

## WITTGENSTEIN ON RELIGION AND MEANING OF LIFE\*

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Wittgenstein's interpretation of religion opens up a new dimension in philosophy of religion in modern times. He offers us a non-God based religion. He understands and interprets religion within the realm of language, more specifically, within the sphere of religious language. In his early writings, Wittgenstein has claimed that religion cannot be put into words or language. Accordingly, religious statements are mystical and nonsensical. However, in his later writings, Wittgenstein acknowledges religious language as *a form of life or as a language-game*. However, his interpretation about religion remains the same because like his early interpretation, Wittgenstein in his later interpretation does not believe in the existence of God. In this regard, Wittgenstein was influenced by logical positivism. For logical positivism, religious assertions are meaningless and for Wittgenstein, religious assertions are nonsensical. They are nonsensical in the sense that they lack factual sense. Wittgenstein called them important nonsense. However, at the end of his philosophical career, Wittgenstein conceives religion with regard to culture and value. Like many others, he asserts that religion is culture. The religion of a community reflects the culture of that community in the real sense of the term. Thus, in a sense the value of life and the value of the world are determined by religion. Religious feeling is a sort of mental feeling through which one can reveal his deep association with God. This feeling gives him comfort and safety. In order to unearth the meaning of life, one has to be a part of religion. Thus, in a sense, religion determines the meaning of life.

Religion determines *the value of the world*. *The value of the world is at par with the meaning of life*. When Wittgenstein in his *TLP* asserted that ethics, religion, aesthetics are nonsense, he did not want to say that they are plain nonsense; rather he wants to say that they are nonsense because they lack factual sense. However, they have sense in other contexts. They help us to determine the meaning of life; they help us to determine the value of the world. They help us to have a sense of God. Wittgenstein does not believe in the existence of God, but he acknowledges that one can have a sense of God without preconceiving its existence. To think of God is to have a better sense or feeling. One can reveal himself safe while thinking or feeling of God.

For Wittgenstein, culture and value are no longer associated with propositional value he has anticipated in his *TLP*. For Wittgenstein, the sense of the proposition is no way associated with the sense of the world. The sense of the world or the value of the world is higher than the sense of the proposition. Anything higher cannot be comprehended by means of anything lower. Therefore, the sense of the proposition cannot reach up to that. Wittgenstein in his *Culture and Value*<sup>1</sup> thus

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, University of Chicago Press, 1977.

outlines the relevance of religion with regard to the twin concepts, namely, *culture* and *value*. In this regard, Wittgenstein intends to say that religion is in another sense culture. Or alternatively, it can be said that the culture of a community is reflected through religion. It is associated with *the meaning of life*. The meaning of life is made possible through the association of the value of the world. One can have a sense of the value of the world just by way of revealing the feeling of God. Thus for Wittgenstein, to think of culture and value through religion helps one to reveal his association with God. This sort of religious feeling makes him safe and comfortable. Thus in a sense, religious safety would be treated as absolute safety. The meaning of life cannot be determined without ensuring absolute safety of life.

This position of Wittgenstein is metaphysical in nature. Here we have to engage in self-reflection upon our reactions to the rituals and upon activities within our lives. Here we need to engage in self-reflection of our own which would be profoundly ethical and having religious implications. It would be “a sort of religious experience or feeling where we find ourselves *absolutely safe*.”<sup>2</sup> It would be a stage where the answer to the question cannot be formulated. It means to say that there is something wrong with the question. It is an attempt to get something said that can only be shown. Here Winch takes Wittgenstein’s pronouncement of *the feeling of absolute safety* to be one exemplification of ‘the ethico-religious idea’. In certain places, it exhibits a depth of self-exploration on Wittgenstein’s part comparable to that of many of the manuscript notes that came to be published in his *Culture and Value*. In our sense, the statement concerning absolute safety is one of the few instances of what Wittgenstein identifies as expressions or judgments of ‘absolute value’. While scrutinizing the statements of ‘absolute value’, Wittgenstein reveals them to be nonsensical in the light of the contemplation of meaningfulness to which he was still in thrall in the time of the lecture. Many would say that Wittgenstein’s remark about absolute safety need be allied to a notion of virtuousness as a guarantor of safety in the way that he remarks from Socrates and Kierkegaard. However, we think that unlike the latter, Wittgenstein’s remark seems better understood as gesturing towards a standpoint beyond what we ordinarily recognize as virtue and

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<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein, *A Lecture on Ethics*, op. cit., p.8.

vice altogether, a philosophical standpoint which may be characterized by Wittgenstein in his *TLP* as *mystical*. Thus, we reveal a tendency in the human mind concerning the feeling of absolute safety. In this regard, Wittgenstein says, “We all know what it means in ordinary life to be safe. I am safe in my room, when I cannot be run over by an omnibus. I am safe if I have had whooping cough and cannot therefore get it again. To be safe essentially means that it is physically impossible that certain things should happen to me and therefore it’s nonsense to say that I am safe whatever happens ... this is a misuse of the word ‘safe.’”<sup>3</sup> Thus it seems clear that by the term ‘safe’, Wittgenstein does not mean *physical safe* or someone is safe physically, rather he intends to say *a tendency in the human mind*.

When Wittgenstein describes that what he has said as nonsense, it does not follow that he means there is no point in saying it. Rather what he seems to be getting at is that the words with which he has tried to characterize a certain experience cannot be given what he might want to call it a factual sense. That means they do not express a proposition. He took semantics approach in his early part of his *TLP* where he vehemently claimed that all meaningful utterances must express propositions, which in turn, correspond to facts. Thus, one should be aware that Wittgenstein was inclined to label as nonsense any use of language other than a description of such facts. However, we have seen in his *PI*, where Wittgenstein was to change his mind about this. Here he dispense with his notion of the general form of a proposition in favor of their being innumerable forms or uses of language, with no essential structure. We have to understand his talk of absolute safety within the context of religious allegory and to classify all such uses of language as ultimately nonsense. Here an attempt has been made to transcend language and the world by *means of language*. For Wittgenstein, they involve in running ‘against the boundaries of language, against the walls of our cage; and this, though a natural and respectable human tendency, is perfectly and absolutely nonsense.’<sup>4</sup>

We thus think that religious allegories are not instances of nonsense, but as pictures that have a particular use, and hence a sense, within a believer’s life. The fact

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<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, *A Lecture on Ethics*, op. cit., p.9.

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein, *A Lecture on Ethics*, p.12

is that such pictures are not propositions devoid of evaluative content. They do not express or describe neutral states of affair in the world. However, this is not the reason for designating them nonsense, rather was merely a reason for denying that there is any point in trying to translate them into non-evaluative. A religious utterance, or an ethical or aesthetic one, can have a point and a use, and hence a sense differs from factual sense, irrespective of whether it expresses anything that the earlier Wittgenstein would have wanted to call a 'fact'. Thus, if Wittgenstein is able to have a sense in *ethico-religious uses of language*, then there seems no obvious reason for being deferred from seeking sense in an *ethico-religious* utterance articulated by Wittgenstein. We think that when Wittgenstein announces his religious feeling of absolute safety, he too is drawing a connection between invulnerability and virtuousness and in fact, unlike Socrates and Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein does not explicitly draw a connection between *safety and virtue*.

Thus, by calling for absolute safety, Wittgenstein has a different experience altogether. In this regard, Winch quotes Wittgenstein, "I will mention another experience straight away which I also know and which others of you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling absolutely safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say 'I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens.'"<sup>5</sup> Here Wittgenstein has described his experience of religious allegory, namely, the experience of wondering at the world's existence, what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world and of the existence of absolute safety. He says that it has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. He also added a 'third experience' of guilty feeling. Guilty feeling cannot be approved by God. Thus, in the case of feeling of absolute safety, Wittgenstein is alluding to something wholly unconditional. In this sense, it can be said after Wittgenstein that the feeling of absolute safe is deeply associated with the absolute value that would preserve one's upstanding moral character until the end of his life. Thus, if we take seriously Wittgenstein's use of the term 'absolutely safe' here we should reject the assumption that absolute safety, in Wittgenstein's sense, is based on moral character. Wittgenstein then said that the feeling of absolute safety

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

can be expressed as the feeling that we are safe in the hands of God. To feel safe in the hands of God is to acknowledge that the ultimate power over life and death rests not in one's own hands, but in those of supreme deity. It is to believe in the goodness of creation, where 'goodness' is used not in a relative but in an absolute sense. The feeling at issue here is not a denial of the presence of pain and suffering of the world, but recognition that there is a perspective from which everything without exception, is all right. More succinctly, it would be a sort of feeling that we are all loved.

According to Christ, this world is itself good. There are pains we suffer as much an expression of God's love as are our joys. God's love for his creation redeems us all. Commenting on this viewpoint as a possible response to the question of why we must undergo the suffering that comes to us as a consequence of natural events, Roy Holland said, "It is not possible for [such suffering] to be seen as God's love. I offer this neither as the answer nor as my answer to the question but cite it as a perspective: one which is not accessible to many but one from which it is possible for suffering to be seen, possible because it has been seen that way, by Julian of Norwich for instance..."<sup>6</sup> If all shall be well with the world as a whole, by a kind of divine necessity, then it seems to follow that all must be well with oneself, no matter what happens. It must include the condition of one's own moral character among everything else. Everything would be a manifestation of God's love. Wittgenstein says, "What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural".<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, you cannot lead people to what is good, "you can only lead them to some place or other. The good is outside the space of facts."<sup>8</sup> The earlier culture will become a heap of rubble and finally a heap of ashes, but spirits will hover the ashes. Wittgenstein continues that the difference between a good and a poor architect is that 'the poor architect succumbs to every temptation and the good one resist it.'<sup>9</sup> People now seeking religious epistemology, religious justification, attempting to develop philosophical

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<sup>6</sup> Holland, 'On the Form of "The Problem of Evil"', in *Against Empiricism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, p.241.

<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Culture and Value*, translated by Peter Winch, The University of Chicago Press, 1977, p.3e.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p.3e.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3e.

theories about religious matters, but it should be kept in mind that there was a time when people lead a good life with the help of religion when there was no question raised for its justification. In this regard Wittgenstein remarks, “If there were a ‘solution’ to the problem of logic (philosophy) we should only need to caution ourselves that there was a time when they had not been solved ( and even at that time people must have known how to live and think)”.<sup>10</sup>

It would then be treated as *ethical monism* according to which the benevolence of the universe as a whole outstrips the categories of good and evil as used in most everyday ethical discourse. According to Wittgenstein, the goodness of the whole is *paradigmatically mystical one* - none of us can be harmed, irrespective of any features of our character that may be construed as moral flaws from the relative perspective of everyday morality. While reflecting on this issue, McGuinness asserts that “in mysticism the right feeling about the existence of the world (which is the same as to say: about the ultimate nature of reality) leads to an acceptance of the sort of world that there is, so that we cease to ask what the purpose of life or of the world is.”<sup>11</sup> Citing various texts of Wittgenstein, McGuinness related the experience of feeling absolutely safe. For him, the happy man of the *Notebooks* and the *Tractatus* would need to have the attitude of one with this experience. He would have to feel perfectly content, comparatively free from fear and anxiety of all the misery of this world. “To be indifferent to the facts, to live without fear or hope involves feeling safe whatever happens.”<sup>12</sup> If the life as a whole is virtuous, then the life and hence the person, cannot suffer moral harm. In such a case Wittgenstein’s inclination to say “I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens” The other points that needs to be taken care of at this point is that Wittgenstein unlike Socrates and Kierkegaard, is not associating absolute safety with integrity of moral character, rather than associating the feeling of safety with an understanding of oneself as innocent and virtuous, Wittgenstein associates it with the feeling that one is in the hands of God. For Wittgenstein, God is with one and that God’s miraculous creation is to be accepted as *an absolute one*. Of course, it always remains possible that one who has

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4e.

<sup>11</sup> McGuinness, “The Mysticism of the Tractatus”, *Philosophical Review*, 75, 1966, p.315.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p327.

the feeling of absolute safety may lose it. The feeling of absolute safety may not be enduring. However, it would not invalidate the claim that one is absolutely safe. The question of whether one agrees with a statement such as, 'I feel absolutely safe irrespective of what happens' is a matter of one's own religious experience and conviction. It is a matter of the sort of life one is living and is prepared to aspire to. Whether the statement can have sense is irrelevant here. Rather the statement under consideration expresses *an attitude towards life and the world*. It expresses an attitude towards God that is both intelligible and spiritually profound. In expressing this attitude, Wittgenstein is not merely contemplating a religious form of life, *but inhabiting it, exploring it, 'from the outside'*. Here he is occupying the role of one who sees the world in a particular way - who has a feeling that one might characterize as religious *awe and reverence*. His role here is to play and act as an 'honest religious thinker' who reflects upon the role of that religious feeling. This is how one finds himself *absolutely safe and secure* in religion.

### **Call for honest religious thinking**

We thus claim that only an honest religious thinker can find himself safe and secure in religion. Only through honest religious thinking one can become an honest religious thinker. An honest religious thinker can be able to determine the meaning of life; can be able to perceive the real meaning of life. One cannot become an honest religious thinker without sound moral precept. Therefore we need an honest religious thinker. The possibility of honest religious thinking matters the most *to lead a safe and secure life*. The image of the situation of becoming an honest religious thinker would be reflected in the writings of Tolstoy: "...there is a pillar at my head and the solidity of this slender pillar is beyond doubt, although there is nothing for it to stand on. A rope is hanging very ingeniously, yet simply, from the pillar, and if one lies with the middle of one's body on the rope and looks up there can be no question of falling. This was all clear to me and I was glad and tranquil. It was as if someone were saying to me: 'See that you remember.' And I wake up."<sup>13</sup> It indicates that religious belief really is a matter of *wishful thinking*. Alternatively, following cynical

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<sup>13</sup> Tolstoy, *A Confession* in *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987, p79.

readers we can say that the absence of any basis for faith is precisely what *the believer is not ignoring*. By looking upwards to heaven, faith is acknowledged to be *an aspiration of love, hope and trust*. For the Christian, this will be *love, hope and trust directed towards God*. By acknowledging this, the believer recognizes that faith is not built on foundations of earth, and hence that looking downwards will never provide the support that is required for faith. According to Thomas,<sup>14</sup> the height of wisdom is to set your face towards heaven by despising the world'.<sup>14</sup> The same has been reflected in Wittgenstein as well. Wittgenstein has said that religious faith conceives as *a kind of suspension from above*.

While referring to Christ, Wittgenstein writes of religious belief as a holding fast to redemption, to redeeming love. This can be made possible, Wittgenstein reveals *if you no longer support yourself on this earth but suspend yourself from heaven*. In such a case, everything would be different and there would be no wonder. If you can do, then do what now you cannot do. Wittgenstein remarks, "It is true that someone who is suspended looks like someone who is standing but the interplay of forces within him is nevertheless a quite different one & hence he is able to do quite different things than one who stands."<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein elsewhere describes 'the honest religious thinker' as being 'like a tightrope walker' upon which the walker stands, the Grund, "is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it."<sup>16</sup> We think that through the image of the tightrope walker, Wittgenstein is depicting the *honest religious thinker*, someone who, while attending the needs of the heart and soul, does not neglect the pull of rational reflection. This actually creates a tension among the religious thinkers. In this regard Wittgenstein reveals that one way of seeing the image would be as embodying an ongoing tension in the life of one who strives to reconcile the passion of faith with the intellecter's desire for grounds or reason other than those of the heart - reasons which might take the form of empirical or theoretical evidence. Wittgenstein was alert of this tension and that is why he strictly adheres towards maintaining religious belief alongside honest self-critical awareness that would lend depth to many of his observations on religious matters.

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas, *The Imitation of Christ*, translated by Ronald Knox and Michael Oakley, London: Burns & Oates, 1959, pp.17-18.

<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig., *Culture and Value*, op. cit. p.39e.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.84e.

That means the value of religious matters actually hinges on honest religious thinking and it is the most important task of religious thinkers to find out the possibility of honest religious thinking. Wittgenstein with the influence of Tolstoy and Kierkegaard claimed that religious belief should not be conflated with other kinds of belief, especially of a scientific kind because they have different spheres. The tightrope walker feels the ever-present temptation to turn religion into a matter of metaphysical speculation.

The question then is: whether such religious tension can be solved or it would remain unsolved? Schroeder remarks that the tension embodied by Wittgenstein's tightrope walker is psychologically impossible. He doubts that it is possible to hold reason in abeyance in the way that the image suggests – to hold that a religious belief is not likely to be true. In this regard, Schroeder maintains that there is *an unresolved tension in Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion*.<sup>17</sup> We think that the image of the tightrope walker does suggest a tension that has been personified in the honest religious thinker as something impossible. According to Schroeder, a putative honest religious thinker is impossibility and therefore Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion has in internal tension. Therefore, it is necessary to bring out the genuine life in Wittgenstein's contemplations on religion to show where Schroeder's contention is liable to lead us astray.

On the basis of the above observation, we conclude by saying that in religion culture and value play an all important role to determine the meaning of life. For Wittgenstein, language is culture and the cultural aspect of language determines the meaning of life and also determines the value of life. In this regard, the religious person must be an honest religious thinker. An honest religious thinker must be morally and ethically sound. As a result of that an honest religious thinker always reveals himself safe and secure in religion. Of course, the disappearance of a culture does not signify the disappearance of human value, but simply of certain means of expressing this value. Wittgenstein does not have any sympathy for current European civilization. For Wittgenstein, the current European civilization appears as a threat to culture. Wittgenstein foresees cultural decline within European civilization.

Wittgenstein's culture and value give us an insight into his moral intensity and integrity towards determining and weighing the meaning of life. Here he wants to experience the intellectual thrill of thinking in a new and illuminating way. In this regard, Wittgenstein asserts that within the paradigm of culture and value, a religious man always tries to become an honest religious thinker. For that one has to stay within the religious sphere and one has to struggle for it. He has to believe that God is judging him out of his own mouth and he has to bow down his knee before God. This is how can reveal himself safe and secure in life.

<sup>17</sup> Schroeder, S., 'The Tightrope Walker', *Ratio*, New Series, 20, 2007, p.442.