the very least deserves to be reexamined.

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