

Religion as A Form of Life: Some Remarks on Wittgenstein's Concept of "Religion"

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Abstract:

Wittgenstein's remarks on religion and religious language has some bearings on the current discussions on place of the religion in the secular societies. Early Wittgenstein represents a restrictive concept of religion as the religious language remains beyond the limits of ordinary experience and senses. In the *Investigations* religious life regarded as one form of life among other life experiences and hence the religious expression may as well constitutes a particular language game in itself. Wittgenstenians are divided on implications of this new conception of religion later works of Wittgenstein indicates.

In this article I will analyze the implications of Wittgenstein's concept of religion and religious language in the context of his later works. The question about the religion as a form of life needs to be answered as follows: Is religious language, according to Wittgenstein, a closed discourse that only within particular religious language game becomes meaningful? Or does Wittgenstein take religion in the sense of religious experience or just a set of beliefs? These questions are important to re-evaluate the legal, moral discussion about the place of religion in the modern public life.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Life Form, Language Game, Religion, Religious Experience.

There is almost a general consensus that one of the cardinal notions in Wittgenstein's later philosophy is that of "form of life". However, when it comes to the application of this concept to religion a controversy surrounds it. On a quite literal reading of the term in the *Investigations*, religion is obviously one of the forms that life takes. Several writers have applied the concepts of "form of life" and "language-game" to religion. The attempts to apply Wittgensteinian notions to religion in theological studies and in philosophy of religion are due to the appealing features of Wittgenstein's philosophy in the religious field.

Wittgenstein's philosophical attitude towards religion seems to have followed different lines during his philosophical career: *Tractatus*' mystical silence and its religious implications; transitory period's truth pictures of religious belief; and finally religion as a form of life and religious language as a language game. In the *Tractatus* there were external boundaries of language. Ordinary religious discourse is possible in this limit, but metaphysical and theological discourse was not possible. Wittgenstein said to Waismann some years after the *Tractatus*, that he could imagine a religion in which nothing is said. On the same occasion he went on to say: "If the speech does occur this itself is a component of religious behavior and not a theory. Therefore nothing turns on whether the

words are true, false, or nonsensical.”(Waismann 1968, 19)¹

In his second period, Wittgenstein considered religious discourse and activities as springing from religious beliefs which are absolutes in the mind of the believer. There are some kinds of mental images or pictures in the mind of the believer which provide a point of reference for activities and their justification. (O.C., 19)²

In yet a later period the notion of the external boundaries of language is totally dismissed; instead there is now a whole range of internal boundaries. There is not only one. But according to this new position, the internal boundaries do not in general assume the same role which Wittgenstein, in earlier period, assigned to the external boundaries. Indeed, the domain of the ‘transcendental’, about which, in the *Tractatus*, we must remain silent, is now placed in its own religious, ethical etc., language-games. In the *Investigations* religion appears to be a form (or forms) of life alongside other forms of life, containing activities verbalized in language-games. The dissatisfaction of some philosophers and theologians with the way some Wittgensteinians applied form of life and language-game to religion seems to be partially related to the question of whether or not it encompasses other forms of life.

After briefly touching on the reductionist results of Wittgensteinians’ “one among many form of life” oriented approach, this paper will deal with the following questions: What does Wittgenstein precisely mean by the term “form of life”? How does it apply to religion?

According to the reductionist followers of Wittgenstein, for example D. Z. Phillips, religion could only be properly understood from inside, because it is a complex of certain human activities, responses and relations.(Phillips 1965, 83) Malcolm too, following the same line of argument says that there is no justification in a language game, it can only be understood from inside. “Religion is a form of life”, he says, “it is language embedded in action -what Wittgenstein calls a ‘language game.’ Science is another... Neither stands in need of justification, the one no more than the other.” (Malcolm 1986, 332)

Wittgensteinians seem to apply the notion of meaning as use to religion. But in doing so, they take use as the standard of truth. They argue that religious language originates in certain primitive reactions, not in speculative reasoning and for this reason the practice of religion cannot rightly be thought to involve belief in the existence of any sort of queer transcendental being. (Cook 1988, 429-452)³

Religion may be described, in a quite simple way for this purpose, as containing verbal and non-verbal activities with a language which is used for performing verbal religious activities and for explaining beliefs in which religious discourse and behavior take place; this description fits well into the conceptual framework provided by language-games and forms of life. This conceptual framework allows us to think that religion involves certain activities and that it plays various roles in human life, with its own verbal activities, its own concepts and language-game. But Wittgensteinians do not stop here, and they are also attacking what they regard as a misguided demand for justification by both philosophers and theologians. In their attempt to do so, they fall into a kind of reductionism.

Wittgenstein's later philosophy seems to be a defense against any kind of reductionism, including his own approach in the *Tractatus*, because it shows that there are internal limits in different regions of discourse; if you step over these boundaries nonsense arises. This attitude does supply a comfort against any 'external- reductionist' approach. However, I am not sure about whether the same attitude provides a comfort against 'internal-reductionism' which seems to me committed by some of Wittgenstein's followers. They seem to reduce the religious language to religious behaviors. This is what I mean by internal reductionism.

For instance, in both scientific discourse and religious discourse people refer to or talk about the same universe. When the scientist demands from religion the same methodological approach in explaining the origin of universe he wants a reductionism in which religious belief must depend on empirical evidences. This is an example of external reductionism. When one claims that in religious discourse the believer is actually not talking about the same universe, he reduces religion to certain human concepts and activities. Some Wittgensteinians seem to think in this way, namely, that when a believer uses religious language-game he does not talk about something over and beyond the context in which religious discourse takes place. (Keightley 1976, 118)

Literature on these issues is so massive and discouraging that it is impossible to bring some of relevant discussion in the scope of this paper. But, more or less, certain philosophers following similar lines of argument repeat such themes as: Religion is a way of life, and not a body of doctrines; Religion is "given" so that it needs not to be justified, indeed cannot be. Its concepts are in their order as they are, for "this language-game is played" (PI., 654). It seems difficult to define religion as just one language-game and one form of life as far as the *Investigations* is concerned. In many cases Wittgensteinians seem to apply to religion what they consider to be Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion, rather than the "form of life" found in the later Wittgenstein. In the rest of the paper we will discuss the place and the context of the term "form of life", in other words, how "form of life" is to be understood.

Wittgenstein, to my knowledge, does not say precisely what he means by "form of life." He uses it only five times in the *Investigation*:

1. "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (PI., 19).
2. "the language-game is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity or of a form of life" (PI., 23).
3. "It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life" (PI., 241).
4. "the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life" (PI., 174).
5. "What has to be accepted, the given, is -so one could say- forms of life" (PI., 226).

Some of his early references to "culture" (B.B.B., 134; L.C., 34) seem to run parallel to the term "form of life". Also other expressions such as "activities", "whole life", and the "occasions" of use (L.C., 2, 3) might have crystallized into "forms of life" in the *Investigations*. Wittgenstein also speaks

about “the common behavior of mankind” (PI., 206), “natural history” (PI., 25), “custom” and “institutions” (PI., 199).

However, it is difficult to say precisely what Wittgenstein means by “form of life”, because he does not give a specific example of a complete form of life. He speaks of hope (PI., 174) and certainty (O.C., 358) as forms of life. His interpreters, too, are unjustifiably silent on how a form of life is to be understood. N. Malcolm, for instance, gives the following as a good example of what Wittgenstein means: “the gestures, facial expressions, words, and activities that constitute pitying and comforting a person or a dog.” (Malcolm 1970, 91)⁴ Malcolm thinks it is hardly possible to over-emphasize the importance of the term “form of life” in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, though he himself is, as has been seen, unhelpful regarding the problem of how “form of life” is to be understood.

“Form of life” as meaning a whole way of life should not be readily dismissed. Janik and Toulmin provide some historical material which arguably supports the interpretation of form of life in a broader sense. The notion of “forms of life” (lebensformen), they argue, was an abstract scheme concerned with the categories and forms of thought. To this existing notion in the Viennese intellectual circles of 1920s, Wittgenstein gave an “anthropological” dimension. Wittgenstein stressed the actual features of human thought which provide the context for those categories. (Janik and Toulmin 1973, 230) Dallas M. High, on the other hand, cites an unpublished manuscript to the effect that Wittgenstein wanted “form of life” translated as “way of life of human beings.” (High 1972, 245)

It follows, from these remarks and interpretations, that Wittgenstein uses the term “form of life” in both a broader and a narrower sense. In the former sense, it appears that agreement in language, possession of common concepts is what he calls a “form of life” (PI., 240-241), a common way of conceptualizing experience together. On the other hand, the term denotes something on a smaller scale, e.g., measuring, hoping, pitying.

Now we might ask: can religion be construed as a “form of life” in Wittgenstein’s sense of this term? If it can, in what sense is religion a form of life? Wittgenstein, as far as I have seen, never describes religion as a form of life. However, he seems to come close to so doing when he asks “why should one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in the Last Judgment?” (L.C., 58). Probably, Malcolm had in mind this remark when, in his *Memoir*, he says: “I think that there was in him, some sense, the possibility of religion. I believe that he looked on religion as a ‘form of life’ (to use an expression from the *Investigations*) in which he did not participate, but with which he was sympathetic and which greatly interested him.” (Malcolm 1962, 72)

The importance of Malcolm’s remark is that he sees that religion is a form of life in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, especially in the *Investigations*. It also provides strong evidence for the application of the term “form of life”, as employed by the later Wittgenstein, to religion. No one can deny the fact that, in an ordinary sense, the religious way of life is one of the forms people try to live by. It is not a discovery for Wittgenstein to see religion as a form of life in this sense. What is important here is whether we treat religion in the same way as we do to his concept of “form of life”. However, there is only one reference to religion and/or theology in the *Investigations*: “Grammar tells

us what kind of object anything is.” (Theology as Grammar) (PL, 373). Also, a similar remark can be found in the *Zettel* (144): How words are understood is not told by words alone. (Theology.)

W. D. Hudson offers a few comments to the effect that “Theology stands to religious belief... as its grammar does to a language.” (Hudson 1968, 58) Thus understood, the cryptic remarks to theology become more intelligible. Theology gives expression to a particular way of life. Words alone are empty of life. Language or religion, then, has -or should have- an active grammar. In short, the correlation between grammar and theology implies that theology, as grammar, articulates the standard of intelligibility implicit in the language and activities of a religious tradition. (Keightley 1976, 55) There is an issue at stake here because of the close connection between form of life and the justification in *Investigations*. If religion is a form of life, then religious belief and the religious language are totally “the given” and “accepted”.

Wittgenstein maintains that language-games, like forms of life cannot and need not be justified. But, this attitude does not support the position that the activities associated with a form of life are the absolutes for every reference. For the “form of life” to be given or accepted does not mean it is an absolute criteria of truth and falsity. Rather, as a whole, the speaking of a language itself is part of a form of life. Languages-games are forms of life in the sense that we cannot understand language except as a part of an activity which is not simply oral. So we cannot conclude from the ‘givenness’ of language-games and forms of life to the effect that their origin is in the “history of nature”. History of mankind, culture and the like refer to the basic human conditions in the past and the present and probably same in the future. Where do they come from? He does not seem to deal with this question; rather he draws attentions of philosophers to the fact.

Wittgenstein does not talk about the absolutes for determining the truth and falsity at all. He is simply trying to show that in any attempt to ask or supply any justification for any kind of activity or language game, we simply forget that these are basic ‘givens’ of human life. Once this point becomes clear, I do not think Wittgenstein would oppose the idea that in every complete form of life, insofar as it remains in its own language-game, any reference to transcendental and the like is possible. In this sense to call a language-game a “form of life” means to conceive it “as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing” (PL, 25). How absurd to ask why we eat as a demand for justification of it. We can explain it in detail to the extent we know it, but this is not a justification.

In this sense, philosophy must not define anything, but rather must describe and explain it. “Form of life” underlies, in one way or another, everything that we normally say or do from an awareness of moral, aesthetic, or religious values and so on. These and similar things which deserve to be called a form of life or a language-game are all basics of human life and they are the way we act. The origin or the reason for the existence of such forms of life is out of the question, or Wittgenstein avoids talking about this. A form of life, whether containing other forms of life or not, has rules regulating the actions or the discourse within itself. Since the speaking of a language itself is a form of life, regulating rules of using a language is called grammar. For religion, theology assumes the same

role, i.e., specifying what is true, and what is false in a religious discourse in a particular religion.

Religion, is certainly a form of life in the broader sense of the term, and within religious form of life there are certain others forms of life. To describe religion as just one form of life altogether falls short in explaining how a religious man integrates different aspects of his life into a single whole, as a life in the way to God. Religion should be described as a form of life containing forms of life. These forms of life can have something similar to other non-religious forms of life. For instance, thanking is one of the examples we can give. One thanks his lucky star, the other thanks God. Through these kinds of commonalities religious forms of life can permeate other domains of human life. Religion, as sociological, historic and psychological evidences suggest, tends to dominate all aspects of human life. If it is one and only one form of life, it could be possible to draw a line between religious and secular forms of life, which prevents any possibility of understanding each other. One can avoid looking for any religious significance in some aspects of human life and he is able to put aside or prevent religion to penetrate other aspects of life. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily entail that religion itself must occupy only one form among others which human life can take.

Wittgenstein's philosophical attitude towards religion seems to have followed different lines during his philosophical career: *Tractatus*' mystical silence and its religious implications; transitory period's truth pictures of religious belief; and finally religion as form of life and religious language as language game. In the *Tractatus* there were external boundaries of language. Ordinary religious discourse is possible in this limit, but metaphysical and theological discourses were not possible. Wittgenstein said to Waismann some years after *Investigation*, that religion could only be properly understood from inside, because it is a complex of certain human activities, responses and relations. (Phillips 1965, 83)

For this reason philosophy must not define anything, but rather must describe and explain it. "Form of life" underlies, in one way or another, also the religious forms that an individual follows in his private or public life. On a quite literal reading of the terms in the *Investigations*, religion is obviously one of the forms that life takes. Several writers have applied the concepts of "form of life" and "language-game" to religion. These attempts to apply Wittgensteinian notions to religion in theological studies and in philosophy of religion are due to the appealing features of Wittgenstein's philosophy in the religious field. It justifies the religious language in both public and private life in the modern secular societies as various expressions of a certain form of life that is called in many traditions 'religion'.

Endnotes:

1. Two articles about the mysticism of Wittgenstein are worth mentioning: E. Zemach, "Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mystical", in I. M. Copi and G. W. Beard (eds), *Essays On Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, pp. 359-375; and B. F. MacGuiness, "The Mysticism of Tractatus", *Philosophical Review*, (1966), Vol. 75, pp. 30.
2. L.C., p.58; Cf. Alan Keightley, *Wittgenstein, Grammar and God*, London: Epworth Press, 1976, pp. 70 ff.
3. Cook criticizes the notion of language games in general and its application to the religion. See, John W. Cook, "Wittgenstein and Religious Belief", *Philosophy* 66 (Oct. 1988), pp. 429-452.

4. P. J. Sherry suggests that there are more than one religious forms of life within religious form of life. See his "Is Religion a 'Form of Life'?", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, April 1972, Vol 9, No 2, p.159-167.

Abbreviations for Wittgenstein's Works the text:

- B.B.B.: *The Blue and Brown Books*. Ed. by R. Rhees, trans. R. Hargreaves and R. White. Oxford: Blackwell, 1967.
L.C.: *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Ed. by C. K. Barrett. Oxford: Blackwell, 1966.
O.C.: *On Certainty*. Ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. Von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1969.
PI.: *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1958 (References to Part I are by paragraph numbers and to Part II are by page numbers.) *Tractatus: Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears & B. F. McGuinness. London: Routledge, 1974
Z.: *Zettel*. Ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G.H. Von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1967.

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