

Wittgenstein's Counter-explanatory take on Religion

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Abstract

If we try to understand any philosophy of religion in Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings we may not find one, still his remarks on religious beliefs and languages draw some interesting points that could tempt us to look at religions and religious practices with an open ended perspective. Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* is an example of his approach against explanation of religious beliefs and rituals. Wittgenstein thinks that the explanation of killing the priest-king in order to keep his soul as fresh does not add any significant value to the religious discourses. Any kind of metaphysical thematization in this regard is better to get rid of, as far as Wittgenstein's views are concerned. Rather he takes an anthropological approach to religion and its practices, where the practices are intertwined with his notions of language-games and forms of life. D.Z. Phillips addresses the fact that in Wittgenstein's earlier writings on Frazer we find that there could be a principle in the language by which all the rituals could be ordered, but later on as Rush Rhees points out, it has been found that the imagination of ritual implies it imagining in a form of life. Our urge for explanation often takes us to a juggernaut from where it becomes so much difficult to return and have peace. I will be trying to show how clarity in the Wittgensteinian sense could help us better to comprehend the value of religion and have impact over our religious discourse. Rituals in religion can't be based on evidences, like what is done in science. Religion is based on faith. If there is loss of faith in God, then it need not be based on rational justification rather a shift in the form of life where the older language might seem meaningless to the concerned person.

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Concentrating on any particular theory or issue it often makes us think that there is something still to be explained, to figure out and go deeper. There lies the possibility of being succumbed to intellectual enigma or disease, as Wittgenstein shows through his philosophy. He says, 'A philosopher is a man who has to cure many intellectual diseases in himself before he can arrive at the notions of common sense' (Wittgenstein L., *Culture and Value*, 1998, p. 44e). Ludwig Wittgenstein's

various remarks illustrate his opposition to explanation, esp. his later thoughts. Wittgenstein says that we want to explain, and therein lies our illness (Wittgenstein L., *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, 1978, p. 333). This is perhaps a prejudice to be philosophically justified by explaining and introspecting deeper into any matter. And it also brings about the disease that Wittgenstein wants us to address. This prejudice also takes us away from the common sense reality. Therefore, he says: 'The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness' (Wittgenstein L., 1958, § 255).

This needs to be taken into account while discussing on Wittgenstein's idea of religion and religious discourse. He has not given any philosophy of religion so to say, but his remarks portray an approach which can be related to his counter-explanatory approach to religion. Wittgenstein was influenced by Tolstoy, read his *Gospel in Brief* many times. Although he did not believe in any conventional or institutionalized religion, he was a deeply serious and spiritual person having a powerful sense of his own unworthiness and guilt. Here, we should realize in the line of Norman Malcolm that being a religious person is not the same as leading a religious life. If such is the case, Wittgenstein cannot be termed as a religious person. However, Malcolm has found that Wittgenstein, at times, felt a dread of the Last Judgement when he wrote to Malcolm that 'may I prove not too much of a skunk when I shall be tried' (Malcolm, 1984, p. 83).

The existence of God is treated as absolute by the believers in God. Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough"* (1979) contained some handwritten remarks which he did in 1931. Here also, like *Philosophical Investigations*, he began with Augustine thinking of him as 'Mistaken... when he called on God on every page of *Confessions*' (1979, 1e). The activity of praying before God does not have any truth function, rather it is one of the legitimate uses of language. Now what about the existence of God? Wittgenstein says:

The word 'God' is amongst the earliest learnt-pictures and catechisms, etc. But not the same consequences as with pictures of aunts. I wasn't shown [that which the picture pictured] (Wittgenstein L., *Lectures and*

Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief, 1966, p. 59).

God does not reveal himself in a way that can be empirically proven. According to Wittgenstein, He reveals himself in the existence of the world as the way the world is. He says in the *Tractatus*, 'It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists' (Wittgenstein L., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922, § 6.44). It is something on which nothing can be said as God cannot be referred like an object. However, Wittgenstein does not promote the idea that by explaining the existence of God the existence of the world can be explained. This is what traditional religions do, on which Wittgenstein is unsympathetic. The penchant for explanation as far as religions are concerned that God has willed the world to be as they are, has no explanatory power according to Wittgenstein (Child, 2011, p. 221).

My believing in God is not the same as believing in another person, as I can't produce evidence showing an object that is God. Here the believer would not be so much concerned with evidential existence. God is among the earliest learnt words, but it cannot be shown like the picture of aunts. So, if we take into account the picturing relationship between the word and its corresponding object we will not be able to comprehend God or gods. What is important here is to locate the issue in an anthropological way, if we want to understand Wittgenstein. God is not a matter of knowledge, rather a personal experience or realization. Here, Wittgenstein's view could be related to Kierkegaard. People may offer prayers to God collectively, but that does not imply to a collective realization of God, rather praying in a certain manner or performing ritual could be seen as a form of life. However, it all depends on faith instead of reason when it comes to believing in a God. One cannot give a rational account nor have epistemic claim in this respect.

Let us come back to Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough"*. The mistaken appearance of magical and religious aspects of men as held by Frazer is problematic for Wittgenstein. For example, the priest-king has to be killed in his prime, because otherwise, his soul would not be kept in fresh. The explanation of this practice seemed wrong-headed to Wittgenstein as it made the practice plausible

to people. If later on the practice is found to be based on error, then one may give up such practice. From where does such error occur? Wittgenstein thinks that it cannot arise from religious symbol, rather its source is in the opinion – error belongs only with opinion (Wittgenstein L., Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough.”, 1979, pp. 2, 3). According to Hume, custom and habitual conjunctions persuade us in believing certain things as true. As far as Wittgenstein is concerned, he is not bothered about the origin of belief or its validation, his urge is to address the practices that are involved in the rituals. One should take a distinctive form of life in practicing religion. With this, he is also involved in a distinctive language-game. Due to this reason, Wittgenstein is dissatisfied with Frazer regarding the explanation of religious practices in terms of its origin. Frazer treats the practices in terms of truth or falsity, sense or non-sense which is unacceptable to Wittgenstein. In his *Tractatus* he makes the point that whatever is not sayable belongs to the transcendental realm which may be shown but cannot be said. Religion will not be in the realm of sayable even in *TLP*. With Frazer’s argument, Wittgenstein finds dissatisfaction because of the explanation of magic and error that Frazer takes into account. Wittgenstein does not believe that there is any such need of explanation, as there is nothing to add, we only have to put the things together what one already knows.

Someone who believes in the Last Judgement, for him the beliefs have absolute value where the beliefs are not to be considered as testable hypotheses (Phillips, 1993, p. 65). Wittgenstein thinks that if at all evidences were there, that would destroy the whole business. The question of believing in a religious practice or ritual brings forth a conversation with the practice or ritual, with the language-games that are involved. When we want to know another culture and its associated phenomena, can we do away with explanation? Wittgenstein says that we can only describe and say that is what human life is like. At this juncture, it takes an anthropological turn in Wittgenstein. If we look at Kant’s philosophy, we find that he addresses the emergence of anthropology within the philosophical framework when philosophy is freed of metaphysics (Kant, 1974). Human being is considered to be evaluated in terms of social, ethical and political aspects. The early 1930s when Wittgenstein’s thoughts were going through a transition he wrote the *Remarks*

on Frazer's *Golden Bough* to challenge the anthropological pretensions of philosophy. Magic is taken as one of the earliest philosophies of life of the humanity in Frazer's account. The theoretical magic, based on the law of homeopathy and the law of contiguity produce philosophizing. The former talks about the resemblance of cause and effect, while the latter talks about the things acting on each other with physical contact at the beginning, and later on without any physical contact between them they act on one another. This system of belief has been termed as 'theoretical magic' by Frazer (Clack, 2001, p. 13). This enterprise has been criticized by Wittgenstein who thinks that Frazer treats magic in such a way where even without any technical expertise there could be primitive application of magic. But that is not the objective of magic. Magic cannot be tested on truth or falsity. The primitive case of magic that Frazer brought into account is not a form of crude science, or a mistake.

Wittgenstein's critique of Frazer points to his position against essentialism. Wittgenstein thinks that it is a mistaken assumption that there is an underlying motive common to all the fire festivals that Frazer describes. Even if there are similarities found at different fire festivals, the dissimilarities of all these rites seem to be more striking to Wittgenstein. He says, 'It is a multiplicity of faces with common features which continually emerges here and there' (Wittgenstein L., Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough.", 1979, p. 143).

Secondly, the magical and ceremonial practices serve some utility, according to Frazer. For example, people perform rain-making ceremonies with a desire to cause something that would bring about rain. In this respect, Wittgenstein claims that engaging in such rituals and magic do not always take place because of people's belief in certain effects. One may kiss the picture of one's beloved because of some satisfaction or affection, not because it will have some specific effect on the object. 'Or rather:', Wittgenstein states, 'it aims nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied' (Wittgenstein L., Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough.", 1979, p. 123). What we do by kissing a picture of any particular person? When I kiss an image of a near one I do so in the form of an expression of love or affection. When I do this I do not necessarily believe that the person can feel it, rather I express my desire or feeling by kissing the image. The kiss takes place

because of the absence of the person. I may tear apart the photograph also if the relationship becomes ugly with the person. In either case what I am doing is expressing my love or anger, but not directly loving or hurting the person. In the case of magic, the magician destroys the image of his foe not to destroy the person himself, but to express his anger. Some form of expression, or catharsis, takes place in such a case. According to Brian Clack (2001, p. 15):

This cathartic account of ritual thus lays its emphasis on how we as human beings have within us certain passions, hopes and feelings which need occasionally to be let out. Ritual functions as just such an emotional safety-valve, enabling us to bring those feelings out in the open, to bring to expression our desires and wishes, both individual and collective.

Thirdly, Wittgenstein thinks that Frazer's account of a Rain-King in Africa itself suggests that some of the practices or rituals are not undertaken out of false causal beliefs. People's prayer to the king seems to happen when the rainy season arrives. This implies that if the people really believe that the king can bring about rain then 'they would do it in the dry periods of the year in which the land is parched and arid desert' (Wittgenstein L., Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough.", 1979, p. 137).

Phillips shows that in Wittgenstein's earlier writings on Frazer there could be a principle in the language by which all the rituals could be performed in an ordered manner. Reasoning does not occur at the primitive stage of our reactions to pain, colours, sounds etc. Later on, at the refined stages reasons become appropriate, that the fact we agree to react to shows itself in the reactions. Phillips says, 'In calling our attention to primitive reactions, Wittgenstein is opposing the rationalistic view of language which suggests that language is the result of intellectual reflection' (Phillips, 1993, p. 113). We cannot reason out the rituals and practices involved in religion. People may tag Wittgenstein as fideist due to this, and his argument for faith, instead of reason in religious practices. For example, Kai Nielsen has charged Wittgenstein as a fideist in this regard, or rather some Wittgensteinians as fideist so to say. However, it would be difficult to label Wittgenstein succumbing to the

charge of fideism. One may worship or pray to the God as a believer, on the other, the non-believer does not follow the prayer. There is no contradiction in such situation. Our confusion arises if we take the prayer to God as if the God represents a reality. Worshiping does not imply one's conversation with the God, rather it is an activity like many other religious activities. Like magic is a form of expression, praying is also the same that one has to take part into. If the magic that Frazer talks about does not fulfill the desired goal, then that magic would be seen as a blunder. But Wittgenstein's view is different here – the magic was not set out to prove a point, instead it remains as an activity in a religious practice or a form of life. Even if it does not turn out to be productive, it cannot be called as blunder since it is not a scientific enterprise. It could be valued in another system of belief or form of life. In his *Lectures on Religious Belief* (p. 59) Wittgenstein remarks:

Whether a thing is a blunder or not-it is a blunder in a particular system. Just as something is a blunder in a particular game and not in another.

You could also say that where we are reasonable, they are not reasonable – meaning they don't use reason here.

If they do something very like one of our blunders, I would say, I don't know. It depends on further surroundings of it.

There is nothing private in a religious discourse. If someone says that that he has an 'idea of death', that does not have any private connotation as others can also have the right to use such phrase in order to express his belief over death. The entire discourse over death or belief in God will come under language-games where people will voice their opinion and partake into the debate.

What kind of clue in Wittgenstein's thinking do we get here? One might argue that there is expressivism in his argument against Frazer, since Wittgenstein believes that religious acts like worshiping, praying are expressions in different ways. One's kissing on a picture of his dear one implies emotivism which has nothing to do with rational justification. We can see that Wittgenstein is opposing excessively intellectualistic nature of human being which is dominated by reason. It has also been argued that Wittgenstein has taken a naturalistic position against

Frazer's intellectualism as regards to the rituals and practices in religions. Rituals, in this context, are not based on cognitive understanding or theoretical modes of cognition, rather they arise naturally out of instinctive modes of behaviour (Burley, 2018, p. 58). Insofar as the religious discourse is concerned, Mikel Burley cites Brian Clack's argument that only in the sphere of surface grammar one can participate in the religious discourse; a confession of belief in God is not subject to truth or falsity. Burley (2018, p. 61) affirms:

This is why Clack maintains that genuine belief in God cannot withstand Wittgenstein's account of religious belief...it is, beneath the surface, an expression of non-cognitive feeling, a linguistic refinement of an instinctive reaction to the natural, nonspiritual world. The very idea of God's reality as being spiritual and transcendent therefore evaporates.

The approach is a counter-explanatory one to dispel the disease in understanding. It is important to note that Wittgenstein's objection is against the theorization of religious practices and magic – as the actions emerge from our very nature. His account of religion and religious practice goes beyond the spectrum of fideism and atheism, since he does not advocate the reality of God, neither does he oppose the idea that people pray towards God believing that God exists. It is the human behaviour and natural reaction to certain practices that consist of the rituals and practices in religion. Therefore, no explanation would be adequate in this regard, as there is nothing to be explained when the rituals, prayers are performed out of natural reaction or expectation or faith rather than reason. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein's philosophy may not be accepted by those who admit that the ordinary human beings have reason for performing rituals and rites in the religious discourses. If men perform such activities with a purpose, then apparently they have some reason for doing so. But here also we cannot rule out the fact that those activities primarily consist of primitive reactions and emotions, instead of any rational foundation. Wittgenstein remarks (Wittgenstein L., 1958, § 109), 'We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place'. Explanation actually fails to deliver as far as religious discourses are concerned, since there is nothing to explain. We can only describe or leave everything as it is, instead of looking for a scientific or rational foundation of religion. Philosophy,

according to Wittgenstein, in fact cannot give any foundation, it leaves everything as it is (Wittgenstein L., 1958, § 124).

Wittgenstein's philosophical anthropology does not rule out the primitive nature of man and his reactions, as he says in *Culture and Value* (p. 31), 'In the beginning was the deed.' Once the deed is weaved into language, human beings start communicating their thoughts. But the universalization of meaning is impossible as language has complex structure across different cultural milieu, gender, race – different forms of life. There is no fixed meaning or essence of all the languages; there are rather forms of life that imbibe varieties of language-games. The use of language makes it meaningful, and grammar plays a critical role. It makes the entire programme open, bringing into a multitude of different aspects of life. Problem arises when we look for essence as far as meaning is concerned, as the word 'meaning' itself has a complex grammar. Whenever one tries to create a theory or form universal definition of meaning, confusion would arise (Asad, 2020, p. 406).

Wittgenstein does not regard himself as a religious person, but he also says that he can't help seeing every problem from a religious point of view – as once remarked to his student Maurice Drury (Drury, 1984). This does not make him committed to any particular religious belief or assertion; he cannot be charged as a fideist, since his ideas of language-games and forms of life assert that there is a wide spectrum of different cultures along with their associated linguistic practices. The fundamental point that Wittgenstein wants to convey is that religious practice is not different from ordinary life, as the language by which any religious practice is communicated belongs to the ordinary life of human beings. One has to understand the multitude of the uses of language, instead of admitting that religious practice produces some magic, has some system of hidden signs which according to the viewer work as an evidence of highly significant value. According to Talal Asad, 'Learning to recognize and negotiate the world in and through the multiple possibilities and demands of ordinary language is part of what a discursive tradition enables. The divine language of which the faithful speak—as part of their everyday life—is inhabited and not simply interpreted' (2020, p. 427). The question we need to ponder over is: Do we need a definition of the essence of religion at all? If we

take into account the concept of 'secular', its usage as 'worldly' as held in Christianity against the monastic or rule-governed idea of religion has made religion an exclusion from the domain of politics (Asad, 2020, p. 428). However, secularization is a continuous process of unmaking any particular identity of the world and its simultaneous transformation into another world, or a form of life so to say.

Our penchant for finding a solution of every problem often takes us to a radical yet confusing stance of beliefs, whether in religious practices or in socio-political issues. We forget that we have an obvious dependence on others, and thereby, become ruthless in denying others' space. We are becoming the flies, stuck in the bottle, unfortunately without even knowing that we are trapped. Looking for explanation in religious rituals could probably take us into a no man's land, as there is nothing to be explained when the discourses and rituals are constituted by faith. The evidential status of such explanation will always be ambiguous, as one's set of religious ideas may be quite different than another, differences in practices could be found even within a particular religion as well. The cause or loss of faith does not matter, as the practices differ in communities, and in accordance with the commitments of the individuals to their religions. The magical aspect of a ritual is better to be left as it is, instead of explaining them, as Wittgenstein insists.

In the concluding part I would like to say that since religion is not beyond the ordinary or social life of the human beings, the nuances of religions are varied. The language-games associated with the practices are different, and so are the forms of life. One's loss of identity is caused by denying the differences, the space that one should naturally have. In this regard, Wittgenstein's invitation to go back to the 'ordinary' makes transformative possibilities even within the scope of language itself. His greatness is in making us recognize the ordinary, the builders and wood pilers and soft rulers against the settled and inhumane order of the world (Pohlhaus & John, 2002, p. 822). The openness for the infinite others is then a greater choice instead of the more appealing kinds of misleading notions such as 'one world', 'one nation' etc. Rather, it gives us a deeper insight if we follow Wittgenstein's thought that a believer and a non-believer in God can both walk together without agreeing. Therefore, there should be openness for other views, difference rather than a fixed

pattern of explanation of religious rituals and practices to which the individuals have to surrender themselves.

Wittgenstein's counter-explanatory approach does not undermine the value of traditions, or traditional concept of religions. Rather, it opens up to a greater vision, a vision of tolerance, respect and empathy towards others. In this respect, I like to cite a conversation between Wittgenstein and his Indian student K.J. Shah, that illustrates Wittgenstein's tolerant and respectful mind towards other traditions, in spite of being an atheist. The conversation is summarized by Ramchandra Gandhi as follows (Gandhi, 2007, pp. 146-147):

Apparently Shah and Wittgenstein used to go for long walks together, observing a rule laid down by Wittgenstein: that there was to be no conversation. Clearly, Wittgenstein was not very tolerant of conversation, especially with his favourite pupils. He was eccentric in this respect, but he taught Shah an important lesson in tolerance during one of these walks on the edge of silence. Breaking the rule of silence, Wittgenstein asked Shah if he was a Muslim. Shah said, 'No.' Wittgenstein said, 'Are you a Hindu?' Shah said, 'No, I'm a Jain: neither Hindu nor Muslim.' Wittgenstein knew something about Jainism from the Indian philosopher Surendranath Dasgupta, who had lived in Cambridge many years before. Wittgenstein said to Shah, 'Isn't it true that Jains believe that the enlightened ones after their death all gather together on a rock and meditate?' Now young Shah in those years was a typical, intolerant freethinker, intolerant of metaphysical beliefs. So he looked profoundly embarrassed and said, 'I don't believe in these foolish things now.' Wittgenstein was furious, and he said to Shah, 'You think you are Very clever, Shah, you think you know more than these ancestors of yours who have thought about these things for thousands of years?

It is said to have changed Shah's life and made him dedicated to the study of tradition. It also speaks a volume about our views towards other religions and cultures. We can still become tolerant towards others, without conforming to their

rituals and practices associated with their religions. The openness towards other customs and beliefs make the world more beautiful and peaceful, if we refrain from being cynical and harshly judgmental or dismissive.

One should not go on explaining the cause of faith or loss of faith, since explanation does not lead anywhere. Religious belief, according to Wittgenstein, is a way of living to which a person has to be committed. However, different communities may have different world pictures while practicing religion. In this sense, searching for an essence of all the religions could be an illusion and a disease of understanding the religions themselves. A believer and a non-believer in God can co-exist without hampering each one's faith, which I find a crucial point in Wittgenstein that creates room for openness and tolerance in religious discourse. At this juncture, Wittgenstein talks about clarity desired as goal, instead of the clarity serving a further elaboration or any idle speculation. This may be problematic for the theologians who vouch for rational justification of religious belief, but on the other hand, it creates a space for openness in our understanding of religion as well as the ethical dispositions towards others.

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