

‘Philosophy to the glory of God’.

Wittgenstein on God, religion and theology

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“the next best thing to being really inside
Christendom is to be really outside it”
G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (1925)

1. Introduction

It is said that Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)¹ admired St. Augustine. And indeed, references to this church father can be found in his work frequently. If I am right this is quite remarkable for a philosopher who can be considered as the founder of the analytic philosophical tradition. Since the question that arises is whether Wittgenstein would in the end believe Augustine’s theology makes sense. What is for example the philosophical meaning of Augustine’s statement in his *Confessiones* that “to praise you [God] is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rest in you”² It may be doubted whether Wittgenstein conceived such language as meaningful. After all, his best-known statement is undoubtedly ‘what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence’ and agnostics and atheists have used it to stress that we cannot and should not speak about God. So the question that occupies me in this essay is how the analytic philosopher Wittgenstein and Augustine, as representative of religious thought, can be reconciled.

Interestingly, Wittgenstein once said in a conversation “I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view”.³ In my opinion the latter is plausible, but the former can be questioned. After all, Wittgenstein was brought up in a Roman Catholic persuasion, several times even contemplated becoming a monk and remained a pious man in search of religion throughout his life.⁴ For example his *Tagebücher* and various *Bemerkungen* speak more than once on God and the meaning of life, there are many notes in his *Vermischte Bemerkungen* on influential Christians like St. Paul, Blaise Pascal, John Bunyan, Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth, and the introduction of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophische Bemerkungen* (1930) even contains the striking remark “Ich möchte sagen ‘dieses Buch sei zur Ehre Gottes geschrieben’”.⁵ On the other hand, besides these occasional remarks, religious themes do not play an important role in his ‘academic’ writings. Might it be the case Wittgenstein in his work strictly separates science and religion or is it actually not averse to religion at all?

The purpose of this essay is to answer this kind of questions and to examine Wittgenstein’s conception of God, religion and theology in his (more or less) public work.⁶ In order to add

¹ A well-known biography is R. Monk (1990), *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*, Free Press.

² Augustine (1991), *Confessions*, Oxford University Press, I. i (I).

³ R. Rhees (1970), *Discussions of Wittgenstein*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 94.

⁴ A.C. Grayling (1996), *Wittgenstein*, Oxford University Press, 2 and H.J. Glock (1996), *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Wiley-Blackwell, 320 (see 320-323 for many references to religious remarks in Wittgenstein’s work).

⁵ Wittgenstein (1964), *Philosophische Bemerkungen*, Basil Blackwell, vorwort.

⁶ By adding the adjective ‘public’ I mean to exclude private diaries and personal remarks. Moreover, it should be noted

something new or at least non-existing to the extensive literature on Wittgenstein and the philosophy of religion I will present my *own* interpretations of his writings without relying on secondary literature. That is to say I will try to interpret and explain Wittgenstein's thoughts from an internal perspective. I believe this is not only an useful scholarly exercise, but also yields a sort overview of religious thoughts in Wittgenstein's work, which as I can ascertain is not yet available. I do follow a common distinction between an early (§2) and later Wittgenstein (§3),⁷ which are embodied respectively in his *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* (1918) and *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (1953). In this essay I assume this distinction to be known. Special attention will be paid to the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* itself, which does not contain many remarks on our topic, but can be interpreted accordingly. Thereafter I will survey some of the existing literature on Wittgenstein and religion and present some useful interpretations (§4). In the final section (§5) I will provide an evaluation and draw conclusions.

2. The early Wittgenstein: religion as the non-scientific unspeakable

2.1. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921/1922)⁸

The early Wittgenstein is associated with his *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* (1921) or *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922). This book deals with the problems of philosophy which arise, Wittgenstein believes, because of misunderstanding of the logic of our language. In the introduction he famously summarizes his book as follows: "Was sich überhaupt sagen läßt, läßt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muß man schweigen".⁹ Understanding this sentence enables us to discuss the role of religion in the *Tractatus*.

Let us therefore look at some of its basic ideas. Wittgenstein believes language is used to express our thoughts. These thoughts are actually logical pictures of the world; the world comprising the totality of facts that describe the way objects are connected to each other such that they form a state of affairs. Objects in turn are the non-composite and unalterable substance of reality that together determine all possible state of affairs. A logical picture of facts may represent existing or non-existing state of affairs, but should be compared with reality to determine its trueness or falseness; a thought is true when it agrees with reality and vice versa. The same holds for language, which is defined by Wittgenstein as an expression of thoughts in propositions. The configuration of the most primitive parts of language, namely names, should correspond to the configuration of objects in order to be true. To understand the sense of a proposition thus means to know what is the case in reality.

However, as Wittgenstein points out, "Die meisten Sätze und Fragen, welche über philosophische Dingen geschrieben worden sind, sind nicht falsch, sondern unsinnig".¹⁰ This is the case if language refers to facts or objects that do not exist at all. After all, "Der Sinn des Satzes ist seine Übereinstimmung und Nichtübereinstimmung mit den Möglichkeiten des Bestehens und

that apart from the *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* Wittgenstein published hardly anything during his lifetime. This means that, although some of his notes and manuscripts were intended for publication, Wittgenstein's ideas in his posthumous works should be interpreted carefully and reservedly.

⁷ For example in R. Scruton (1995), *A Short History of Modern Philosophy. From Descartes to Wittgenstein*, Routledge. Thiselton even distinguishes a 'middle period' in Wittgenstein's work in A.C. Thiselton (2002), *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion*, Oneworld Publications, 322.

⁸ Only in this case the date corresponds to the year of publication, whereas in the sections below it indicates the period Wittgenstein worked on the mentioned text.

⁹ Wittgenstein (1998), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, vorwort.

¹⁰ *Tractatus*, § 4.003.

Nichtbestehens der Sachverhalte”,¹¹ and not of facts or objects themselves. This implies that the limits of meaningful language (what can be said) are the limits of the world (what we can talk about). From this more or less follows: what can be said at all can be said clearly and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.

As a consequence religious statements and theology, although Wittgenstein does not make this explicit, are meaningless (*Bedeutungslos*) and nonsense (*Unsinn*). They do not refer exclusively to the empirical reality and lie partly on the other side of the limits of language. But even if the lack of linguistic counterparts in reality would be acceptable, there is another difficulty for religion. At the end of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein states that the sense of the world itself lies outside it and in the world no values exist. This makes him believe that “Wie die Welt ist, ist für das Höhere vollkommen gleichgültig. Gott offenbart sich nicht in der Welt”.¹² Not how things are related in the world is its sense, but the ‘mystical’ fact (*Mystische*) that the world exists at all. Besides, there are more mystical ‘*allerdings Unausprechliches*’ that make themselves manifest (*zeigt sich*).¹³ Wittgenstein believes all scientific questions, regarding state of affairs in the world, may be once answered without even having touched the transcendent problems of life (*Lebensprobleme*). Nevertheless he maintains that metaphysical propositions lack a meaning in the Wittgensteinian sense as they do not refer to verifiable in-the-world facts.

2.2. *A lecture on ethics (1929/1930)*

The idea that religion, involving nonsensical sentences and questions, is a misunderstanding of language is elaborated further in Wittgenstein’s lecture on ethics. He claims there that a “certain characteristic misuse of our language runs through all (...) religious expressions”.¹⁴ Wittgenstein observes that religious terms are often used as similes or allegorically, for example in describing God as the creator of the world or by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. But a simile must be a simile for something and is not independent. In order to be justified to describe facts by means of a simile one must also be able to drop it and describe the fact without it. Now in case of religion there are no such facts which stand behind it and so “what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be mere nonsense”.¹⁵ After all, in the light of the *Tractatus* the existence of supernatural facts is literally unrealistic.

Wittgenstein however admits that the nonsensicality of religious expressions is their very essence as they go beyond the world and significant language. This means that an attempt to write or talk about religion makes it run against the boundaries of language, which is absolutely hopeless. Although religion can be no science, as it adds nothing to our knowledge in any sense, Wittgenstein states that “the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life (...) is a document of tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it”.¹⁶ To be honest this remark concerns ethics, but in its context applies to religion as well.

¹¹ *Tractatus*, § 4.2.

¹² *Tractatus*, § 6.432.

¹³ *Tractatus*, § 6.522.

¹⁴ Wittgenstein (1965), ‘A lecture on ethics’, *The Philosophical Review* 71(1), 9.

¹⁵ ‘Lecture on ethics’, 10.

¹⁶ ‘Lecture on ethics’, 12.

2.3. *Bemerkungen über Frazers Golden Bough (1931)*

In about the same period of the lecture Wittgenstein read (parts of) J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890), a comparative study of mythology and religion, and commented on it. I cannot discuss the contents of Frazer's book here, but I think Wittgenstein's remarks speak for themselves. It appears he has serious problems with Frazer's approach to religion: "Frazers Darstellung der magischen und religiösen Anschauungen der Menschen is unbefriedigend: sie läßt diese Anschauungen als Irrtümer erscheinen. So war Augustinus im Irrtum, wenn er Gott auf jeder Seite der *Confessionen* anruft?".¹⁷ He argues that religious practices (*Gebrauch*) cannot be explained and therefore presenting them as mistakes or errors is unsatisfactory. Religion can only be mistaken if it is presented as science. However, "Einem religiösen Symbol liegt keine Meinung zu Grunde. Und nur der Meinung entspricht der Irrtum".¹⁸ Even if explanation would be possible, explanations are merely hypotheses. Religious practices simply are there and can only be described as expressions of human life. It is at most possible to compare or relate practices as "In allen diesen Gebräuchen sieht man allerdings etwas, der Ideen-assoziaton ähnliches und mit ihr verwandtes. Man könnte von einer Assoziation der Gebräuche reden".¹⁹ These possibilities make Wittgenstein believe Frazer is narrowing down spiritual life in his *The Golden Bough*.

2.4. *The early Wittgenstein on religion*

In sum, Wittgenstein depicts religion and theology as non-scientific, meaningless and nonsensical in his early work. Ultimately religious language does not refer to observable, empirical facts and goes beyond the limits of proper language. God does not reveal himself in the world. Since there stand no facts behind it, religion is unscientific. This means, although religion shows itself or makes itself manifest, it cannot be talked about. Therefore the position of the early Wittgenstein can be summarized as religion as the non-scientific unspeakable. Nevertheless, he states that the nonsensicality of religion is its very essence and the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life should be respected.

Already in a conversation with the Vienna Circle in 1931 Wittgenstein remarked that the *Tractatus* is a 'dogmatic' book. This can of course be understood as a first move towards his later work. Actually I regard his *Bemerkungen über Frazer* as a transitional work. After all, though he still compares religion to science, there is already a clear focus on the practices of religion. This evokes associations with Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

3. The later Wittgenstein: religion as a practice and language game

3.1. *Lectures on Religious Belief (1938)*

The only writings that entirely deal with religion are Wittgenstein's lectures on religious belief, which I believe clearly fit in his later philosophy. After introducing several religious statements and possible responses in the first lecture, Wittgenstein raises the question how we are to know

¹⁷ Wittgenstein (1979), *Bemerkungen über Frazers Golden Bough / Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, The Brynmill Press, 1.

¹⁸ *Bemerkungen über Frazer*, 3.

¹⁹ *Bemerkungen über Frazer*, 13.

whether a believer believes something, say the existence of a Last Judgement. He argues that “Asking him is not enough. He will probably say he has no proof. But he has what you might call an unshakeable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary ground for belief but rather by regulating for in all his life”.²⁰ Belief is thus reflected in the fact that it is guidance for a person’s life. It may involve giving up certain things or even risking our lives on the ground of this belief. Wittgenstein states this kind of belief is normally not based on (scientific) evidence and accordingly will normally not be refuted by counter-evidence. After all, religious beliefs are usually called dogmas, faith or convictions rather than opinions. “We don’t talk about hypothesis, or about high probability. Nor about knowing.”, Wittgenstein argues, as “In a religious discourse we use such expressions (...) differently to the way in which we use them in science”.²¹ Religion should simply not be made a question of science. Not because it is unreasonable, but not obviously reasonable and religion has even no pretensions to be so. Although they may try to explain the same things, science and religion have a different criterion of meaning.²² Although there is still room to point out believers reason wrongly, for example in case of a contradiction, they may agree on an entirely different kind of reasoning. To say their religion contains errors or blunders means there is one in their particular system, “Just as something is a blunder in a particular game and not in another”.²³ Interestingly, Wittgenstein is introducing the game theme here already, which plays an important in his later *Philosophische Untersuchungen*.

In the second lecture, Wittgenstein states that although God was not shown, the word ‘God’ is among the earliest learnt. God is for example represented in pictures. However, that which the picture of God pictured is something we merely believe in. One merely believes in the existence of God. Wittgenstein argues believe is used in an extraordinary sense here since we cannot test it or even find means of testing. The picture of God, or any other picture of a Biblical subject, cannot be compared to something in our reality. That is to say there is no evidence. We even do not know the technique of using such a picture. This implies we can only express ourselves by means of such unverifiable pictures in religion. In the third lecture Wittgenstein adds that knowing certain religious ideas is like having certain pictures of them. However, it remains difficult to find out what they mean or what their consequences are. Wittgenstein for example imagines

Suppose someone said: ‘What do you believe, Wittgenstein? Are you a sceptic? Do you know whether you will survive death?’ I would really, this is a fact, say ‘I can’t say. I don’t know’, because I haven’t any clear idea what I’m saying when I’m saying ‘I don’t cease to exist,’ etc.²⁴

3.2. *Philosophische Untersuchungen (1945-1949)*

The philosophical remarks of Wittgenstein in the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* are the precipitate of his own philosophical investigations. He believes the book is an unsuccessful attempt to present the results as a whole and still consists of sketches. Although Wittgenstein had occasion to recognize and correct the ‘grave mistakes’ in his *Tractatus* he states “Ich hätte gerne ein gutes

²⁰ Wittgenstein (1972), ‘Lectures on religious belief’, in *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, University of California Press, 53-54.

²¹ ‘Lectures on religious belief’, 57.

²² ‘Lectures on religious belief’, 58.

²³ ‘Lectures on religious belief’, 59.

²⁴ ‘Lectures on religious belief’, 70.

Buch hervorgebracht. Es ist nicht so ausgefallen”.²⁵ Nevertheless the book embodies many interesting thoughts on (private) language, meaning and understanding, philosophy and thinking, etcetera. But as said, references to God, religion and theology are scarce.

A first reference to religion – apart from a citation of Augustine (in §1ff), which is basically not about religion – is a characterization of praying as a language game (*Sprachspiel*).²⁶ As in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein discusses the meaning of language, but now focuses on the practice (*Praxis*) or process of the use (*Gebrauch*) of it. He states: “Ich werde auch das Ganze: der Sprache und der Tätigkeiten, mit denen sie verwoben ist, das ‘Sprachspiel’ nennen”.²⁷ Wittgenstein shows there is a multiplicity of language games, i.e. the way we use words and sentences, and mentions praying among for example cursing, making jokes, giving orders, describing an object, etcetera. To the question what the essence (*Wesentliche*) is of each of these language games, he answers there is none, but “sie sind mit einander in vielen verschiedenen Weisen verwandt. Und dieser Verwandtschaft oder dieser Verwandtschaften wegen nennen wir sie alle ‘Sprachen’”.²⁸ Although similarities and relationships between language games are difficult to define, they can indeed be found by observing and comparing language games. The result of such a careful observation is that we see a complicated network of overlapping and criss-crossing similarities, which can be characterized as ‘family resemblances’ (*Familieähnlichkeiten*). Basically language games themselves form a figurative family. I think the main reason Wittgenstein introduces the game theme is there are analogies between games and language. As he makes clear throughout the book, both language and games rely on rules – either constitutive or regulative – and their techniques can be learnt. Language games can thus be regarded as practices or even customs that can be mastered. Therefore Wittgenstein states that “Eine Sprache verstehen, heißt eine Technik beherrschen”.²⁹ This is further reflected in the idea that ‘game’ in ‘language game’ “soll hier hervorheben, daß das Sprechen der Sprache ein Teil ist einer Tätigkeit, oder einer Lebensform”.³⁰ The activity of speaking a language is thus always embedded in or interwoven with other activities in a specific life-form. Wittgenstein explicitly states that linguistic activities are as much a part of our natural, cultural and social history.

What does the above discussion of language games imply for the meaning of language? In a famous paragraph Wittgenstein argues that for many cases meaning can be explained thus: “Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache. Und die Bedeutung eines Namens erklärt man manchmal dadurch, daß man auf seinen Träger zeigt”.³¹ So when one tries to grasp the meaning of a word, the actual use in the language – its original home – should be studied. Words should be brought back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. In my opinion this can be regarded as Wittgenstein’s new philosophical stance: “denk nicht, sondern schau!”³² Moreover, philosophy “darf den tatsächlichen Gebrauch der Sprache in keiner Weise antasten, sie kann ihn am Ende also nur beschreiben”.³³ This means language games become objects of comparison. Meaning is not determined by interpretation, but follows from practice. This implies trueness or falseness in language is not based on agreement in opinions, but rather the form of life in which it is embedded. After all, “Zur Verständigung durch die Sprache gehört nicht nur eine Über-

²⁵ Wittgenstein (2001), *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell Publishing, vorwort.

²⁶ *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §23.

²⁷ *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §7.

²⁸ *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §66.

²⁹ *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §199.

³⁰ *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §23.

³¹ *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §43.

³² *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §67.

³³ *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §124.

einstimmung in den Definitionen, sonder (...) eine Übereinstimmung in den Urteilen”.³⁴ Such an agreement can be the grammar of language, which expresses meaning in terms of the ‘correct’ use of words and expressions. Grammatical rules as it were ‘define’ propositions by determining their everyday sense. Interestingly Wittgenstein adds anywhere “(Theologie als Grammatik)”³⁵ which, I believe, means that theology is (ideally) an agreement on the grammar and therewith meaning of religious concepts.

Let us now try to reconstruct the status of religion in the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* further. It goes without saying that religion and its linguistic activities like praying, singing, preaching, etcetera can be regarded as language games (or even a form of life). The same holds for theology, which is sometimes aptly defined as speaking about God. Religion is a specific practice or use of language with an own vocabulary and characteristic rules and techniques. Although religion is an existing language game which can be described and compared to others and in which believers participate, it is possible for anyone to master the religious practice and engage in it. From Wittgenstein’s idea that the meaning of words is their use in the language follows that religious language has its own meaning. The trueness or falseness of religious language thus depends on a context dependent agreement. Wittgenstein rightly characterizes theology as such a grammar which defines the essence of religious concepts.

3.3. *Über Gewissheit (1949-1951)*

During the last years of his life, Wittgenstein commented on G.E. Moore’s defence of common sense. These notes, which can be regarded as a continuation of his *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, have been collected in *Über Gewissheit*. The central question Wittgenstein addresses is how knowledge, certainty, doubt and truth ultimately relate to each other. Important, first of all, is Wittgenstein’s position that ‘I know’ often means to have proper grounds for it and others, who are acquainted with or participate in the same language game, would admit that. Likewise doubt, for example on the existence of something, only works in a specific language game. After all, every language game is based on recognizable words and objects. Again Wittgenstein states that “Eine Bedeutung eines Wortes ist eine Art seiner Verwendung” and he adds “Denn sie ist das, was wir erlernen, wenn das Wort zuerst unserer Sprache einverleibt wird”.³⁶ Throughout *Über Gewissheit* Wittgenstein emphasizes that much of our knowledge and beliefs are learned.

The truth of some of the propositions we have learnt belong to our frame of reference (*Bezugssystem*). A child for example can be instructed to believe or not to believe in God, which enables it to produce derivative arguments for the one or the other. It may also be the case that people base their knowledge on God’s revelation. Wittgenstein believes this makes clear that knowledge is related to a decision, namely to accept some authority. Now “Alle Prüfung, alles Bekräftigen und Entkräftigen einer Annahme geschieht schon innerhalb eines Systems”,³⁷ which is our frame of reference or point of departure. That is to say we use known judgments as principles of other judgements. In short,

Unser Wissen bildet ein großes System. Und nur in diesem System hat das Einzelne den Wert den wir ihm beilegen. Wenn ich sage „Wir nehmen an, daß die Erde schon viele Jahren existiert habe” (oder dergl.), so klingt es freilich sonderbar, daß wir so etwas annehmen sollten. Aber im ganzen System unsrer Sprachspiele gehört es zum Fundament.

³⁴ *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §242.

³⁵ *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §373.

³⁶ Wittgenstein (1969), *Über Gewissheit / On Certainty*, Basil Blackwell, §61.

³⁷ *Über Gewissheit*, §105.

Die Annahme, kann man sagen, bildet die Grundlage des Handelns und also natürlich auch des Denkens.³⁸

As said, most of the principles of our 'knowledge system' are taught by adults to children, who believe them. Eventual doubt only comes after this belief. Wittgenstein states however that "Der vernünftige Mensch hat gewisse Zweifel nicht".³⁹ To which doubts he refers is unfortunately not made explicit.

The bridge to religion is not difficult to build. Religious ideas are among the propositions believers have learnt, either by other people or God's revelation itself. They not only form a language game of recognizable language in which truth and doubt function, but also contribute to our system of knowledge. For some people the religious language is even foundational; it forms the basic of our action and thoughts.

3.4. *Bemerkungen über die Farben (1950-1952)*

Finally, in a manuscript with remarks on colour, which does not focus on religious matter at all, yet an interesting remark of Wittgenstein on religious belief and theology can be found. I will cite it almost completely:

Wenn der an Gott Glaubende um sich sieht und fragt "Woher ist alles, was ich sehe?" "Woher das alles?", verlangt er keine (kausale) Erklärung; und der Witz seiner Frage ist, daß sie der Ausdruck dieses Verlangens ist. Er drückt also eine Einstellung zu allen Erklärungen aus. (...) Eigentlich möchte ich sagen, daß es (...) nicht auf die Worte ankommt, die man ausspricht, oder auf das, was man dabei denkt, sondern auf den Unterschied, den sie an verschiedenen Stellen im Leben machen. Wie weiß ich, daß zwei Menschen das gleiche meinen, wenn jeder sagt, er glaube an Gott? Und ganz dasselbe kann man bezüglich der drei Personen sagen. Die Theologie, die auf den Gebrauch gewisser Worte und Phrasen dringt und andere verbannt, macht nichts klarer. (Karl Barth). Sie fuchelt sozusagen mit Worten herum, weil sie etwas sagen will und nicht weiß, wie man es ausdrücken kann. Die Praxis gibt den Worten ihren Sinn.⁴⁰

Again Wittgenstein emphasizes that religious faith is not asking for explanation but arises from a certain desire. What religious statements mean appears from the difference they make in the practice of life; practices give words their meaning. Theology which tries to define religious ideas and passes over religious practices makes nothing clearer. Interestingly, Wittgenstein refers here to Karl Barth, who emphasized that God reveals himself '*senkrecht von Oben*' through his word and other knowledge of God is impossible. Moreover, he distinguishes between religion, human activity to 'create' a relationship with God, and faith, knowledge of God by grace from above. Faith is what God's revelation works in man. In this view Wittgenstein and Barth clearly agree.

3.5. *The later Wittgenstein on religion*

The stance of the later Wittgenstein towards religion can be summarized as religion as practice and language game. Although religion is normally not based on scientific evidence, a religious

³⁸ *Über Gewissheit*, §410-411.

³⁹ *Über Gewissheit*, §220.

⁴⁰ Wittgenstein (1977), *Bemerkungen über die Farben / Remarks on Colour*, Basil Blackwell, § 317.

discourse exists with an own criterion of meaning. Religion, theology and speaking about God are language games or forms of life in which believers express themselves by means of (unverifiable) religious pictures. Nevertheless, the meaning of religious words is their use in religious language. Therefore trueness or falseness is not based on an external scientific criterion, but agreement among believers, for example in theology. What religious language means appears moreover from the practical difference they make in guiding a person's life.

4. Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion

4.1. *Three interpretations of Wittgensteinianism*

Now I have discussed thoughts on God, religion and theology in the early and later Wittgenstein it is interesting to present some interpretations of it. Actually, the number of books and articles on religious remarks and topics in Wittgenstein's work is countless.⁴¹ They mainly discuss the following topics: religion as language game or form of life, the nature of religious belief and language, the use of pictures in religion, the theological relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy, the idea of theology as grammar, issues in comparative religion and Wittgenstein's conception of mysticism. Furthermore Wittgenstein's religious thoughts have been compared to in particular Aquinas, Augustine, Barth, Buber, Dewey, James, Kafka, Kierkegaard, Levinas, Rosenzweig and Tolstoy. However, in this context I am interested in a general characterization of Wittgenstein's attitude towards religion. What does it mean to be a 'Wittgensteinian' in theology or what is in other words Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion? I think John Hyman is right that "The best introduction to Wittgensteinianism is Wittgenstein",⁴² but besides all his ideas I have discussed in the previous chapters, I have found three useful general interpretations.

⁴¹ For example, only the English books on Wittgenstein and God, religion and theology God already include:

- 1967 - D.M. High, *Language, Persons, and Belief*, Oxford University Press;
- 1968 - W.D. Hudson, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Bearing of His Philosophy upon Religious Belief*, John Knox Press;
- 1968 - M.M. Jones, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: His Influence on Modern Philosophy of Religion*, Smith College;
- 1970 - W.D. Hudson, *Wittgensteinian Fideism*, Anchor Books;
- 1974 - A. Keightley, *The Grammar of God*, University of Birmingham;
- 1975 - W.D. Hudson, *Wittgenstein and Religious Belief*, Macmillan Press;
- 1976 - A. Keightley, *Wittgenstein, Grammar and God*, University of California;
- 1977 - J.H. Churchill, *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, Yale University Press;
- 1977 - P. Sherry, *Religion, Truth and Language Games*, Macmillan Press;
- 1978 - D.J. Ard, *Language, Reality and Religion in the Philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein*, McMaster University;
- 1986 - D.Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, Palgrave Macmillan;
- 1989 - C.L. Creegan, *Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard*, University of Michigan;
- 1990 - M.L. Copithorne, *The Later Wittgenstein and the Defence of Religion*, Harvard University Press;
- 1991 - C. Barrett, *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief*, Wiley-Blackwell;
- 1993 - R. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View*, Routledge.
- 1993 - D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, Palgrave Macmillan;
- 1995 - F. McCutcheon, *Religion Within the Limits of Language Alone*, University of New South Wales;
- 1997 - F. Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, SPCK;
- 1999 - B.R. Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion*, Edinburgh University Press;
- 1999 - B.R. Clack, *Wittgenstein. Frazer, and Religion*, Palgrave Macmillan;
- 2001 - R.L. Arrington & M. Addis (eds.), *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, Routledge;
- 2005 - D.Z. Phillips, R. Rhees & M. Von der Ruhr (eds.), *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy*, Ashgate Publishing;
- 2005 - D.Z. Phillips & K. Nielsen, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?*, SCM Press;
- 2005 - B. Plant, *Wittgenstein and Levinas*, Routledge;
- 2006 - T. Labron, *Wittgenstein's Religious Point of View*, Continuum International;
- 2006 - J.M. Lazenby, *The Early Wittgenstein on Religion*, Continuum International;
- 2007 - G. Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres*, Oxford University Press.

⁴² J. Hyman (1997), 'Wittgensteinianism', in P.L. Quinn & C. Taliaferro (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Blackwell Publishers, 150.

In an early reading, Wittgenstein's religious thoughts have been labelled 'Wittgensteinian fideism'.⁴³ Fideism (from *fides*, so literary 'faith-ism'), which is usually ascribed to Pascal, Kierkegaard, James and Wittgenstein, has its origins in Tertullian's question "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?", that is to say what is the relation between reason and faith? Nowadays it stands for the view that religious truths can only be known by means of faith and not by reason, are therefore independent of it or even hostile to it. Religious truths are in other words pre-rational or over-rational. The Wittgensteinian variant of fideism is variously characterized by subscribing to one or more of the following theses: 1) that religion is logically cut off from other aspects of life, 2) that religious discourse is essentially self-referential and does not allow us to talk about reality, 3) that religious beliefs can be understood only by religious believers, and 4) that religion cannot be criticized.⁴⁴ Although it is doubtful whether Wittgenstein would recognize himself in these theses, at least some of his followers have adhered to it. Anyway, a clear difference with fideists like Pascal and Kierkegaard is that Wittgenstein himself is not a Christian apologist.

In a second interpretation, Wittgenstein is depicted as a religious antirealist or relativist.⁴⁵ In contrast to realists, antirealists do not believe in a reality independent of our conceptions of it. They believe there is no truth, meaning, fact or existence unrelated to our understanding of reality. Whether for example God as a Being exists in reality is inaccessible, goes beyond experience and therefore does not make sense. This implies atheism is ruled out by antirealism. The idea that the way we conceive reality is tied to human capabilities such as our language clearly fits Wittgenstein's thoughts on language games and forms of life. Religion is not a matter of scientific knowledge or evidence, but an attempt to speak about God, who does not reveal himself in our reality. Moreover, what counts is what religions means for our practical life. Since the religious discourse is interwoven with religious language, there is no possibility of standing outside it and to criticize or support religion on the basis of for example external facts. Religion is about intelligibility and unintelligibility rather than trueness or falseness. From here it is a small step to religious relativism or even scepticism. A specific religion can no longer be universally or objectively true, because its language is relative to the practice and its ideas cannot be accessed empirically. The meaning of religious world solely depends on their use in religious language.

Related to this second interpretation, Wittgenstein has more than once been compared to the so-called 'reformed epistemology' (advocated by among others Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff).⁴⁶ Its central claims, based on the thinking of Calvin, are that the conviction there is a God is naturally inborn in man and our knowledge of God is immediate. Consequently, reformed epistemologists reject classical foundationalism and argue there is no epistemological duty to prove the existence of God. This denial of externalism, the view that a rational religious belief requires non-religious vindication, is a point on which (the later) Wittgenstein would agree. The justifi-

⁴³ K. Nielsen (1967), 'Wittgensteinian fideism', *The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* XLII(161), 191-209, W.D. Hudson (1968), 'On two points against Wittgensteinian fideism', *Philosophy* 43, 269-273, K. Nielsen, (1969), 'Wittgensteinian fideism again: A reply to Hudson', *Philosophy* 44, 63-65, Hudson, *Wittgensteinian Fideism* and Phillips & Nielsen, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?*

⁴⁴ R. Amesbury (2009), 'Fideism', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <plato.stanford.edu/entries/fideism>.

⁴⁵ R. Trigg (1997), 'Theological realism and antirealism', in Quinn & Taliaferro, *Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 213-222 and R. Trigg (1983), 'Religion and the threat of relativism', *Religious Studies* 19, 297-310.

⁴⁶ Term coined by A. Plantinga in (1980) 'The reformed objection to natural theology', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980), 49-62. See P. Helm (2001), 'Wittgensteinian religion and 'reformed' epistemology', in Arrington & Addis, *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, 101-118 and D.Z. Phillips (2005), 'Wittgensteinianism', in W.J. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford University Press, 447-471 for similarities with Wittgenstein.

cation of religious thoughts is a religion-internal matter and does not depend on epistemic foundations.

Finally, Wittgenstein's ideas have been summarized as a 'theology for atheists',⁴⁷ an understanding of religion from the outside. It is said Wittgenstein conceived religion as an anthropological phenomenon and studied it almost phenomenologically from a third person viewpoint. Especially in his later philosophy, he does not accuse religion of being mistaken or unfounded, but as it were immunizes it. This theology for atheists would involve the following ideas: 1) the non-descriptive and non-cognitive nature of religion; religious statements, including the existence of God, do not describe the reality and do not make knowledge claims, 2) no need for proof; for example the existence of God or immortality of the soul are not based on proofs, but state a decision in life, 3) religion is a *sui generis* form of discourse; religion is not a form of life, but an autonomous discourse that cannot be touched by science or metaphysics, 3) a distinction between faith and superstition; superstition is misguided religion as it is, in contrast to religion, characterized by supernatural causal mechanisms which do not exist.

4.2. *A philosophy of religion?*

In my opinion it is not farfetched to ascribe any of these interpretations to Wittgenstein. However, they all assume a kind of a complete philosophy of religion in his work, while we have seen it contains merely scattered remarks on religion. Norman Malcolm even stated that

Wittgenstein did much religious thinking, but religious thoughts do not figure in his detailed treatments of the philosophical problems. It would seem, therefore, that when he spoke of seeing those problems 'from a religious point of view', he did not mean that he conceived of them as religious problems, but instead that there was a similarity, or similarities, between his conception of philosophy and something that is characteristic of religious thinking.⁴⁸

Besides, the question is whether these interpretations apply to both the early and later Wittgenstein. Is in other words Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion consistent? I believe at least some ideas of it and I will try to summarize them in the final chapter.

5. Evaluation and conclusions

In this chapter I return to the central question of this essay, namely how Wittgenstein conceives God, religion and theology in his public writings. I have chosen to treat the early and later Wittgenstein separately and I think this appeared to be rightly. After all, during his career religion wins back its meaning. The early Wittgenstein still regards religion as non-scientific, meaningless and nonsensical, whereas the later Wittgenstein only maintains the first idea. It can therefore be said in general that Wittgenstein takes God-related religious thought and its formalisation in theology as unscientific. Unlike religion, science tries to add knowledge and relies on factual state of affairs, verification and provability. According to Wittgenstein, the unscientific and transcendental character of religion is its very essence. Another constant in his work, I believe, is Wittgenstein's conception of God. As he states in the *Tractatus*, God does not reveal himself in the world – that is to say He does not exist in it – and this idea is not revoked. Yet Wittgenstein assumes there is something like God or *das Höhere*. First, there is a mystical fact that the world

⁴⁷ Glock, *Wittgenstein Dictionary*, 321.

⁴⁸ Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View*, 24. Cf. R. Harré (2001), 'Wittgenstein: Science and religion', *Philosophy* 76, 211-237.

exists and God has to do with it. Second, some people do believe in God – whether or not in a language game – and are somehow inspired by His revelation. However, in line with Barth, Wittgenstein believes theology does not clarify these mystical problems. Although it may function as grammar in religious language games, for him theology does not make sense. Possibly Wittgenstein regards theology as unsuccessful and even unjustified attempt to be scientific. God does not reveal himself in the world, but somehow *senkrecht von Oben* to speak with Barth, and therefore one cannot climb up by means of theology.

As said, the main shift in Wittgenstein's unofficial philosophy of religion concerns the meaning and sense of religion. The explicit designation of religious expressions as meaningless and nonsensical is no longer applicable in his later work. Religion as a human practice is simply there, it makes itself manifest, and possesses own criteria of meaning. Religious meaning, certainty and doubt only function within the language game of religion. Although Wittgenstein herewith grants religion a respectful place alongside science, religious relativism becomes a serious threat. Religion no longer seems to refer to ultimate truths and if it would like to it still runs against the boundaries of language games instead of merely language. Although religion no longer transcends the limit of language, it now constitutes a limit.⁴⁹ Religion within the limits of reason alone, to speak with Kant, becomes religion within the limits of language (games) alone. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein's 'philosophy to the glory of God' has at least more than other analytic philosophy valued the mystical and mysterious aspect of religion. A Wittgensteinian may be a theist, deist, pantheist or agnostic, but certainly no atheist. Human words might be incapable to describe the distinct aroma of coffee and therefore inappropriate to cope with something subtle as God,⁵⁰ but the verbal denial of the existence of God is at least as presumptuous.

⁴⁹ W.D. Hudson (1981), 'The light Wittgenstein sheds on religion', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 6(1), 275-292.

⁵⁰ A. McGrath (2001), *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Wiley-Blackwell, 253. Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §610.