

# God Regulates the Church, Even if He Doesn't - Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Religion and Realism

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## Abstract

Far from being non-realism or antirealism, Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion shows the meaning of practices within which the whole weight is in the picture that God speaks. 'The authority of the community of believers determines what is the word of God' does not contradict 'God himself determines what is the word of God.' As is shown by an example of Peter Winch, the distinction between inside and outside perspectives on religious practices is already given in those practices themselves. Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion does justice to the independent reality of God, without the adjustments proposed by Stephen Mulhall and Andrew Moore.

Some people say that God supports same-sex marriages, others say that anything to do with homosexuality is an abomination before God. In some churches both opinions are allowed to stand next to each other, in other churches someone excludes oneself from the church by holding one or the other. God is said to direct the church through His word but does He? A congregation is looking for a new pastor; there are two candidates, both claim to have received a calling from God to this particular congregation; now it is up to the congregation to discern which vocation is true. Often it is the religious community that seems to determine what it is that God says. Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion Gareth Moore, therefore, concludes that, "What is the word of God is determined by the authority of the believing community, and the limits of what may be the word of God are determined by the same authority."<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this statement does not seem very controversial; on the other hand, this kind of statement has prompted commentators to accuse Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion of non-realism or antirealism.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will try to refute this accusation.

Is Gareth Moore denying that God himself determines what His word is? Does Moore's conclusion deny that God regulates the church? Moore thinks he does not. For him there is no contradiction between his philosophical claim that the community of believers determines what is the word of God and the religious claim that God himself directs the church through his word. He claims to be merely characterising the role played by certain expressions concerning God within the Christian practice.

Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion has often been accused of not taking seriously the reality that believers address or wish to address. If believers say that God determines what is the word of God and if this is very important to them, how could a philosopher who wants to give an account of these believers' practice hope to avoid taking a stand on this issue? If a philosopher says that the community determines what counts as the word of God and God does not even figure in his account at all, how could that be taken as anything other than a straightforward denial of this Christian practice?

A number of philosophers and theologians who are sympathetic to a Wittgensteinian approach have tried to steer Wittgensteinianism away from anything that might be read as antirealism. In this paper I will discuss two such attempts, relating to the issue of God directing the church. The philosopher Stephen Mulhall and the theologian Andrew Moore would oppose Gareth

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, G. (1995). "Tradition, Authority and the Hiddenness of God". In Timothy Tessin and Mario Von der Ruhr (eds.), *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*. New York: St. Martin's, pp. 134-160, here p. 155.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Trigg, R. (2010). "Theological Realism and Antirealism". In Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper and Philip L. Quinn (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Second Edition. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 651-658.

Moore's conclusion that the authority of the community determines what is the word of God. First, according to Mulhall and Andrew Moore, it is of central importance to the Christian tradition to claim that God himself regulates the church and, therefore, a philosophical account of such a tradition cannot avoid taking a stand on this issue. It is an integral part of the Christian faith that God himself regulates the church. By implication, so Mulhall and Moore argue a philosophical account of this practice that locates the rules anywhere else than in God is denying the Christian faith. Second, Mulhall and Moore question the apparent *a priori* exclusion of God from philosophical accounts within the Wittgensteinian tradition. If believers themselves point to an independently real God to explain their actions and opinions, then philosophy should at least take seriously the possibility that God, instead of the community of believers, determines what is the word of God.

I will argue that Mulhall's and Moore's adjustments to the Wittgensteinian approach in philosophy of religion are unnecessary. In fact these proposed adjustments themselves betray a misunderstanding of both the task of philosophy in the relationships to the practices it describes and of the reality involved in religion. By refuting the proposed adjustments I intend to show that the Wittgensteinian approach in philosophy of religion represented, for example, by Rush Rhees, D.Z. Phillips and Gareth Moore, is a form of realism in the sense that it does justice to the kind of reality that is present in faith.

I will begin by briefly presenting the – what I call – classical Wittgensteinian approach in philosophy of religion and how this approach could apply to the many conflicts within Christianity concerning God's will. According to what rules or grammar does a Christian decide to say that God opposes homosexuality or favours person X for this congregation?

## **1. A Classical Wittgensteinian Approach to Deciding What Is God's Will**

### **1.1 Gareth Moore: *The Community of Believers Decides***

Most Christians say that God directs the church and that it is God who decides what is God's will but what do people mean when they say that God decides what counts as a message from God? The obvious answer that they mean that 'There is a person designated by the word "God" who performs the action of "deciding" by which he influences the rules in the church and so on' may be too quick. Wittgenstein introduced the concept of grammar to highlight the differences in the ways in which sentences and words do mean something. Sentences with the word 'pain', for example, may seem to refer to a particular object – pain – but when attention is paid to the role these sentences play in people's lives, it turns out that it does not always make sense to assume that 'pain' is some kind of object. Similarly the word 'God' in 'God decides what counts as God's speaking' may not be referring to a kind of person, nor 'deciding' to a kind of activity. We need to look at the grammar to see what these words mean.

In his grammatical investigations concerning God, Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion Gareth Moore considers how we learn to use concepts: "Though God is hidden from us, the relevant aspects of situations in which we learn the correct use of 'God' are not. They are as open to us as those in which we learn the correct use of 'apple'."<sup>3</sup> Marie McGinn, in an article on grammar in *Philosophical Investigations*, notes that a "dual approach" is central to Wittgenstein's way of identifying grammar: "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."<sup>4</sup> Instead of simply staring at the sentences in front of us, we should consider how we learn to use those sentences and how we check whether someone has learnt to use a particular concept correctly.

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<sup>3</sup> Moore, G. "Tradition", p. 137.

<sup>4</sup> McGinn, M., (2001). "Grammar in the *Philosophical Investigations*". In Oskari Kuusela and Marie McGinn (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 654.

Moore adds as a third method for identifying grammar to consider how controversies are solved in religion. Wittgenstein referred to this method in his lectures on religious belief: "These controversies look quite different from any normal controversies. Reasons, look entirely different from normal reasons. They are, in a way, quite inconclusive."<sup>5</sup> In religious differences of opinion neither an established procedure for investigation is available, nor a neutral authority to appeal to: "the relevant authority, which determines what is to be believed, is actually a party in the dispute."<sup>6</sup> This is not because religious matters are very mysterious or complicated but it is part of the grammar of religious concepts that disagreements are solved differently.

Moore compares the grammar of claiming that God said something to the grammar of claiming that John Smith said something. We learn to use these expressions differently, we check whether someone uses these expressions correctly, differently and, when we disagree, we argue about these statements differently. If someone does not believe that John Smith actually said something, there are ways for one to find out for oneself whether this is the case. If someone does not believe that God actually said something, there is no such finding out and investigating available. The only way to know what God did say or not is to listen to particular authority of the community of believers: scripture, the church, the pope and so on. This is why Moore concludes that what is the word of God is decided by the authority of the community of believers. He immediately makes the parenthetical remark, however, that: "This is not, of course, to deny that God is the source of revelation. It is a comment on the way the concept of revelation functions."<sup>7</sup> Moore holds that he does not contradict any statements of faith, even if *he* says that the community is the source of revelation and *faith* says that God is the source of revelation. Moore merely wishes to give an account of the way issues within religion are settled, including issues concerning statements like 'God is the source of revelation.' People do not turn to a person named 'God' but the authority within the community of believers to which they belong settles the matter. The authority of the community of believers decides what can and cannot be said of God and His will.

### **1.2 Communities That Accept Defensible Differences**

In the cases that Gareth Moore discusses, the community of believers is united in what it considers to be the word of God. Everyone agrees. If somebody comes to believe things that are incompatible with one's community, Moore sees two options: "he can accept and submit to the authority of the community, or he can reject its authority. If he takes the latter course, this amounts to setting himself (or his guru or his voices) up as an authority."<sup>8</sup> I would like to add that there are also cases in which differences of opinion about the word of God are accepted within a community of believers.

First, there can be different groups or factions within one community who disagree over a particular moral or religious issue. Nowadays, for example, in many church communities the acceptance or not of homosexuality is such an issue. In practice this disagreement is considered to be a "defensible difference", to use the concept, philosopher John Clayton introduced in a slightly different context.<sup>9</sup> People disagree radically over it but generally they are still able to recognise the others as members of the same community.

Former Archbishop of the Anglican Church Rowan Williams discusses a number of such differences accepted within Christian communities and he concludes: "So long as we still have a language in common and the 'grammar of obedience' in common, we have, I believe, to turn away from the temptation to seek the purity and assurance of a community speaking with only one

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<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein, L. (1966). *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barret. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Moore, G., "Tradition", p. 156.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Clayton, J. (1999). "Common ground and defensible difference". *Boston University Studies in Philosophy and Religion* 20, pp. 104-127.

voice.”<sup>10</sup> A particular disagreement on what is the word of God can be a ‘defensible difference’ as long as all parties recognise that the other uses the same Christian language and conscientiously tries to be obedient to Christ. There is still full disagreement – “I cannot at times believe that we are reading the same Bible,” Williams notes<sup>11</sup> – but it is a disagreement within one community. Williams helpfully reminds us that the church is already a community which includes, for example, “earlier generations [which] considered slavery to be compatible with the gospel.”<sup>12</sup> This does not imply that every disagreement can be a defensible difference but it does show that the authority of the community of believers can recognise differences among its members.

The second group of cases where differences of opinion about the word of God are allowed within one community of believers, is individual callings. If someone is called to an office within a community of believers, his or her calling will be tested by representatives of this community. In line with Moore’s argument these tests do not involve comparing the account of one’s calling with the fact of God actually calling someone but the tests involve the publicly available behaviour of the person who claims to be called, what he or she says and does, and so on. If God calls someone to become a fireman or to donate money to a charity or to deliver a message to someone, generally this will not be tested by others except the people in question themselves. One person believes that God called him to be a fireman or to deliver a particular message, his neighbour has doubts about these particular callings, yet they may feel comfortable to belong to one and the same community of believers nonetheless.

Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his study on the claim that God speaks, discusses the case of a certain Virginia who thought she received a message from God for her pastor.<sup>13</sup> How to decide whether it was really the word of God? The message had an “uncanny quality”, which Wolterstorff mentions as the first criterion, but voices that people with a mental disorder hear share this kind of uncanniness as well.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Virginia went to a psychiatrist to check whether she had a mental disorder. The psychiatrist thought she did not. A second test, which Wolterstorff calls “the acceptability of content test”, was unnecessary because nothing in the content triggered any suspicion on that part.<sup>15</sup> Having done these necessary tests, Wolterstorff concludes: “Virginia was entitled to believe that God has spoken to her. So far as I can see, everything she should have done to make here entitled to this belief, she has done.”<sup>16</sup> There are criteria applied here which derive their force from the authority of the community of believers but the conclusion is not that the community of believers accepts this message as the word of God, rather, the conclusion is that Virginia herself is entitled to believe that this is the word of God. In this way personal differences about what is accepted as the word of God are possible within one community of believers.

We can now rephrase Gareth Moore’s argument in the following way. Believers learn to say of something ‘This is a message from God’ not by staring very hard at that particular event or object or statement. They learn it by observing how in their community of believers this expression is used. We may wish to say that someone uses the sentence ‘This is a message from God’ correctly, when one uses it in those cases in which something is actually a message from God. However, people do not check whether someone uses the sentence correctly by comparing this sentence to some ‘actual state of affairs that God is speaking.’ Like the object in the case of speaking of ‘pain’, such an ‘actual state of affairs’ plays no role when one considers how people in real life check whether someone has learned to use ‘This is a message from God’ correctly. Believers check what the person who claims to

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, R. (2012). “Making moral decisions”. In Robert Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, Second Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Wolterstorff, N. (1995). *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 273-280.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

have a message from God, says and does. They check whether this person behaves in the appropriate way and they compare the message to what counts as acceptable messages from God within their community. They apply tests like those described by Wolterstorff. If there is a dispute, if someone says of something that it is a message from God and someone else does not believe this, people will not point to some 'actual state of affairs' but they will make their case by referring to the authority of the community of believers, to scripture, the church, the pope and so on. If someone says 'I have pain' and they use the words correctly given what they say and do, and if there is no reason to assume that they are dishonest, it makes no sense to dispute whether this person has pain. If someone says 'This is a message from God' and they use the words correctly given what they say and do, and if there is no reason to assume that they are dishonest, it may still make sense to dispute whether this is a message from God. It is the authority of community of believers that allows for some defensible differences in this respect. Therefore, the conclusion remains that what is the word of God is decided by the authority of the community of believers. Whether people discuss God's opinion regarding same-sex marriage or the vocation of person X to this congregation, the ultimate court of appeal is the community of believers to which one belongs.

Does this conclusion contradict the believers' statement that *God* decides what is and is not the word of God? Stephen Mulhall and Andrew Moore assume that it is and they propose to adjust the Wittgensteinian approach in philosophy of religion to avoid such a contradiction. In response I will try to show that there is no contradiction to begin with. First, I will discuss Mulhall's and Moore's arguments concerning the importance of the picture that God regulates the church; second, I will discuss their arguments concerning whether an independently real God could be invoked in philosophical reflections.

## **2. The Central Picture That God Regulates the Church**

### **2.1 Mulhall's and Andrew Moore's Arguments**

#### **2.1.1 Mulhall: *The Whole Weight Is In the Picture***

In 2011 philosopher Stephen Mulhall wrote an overview article on 'Wittgenstein on Faith, Rationality and the Passions.' Among other things, Mulhall discusses the philosophical investigation of practices of faith to which it is central that God himself determines what His word is. A philosopher who wishes to give an account of such a practice, Mulhall rightly notes: "will naturally want to ask what, in her game, counts as God's having spoken – what, one might say, the criteria are that she and her fellow-believers employ in playing this language game."<sup>17</sup> In describing the grammar of this practice, a philosopher – or, at least, a Wittgensteinian philosopher – will want to know what in this particular practice decides what is the word of God, what rules are being applied.

In describing these rules, however, it would be artificial to assume a sharp distinction between a philosopher's answer and the answer present in the practice itself, according to Mulhall: "We cannot here regard the business of philosophical clarification as essentially distinct from the business of employing the language about which we seek philosophical clarification."<sup>18</sup> The philosophical and the personal cannot be clearly separated - this is Mulhall's first argument for adjusting a classical Wittgensteinian account as presented above. He proposes to include the picture that God regulates the Christian practice within the philosophical account of this practice itself.<sup>19</sup> A practice to which it is central that God determines what counts as His word automatically: "includes

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<sup>17</sup> Mulhall, S. (2011). "Wittgenstein on Faith, Rationality and the Passions". *Modern Theology* 27.2: 313-324, here p. 320.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> For Mulhall's critique of a sharp separation of the philosophical and the personal, see also Mulhall, S. (2016). "Wittgenstein's temple: Three styles of philosophical architecture". In A. F. Sanders (ed.), *D.Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion*. London: Routledge, pp. 23-38.

certain views about matters of central philosophical concern, as well as the view that certain other ways of viewing those matters fail properly to acknowledge the nature and significance of her own religious perspective.”<sup>20</sup> It is clear that: “From the believer’s point of view, [...] it is not for her (or anyone other than God himself) to lay down rules for what counts as God’s speaking.”<sup>21</sup> Within the Christian practice only God decides what counts as the word of God – not the believer, not the community, not the philosopher – and if one wants to do justice to the practice, one has to respect this. According to Mulhall, a philosopher cannot avoid to choose whether it is God *or* the community of believers which determines what counts as a message from God within a particular practice of faith. As soon as a philosopher claims – like Gareth Moore does – that the authority of the community of believers determines what is the word of God, he or she must contradict the philosophical claim made within this practice itself, Mulhall holds.

Secondly, the mere fact of asking what the criteria are that are being used within the community, in itself suggests that the criteria rest within the community: “whereas it is essential to her understanding of the God of whom she speaks that her ways with religious words have a kind of openness to God’s actions, an openness which means that it is not for her (or anyone other than God himself) to lay down rules for what counts as God’s speaking.”<sup>22</sup> Gareth Moore ascribes to “the authority of the believing community” what he should have ascribed to God and, thereby, as he mentions himself, he is even suggesting that there are “limits of what may be the word of God.”<sup>23</sup> For the believer, on the other hand, according to Mulhall, not the community of believers but only God himself determines what it the word of God, and God is completely free in this process of determining. Mulhall observes that believers themselves would dispute the very investigation of criteria for what counts as the word of God: “From the believer’s point of view, however, the very form of that question implies that we – in our ways of speaking – are the ones who in the last instance determine what counts as God’s speaking.”<sup>24</sup>

A philosopher may wish to simply characterise the Christian practice, without taking a personal stance concerning whether or not God exists and acts in the world and so on, but given the central importance of the picture that God himself determines what His word is in this religious practice, such a neutrality is not attainable: “For when that language makes indispensable use of pictures, any philosopher who attempts to clarify its role cannot do so in a way that is neutral with respect to the ‘first-order’ commitments that the use of the picture embodies, without misrepresenting that role.”<sup>25</sup> In this case this is the picture of God regulating the church. Mulhall argues that: “This religious believer’s practice of talking about God as speaking to her cannot be characterized in a way that does justice to its role in her life unless the characterization invokes the very picture whose use it aspires to describe.”<sup>26</sup> The picture that God determines what is the word of God may be so central in a particular practice that a philosopher has no choice but to take a stand about that picture – this is the second reason why Mulhall argues that classical Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion needs to be adapted.

A third argument of Mulhall’s for why a philosopher has to either accept or deny that God himself determines what is the word of God, can be found in Mulhall’s new interpretation of Wittgenstein. Mulhall sets out to show that Wittgenstein is not an expressivist, as is often supposed: “It is commonly assumed that Wittgenstein’s view of religious belief amounts to a species of expressivism, one which claims – as one standard commentary puts it – that ‘talk of God is in some

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<sup>20</sup> Mulhall, “Wittgenstein”, p. 320.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Moore, G. “Tradition”, p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> Mulhall, “Wittgenstein”, p. 320.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

manner expressive of feelings, attitudes and emotions’.”<sup>27</sup> According to Mulhall, this interpretation of Wittgenstein’s position may seem to fit some remarks of Wittgenstein’s but these are only a few and they should be read within their wider context. Wittgenstein’s considered opinion, Mulhall holds, is captured in Wittgenstein’s remark that: “The whole *weight* may be in the picture.”<sup>28</sup> Sometimes religious language is clearly intended to consist of pictures that can be translated in rules of life, for example, at other times, however, religious language – even if it is clearly pictorial – is not translatable into something else. The whole weight may be in the picture, the picture is far from being a ‘dispensable discursive ornament’, as expressivists take it to be.

For Mulhall, the idea that the whole weight may be in the picture implies that when “the picture of God’s speaking lies at the basis of all her religious thought,” a philosopher cannot exchange the picture for something else in the description of this practice, since it is “central to the religious language-games that she plays.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, in accurately describing this practice, one has no choice but to invoke: “the very picture whose use it aspires to describe.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Mulhall concludes: Wittgensteinian “philosophy cannot hope to avoid taking a stand on the issues addressed by those whose ways of addressing them it might have hoped merely to characterize.”<sup>31</sup> If a philosopher wants to do justice to this Christian practice, in one’s description one has to include statements about God determining that practice. If it is assumed that it is within the Christian practice itself that it is decided what counts as the word of God, then the practice is clearly misunderstood. The practice is founded on the picture of God himself determining what counts as His word, according to Mulhall.

Mulhall sets up an either/or here: either, one adopts a kind of expressivism which holds that religious pictures can be replaced by other pictures or descriptions which have the same effect; or, one accepts the picture as it presents itself, including what it says about practices, grammar, language-games and other philosophical concepts. Mulhall, claiming to follow Wittgenstein instead of Wittgensteinianism, opts for the latter. Mulhall understandably does not want to go the way of expressivist dispensability of religious pictures – he does not want to translate the picture away – therefore he sees himself forced to accept or, at least, take a stand concerning pictures that are at the core of a particular practice.

In summary, the classical Wittgensteinian account of deciding what is God’s will presupposes a too sharp dichotomy between philosophy and the practices it describes; the picture of God guiding the church is so central in the Christian practice that it has to be a part of an appropriate account of this practice; and attempts to characterise this picture in any other way than by invoking the picture itself result in a reprehensible form of expressivism. Since the whole weight is in this picture, it is irreplaceable and Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion should include it in its account of this practice to avoid creating an artificial contrast between inside and outside perspectives. Before responding to Mulhall’s arguments, I will first discuss Andrew Moore’s additional arguments on this point.

### 2.1.2 Andrew Moore: God Keeps Practices In Order

The theologian Andrew Moore, in his book *Realism and Christian Faith; God, Grammar and Meaning*, argues for similar adjustments of classical Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion from a theological point of view.

Moore criticises the Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion D.Z. Phillips and the Wittgensteinian theologian George Lindbeck for following Wittgenstein too closely: they “fail to take

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 318; quoting Clack, B. (1999). *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Religion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein, *Lectures*, p. 72.

<sup>29</sup> Mulhall, “Wittgenstein”, p. 320.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

into account central features of Christian faith” and they do not do justice to “the fallibility of practices.”<sup>32</sup> In line with Wittgenstein, a philosopher or theologian can describe which rules are being followed within Christian practices but what if the practices themselves have gone astray? Wittgensteinian philosophy may identify the rules present in Christian practice at a particular time and place but who is going to judge what is right and wrong in one’s practices? According to Moore, within Christian practice one finds the answer to this question in: “the Christian conception of God’s revealing himself in and through practices.”<sup>33</sup> Within the Christian practice God is acknowledged as the one who regulates this same practice.

Moore accepts Wittgenstein’s suggestion that theology is the grammar of Christian faith but, according to Moore: “Theology is not only a grammatical or regulative activity, but is itself regulated.”<sup>34</sup> Moore acknowledges the Wittgensteinian starting point that there are rules governing Christian practices but, unlike his namesake Gareth Moore, Andrew Moore would never say that what is the word of God is determined by the authority of the community of believers: as a Christian theologian he holds that it is only God himself who can determine this. Theology regulates the ordinary language of Christian faith but, Moore adds, God regulates theology.

Moore is aware that on this point he is diverting from the classical Wittgensteinian concept of grammar.<sup>35</sup> For Wittgenstein a practice, such as Christian faith, is given and a philosopher tries to understand that practice. A philosopher observes what rules are being followed within a practice and this is the grammar or theology of that practice. A philosopher is not concerned with whether those rules are the right rules but is only describing what is actually taking place. Moore observes: “[F]or Wittgenstein there is nothing apart from our human practices that sustains them: they are self-sustaining, self-subsistent, and self-regulating. Seeking a grammar which keeps our practices in order is a foolish and needless circularity: their grammar is shown through them but is not independent of them.”<sup>36</sup> According to Moore, however, this perspective fails to do justice to what is going on in Christian practices.

Moore explains that in most cases we do not need an independent arbiter to tell us what is right and what is wrong. Reality itself shows us that it makes no sense to speak of ‘walking through walls’, for example. However, Moore argues: “In the theological case it is less obvious when we run up against (God’s) reality.”<sup>37</sup> Wrong ideas about walls will be counteracted by reality but wrong ideas about God are different. If someone has a wrong idea about walls, for example, that one can walk through them, this person will bump his or her head; if one has a wrong idea about God, reality is not putting someone into one’s place in such a direct manner. Here language needs to be kept in order in a different way, Moore argues: “God enables us to show his independent reality because he shows himself through the practices of faith.”<sup>38</sup> The independence of God does not show itself in the way in which the independence of walls shows itself, the independence of God shows itself in him regulating our language about him directly by influencing the grammar of Christian language.

When, within the community of believers, some people divert too much, Moore holds, there is an independently real God: “who regulates our practices (including theological ones), teaches us their point, and thereby keeps our language in good order.”<sup>39</sup> Without acknowledging that God himself determines what counts as a message from God, philosophers cannot do justice to the way in which Christian practices are kept in good order, according to Moore.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> Moore, A. (2003). *Realism and Christian Faith; God, Grammar and Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> See *ibid.*: “my use of the term is genetically dependent on, though not a clone of, Wittgenstein’s.”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



Moore states: “To locate the grammar of Christian practices – that which exercises a regulative function over them – elsewhere than in God himself is to deny to the Christian faith and its concept of God their own particular characteristics.”<sup>40</sup> God regulates Christian practices and to identify any other locus of authority – such as the community of believers, for example – is not to give a philosophical account of Christianity but is to contradict Christianity, according to Moore.

In summary, Moore corroborates Mulhall’s point that the picture of God regulating the church is central to Christian practice; even theology, as the rules of this practice, needs to be regulated; and locating this regulation anywhere else than in God would be to deny Christianity itself. Therefore, philosophy cannot remain neutral concerning to the picture of God regulating the church, as classical Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion claims to do.

Having presented both Mulhall’s and Moore’s arguments on adapting classical Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, I will now show where these arguments go wrong.

## **2.2 Counter-Arguments**

### *2.2.1 The Contrast Between an Inside and an Outside Perspective*

Mulhall’s arguments follow from his criticism of a sharp distinction between statements *about* a practice and statements *within* a practice. He holds that a sociological or philosophical outside perspective and a religious inside perspective cannot be neatly distinguished. In this respect he follows other philosophers sympathetic to Wittgenstein, such as Stanley Cavell and Peter Winch.

In his classic study *The Idea of a Social Science*, Peter Winch criticises the idea that social sciences should mirror the empirical sciences. In the natural sciences the subject of study does not have its own opinion about the rules that the scientist observes but this is different in social sciences. Both kinds of science try to describe regularities which they observe in reality, yet, whereas the empirical sciences only have to deal with the rules of their own disciplines, the social sciences investigate a subject matter organised around its own separate set of rules. Winch explains: “Whereas in the case of the natural scientist we have to deal with only one set of rules, namely those governing the scientist’s investigation itself, here what the sociologist is studying, as well as his study of it, is a human activity and is therefore carried on according to rules. And it is these rules, rather than those which govern the sociologist’s investigation, which specify what is to count as ‘doing the same thing’ in relation to that kind of activity.”<sup>41</sup> A philosopher cannot determine for him- or herself what rules are present in a particular practice but he or she has to listen to the participants within that practice. A philosopher who wants to know what rules determine what is God’s word in the practice of Christianity, has to take into account the Christian believers’ own opinions as well.

Winch illustrates his point using the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk 18:9): “Was the Pharisee who said ‘God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are’ doing the same kind of thing as the Publican who prayed ‘God be merciful unto me a sinner’? To answer this one would have to start by considering what is involved in the idea of prayer; and that is a *religious* question.”<sup>42</sup> If a social scientist wants to know whether the Pharisee and the Publican are engaged in the same activity, he or she cannot remain a neutral outsider but one has to understand the rules that are present within the practice for what counts as ‘the same activity’. Winch admits that a social scientist may continue by using technical terms to describe the practice but holds that: “still these technical concepts of his will imply a previous understanding of those other concepts which belong to the activities under investigation.”<sup>43</sup> The rules and concepts present within the practice themselves are primary.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>41</sup> Winch, P. (2008). *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy; Second Edition*, with a new introduction by Raimond Gaita. Abingdon: Routledge Classics, p. 81.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

Winch and Mulhall are correct in pointing out that the sociological or outside perspective cannot be neatly distinguished from the inside one. Sociological or philosophical accounts of a particular practice depend upon the practice itself for the rules that they identify. This should not come as a surprise, since it is these very rules that they wish to characterise. Outside and inside perspectives cannot be clearly separated. Yet *within* the practice there is often already an insider-outsider distinction present and that distinction needs to be acknowledged as well, for one to do justice to the practice itself. It is *this* distinction – rather than one artificially imposed from the outside – that classical Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion elucidates. Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion does not impose a technical distinction upon religious practices but brings out a distinction that is already part of religious practices itself.

This can be illustrated using Winch's example of the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Winch raises the question whether both protagonists in the parable are engaged in the same activity, namely prayer, but Winch does not answer it. He merely states that any answer to this question has to take into account the rules present within the religious practice itself. So, what rules are present? The force of the parable is based upon a contrast between two sets of rules. On the surface level, according to one set of rules, both the Pharisee and the Publican are literally being described as engaged in the activity called 'praying'. On a deeper level, however, the *point* that the parable makes is that only the Publican is engaged in what should be considered as *real* prayer. The parable is intended to encourage people to pray like the Publican, to adopt a different set of rules, because only this kind of prayer is considered to be worthwhile. Of course, the presenter of the parable is aware that both the Pharisee and the Publican can be said to be praying – he said so himself – but within this context he encourages people to adopt the concept of prayer represented by the Publican.

It will not do for a disciple to respond to this parable by pointing out that the parable itself presupposes that the Pharisee is engaged in praying as well or that the parable itself says as much. A disciple does not argue that sociological research has shown that it is not true that only the Publican really prays. If someone makes these kind of comments he or she may well be expelled from the group of disciples, in fact, they remove themselves from discipleship by taking up this kind of attitude. Disciples *as disciples* do not care about sociological research or philosophical arguments about presuppositions. This is not because such research or such arguments would be wrong, but because it is not what disciples care about. What disciples as disciples care about is the right kind of prayer. A proper response from a disciple would be: 'Yes, only the Publican is truly engaged in prayer!' It is only the Publican who is really praying, even if it isn't. This does not imply that the disciple has forgotten the other set of rules for what counts as prayer but his or hers is a statement of commitment, an expression of a willingness to live according to the practice introduced through the parable. It is a confession of faith.

'Only the Publican's prayer is real prayer' is not an outside statement *about* the practice of prayer, it is a statement *within* a particular practice. As a confession of faith the statement 'Only the Publican's prayer is real prayer' derives its meaning from an awareness that the rule for prayer to which someone is pledging allegiance differs from the ordinary rules for what counts as prayer. This is not introducing an artificial contrast between outside and inside perspectives but it follows from understanding the practice itself. 'Only the Publican's prayer is real prayer' serves as a rule for prayer within this practice and saying 'Only the Publican's prayer is real prayer' for oneself is to commit to adhering to that particular practice.

Both Mulhall and Moore mistakenly assume that 'God regulates the church' is a statement *about* the practice, whereas it is in fact a statement *within* the practice, albeit a special statement, in the same way that 'Only the Publican's prayer is real prayer' is. God regulates the church, even if he doesn't – both of these perspectives are present within the practice itself. To say 'God regulates the church' in this context is not a description but an expression of a commitment to this particular practice.

### 2.2.2 God Regulating the Church as a Picture

When Mulhall introduces the example of God directing the church through his guidance, he presents it as a picture: “Suppose we think of this as a picture of God as speaking to his people. In what circumstances would it be natural to say that this picture is indispensable to the religious believer concerned – or as Wittgenstein elsewhere puts it, to say that this picture lies at the basis of all her thinking?”<sup>44</sup> By introducing it as a picture in Wittgenstein’s sense, however, Mulhall has removed it out of the sphere of things that can be denied or contradicted in the ordinary sense.

Wittgenstein introduces the concept of pictures by giving the following example: “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.”<sup>45</sup> Wittgenstein proposes the concept ‘pictures’ to refer to a difference between two people’s ways of thinking, where ‘believing the opposite’ and ‘contradicting’ do not apply, at least not in the ordinary sense. Wittgenstein uses the concept of ‘pictures’ *in contrast to* beliefs that can be denied or contradicted. Like ‘Only the Publican’s prayer is real prayer’ is true by definition within the practice of Christ’s disciples, whereas outsiders by denying it would merely show that they are not part of that practice. Such statements are not statements that can be discussed in an ordinary way but they signify whether or not someone belongs to a particular practice.

If it is *a picture* that God determines what is the word of God, then a philosopher surely cannot accept or deny it, for pictures are the kind of things about which Wittgenstein does *not* want to say that he believes the opposite. Wittgenstein does not think like his interlocutor thinks but it does not follow that he believes the opposite either. Wittgenstein’s philosophical account is not “taking a stand on the issues addressed by those whose ways of addressing them it might have hoped merely to characterize,” whereas Mulhall calls this unavoidable.<sup>46</sup> Oddly enough, Mulhall thinks he *must* either contradict or agree with the picture he finds in the practice he is giving an account of, but a picture in the Wittgensteinian sense is something that, unlike a belief, cannot be contradicted or agreed upon. Wittgenstein is merely characterising his interlocutor’s practice of thinking of illness as a form of punishment, saying that he himself thinks in a different way, says different things to himself but: “I can’t contradict that person.”<sup>47</sup>

Cora Diamond, in the article from which Mulhall takes his example, explains how Wittgenstein’s student Smythies misunderstood Wittgenstein’s use of the concept ‘pictures’ as well: “Smythies sees Wittgenstein as denying the possibility of certain beliefs, as reducing them to pictorial accompaniments of things we do, and Wittgenstein sees himself as denying nothing of what Smythies believes, but as characterizing the use (the different-from-the-ordinary use) to which Smythies is putting the words he is using. [...] Wittgenstein isn’t denying that people do mean what they say [...], but is denying that we can see what it is for him to mean what he says without seeing how he is using a picture, a picture the use of which is essential to what he is doing.”<sup>48</sup> By describing something as a picture Wittgenstein does not want to deny that people mean what they say, he just wants to highlight that these particular words are used in a different-from-the-ordinary way. These words do not express a belief, in the sense of something that can be accepted or denied within a given framework, rather, these words form part of such a framework. A picture is not a description of a particular state of affairs but a picture is part of a particular way of thinking, a particular practice of things that one says to oneself and so on.

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<sup>44</sup> Mulhall, “Wittgenstein”, p. 320.

<sup>45</sup> Wittgenstein, *Lectures*, p. 55.

<sup>46</sup> Mulhall, “Wittgenstein”, p. 321.

<sup>47</sup> Wittgenstein, *Lectures*, p. 55.

<sup>48</sup> Diamond, C. (2017). “Wittgenstein on Religious Belief: The Gulfs Between Us”. In Mario von der Ruhr (ed.), *Religion and Wittgenstein’s Legacy*. London: Routledge, pp. 109-148, here p. 128.

To describe such a practice is not to claim that the picture can be replaced, as Mulhall assumes, on the contrary, it is acknowledging the centrality of it: the picture is part of the rules. If a philosopher, such as Mulhall, identifies 'God determines what is the word of God' as a picture, then it is, thereby, removed from those statements that can be accepted or denied in any direct way. Just like it is only the Publican who is praying, even if it isn't; so, God regulates the church, even if he doesn't. Within this practice 'God regulates the church' stands, whatever happens, but that does not mean that it is true or false. To adopt this statement means to adopt this practice and not everyone does so. A believer of a particular church may say: 'God tells us that he supports same-sex marriage, even if he doesn't do so in a way that is acknowledged by many of my fellow-Christians.' Describing these two sides that are present within the practice itself, is necessary to give a proper account of this practice. Within this particular community 'God tells us that he supports same-sex marriage' is a central picture, affirming this picture means affirming the practice, not affirming it does not mean to deny it, but it means that someone personally belongs to those outside the practice.

### 2.2.3 Practices Are Beyond Right or Wrong

Andrew Moore argues that Christians need God to determine what is the word of God, otherwise their practices would be just as fallible as the humans who participate in these practices. Practices in the Wittgensteinian sense of the word, however, are not fallible, although they are not infallible either – both of these concepts do not make sense relating to these practices. People adhere to a practice or not, including its rules for right and wrong, for what God says and what not, but there is no context within which practices as a whole can be judged. The practices and the grammar present within them cannot be wrong, not because they are so perfect or divine but simply because it is determined in the practices themselves what counts as right and wrong.

"The rules of grammar are arbitrary in the same sense as the choice of a unit of measurement," Wittgenstein explains.<sup>49</sup> It is right or wrong to say that a particular building is fifty metres high but it is not right or wrong to measure the building in metres. The form of measurement is not in accordance with the world, nor is it not in accordance with the world – it is simply the form of measurement one happens to use. Likewise different perspectives or grammars are not different perspectives *on* a given reality or grammars *referring to* the world, they are different perspectives *in* reality and different grammars being *used in* the world. 'The world' is not what is given but 'people's practices in the world' are what is given: individuals participate in communities, they live in the world through the practices they engage in; and within this context philosophers can observe which rules for what is right and wrong, or real and fallible are already being used.

The fact that Wittgensteinian practices cannot be wrong, does not mean that people cannot say 'This practice is wrong' or 'That practice is right' but if they do so, one needs to check which grammar is used in making those statements. Such statements will often turn out to be confessions of faith or declarations of lack of faith rather than philosophical statements. As Wittgensteinian philosopher Rush Rhees argues: "If you are a Christian, you may say that the ideas of Zoroastrianism are wrong, and that Christianity is the only true religion. But the question of which of these religions is true – is a question of deciding between them. And that is a *religious* decision. To say 'The Christians worship the true God' is to believe as Christians believe – to worship as they worship. It is an expression of religious belief – not a statement of a matter of fact."<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, someone may want a statement like 'This practice is right' to be more than a personal confession.

Wittgenstein notes that: "One is tempted to justify rules of grammar by sentences like 'But there are really four primary colours'. And if we say that the rules of grammar are arbitrary, that is directed against the possibility of such justification."<sup>51</sup> To say that there really are four primary

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<sup>49</sup> Wittgenstein, L. (1974). *Philosophical Grammar*, trans. A.J.P. Kenny. Oxford: Blackwell, #133.

<sup>50</sup> Rhees, R. (1997). *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy*, edited by D.Z. Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Wittgenstein, *Grammar*, #134.

colours is like saying that there really are centimetres and metres and so on, instead of understanding that this is simply the unit of measurement we use. Likewise 'God determines what is the word of God' is as a picture something at the basis of all the believers' thinking but one may be tempted to add that it is also really true that God determines what is the word of God. This would be making the same mistake, although it is difficult to express this point in the right way.

It is not as if one happens not to be able to compare one's grammar with reality, one simply cannot conceive of such an activity. People can choose to say whatever words they like to say but they cannot choose for their words to mean whatever they like them to mean. People may speak the words 'This is the practice that God has determined' or 'But there really is a God and He is determining all this' but they cannot choose what role these words play. As a philosophical statement such statements will be very short-lived but they do have a more natural role to play within religion, namely as a confession of faith.

As D.Z. Phillips succinctly says: "Saying a religion is from God is not like tracing the author of a book. It is rather to say 'Amen' to it; it is itself a religious or spiritual judgement."<sup>52</sup> That God determines what His word is does not explain how a religious practice came about, since the religious practice itself gives meaning to what might be meant by saying that God determines what is the word of God.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Publican defines prayer for Christ's disciples, although the disciples are aware that this definition is at odds with the ordinary definition of prayer. Saying that only the Publican truly prays, is showing one's personal adherence to Christ's teachings. Likewise saying that God has directed the church by being pro or anti homosexuality, or by acknowledging this or that claim to vocation is showing one's personal adherence to a particular teaching or practice, while one is at the same time aware that there are other churches who say that God wants something else and that someone who does not follow these teachings and practices will not be able to see that God is doing anything in this case. God regulates the church, even if he doesn't.

Gareth Moore's statement that the authority of the community of believers determines what is the word of God, is a proper characterisation of the practice of the church, which does not contradict (or support!) the statement that God regulates the church since the latter is a different kind of statement. Saying for oneself that God regulates the church is a personal confession of faith which commits someone to the rules of that particular practice. Some people will say that a particular practice is wrong or an illusion, other people will say that God makes sure that this practice will never fail but both these statements are personal confessions of faith and not philosophical statements. The philosopher *as philosopher* simply observes and tries to characterise the practices in which statements make sense, practices within which it is already acknowledged that there is an insider perspective – 'Only the Publican is really praying' or 'God regulates our church' – and an outsider perspective from which such insider statements are confessions of faith rather than factual statements.

Yet the question remains whether, even if this account properly describes the task of philosophy, this kind of philosophy is able to do justice to the reality involved in religion, in particular the independent reality of God. Having refuted Mulhall's and Moore's arguments concerning the centrality of the picture that God regulates the church, we will now turn to this question.

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<sup>52</sup> Phillips, D.Z. (2001). *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 8.

### 3. The Independently Real God

#### 3.1 Mulhall's and Andrew Moore's Arguments

##### 3.1.1 Mulhall: Philosophy Cannot Exclude God

We have seen above that Mulhall assumes that the picture of God regulating the church may well be at the basis of all the religious language-games that a believer engages in. In addition Mulhall states that this picture may also be central “to the way she regards or relates to those language-games – namely, not as practices in which what counts as God’s speaking is ultimately subject to determination by our rules.”<sup>53</sup> The picture central to her practice includes philosophical ideas about how she, as a participant in the practice, relates to the practice and what kind of rules are being used in that practice – in this case that they are not human rules but God’s rules. Mulhall continues: “Part of what it means for that picture to be at the basis of her thinking is, accordingly, that she will resist any philosophical description of her religious language that makes its deployment ultimately a matter of our modes of speaking rather than God’s.”<sup>54</sup>

The believer will disagree with any philosophical account of her practice that does not ascribe the ultimate authority within that practice to God. Mulhall rephrases: “More formally: the grammar of ‘description of this language-game’ here includes the use of the relevant picture in the description.”<sup>55</sup> Here Mulhall is adapting Cora Diamond, whose example he is discussing, who puts it more explicitly: “The grammar of ‘the description of *this* game’ (of what she will take to be *this* game) includes the use of the picture in the description.”<sup>56</sup>

Philosophers may be inclined to say that God cannot figure in a description of a language-game, however, since people in the practice themselves say that he does, philosophers cannot avoid introducing God in their philosophical description of this practice. At the very least, one should engage the possibility of introducing God in one’s philosophical description, according to Mulhall. He concludes: “This religious believer’s practice of talking about God as speaking to her cannot be characterized in a way that does justice to its role in her life unless the characterization invokes the very picture whose use it aspires to describe.”<sup>57</sup>

Legislating that participants in practices cannot join in philosophical debates about those practices will not do, Mulhall argues, nor will legislating that ‘God’ cannot be part of the philosophical account of a practice. A philosopher can only take this practice seriously by, at least, contemplating the picture that it is God who determines what His word is in this practice. If a philosopher’s account of this particular practice ascribes the authority to determine what counts as a message from God to anything or anyone other than God, then this account stands in direct contradiction with the participant’s own philosophical account of their practice. The philosopher should not legislate against such an account but take it seriously, either by acknowledging its truth or by arguing against it.

The philosopher should allow a participant in a practice to take part in the philosophical debate about that practice, since, according to Mulhall: “Her way with words, and hence with this picture, thus includes certain views about matters of central philosophical concern, as well as the view that certain other ways of viewing those matters fail properly to acknowledge the nature and significance of her own religious perspective.”<sup>58</sup> A philosopher of religion should take seriously a religious practitioner by entertaining in earnest her philosophical proposals about what or who determines what counts as the word of God within this particular religious practice. An

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<sup>53</sup> Mulhall, “Wittgenstein”, p. 320.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 320-321.

<sup>56</sup> Diamond, “Gulfs”, p. 133.

<sup>57</sup> Mulhall, “Wittgenstein”, p. 321.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

independently real God, as figures in what a religious believer says herself, cannot be excluded *a priori* from philosophical discussions.

In summary, Mulhall's argument is that to get away from the idea that philosophy can act as an authority to tell people what is meaningful or not, philosophers should seriously contemplate introducing an independently real God as actor in their account of a particular practice. Andrew Moore adds to Mulhall's case from a theological perspective.

### 3.1.2 Andrew Moore: Take Seriously What People Say

Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is often taken to be *a priori* opposed to acknowledging God's independent reality, yet Andrew Moore quotes the eminent Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion D.Z. Phillips stating: "by all means say that 'God' functions as a referring expression, that 'God' refers to a sort of object, that God's reality is a matter of fact, and so on. But please remember that, as yet, no conceptual or grammatical clarification has taken place."<sup>59</sup> So how should the independent reality of God be understood? Phillips accuses George Lindbeck of neglecting the Christian practices that give sense to talking about God's reality but, according to Moore, Phillips himself fails to explore "the grammar of 'the independently real' in a religious context" as well.<sup>60</sup>

The religious context in which speaking of God as an independent reality has its home, shows what this independent reality entails. Most Christians assume that God determines what His word is, so we noticed. Now, are Christians correct in assuming that God himself has such an independent reality that he can determine the way in which the Christian practice speaks of him? Moore holds that: "If he really means it when he says that a believer thinks that God has 'a reality which is independent of himself', Phillips cannot dismiss such questions as the confused result of language's idling and doing no work because the grammar of 'God' has been ignored."<sup>61</sup>

On the one hand, Phillips admits that Christians speak of an independently real God, on the other hand: "Phillips thinks that the dispute between realists and non-realists is a result of idle talk and hence impossible to resolve."<sup>62</sup> Moore considers this to be a contradiction: if Phillips holds that the realism-non-realism debate is language idling, then he is blatantly ignoring the fact that Christians speak of an independently *real* God. Since, within their practices, Christians speak of the reality of God, Phillips should side with the realists against the non-realists. Moore concludes: "Until this is clarified, Phillips must face the question of how, if God's independent reality is to be understood by looking at practices, this reality is nevertheless not a projection of them or otherwise constructed."<sup>63</sup>

Moore says of Phillips: "it would be interesting to know what he would make of the Christian conception of God's revealing himself in and through practices, I suspect that this would lead him to modify his description of Christianity in a way that would make it far easier for him to show what God's independent reality amounts to."<sup>64</sup> Once Phillips fully acknowledges that it is central to Christian practices that God determines what His word is, he can no longer dismiss the question of whether God really exists as 'language idling'. As soon as Phillips addresses the question of God's existence, so Moore assumes, it would have become easier for him to understand what Christians say about this existing God as well, like the fact that this independently existing God determines what is to count as a message from God.

In summary, according to Moore, Phillips has to choose: either he accepts that there is an independently real God who determines the Christian practices of what counts as the word of God,

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<sup>59</sup> Moore, A., *Realism*, p. 84; quoting Phillips, D.Z. (1995). "Philosopher's Clothes". In Charles M. Lewis (ed.), *Relativism and Religion*. London: Macmillan, pp. 135-153, here p. 138.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

for example, or he holds that what is meant by God's so-called 'independent reality' itself depends upon our human Christian practices and is therefore mere projection. Given the fact that Christians in their practices speak of a God who determines what is right and wrong in Christian practices, Phillips's escape route that such talk of an independently real God is idle talk is not available. The practice that includes speaking of an independently real God exists – Phillips himself often admits that – so now it is up to the philosopher to deal with it: is it a correct account of how the Christian practices are regulated or is it an illusion? As Moore phrases it: "Are Christians of all people the most deluded? Is their spiritual affect merely an effect of their practices, a solipsistic projection; or is it the result of an encounter with the Divine Other?"<sup>65</sup> A philosopher cannot hope to avoid taking a stand on this issue once he or she admits that in their practices Christians speak of an independently real God.

Stephen Mulhall and Andrew Moore argue that classical Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion mistakenly assumes the role of arbiter deciding what is meaningful in philosophy and what is not. I will show that their claim is unwarranted.

### **3.2 Counter-Arguments**

#### *3.2.1 The Grammar of 'God'*

If we want to know what the law says about same-sex marriage or what our father wants us to do, we can check the books of law or ask our father but determining God's will on a particular matter works differently. Believers may wish to speak of an independently real God but if we look at how they learned to speak of God, how we check whether someone speaks of God in the correct way and how disagreements involving God are solved, it is clear that there is not an empirical person or object that plays a role in the same way when believers speak of God. The grammar of God is more similar to the grammar of pain in this respect: people may say that pain is something independently real but it is important to remind ourselves of how we learnt to use the sentence 'I have pain'.

People did not show us a particular object, pointing out that this object is called 'pain'. We did not learn to say 'I have pain' by focusing our attention on a mysterious object inside ourselves. We learnt to use the sentence in particular circumstances and to draw particular conclusions from this expression, particular kinds of behaviour that are appropriate and so on, through observation and trying out, without ever checking out something like the object 'pain'. There are rules and practices that belong to saying 'I have pain' in our shared contexts but there is not an object 'pain' that plays a role within that context. As Wittgenstein notes: "If we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and designation' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant."<sup>66</sup> We may want to say that pain is an object and the word 'pain' its designation but in how we learnt to use the sentence 'I have pain', so it turns out, such an object does not play a role. Neither does it play a role in checking whether someone has learned to use 'I have pain' correctly. Yet it makes no sense to say that either one acknowledges the existence of an object 'pain' or one must consider it to be mere projection. The concept 'pain' is simply used differently. We may want to say that someone uses 'I have pain' correctly when, while saying it, one has in fact pain but that is not how we check this. We do not investigate whether some mysterious object 'pain' is really there but we check again whether 'I have pain' is used in the right circumstances, with the right expectations and responses and so on. The object plays no role, it drops out, as Wittgenstein says; it is not part of the grammar of 'I have pain'.

Similarly, Wittgensteinian philosopher Rush Rhees concludes concerning 'the independent reality of God': "[I]t appears that the 'independence' is somehow not such an important part of the reality – does not constitute so much of what we mean by the reality – as in connexion with physical objects. (Which does not mean that God is any less real, or any nearer to a fiction.) (The reality of

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.. 86.

<sup>66</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, #293.



God is still the reality of him in whom we live and move and have our being.)”<sup>67</sup> We did not learn to speak about God by being shown a picture of him. Neither do we check whether someone is correct in what he says about God by going to a person named ‘God’ and ask him in any ordinary sense. In fact, if someone claims to have identified an empirical person or object that is ‘God’, we would conclude that he or she is *not* using the word or name ‘God’ correctly. As Rhees continues: “discussions about what is true or what is false in religion are not settled by appeal to something ‘outside’ religion.”<sup>68</sup> People look for confirmation of their opinions about God as much as about anything else but the way you ‘bump into reality’ and the way you look for ‘outside’ confirmation in religion differs from ‘bumping into reality’ and ‘outside confirmation’ in practical situations or in the empirical sciences.<sup>69</sup> In religion it does not involve bumping into God directly and accounts of where we bump into reality with respect to what God wants us to do, will not convince someone with whom we disagree concerning such matters. Neither are discussions concerning what is God’s will settled by reference to empirical entities. The truth in this case does not lie in the accurateness of descriptions but is connected to the rest of someone’s life; it is, as I explore elsewhere, about what someone personally ‘cannot see otherwise’.<sup>70</sup> It makes no sense to say – as Moore does – that either one acknowledges the existence of an object ‘God’ or one must consider it to be mere human projection.

Rhees considers someone who says: “‘If I had not had that experience, I should never have come to recognize the divinity of the Scriptures.’ But then what I recognize is not something quite apart from what I had in that experience.”<sup>71</sup> Recognising something as a guarantee from God and the guarantee itself are one and the same experience. One event would not support the other but both would be there at the same time: “‘It is from God’ would mean the same in both cases.”<sup>72</sup> Without elaborating the example Rhees compares this to someone who says: “There is no such thing as great music. There is only pleasant music and unpleasant or indifferent music.”<sup>73</sup> If such a person at some point discovers that great music exists after all, then in support he or she will simply say: ‘Listen!’ They would ask others to listen to the very same music that prompted them deny that there was great music before. The new perspective, on the one hand, and the arguments supporting this new perspective, on the other hand, are not separate but are present simultaneously. It works in the same way with respect to recognising something as the word of God.

If the grammar of ‘God determines what is the word of God’ is considered, it is clear that this is not learned by observation or constructing arguments but is accepted (or not) as the background against which to speak and think, by accepting the authority of the community of believers. Not everybody accepts this particular authority but the difference between those who do and those who do not, is not like the difference between people who have a disagreement about a matter of fact, or people who believe opposite things. Disagreements cannot be settled by referring to some empirical fact or independent reality. Like Wittgenstein said about the belief that an illness is a punishment: Wittgenstein for himself does not think in that way but he does not wish to consider himself as ‘believing the opposite’ either because it is entirely different from what we would normally call ‘believing the opposite’. This is part of how ‘God determines what is the word of God’ is used in the practice of faith, this is part of its grammar.

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<sup>67</sup> Rhees, *On Religion*, p. 54.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104.

<sup>69</sup> For the way in which one can bump into reality within religion see Kroesbergen, H. (2014). “Beyond Realism and Non-Realism. Religious Language-games and Reality”. *NGTT Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif* 55/1, pp. 189-204, here pp. 197-199.

<sup>70</sup> See Kroesbergen, H. (2019 forthcoming). *The Language of Faith in Southern Africa; Spirit World, Power, Community Holism*. Cape Town: AOSIS Scholarly Books.

<sup>71</sup> Rhees, *On Religion*, p. 52.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

### 3.2.2 *The Grammar of Philosophical Debate*

'The authority of the community of believers determines what is the word of God' is not used in the same way as 'God determines what is the word of God'. 'The authority of the community of believers determines what is the word of God' is used within philosophy. It is not a picture – not in the Wittgensteinian sense – but it is a statement. Philosophers did not accept this based on the authority of their community but it is the conclusion of an argument. They learnt it by following or constructing an argument. It is debatable; in fact, within the practice of philosophy, debate around such statements is essential.

What if someone says: you have described how 'God determines what is the word of God' is used in the practice of faith but I want to take the same statement as a philosophical statement as well? Is that possible or is Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion legislating against that after all? To answer these questions we can compare the difference between saying 'His heart is made of stone' and 'His heart is made of muscle tissue.' The role that these statements play is very different if we consider how we learn them and how we argue about them. The first statement is a moral one, the second is a medical one. This does not mean that philosophers legislate against 'His heart is made of stone' being a medical statement by definition but, when someone uses it as a medical statement, it will surely not be seriously considered for long. 'His heart is made of stone' may be true, that is: as a moral statement, as a medical statement it hardly makes sense to even consider it.

Likewise 'God determines what is the word of God' is not excluded *by definition* from the philosophical practice but as a philosophical statement there are serious issues with it, such as that it does not seem to be open for discussion and it is not clear what arguments can be brought forward in favour of or against it. 'God determines what is the word of God' may be true, that is: as a religious statement, as a philosophical statement it hardly makes sense to even consider it. If we look at how in ordinary life 'God determines what is the word of God' is used, we see it is used as a confession of faith which tells us where someone stands without this being open for discussion. If we look at how in ordinary life 'The authority of the community of believers determines what is the word of God' is used, we see it is used as a philosophical statement which is in principle open for discussion and requires publicly accessible supporting arguments, for example. If someone thinks that there is a contradiction between the religious confession that 'God himself determines what is the word of God' and the philosophical observation that 'The authority of the community of believers determines what is the word of God,' one misunderstands the distinctive nature of faith and philosophy. This is not legislating language, or setting up an authority which can tell us what is meaningful or not, or drawing an artificially sharp boundary between the personal and the philosophical, but this follows from a clear view of the role that these expressions play in both faith and philosophy.

### 3.2.3 *Characterising the Reality of God*

To say that 'God is independently real' is a statement that – like every other statement – depends for its meaning upon a particular grammar; and the Wittgensteinian philosopher tries to identify this grammar. People learn to speak of God from fellow humans and, at best, *indirectly* from God. Andrew Moore comments on Phillips's work: "He rightly criticises others for abstracting religious concepts 'from the human phenomena that lie behind them,' but what if behind them there is a divine phenomenon?"<sup>74</sup> Well, if there is a divine phenomenon behind a particular message, people did not learn that this was the case in the same way as they learn that another message was from John Smith, as Gareth Moore highlights. If the message and the divine phenomenon are constructed on the model of object and designation, the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant. People learn the correct use of the words 'independently real God' not through their own investigations or discoveries but through accepting the authority of the community of believers.

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<sup>74</sup> Moore, A., *Realism*, p. 91.

Andrew Moore argues that, if this is the case, Wittgensteinian theologians would have dismissed belief in the crucified Lord as blasphemy: clearly the authority of the community of believers at the time considered crucifixion to be an obvious sign of God's disapproval.<sup>75</sup> Only a God from beyond people's practices determining those practices could show that the crucified one is nonetheless the Lord, Moore holds. However, Moore himself learnt that the crucified one is Lord within the community of believers. To say that God taught believers that Christ is Lord is not to identify the process through which they came to say that Christ is Lord but it is to appropriate it personally. Just like to say that 'Christ is Lord' is a confession, so to say that 'God taught believers this fact' is to confess one's personal faith stance. 'God determines what is the word of God' is not a philosophical characterisation of what determines what is the word of God, since it is an expression of faith.

Gareth Moore argues that, in important ways, God cannot surprise us. John Smith may say things that one had never expected from him but if one hears that God has said 'Burn all widows and orphans,' Gareth Moore states: "My only option is to reject the report as untrue, to say: 'I know what God is like; he could not have said any such thing.'"<sup>76</sup> So, God cannot surprise us, however, in another way, God by definition surprises us. Consider the following example: "People are said to be looking for their vocation. When people wonder what is their vocation, they are in the dark over what is the right way to go. They may know, or be pretty sure of, what job will bring in the most money or status, what is strategically and verifiably the best option, but what is their vocation, what is it that they actually should do? Saying that God has a specifically outlined vocation ready for her, may be a way of saying that she does not know herself right now what is the best way to go."<sup>77</sup> People could have told her what would prudent, people could have told her what the community of believers would like her to do but in the end only God determines what is God's will. Asking about the will of God in one's life is asking for such a different perspective – which may accidentally coincide with one of the other mundane perspectives. The different nature of the answer this woman is looking for, is the sense of saying that God is independently real and that God determines what is God's will: his message for someone cannot be derived in any direct way from what is given in reality, not even from the authority of the community of believers.

In describing this, I am giving a philosophical account of the religious perspective that God determines what is the word of God without taking a personal stand on whether it is true or not. Can God himself determine what is the word of God? There are practices of faith to which it is central that He does and it is a philosophers' job to characterise such a practice. Philosophy's task is to characterise in what way statements about God's independent reality are used by reminding us of how people learn such statements, how we check whether someone uses them correctly and how disagreements concerning God are solved. In these grammatical investigations, Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion represents a form of realism that could be called ordinary realism.<sup>78</sup> It does not *a priori* assume to know what people mean by their words, as Mulhall and Moore appear to do, but it awaits how words are used in different practices. Within Christian practices the independently real God regulates the church but, like the statement 'Only the Publican really prays', statements involving this God play the role of committing the speaker to a particular practice within a context in which not everyone does so. Acknowledging this fact is, what could be called: real realism.

#### 4. Conclusion

Contrary to what Stephen Mulhall and Andrew Moore suggest, 'The authority of the community of believers determines what is the word of God' does not contradict that 'God determines what is the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>76</sup> Moore, G., "Tradition", p. 154.

<sup>77</sup> Kroesbergen, H. (2016). "The static imagery of vocation". *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 58(1): pp. 76-95, here p. 91.

<sup>78</sup> See Kroesbergen, "Beyond Realism".

word of God.’ The latter statement is an expression of faith and the philosopher may characterise it without either accepting or denying that faith statement for oneself. Religious people may venture philosophical statements but, when they do, these statements will be treated as philosophical statements. To say that a practice is or is not in good order, on the other hand, is to adhere to that practice or not. What God’s independent reality comes to, is shown in the grammar of faith as it is practiced by the communities of believers. Within those communities ‘God determines what is the word of God’ may play the role of reminding people of the way in which God can be surprising and of how defensible differences may be part of a particular community of believers without challenging the authority of that community of believers. It is the philosopher’s job to characterise the different roles that such statements and pictures play in the life of a community. A believer of a particular church who says ‘God tells us that he supports same-sex marriage,’ is well aware He does not do so in a way that is acknowledged by many other people. Christian practices themselves imply the dual acknowledgement that God regulates the church, even if he doesn’t.

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