

WITTGENSTEIN ON RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

KANTI LAL DAS

The main contention of this paper is to explicate and examine religious epistemology with regard to religious language and religious experience after Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein (1889-1951), being a leading proponent of linguistic philosophy, adhered to the view that philosophy is *all about of analysis, clarification and interpretation of language*. He considered analysis of language as a philosophical method towards establishing the relationship between language and reality (fact, culture, value) just by way of clearing the slums and muddles arising out of misinterpretation of language. In his early work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) (henceforth TLP) and ‘Lectures on Ethics’ (1920), Wittgenstein took **agnostic outlook** regarding religious language and religious experience. In his TLP, Wittgenstein was very careful about the nature of language and the nature of reality. Here he conceived language as propositional or truth-functional and reality as ‘the totality of facts’. Accordingly, he drew *the limits of language* as well as *the limits of the world*. In this regard, he says, “*The limits of my language means the limits of my world.*” (TLP: 5.6). Anything belonging to the limits of language *can be shown* within the limits of world. On the contrary, anything lays outside the limits of language equally rests outside the limits of the world. He then said that only propositional (truth-functional) language containing logical proper names and relational terms would be treated as legitimate language capable of picturing facts in logical space. In this regard, he introduced the concept of pictorial form, pictorial relationship, etc. He thus conceived language as the totality of propositions and the world (reality) as the totality of facts and in turn established the relationship between language and reality with the help of his celebrated *picture theory*. He then said that the language of ethics and religion (he conceived religion with regard to ethics) lies beyond the limits of language and also the limits of the word and hence such type of language is not expressible in the desired sense. Thus, for Wittgenstein, religious language is inexpressible because it rests outside the limits of language. Accordingly, any attempt to talk about religion is to “run against the boundaries of language. This

running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely, hopeless.”¹ Wittgenstein in his TLP has set up a limit upon which ‘what can be said *meaningfully*’. Inside the limit everything can be said meaningfully and ‘on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense’.² He then remarked that metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics and religion lie on the other side and hence they are nonsense. They had nothing to say because there was nothing to say. Thus, Wittgenstein completely rejected the relevance of religious language and expression in his TLP. For him all meaningful propositions are truth-functions of elementary or atomic propositions which picture atomic facts in logical space. Wittgenstein rules out the possibility of any truths beyond empirical truths. As religious and theological truths were trans-empirical truths, such truths certainly transcended empirical facts. Simplistically, it can be said that Wittgenstein leaves no vacancy for an expressible body of religious doctrine.

It should be kept in mind that Wittgenstein was not *indifference* about religious life. Rather he took religious matters very seriously throughout his life. He inclined to say that what rests on the other side of the world is higher that cannot be expressed by means of truth-functional propositions. In TLP Wittgenstein said, “The sense of the world must lie outside the world....in it no value exists- and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere...”³ Like TLP, Wittgenstein held the same position about religious language and religious experience in his ‘A Lecture on Ethics’. Very similar to TLP, he conceived religious expressions as *nonsensical and absolutely hopeless*. Religious language is inexpressible. No purported theological statements are meaningful statements. Such statements are associated with absolute truth, a higher form of truth, which cannot be reduced to facts like relative values. Language associated with relative values is significant and language associated with absolute values is beyond significant. Naturally to talk or to write religion was to run against *the boundaries of language*.

¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, “A Lecture on Ethics”, in James Klagge and Alfred Norman (eds.) *Ludwig Wittgenstein- Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, p.44.

² Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge Classics edition, London, 2002, p.4.

³ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, London and New York, 1922, p.71.

Thus, it seems that Wittgenstein's position of religious language and religious experience is absolutely pessimistic in his TLP. Here he completely forfeited the relevance of religious language. His pessimism about religious expression continued even in his later philosophical writings. Even though Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth PI) introduced natural language contrary to propositional language, but his pessimism about religion remained intact. In his PI, Wittgenstein never addressed questions of God and religion. He continued to hold that expressions of religious belief are not expressions of factual belief. Since religious expressions are no longer factual expressions and only factual expressions are meaningful, religious expressions are no longer meaningful. Religious expressions are nonsensical. Unlike the language of TLP, Wittgenstein in his PI remarked that the language consists of a plurality of different language- games regulated by its own autonomous set of rules and grammar. In his PI, Wittgenstein asserted that language is rule-following and following a rule is a practice in our society or community or within the *form of life*. In this regard, Wittgenstein criticized Augustine's position of language where individual words in language name objects, *where naming is correlated with the world*.¹ Thus, the PI of Wittgenstein was against any *interference of language* what he explored in Augustine and his TLP. In his PI, Wittgenstein held that in order to discern the meaning of words, one has to look at the use of words. He remarked, "Don't ask for meaning, ask for its use". Due to misinterpretation of language, metaphysics was born. When a philosopher tries to find some common essence behind the various uses of 'to be', metaphysics or the study of *being* is born. In such a case a philosopher is wrenching of words out of his living use and creates unnecessary and insoluble problems. As a result of that, philosophers find obdurate situation just like 'the fly the way out of the fly-bottle'.² For Wittgenstein, "Philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*".³ Language is rule-following; language is autonomous. Therefore, there is no way to interfere language as Augustine and early Wittgenstein did. For Wittgenstein, "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language ... It leaves

¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Macmillan, New York, 1958, para.1.

² *Ibid.*, para: 309

³ *Ibid.*, para: 38

everything as it is.”¹ In this regard Wittgenstein cited the multifarious functions of the tools in a tool-box.² He also brought the metaphor ‘language-games’³ where he asserted that words had meaning only in the context of different language-games. Language, Wittgenstein opines, as diverse as life. Accordingly, if words have a use in life, they have a meaning. Therefore, there is no point in saying that words are nonsensical like the TLP and Vienna Circle. A word gets its meaning in the context of life, what Wittgenstein famously attributed it by using the metaphor ‘forms of life’.⁴ ‘Language-game’ functions under ‘forms of life’. They are entwined with each other. Here Wittgenstein took ‘looking and seeing’ approach to solve philosophical problems by means of language. He pointed to the ‘form of life’ and ‘language-games’ to locate the locus of philosophical questions and if he came to know that any philosophical question was in dubious nature, he recommended how we might dissolve it. Wittgenstein’s approach of different language- games and different forms of life may be compared with the Quinian metaphor of a ‘web of belief’⁵ in which some beliefs are more central than others but all are integrally related and supported by each other. Very similar to these, Wittgenstein of PI developed yet another metaphor ‘river-bed and the shift of the bed itself’ where he distinguished between the ‘movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.’⁶

According to Wittgenstein, our belief structure is complex and it equally indicates that our justification is equally complex. When our justification comes to an end, it is grounded in *an entire form of life* rooted in one’s entire cultural history of leaning. It gives a full satisfaction not arising as a kind of *seeing on our part*, but as *a part of our acting* rooted at the bottom of our language-games.⁷ Wittgenstein warned against attempt to define the meanings of words too precisely because realistically we can hardly find a common or precise definition of the term ‘game’, rather there are

¹ Ibid., para: 124

² Ibid., para 11

³ Ibid., paras 7, 23

⁴ Ibid., paras 19, 23

⁵ Stiver, D. R., *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, Blackwell, 1996, p.64.

⁶ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *On Certainty*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, translated by Denis Paul and G. E., H. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1969-1975. para: 96-97

⁷ Ibid., para:204

overlapping characteristics between the games at one end of a spectrum to another. He compared this similarity to “family resemblance”. Following Jerry Gill, one may say do not seek ‘the principle of sufficient precision’,¹ but to seek the kind of precision that is appropriate. Could one be exactly precise? Is it even necessary in the context of our life? Obviously it is not. The passion for precision is an example of the ‘bewitchment of language’ where language is supposed to be taken out of its context and thereby creating unnecessary metaphysical quandaries. As language is a matter of public-rules, there are reliable rules that can be *inter-subjectively* checked that would provide the basis for meaningful communication. Thus, the Wittgenstein of PI offered us a language where religious language as a language –game can be comprehended. For example, when a student writes on the board $2 + 21 = 13$, he commits a big mistake. Wittgenstein says, “For a mistake, that’s too big.”² The unexpected gap between what we would expect and what is given actually divulges that *a different language-game is going on*. Let us consider another example. When someone is ill and says, “This is punishment” and I say: “If I’m ill, I don’t think of punishment at all.”³ Thus, one cannot rule out the possibility of just believing the opposite. For Wittgenstein, there are different language games, different forms of life. In this regard, we can refer the article ‘Wittgensteinian fideism’ published in 1967 where Kai Nielson characterized some insights of religious experience. As an atheist he wants to go on arguing that *religion is a massive error*. First, the different modes of discourse as distinctive forms of life have a logic of their own. Secondly, forms of life taken as a whole are not amenable to criticism because each of which has its own criteria, norms of intelligibility, reality and rationality. Thirdly, there is no Archimedean point in terms of which a philosopher can relevantly criticize ways of life. According to Nelsen, the concepts that are familiar in religion are supposedly available only to those who share the ‘form of life’. Religion, for Wittgenstein, is a form of life which ‘has to be accepted’.⁴ Religious talk is supposed to a ‘language-game’ based on autonomy with its own rules and can intelligible only to the players.

¹ Gill, J. H., *Our Knowing God: New Directions for the Future of Theology*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1981, pp. 83-86.

² Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, p.62.

³ *Ibid.*, p.55.

⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., p.226.

How a form of life is to be identified? How does one can imagine a form of life? Wittgenstein said, “And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.”¹ It is equated with a kind of activity that customarily includes some speaking: activities such as giving and obeying orders, describing, surmising, and forming a hypothesis, telling a story, joking, counting, thanking, cursing, greeting and praying. Wittgenstein was equally concerned of social interaction out of which human life is formed irrespective of language and social structure. In this sense to imagine a language is to imagine an activity, such as, commanding and obeying. Language is the conversion that is interwoven with the characteristic activities of human life. It should be worth mentioned that it was Malcolm, a Wittgenstenian, who has been largely responsible to conceive language as a form of life. In this regard, Malcolm said, “I do not wish to give the impression that Wittgenstein accepted any religious faith - he certainly did not-or that he was a religious person. But I think that there was in him, in some sense, the possibility of religion. I believe that he looked on religion as a ‘form of life’ (to use an expression from the *Investigations*) in which he did not participate, but with which he was sympathetic and which greatly interested him.”² Being a Wittgenstenian, Malcolm conceives religion as a form of life because it is language embedded in action what Wittgenstein termed as ‘language-game’. Science is another form of life. Neither stands in need of justification. This indeed is a perfect example of *Wittgenstenian fideism*.

Phillips as one of the proponent of Wittgenstenian’s fideist made an influential remark on Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion. Like Wittgenstein, Phillips revealed philosophy as a *clarifying therapy*. Philosophy is neither for nor against religious beliefs. There is no point in seeking external justification of religion. It would then be treated as a big mistake. Like Wittgenstein, Phillips introduces a non- cognitive interpretation of religious practice where eternal life and of prayer play the dominant role. Phillips’ view is close to Hare’s *blik theory*. Following Wittgenstein, we can allow that religious belief means to live by a picture, *a blik*, or an attitude not revealable by science. In this regard, we sense continuity between early and later Wittgenstein. Scientific language is still the language with which to

¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, para:19

² Malcolm, *Wittgenstein, Ludwig: A Memoir*, 1958, p.72.

depict reality. What is beyond the world may now be sayable - it is not simply the mystical- but it is still clearly noncognitive. The continuity and the relevance of religious use had further been strengthened with the contribution of Braithwaite outlook on Wittgenstein's 'meaning as use'¹ principle. Religion, according to Braithwaite, gives us stories which need not be true but support the intention *to lead in a certain moral way of life*. We find the same in Wittgenstein who held that the difference in religions lies in the difference in their stories and in the moral convictions associated with them. It should be remember that the ethical discourse and moral discourse had been conceived by Wittgenstein alike.

It seems to me that Wittgenstein certainly discussed about religion and theology. It seems also clear to me that his understanding of language-game and form of life contained every aspect of human life beyond cognitive account. Certainly, in TLP Wittgenstein anticipated the language of science based on cognitive account on the basis of which he ruled out non-cognitive account of language. However, in his PI, he introduced ordinary language which touches upon the stream of human life in variety of ways. Naturally, the point of cognitive account has not been resonant in ordinary language. Since the language he presumed in PI encompasses everything and leaves nothing, religion would be an inevitable part of discussion. The point is that to talk of religion does not make sense to say that one has become a religion man. It has been revealed from the confession of Drury that Wittgenstein discussed about religion. But still he had been regarded as an atheist. Why it had been the case? Why he did not regard a theist? He had been regarded as a religious person because he was hungry about religion. He had been treated as an atheist because he did not believe in God. That is why he had been treated as a *religious atheist*.

Let me relook the past development of philosophy of religion. Religion in the past was full of myths, mysteries, superstitions, and unscientific prejudices. It was continued before Hume and took a dramatic turn from Kant's onwards. Religion *per se* is God based. God is *sui-gensis* and beholder of any kind of religion. This trend of religion has been clogged by Kant by taking an *agnostic position of God* as the

¹ Braithwaite, R. B., "An Empiricist's view of the nature of religious belief," in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed., Basil Mitchell, Oxford Readings in Philosophy, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971, p.77.

locus of religion. In this regard Kant acknowledged Hume. The agnostic position of God within the realm of religion had further been strengthened with the contribution of logical positivists' criterion of the Principle of Verification where religious statements were treated as meaningless because of non-cognitive account. The reflection of Kant and logical positivism was continued and reflected on Wittgenstein and Wittgenstenian's, (Post-Wittgenstenians) and Continental philosophers where attempt had been made to develop a non-God based kind of philosophy of religion and religious experience. Thus, to me there is no problem of considering or treating Wittgenstein as a religious man even though he took pessimistic approach regarding the existence of God. In this sense there remains nothing incoherence and inconsistent in the twin concept '*religious atheist*'. Wittgenstein, I do reckon, would be a religious atheist because of his own inclination towards establishing a non-God based religious theory within the form of life. The impact of Wittgenstein about religious language and religious experience has been enormous because with the influence of Wittgenstein there developed Wittgenstenian, post-Wittgenstenian and Continental (Post modernism) movement of philosophy of religious language and experience. Derrida and Martin Heidegger within the womb of Post Modernism had deeply been involved in exploring *divine reality* in ways differs from scientific reference.

Thus it seems to me that unlike the monolithic conception of language, Wittgenstein in his PI emphasized on multiplicity and differences. In *Lectures and Conversations*, Wittgenstein had explicitly distinguished between *factual belief and religious belief* and justified each of these beliefs in a different way. He did not think that religious belief was nonsensical. Religious language has its *own grammar* as distinguished from the grammar of factual language. Thus, in his PI, Wittgenstein explicitly rejected his early views that religious language is inexpressible. In fact, in personal conversion with Drury, Wittgenstein explicitly rejected his early view that *theology is impossible* developed in TLP and in 'A Lecture on Ethics'. Even it was reported by Drury that Wittgenstein at the end of his life confessed and characterized his earlier view as *the mark of stupidity*.¹ Wittgenstein, according to Drury, confessed at the end of his life that it is indeed possible to talk sense about God as well as

¹ Drury, "Conversations with Wittgenstein", in Rush Rhees (ed.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein-Personal Recollections*, Totowa, NJ, 1981, P.113.

religion and in fact he discussed about God and religion with Drury on several occasions. In his *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein made various observations about religion, religious conviction and religious doctrine. Having said this, Wittgenstein did not feel free to discuss about religion. He was generally reluctant to talk of religious matters. He preferred selected friends to talk of religious doctrines. This indicates that Wittgenstein was conservative to discuss about religion. However, it remained unknown why he had been selective while discussing religious matters. Thus, it is our general perception that Wittgenstein's attitude towards religious language and religious experience was pessimistic in nature if not *absolute pessimistic*. In *TLP* he took extremely negative approach about religious language and religious experience and considered these as nonsensical. He held the same position in his 'A Lecture on Ethics'. In his *PI*, his approach about language took a radical turn. The language of *PI* surely contained religious matters within the form of life.

In *PI* Wittgenstein conceived language having multidimensional and multifarious uses. We think Wittgenstein was pessimistic about religion because he was struggling to locate *the source of religion*. Even Wittgenstein himself confessed that his own view of religion was misunderstood. In his *Philosophical Remarks*, Wittgenstein made so many cryptic religious remarks and that is why he dedicated that book "to the Glory of God".¹ Thus, it may be said that *Philosophical Remarks* of Wittgenstein appeared as a semblance of religious dedication. It would indeed be a misnomer to conceive religious dedication as a misuse of language and it might not be treated as the source of his pessimism about religion. Even within the Wittgenstenians, we observe some overlapping remarks about the philosophical position of religion of Wittgenstein. This actually makes this issue even more interesting. Having said this, my position is that Wittgenstein to me had been a consistent doubter about religious language and religious experience. His pessimism, to me, is not about religious discourse, but about *the authentic locus and source of religious discourse*. His understanding of religious language and religious experience would be *non-God based religion*. Thus, he would be treated as a religious person from non-conventionalist point of view. He made it clear that he should not be treated

¹ DeAngelis, W. J., *Ludwig Wittgenstein- A Cultural Point of View*, Ashgate, 2007, p.117.

as a religious man if religion *per se* be conceived as the owner of God. In this regard he says, "I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view."¹

Wittgenstein was an atheist. He did not believe in God's existence as the locus of religion. This does not however make sense to say that Wittgenstein was not a religious man. In fact Wittgenstein 'had a deep religious hunger'² according to Searle. For Searle, Wittgenstein's attitude towards religion and religious experience was altogether different from the middle-class Anglo-American. His position about religion is interesting. He had been regarded as an atheist even though he wanted to talk about God. Phillips remarks, "Searle says that Wittgenstein had 'a hunger for God', but did not call himself a believer."³In this regard, Phillips addresses on two separate theses which are apparently confusing. First, to understand religious belief one must take account of the use of religious concepts in people's lives. The second has been called Wittgenstenianian's fideism which states that 'religious belief can only be understood by those who play the religious language-game. Thus, Wittgenstein's thought is fideistic because it leads to holding unfounded beliefs. Wittgenstein held the first and not the second. Wittgenstein's objective is to gain conceptual clarity out of conceptual puzzlement and in this regard he would clarify the grammar of belief and disbelief and makes philosophy as a therapy.

Wittgenstein's perception of philosophy of religion and religious experience is radical in nature because he conceived religion as *a form of life*. For him religion integrates culture, ethics and values. Many would say that Wittgenstein was influenced by Spengler because like Spengler, Wittgenstein observed a sort of *cultural decline* in 20th century modern civilization. The forms of artistic expression which had once stood at the centre of a high culture had lost their power and gave way to a civilization. The fate of religion is very much the same as art. There we notice a gradual decline of religion and culture. The religious experience we observed in Post Kantian, Post-Positivism and in Wittgenstein and Wittgenstenian is altogether

¹ RW, P.79.

² Searle, "Language-Games and Religion", included in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, D. Z. Phillips, The Macmillan Press Ltd., p.23.

³Phillips, D. Z., *Wittgenstein and Religion*, The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1993, p.30.

different from the religion of the past. Kant was skeptical about the existence of God; logical positivists in general completely denied the possibility of religious language and religious experience. Wittgenstein was absolutely pessimistic about the possibility of God based religion. Even in the 21st century, the Post-modernists, namely, Derrida and Heidegger talked in favor of *divine God* and were completely against the *existence of God*. The new interpretation of religion in some sense or other is a deviation from the religion of the past. Religion of later Wittgenstein and Post-Wittgenstein is radical because by way of releasing religion from the *womb of God*, they interpreted religion in altogether a different way. Whether non-God based religion is at all possible or not is a matter of serious philosophical discussion.

In fact within the womb of civilization, classical or traditional religious experience and practices lost their life, their vitality and their meaning. There is no room of religion within the realm of Western civilization. In fact, we notice the same in Wittgenstein as well. Wittgenstein in his TLP stated with *civilized language or scientific language* where the sense of proposition determined on the basis of cognitive account played the upper hand. Naturally, there would be nothing wrong in supposing that Wittgenstein's account of the language of TLP had been marked as declining of culture to a great extent. The pessimistic approach of Wittgenstein towards religious experience, I do reckon, would be treated as a *semblance of cultural decline*. Wittgenstein's position of religious inexpressibility of TLP is absolute. However, in his PI his position of religious inexpressibility is not absolute. Unlike TLP, Wittgenstein in both *Lectures and Conversations* and *Culture and Value* expressed a consistent set of observations about religious language. In his later writings, Wittgenstein focused mainly on the real grammar of religious language and its proper function. Like TLP, Wittgenstein was pessimistic about religious language and religious experience in his PI, but unlike TLP, he thought that religious language and religious experience were not meaningless. I think that Wittgenstein believed that religious discourse is meaningful and unproblematic in the right cultural setting. He admitted the relevance of religious discourse in a passing manner in PI and in great detail in his *Lectures and Conversations* and *Culture and Value*. In his *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein had pointed out that religious discourse as cultural discourse is well placed in our life. Religion is a way of life. He further predicted that in future

times and settings will appear 'when religious discourse is capable of successfully doing its job, the grammar of such discourse works something like this'. Thus, the future of religion will survive without believing the existence of God, without priests and vicars and will function against the background of the religious discourse of the past. Religion must work on the basis of *internal grammar* and must be freed from the externals. The future of religion will be needed cultural surroundings, the forms of life. Of course, religious expressibility is highly problematic to Wittgenstein both in TLP and PI and the issue that religious expression is problematic remained intact. However, unlike TLP, in his later writings he bought cultural surroundings necessary for meaningful religious expression. Many would say that Wittgenstein in this regard was influenced by Spengler's cultural insularity. In fact, it was revealed from his remarks on Frazer in which he (Wittgenstein) takes Frazer to ask for doing the significance of certain primitive religious practices with regard to his own time and culture. Having said this, it seems to me, Wittgenstein's outlook about religious language and religious experience had been marked as distinct nature from where the interpretation of religion, religious language and discourse may find a new orbit. His religious epistemology sets up a new foundation of philosophy of religion where one can talk matters about religion without believing the existence of God.