THE TIGHTROPE WALKER

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Abstract
Contrary to a widespread interpretation, Wittgenstein did not regard credal statements as merely metaphorical expressions of an attitude towards life. He accepted that Christian faith involves belief in God’s existence. At the same time he held that although as a hypothesis, God’s existence is extremely implausible, Christian faith is not unreasonable. Is that a consistent view?

According to Wittgenstein, religious faith should not be seen as a hypothesis, based on evidence, but as grounded in a proto-religious attitude, a way of experiencing the world or certain aspects of it. A belief in religious metaphysics is not the basis of one’s faith, but a mere epiphenomenon. Given further that religious doctrine is both falsification-transcendent and that religious faith is likely to have beneficial psychological effects, religious doctrine can be exempt from ordinary standards of epistemic support. An unsupported religious belief need not be unreasonable.

However, it is hard to see how one could knowingly have such an unsupported belief, as Wittgenstein seems to envisage. How can one believe what, at the same time, one believes is not likely to be true? This, I argue, is the unresolved tension in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion.

The honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. It almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it. [CV 84]

I

Religious belief is widely thought to be irrational: a view about the world for which there is no reliable evidence and which can easily be explained as the product of upbringing, tradition uncritically accepted, and naive wishful thinking. Indeed it is not only ill-supported, there is reason to doubt whether its tenets ultimately make any sense. Its very consistency is threatened by a number of conceptual problems related to the notion of an omnipotent,
omniscient and benevolent being. Wittgenstein would have agreed with this critical view: as an hypothesis to be assessed in cold blood in the light of its evidence and coherence theism is a lost cause. And yet he did not dismiss the belief in God as necessarily irrational. It may not be reasonable, but it need not be unreasonable either (LC 58). How is that possible? How can one be an ‘honest religious thinker’, in other words, how can one combine being a thinker – a rational person –, being honest – not deceiving oneself –, and being religious – believing in God. It is possible, according to Wittgenstein, but it is extremely difficult: a tightrope walk.

The problem, in short, is how to reconcile the following two statements held by Wittgenstein:

(1) As a hypothesis, God’s existence (&c) is extremely implausible.
(2) Christian faith is not unreasonable.

To achieve this reconciliation it has been suggested that Christian faith according to Wittgenstein does not actually involve any metaphysical beliefs. Credal statements should be seen merely as figuative expressions of a certain attitude towards life, or as part of a ritualistic practice expressive of such an attitude.¹ But the obvious objection to such an expressivist construal of credal statements is that it is not a correct account of the actual religious language-game. Christian believers do not, on the whole, intend their credal statements to be taken in this merely figurative, expressivist sense. Thus it would appear that what Wittgenstein shows to be not unreasonable is not in fact Christian faith, but merely a carefully sanitized substitute, a demythologized version of the popular brew: with (nearly) the same emotional taste, but without its noxious metaphysical stimulants.

However, both the expressivist interpretation of Wittgenstein’s position and the standard objection to it miss their target. First, Wittgenstein does not offer an account of ‘the religious language-game’. He is not offering an analysis of what people in general mean when they speak of God, the Resurrection or life after death. He was well aware how commonly people did take their beliefs about God to be something like metaphysical hypotheses.

¹ Phillips 1993.
He repeatedly mentions examples of this more straightforward construal of religious beliefs (LC 57–9, OCD 159). He had a very low opinion of this kind of view, to be sure, but he was clearly not trying to deny that people (even intelligent people) had such beliefs. He was not trying to tell such people that really when they used the word ‘God’ they were merely expressing a certain attitude towards life.

What was Wittgenstein’s intention then? He was trying to describe the kind of religious belief that he personally found appealing: comprehensible, intellectually respectable and morally attractive. The kind of faith, in fact, that he would have liked to have; that he so often felt in need of; without ever being able to attain it. (It is worth remembering the rather private nature of what we have of Wittgenstein’s remarks on religion. The only remarks on the topic that can be attributed to him verbatim – and probably the most illuminating ones – are private diary entries, never intended for publication.)

2 Of Yorick Smythies and Elizabeth Anscombe, who were both Roman Catholics, he said: ‘I could not possibly bring myself to believe all the things that they believe’ (M 60); OC §336; B 34f.

3 Note that the situation is very different here from what it is in other areas where Wittgenstein did indeed contradict people’s own accounts of what their words meant. For example, mathematicians may be firmly convinced that in using numbers they are talking about Platonic entities. That can be set aside because it can be made plausible that such metaphysical interpretations are irrelevant to the everyday use of number signs. When a philosopher of mathematics says that he believes that the equation ‘10 − 3 = 7’ describes eternal relations between abstract objects, one may reply: ‘You can believe these things if you like, but that has very little to do with their actual use in our language. It is not part of your arithmetic competence. What matters is, for example, that if I owe you 3 pounds and give you 10 pounds you have to give me 7 pounds change. That is an example of what constitutes the public meaning of those expressions in our language. And as far as that is concerned, the linguistic meaning of those signs, your metaphysical beliefs are irrelevant.’ However, no such move can be made plausible in the case of credal statements. For they are expressly about what metaphysical beliefs people hold, and so those beliefs cannot be set aside as irrelevant. Rather, what people say here is (on Wittgenstein’s view) protected by first-person authority. I cannot be mistaken in my honest expression of my beliefs (which covers even inconsistencies as long as they are not too obvious).

4 Many of them were posthumously published under the title Vermischte Bemerkungen or, in English translation as Culture and Value. The text of the ‘Lectures on Religious Belief’ is doubly unreliable: For one thing, the students writing those notes may have misunderstood or misremembered what Wittgenstein said. For another thing, what Wittgenstein said in those improvised and informal classes may well have been tentative or carelessly phrased. Once in a lecture on aesthetics, given at about the same time, he stopped a student from taking notes saying: ‘If you write these spontaneous remarks down, some day someone may publish them as my considered opinions. I don’t want that done. For I am talking now freely as my ideas come, but all this will need a lot more thought and better expression’
remarks could indeed be read as a downright expressivist account of religious statements, the common objection that he misdescribed ordinary believers’ religious views would be mistaken. Wittgenstein was not concerned with ordinary believers’ religious views. He was interested only in an approach to religion that appealed to him personally – however uncommon or even idiosyncratic that approach might be. By contrast, certain other types of belief in the supernatural, however prevalent among, or even characteristic of, common-or-garden Christians, Wittgenstein regarded as contemptuously as did Nietzsche, Freud or Russell: as wholly irrational, indeed as forms of superstition (LC 59).

Secondly, contrary to that widespread view, Wittgenstein did not propound a purely expressivist construal of credal statements. At first glance, a form of expressivism – the reduction of religious belief to an attitude towards life – seems to be suggested by the following passage written in 1947:\footnote{Cf. Hyman 2001, 5–7.}

\begin{quote}
It appears to me as though a religious belief could only be (something like) passionately committing oneself to a system of coordinates // a system of reference. [CV 73]
\end{quote}

However, the expression ‘could only be’ is just another way of saying ‘must be’; it does not mean ‘is only’ or ‘is nothing but’. For instance: ‘The thief could only be a member of staff’ does not mean: ‘The thief is nothing but a member of staff’. Clearly, the person in question will be other things as well, in particular – a thief. Similarly, the claim that a religious belief can only be (i.e. must be) a passionate commitment is not supposed to rule out that it is not also a belief. And that is exactly what Wittgenstein says expressly in the sentence immediately following:

\begin{quote}
Hence although it is belief, it is a way of living, or a way of judging life. [CV 73]
\end{quote}

Thus, Wittgenstein stresses the importance of commitment, the practical dimension of religious faith, without denying that it is, or involves, also believing certain things to be true.\footnote{It should also be noted that the German word ‘Glaube’ covers both belief and faith. Thus some of Wittgenstein’s remarks about religious ‘belief’ may be better translated as about faith.}
This becomes perfectly clear when he notes and deplores his own lack of faith. He was very sympathetic towards the Christian faith, but ultimately he felt unable to embrace it himself – because he could not bring himself to believe what Christians believe.

I cannot call [Jesus] Lord; because that says absolutely nothing to me. ... I cannot utter the word “Lord” meaningfully. Because I do not believe that he will come to judge me [CV 38].

A little later in the same passage he explains why it is essential for a Christian to believe in Christ’s resurrection:

If he did not rise from the dead, then he decomposed in the grave like every human being ... & can no longer help; & we are once more orphaned & alone. [CV 38]7

And he adds: ‘Only love can believe the Resurrection’ (CV 39).8 Far from denying people’s belief in the supernatural, he is trying here to explain its psychology.

Christian faith, for Wittgenstein, involves the belief in ‘redemption through Christ’s death’ (D 193) and also the belief in ‘eternal life & eternal punishment’ (D 188); neither of which he himself has (D 190; 1937). Again, in a passage written in 1944 he characterises a miracle as ‘a gesture which God makes’ and adds: ‘Now, do I believe that this happens? I don’t’ (CV 51).9 And in his 1938 lectures he expressly rejects the reductivist suggestion that a statement about life after death is merely an expression of ‘a certain attitude’: ‘No’, he responds. ‘It says what it says. Why should you be able to substitute anything else?’ (LC 71).

The fact that, contrary to what is commonly said, Wittgenstein did not mean to reduce credal statements to metaphorical expressions of an attitude towards life bars the easy way of reconciling propositions (1) and (2). So the question is how, according to Wittgenstein, one could reconcile:

(1) As a hypothesis, God’s existence (&c) is extremely implausible.

7 Cf. I Cor. 15:17.
8 Cf.: “[Someone says:] “... there will be a Resurrection of you.” If some said: “Wittgenstein, do you believe in this?” I’d say: “No.”” (LC 53)
Christian faith is not unreasonable.
Christian faith does involve belief in God’s existence (&c).

II

Religious faith has both a theoretical or intellectual and an emotional-practical side. On the theoretical side there are certain historical and cosmological beliefs, on the other side there are certain rituals, observances, typical responses and forms of behaviour, and moral and emotional attitudes. What, according to Wittgenstein, is the relationship between those two irreducible aspects of religion: between, in particular, doctrinal beliefs and emotional attitudes?

It is important to note that the mundane model of evidence, belief and attitude is not satisfactorily applicable to the religious case. Ordinarily, there is a justificatory chain of three parts:

\[ \text{evidence} \rightarrow \text{[justifies]} \rightarrow \text{belief} \rightarrow \text{[justifies]} \rightarrow \text{attitude} \]

For instance, I have been bitten by my neighbour’s dog before; therefore I believe that dog to be dangerous; therefore I am afraid of the dog and inclined to avoid it. Similarly, it is often thought that the world provides evidence for God’s existence and that the Gospels provide evidence of God’s incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth who worked miracles, was crucified and raised from the dead. Then the belief in God and Jesus Christ provides a reason for a Christian attitude towards life. However, since Hume it has often and persuasively been argued that the evidence for the truth of Christian doctrine is grossly insufficient. Moreover, even the second step: from a theoretical belief in the cosmological and historical tenets of Christian doctrine to a Christian attitude, is problematic. Suppose there is an omnipotent being who created the world, visited the world in a human body, worked miracles and was crucified; suppose further that those who believe in him and submit to him will be rewarded after death and those who don’t will be punished. Such a belief will of course yield a prudential reason to become a Christian; just as those living in a totalitarian

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10 The critical arguments are well known. For the purpose of this paper, I assume them, or some of them, to be by and large successful. For a useful survey see Mackie 1982.
country have a prudential reason to show approval of their dictator. But it is difficult to see, in either case, how such a situation should engender *love* for the ruler (cf. CV 92f.). Of course Christians will urge that God loves us, and therefore deserves to be loved by us. The problem is that His love does not seem to be obvious: not in His wish to be worshipped by His creatures (John 4:23) and His condemning of those who don’t believe in Him (John 3:18), and not in the world of toil and suffering he has created (cf. CV 34), even if one takes into account the possible compensations of an afterlife. This is the well-known problem of evil. As a solution it has been suggested (by Leibniz and others) that with all its misery this world is still the best of all possible worlds: that there is a *logical* link between happiness, freedom and suffering such that even an omnipotent god could not have created a better world. The weakness of this defence is that no such logical link has actually been demonstrated. So the defence doesn’t show that the evidence against a benevolent god is deceptive, it merely shows that it is conceivable that it might be deceptive. But that is true of all empirical evidence and does not undermine the evidence. Things are different, however, if the belief in God is not based on empirical evidence in the first place. In that case, if one is independently certain of God’s existence, a reassurance that it may not be logically inconsistent with the world’s misery could indeed be found sufficient. There is a great difference between somebody who already ‘knows’ that God is good and only needs to reconcile that with the state of the world and somebody who tries to work out from the evidence of the world whether there is a benevolent god. For the former it may well be appropriate to say that ‘the ways of the Lord are unfathomable’, for the latter such a response will not do.

Wittgenstein agrees with many philosophical critics of religion that belief in religious doctrine cannot rationally be based on any empirical evidence. A belief that could be established on evidence would not be religious:

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12 To use a distinction by Gabriel Marcel, the believer may regard the amount of evil and suffering in the world as a *mystery*, whereas the sceptic must see it as a *problem* (cf. Cottingham 2005, 159f.).
13 The attempt to show religious belief to be reasonable in the light of the evidence struck Wittgenstein as ‘ludicrous’ (LC 58).
The point is that if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business [LC 56].

This idea can be developed by a thought experiment:

We come to an island and we find beliefs there, and certain beliefs we are inclined to call religious. [LC 58]

The islanders may, for example, believe that there is an immensely powerful being that can punish them or reward them, and that they worship. But now suppose they take us to the peak of a mountain where indeed we see that powerful being: somebody who sometimes strikes people dead and sometimes cures people’s illnesses by a touch of the hand. Then we will no longer call their attitude towards that being a religious belief (cf. LC 60); it has turned out to be a straightforward piece of knowledge of, and a reasonable response of awe and submission to, a superior person.

III

Having rejected the mundane evidence-belief-attitude model as inappropriate to religious belief, Wittgenstein invites us to turn things round and regard a religious, or proto-religious, attitude, a way of experiencing the world or certain aspects of it, as basic and of primary importance. Such an attitude or cluster of feelings is not a mere consequence of a theoretical belief, it is the very root and centre of faith. Here are a few examples:

(i) In the Tractatus Wittgenstein writes:

6.44 It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists.

Later, in a lecture (1929), he elaborates this thought. He speaks of a particular experience that makes him ‘wonder at the existence of the world’ (LE 41; cf. WVC 118). Such a feeling ‘of seeing the world as a miracle’ (LE 43) may well give rise to, and become contained in, the idea of a supernatural creation of the world, of God as the creator (LE 42).

(ii) In the same lecture he mentions another proto-religious experience: ‘the experience of feeling absolutely safe’ (LE 41; cf.
WVC 68). Norman Malcolm remembered how Wittgenstein told him of his first encounter with this idea:

He told me that in his youth he had been contemptuous of [religion], but that at about the age of twenty-one something had caused a change in him. In Vienna he saw a play that was mediocre drama, but in it one of the characters expressed the thought that no matter what happened in the world, nothing bad could happen to him – he was independent of fate and circumstance. Wittgenstein was struck by this stoic thought; for the first time he saw the possibility of religion. [M 58]

Obviously, there is no such thing as absolute safety from diseases, accidents or crimes, but one can have a feeling that somehow these things don’t matter; that whatever happens, in some strange sense it will be all right. From such a feeling of absolute safety it is but a short step to feeling safe in the hands of God (LE 42). This emotion is essential to Wittgenstein’s conception of religion: ‘Religious faith . . . is a trusting’ (CV 82). Thanks to this basic trust, ‘[f]or a truly religious man nothing is tragic’ (OCD 107; cf. CV 21d). The religious temperament that Wittgenstein had in mind is able to accept everything in the world with equanimity, a peaceful resignation that can find expression in the words ‘It was God’s will’ (CV 69f.). It is not that one first understands theoretically and on reliable evidence that God is a firm protection against all possible dangers and consequently one feels safe; rather, it is the other way round. A basic feeling of safety, an indomitable disposition to trust and hope may lead to the idea of divine protection.

(iii) Many people are naturally inclined to be grateful for the happiness they experience. Where life is felt to be beautiful, a blessing, a gift, one can easily be moved to form the idea of a giver whom one would like to praise and thank (cf. Cottingham 2006, §4). If, on the other hand, one is deeply impressed by the dark side of life – the incessant toil, suffering, atrocities and futility – one may, like Schopenhauer, feel the opposite inclination: of looking for somebody to blame or be indignant about, if not a devilish creator, at least a ubiquitous world will.

(iv) An acute conscience brings ideas of right and wrong and their sanctions to the forefront of a person’s mind:

One person might, for instance, be inclined to take everything that happened to him as a reward or punishment . . . If he is ill,
he may think: “What have I done to deserve this?” . . . [Or] he thinks in a general way whenever he is ashamed of himself: “This will be punished.” [LC 54f.]

This inclination will naturally lead to the idea of a superhuman judge, who sees everything, and of a final reckoning. At the same time, the stern sense of duty that tends to accompany such a moralizing view of life may produce thoughts of eternal existence:

Wittgenstein once suggested that a way in which the notion of immortality can acquire a meaning is through one’s feeling that one has duties from which one cannot be released, even by death. [M 59; cf. LC 70]

In a similar vein he once remarked to Drury:

If what we do now is to make no difference in the end, then all the seriousness of life is done away with. [OCD 161]

Hence if you are, in Wittgenstein’s demanding sense, serious about life, you may feel that life cannot be as transitory as it appears; somehow there must be more to come.

(v) An uncommonly severe conscience may make it impossible for a person ever to be satisfied with himself. He will feel sinful and miserable, what William James called a ‘sick soul’ (1902, Lectures VI-VII). Bunyan was an example, Wittgenstein himself was another one. The sick soul is so desperate that nothing in the world can help – only a God. To Malcolm Wittgenstein once remarked that he thought that he could understand the conception of God, in so far as it is involved in one’s awareness of one’s own sin and guilt. . . . I think [Malcolm adds] that the idea of Divine judgement, forgiveness, and redemption had some intelligibility for him, as being related in his mind to feelings of disgust with himself, an intense desire for purity, and a sense of the helplessness of human beings to make themselves better. [M 59]

In about 1944 Wittgenstein wrote:

People are religious to the extent that they believe themselves not so much imperfect as sick.
Anyone who is half-way decent will think himself utterly imperfect, but the religious person thinks himself wretched. [CV 51]

And a little later:

The Christian religion is only for the one who needs infinite help, that is, only for the one who suffers infinite distress. . . .

Christian faith – so I believe – is refuge in this ultimate distress. [CV 52; cf. OCD 100]

Thus a certain type of moral despair can make someone experience the need for supernatural help, for a redeeming god. In another diary entry Wittgenstein insists that if Jesus is to be the redeemer he must be God: ‘For a human being cannot redeem you’ (D 145).

(vi) Lev Tolstoy, who at about the age of fifty was suddenly overwhelmed by an intense sense of the futility of life, a paralysing experience of a lack of meaning in life, is another type of the sick soul. Again, despair becomes so acute that the only possible cure can come from God. ‘God’, in this case, is the name of what could endow the world with the meaning the absence of which is so painfully felt.

Of course such religious or proto-religious emotions and attitudes are not in themselves religious belief (cf. LC 55b). They may bring with them, or manifest themselves in, a preoccupation with the idea of God, but they do not necessarily lead to a belief in the existence of God. One can feel drawn to those pictures, but never see more in them than pictures: metaphors, mythological expressions of one’s feelings. That was Wittgenstein’s case. He noted that he felt an ‘inclination’ towards belief in Christ’s resurrection: ‘I play as it were with the thought’ (CV 38); but as far as we know he never actually believed in it.

But others did and do. Sometimes the further step is taken: a certain emotional attitude not only expresses itself in religious pictures and ideas, but those pictures and ideas are also believed to be literally true.

IV

The following six theses are an attempt to summarize Wittgenstein’s picture of religious faith. Again, it needs to be stressed that
Wittgenstein was concerned only with the type of faith he found appealing; he was not interested in describing all possible forms of religious belief, or the essence of religious belief. Having read William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, he was aware ‘that religion takes many forms, there are similarities, but there is nothing common among all religions’ (B 55).¹⁴

1. A belief in religious metaphysics is a manifestation of a certain emotional or moral attitude.
2. A belief in religious metaphysics cannot be fully understood independently of the underlying attitude.
3. A belief in religious metaphysics is not the basis of one’s faith, but a mere epiphenomenon.
4. Religious doctrine is falsification-transcendent.
5. Religious faith is likely to have an enormous beneficial impact on one’s life.
6. Therefore (3, 4 & 5) religious doctrine can be exempt from ordinary standards of epistemic support.

I shall comment on these points in turn.

1. *A belief in religious metaphysics is a manifestation of a certain emotional or moral attitude.* Belief statements are not simply and directly expressions of an attitude (as R. B. Braithwaite suggested); they do indeed express a belief. However, that belief can itself be seen as a manifestation of a certain attitude. When Madeleine Bassett declares that the stars are God’s daisy chain and that whenever someone weeps a fairy dies, she may well be taken to believe these things. But her doing so characterises her. As Bertie might put it, she is just the kind of soppy girl that believes that sort of rot. Again, when an inveterate pessimist says ‘I’m sure it will rain tomorrow and the picnic will be spoilt’, this may be a sincere expression of what he believes, but at the same time it manifests his lugubrious temperament.

2. *A belief in religious metaphysics cannot be fully understood independently of the underlying attitude.* The attitude is ‘part of the substance of the belief’ (LC 56). Thus, Wittgenstein claims, the declaration that one believes in a Judgement Day may mean different things

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¹⁴ Indeed, James’s warning ‘that we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion’ (James 26) was probably one of the inspirations for Wittgenstein’s account of a family resemblance concept (PI §§65–75).

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(LC 58), depending on what role it plays in one’s feelings and one’s life. More clearly, a person’s belief in the Christian God may be a very different belief, depending on whether it is emotionally driven by ideas of sin and judgement (iv & v), or by exuberant feelings of love and gratitude (iii).

The attitude underpinning a belief can also be said to show in what is taken to establish the belief. ‘The idea is given by what we call the proof’ (LC 70). If the belief in immortality is taken to be established by the moral considerations mentioned above (iv): as a consequence of moral seriousness, then that tells us something about what kind of belief it is. It shows how different it is, for example, from the guarded acceptance of a scientific hypothesis supported by some provisional experimental evidence. Or if a Christian (of the kind Wittgenstein could respect) does not subject the Gospels to the same historical criticism as other reports from that time (cf. CV 37f.; OCD 101), his belief in the ministry and resurrection of Jesus can be seen to be different in kind from the beliefs he holds about the lives of Roman Emperors (LC 57). Then to criticise his idea of Jesus from a historical point of view would be a misunderstanding comparable to that of responding in all seriousness to a humorous suggestion, or of answering a hyperbolical statement with a pedantic demonstration that it is exaggerated.

When Mr Jarndyce (in Bleak House) feels vexed about the turn a conversation takes, he puts his discomfort down to easterly winds. If someone unfamiliar with Mr Jarndyce’s ways were to notice that the wind was not in fact easterly and were to contradict him, the two would be at cross purposes. Although, we may assume, Mr Jarndyce does indeed believe that the wind is in the east on such an occasion (his complaint is not merely an eccentric figure of speech), it is not meant as an ordinary hypothesis about the weather. Strangely enough, Mr Jarndyce takes himself to have something like first-person authority about easterly winds. The way he uses the statement, he allows virtually no room for empirical confirmation or disconfirmation. That shows that what really matters in this case is the emotion of mental discomfort from which his meteorological belief springs and which is, as it were, the main substance of his belief.

Here we re-encounter the famous, or notorious, verification principle: not, however, in its crude polemical application to dismiss what is unverifiable as nonsense, but quite irenically employed as a means of distinguishing different types of proposi-
tion. Once in conversation Wittgenstein compared the question of verification to a policeman’s enquiry about people’s employment: A negative answer should also be envisaged and treated as a useful piece of information (M 55).

3. A belief in religious metaphysics is not the basis of one’s faith, but only, as it were, its pediment or frieze decoration, a mere epiphenomenon, in itself comparatively unimportant (cf. CV 97). Not quite as unimportant, to be sure, as Mr Jarndyce’s belief about the direction of the wind: For easterly wind is just one of countless possible causes of discomfort that could be named – among them of course the real concern that Mr Jarndyce is reluctant to consider –, whereas the link between the emotional attitudes described above and the accompanying creed is much more specific and understandable – and the religious belief is, arguably, not just a smoke screen to hide a person’s real concern. Still, the details of a belief in religious metaphysics are underdetermined by the underlying emotional attitude. It may be important for a religious temperament to find some such belief for the underlying emotional attitude to ‘make sense’, to be rationalized (for example, one may feel compelled to believe in some addressee for one’s feelings of gratitude); but this belief may take very different forms in different cultural settings.

In another sense, however, the details of the religious stories and dogmas may become very important. That is, although other stories and pictures might have done the same service, now that we have these they have through a venerable tradition become sacred to us. Religious doctrine tends to be treated in a ritualistic way, as something sacred that – however arbitrary in its origins – once established, must be observed and preserved unchanged. Wittgenstein thought that ritual was essential to religion (B 34) and disapproved strongly of breaks with religious tradition (e.g., the use of a piano, rather than an organ in church: OCD 121). Thus the details of the Gospel narrative, even their archaic diction, have become an integral part of the Christian ritual.15

Wittgenstein was also sensitive to the aesthetic attractions of religious doctrine. He found the symbolism of Christianity ‘wonderful beyond words’ (OCD 86), and hence, again, not easily replaceable by anything else. In a lecture Wittgenstein suggested the analogy that chess could also be played in writing, or with

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15 Cf.: ‘a belief . . . can itself be ritualistic or part of a rite’ (GB 129).
numbered cards instead of wooden pieces placed on the board (e.g., ‘1’ for a pawn, ‘2’ for a knight &c.). But it may be very important to our enjoyment of the game that it looks a bit like a miniature battle (LC 72). Similarly, the Gospel narratives in all their colourful details are not strictly necessary to codify the crucial ideas of Christian doctrine (sin, and redemption through God’s incarnation, death and resurrection), but they obviously add to its appeal.

The epiphenomenal character of the belief in religious metaphysics is probably what Wittgenstein has in mind when in his lectures – in what must be a rhetorical overstatement – he denies that there is a contradiction between theist and atheist (LC 53, 55). The case may be compared to that of a disagreement between a music lover praising a piece in superlative terms and a tone-deaf philistine who finds nothing worthwhile in it. On the face of it, they do of course contradict each other (‘This is wonderful!’ ‘No, it isn’t.’), but at a deeper level it is not so much that they disagree, rather they cannot communicate at all. It is not that the tone-deaf person knows what a truly wonderful piece of music is, but does not think that this is one. Rather, he has no notion of wonderful music. He has never had such an aesthetic experience. In such a case the word ‘contradiction’ would over-intellectualize the disagreement and make it appear too slight. Similarly in the religious case. What really matters, for Wittgenstein, is the emotional underpinning. And on that level the opposition is not one between holding true and holding false, but between having a certain attitude and not having it.

4. Religious doctrine is falsification-transcendent. In the Tractatus Wittgenstein remarked that ‘God does not reveal himself in the world’ (TLP 6.432), and on this point he never changed his mind. On the face of it, this of course appears to contradict directly what any Christian will say. After all, God created the world, He lived and died in the world as Jesus of Nazareth, and many people claim that He answered their prayers and made Himself known to them. However, none of this could ever be proved or disproved by those who do not believe it. Religious belief is such that it will never be in conflict with any possible experience. Those who feel safe in the hands of God do not mean that they could not come to any bodily harm (see III. (ii) above). God is believed to love us, but nothing is thought to follow from this about the future course of events. If a human being loves you, he will if he can protect you from suffering; God’s love, by contrast, is not expected to protect
Christians from suffering in this world, even though He is omnipotent. In an important sense belief in God is a no-risk belief. As, unlike ordinary beliefs (e.g. about other people’s benevolence), it does not imply that anything particular will happen, it cannot be disappointed and one does not risk getting into trouble as a result. Therefore in everyday life – in earning their living and making provisions for their old age and their family – Christians do not because of their belief in God behave differently from other people.

It may be objected that Christianity is committed to the truth of certain historical claims that are, in principle, susceptible of confirmation or disconfirmation. Wittgenstein dismissed that as irrelevant:

Queer as it sounds: the historical accounts of the Gospels might, in the historical sense, be demonstrably false, & yet belief [faith] would lose nothing through this: but not because it has to do with ‘universal truths of reason’! rather, because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief [faith]. [CV 37f.]

Of course one cannot accept the Gospels to be demonstrably false (in their essential points, not only in details) and still believe them to be true. The point is rather that what in the research of ancient history is regarded as good evidence or even as proof is only ever of a certain probability, clearly not infallible, and can easily be overruled by the deeply felt certainty of faith. After all, a Christian believes that Jesus worked miracles and was resurrected from the dead; yet if one’s belief is not restrained by the laws of nature, why should it be embarrassed by the mere probabilities of historical evidence?

5. Religious faith is likely to have an enormous beneficial impact on one’s life. Analytic philosophy has seen religion predominantly as an intellectual challenge. Reasons for and against the existence of God have been discussed like reasons for and against the existence of qualia. Wittgenstein, by contrast, regarded religious faith above all as a powerful moral and psychological remedy (OCD 100). His own life was full of despair, he lived through a number of intense crises when time and again he was close to suicide. And he knew that his wretchedness and despair, the disgust he felt with what he regarded as his own sinfulness and vanity, was of the kind that others had overcome by a conversion to faith. He understood
very well how one could feel the need for religion: how the burden of one’s sinfulness could become too heavy for one to carry, so that one could be redeemed only by God. He often felt a longing to ‘be submerged in religion’ (CV 54), but, alas, his knees wouldn’t bend (CV 63).

The psychological efficacy of faith is beyond doubt. One hears frequently of people who have found solace in religion or who have been sustained by it to show great courage and moral integrity, and most of us have probably encountered confirmed believers whose friendly equanimity seems to testify to the beneficial moral and psychological effects of their faith.¹⁶

6. Therefore (3, 4 & 5) religious doctrine can be exempt from ordinary standards of epistemic support. To be rational is to do what is appropriate in the light of one’s aims and objectives. In general, to be well-informed is likely to be useful in the pursuit of one’s goals, to be misinformed is likely to be a hindrance to success. Therefore, it is rational to be critical. Credulity, a lack of care about the correctness of one’s beliefs is, in general, irrational. But there are exceptions. For one thing, there may be areas of belief so far removed from anything we need to know in order to pursue our goals efficiently that an error is of no consequence. And for another thing, in some cases, the drawback of being misled by a false belief is outweighed by its beneficial psychological effects. Thus it may be better for a person not to learn a truth that would throw him into utter despair and ruin his life. And it is a psychological commonplace that optimism, a firm belief in one’s own abilities and luck – even if it is unfounded –, tends to increase one’s chances of success. Now, the argument is that religious doctrines are an area where credulity is not as irrational as it is elsewhere for both those reasons: because a possible error in the relevant metaphysical and historical beliefs will not mislead us in the pursuit of our mundane aims, and because holding those beliefs is likely to have considerable psychological benefits. At best, faith is a powerful medicine for overcoming despair, making contented, and facilitating moral improvement, at worst, it has no harmful side-effects since religious belief, cleared from superstition, in no way

¹⁶ Of course there is also a lot to be said about the harmful effects of religious belief, from crusades to suicide bombers, but following Wittgenstein my concern in this paper is only with the possibility of a thoroughly attractive version of faith.
conflicts with everyday rationality. ‘Go on,’ Wittgenstein encourages himself in a diary entry, ‘believe! It does no harm’ (CV 52).

V

The problem is of course that one cannot simply decide what to believe. One can sometimes bring oneself to believe something, yet not by a mere act of the will, but by finding reasons or, at least, the impression that there are reasons. These, however, must be reasons to think the belief true (as believing is believing to be true), not just the expectation that having the belief would make one feel better. Of course, indirectly it is possible voluntarily to acquire or preserve beliefs because they are agreeable, or to prevent oneself from acquiring beliefs because they are disagreeable. This is done by avoiding exposure to what one suspects might be evidence or reasons for an undesirable belief. It is typically a matter of not pursuing matters as far as one could, not paying attention to what on closer inspection might undermine one’s cherished views, and refraining from critical questions. Thus a husband in order to preserve his belief in his wife’s faithfulness may decide to refrain from reading a suspicious looking letter that fell out of her handbag or not question her in too much detail about her doings during his absence. Similarly, somebody brought up in a Christian faith may at a later age be careful not to subject its tenets to any critical probing. Initiating a religious belief in such a way is much more difficult, but could perhaps be achieved by keeping company for a while exclusively with particularly friendly, admirable and eloquent adherents of that belief.

That is what is called self-deception. However conducive to one’s happiness, for Wittgenstein it was out of the question. His ideal was the honest religious thinker, who is, and remains, fully aware that the arguments of natural theology are unconvincing. Even in the midst of his struggles to find some faith and overcome his misery Wittgenstein would exhort himself in his diary not to compromise his intellectual integrity: ‘Let me . . . at all events not be superstitious!! I don’t want to be uncleanly in my thinking! . . . Preserve my understanding pure and untainted!’ (D 173f.).

If it is not possible to bring oneself into a state of religious belief without muddled thinking or self-deception, it may still be
possible for some to be in that state. Perhaps some people are able to believe in God and resurrection even though they are fully aware that their belief has no rational basis. As Wittgenstein described it:

redeeming love believes even in the Resurrection; ... What fights doubt is as it were redemption ... first be redeemed & hold on tightly to your redemption ... – then you will see that what you are holding on to is this belief. [CV 39]

An intense religious emotion, answering and dissolving the despair of the sick soul (see III. (v) above), an overwhelming experience of feeling oneself forgiven and redeemed, is to bring with it a belief that needs no reasons: a belief that can be sustained solely by an emotion. Others have claimed that aesthetic considerations, experiences of beauty – in ritual and symbolism (cf. OCD 86, 93) – sustained their belief:

‘But my dear Sebastian, you can’t seriously believe it all.’
‘Can’t I?’
‘I mean about Christmas and the star and the three kings and the ox and the ass.’
‘Oh yes, I believe that. It’s a lovely idea.’
‘But you can’t believe things because they’re a lovely idea.’
‘But I do. That’s how I believe.’
[Evelyn Waugh, Brideshead Revisited, ch. IV]

It may well be possible for an emotion to cause and sustain a belief, the question however remains whether it is compatible with the intellectual clarity Wittgenstein would not want to compromise. Can one believe with a clear awareness that one’s belief is epistemically unsupported? Will a thinking person not feel compelled to find at least a semblance of a reason to make the belief appear respectable?

It may be useful to consider the analogy with optimism, which like religious belief may or may not be supported by reasons:

Wittgenstein remarked that when someone said he was optimistic because the law of historical development showed that things were bound to get better, this was nothing he could admire.

‘On the other hand, if someone says: “By the look of them, things are getting worse, and I can find no evidence to suggest
that they will improve. And yet in spite of this, I believe things will get better!” – I can admire that.’ (RR 201f.)

The person who claims to give a rational justification for his optimism must be fooling himself. There is no law of historical development on which any optimism could be based. This is just bad reasoning, comparable perhaps to philosophers’ well-known unconvincing attempts to prove the existence of God. Contrasted with that is the person whose belief in a better future is not claimed to be based on any dubious reasoning, but acknowledged to be the unjustified attitude of a sanguine temperament. Wittgenstein admires the latter person because he is honest and not guilty of bad reasoning. The first person’s optimism is in all likelihood also the expression of a sanguine temperament, but, somewhat disingenuously, he prefers to dress it up as the result of some sophisticated reasoning. As F. H. Bradley put it, metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct.

However, the second person’s stance is not free from difficulties. Changing the scenario a little, let us consider the simpler case of a seriously ill relative: the symptoms make it reasonable to expect the worst. Of course one can expect the worst and still keep up one’s hope for a good outcome. Hope requires only a possibility, be it ever so slight, of what is hoped for, not probability. But suppose a person’s temperament is indomitably optimistic to such a degree that he is not only always full of hope, but even feels compelled to believe that there will be a good outcome. The problem is that this unjustified belief is in stark conflict with what he knows about the case. Given his medical understanding of the symptoms it is patently irrational for him to expect a recovery. The tension between a realistic diagnosis and an optimistic expectation would produce a strange incoherence in the person’s mind, almost a split personality. Would not a rational person find this conflict between evidence and belief intolerable? And if the belief stays firm must it not cast doubt on his understanding of the evidence? In that case he will probably look for alternative explanations of the symptoms, however far-fetched, and focus on the slightest appearance of alleviation. Similarly, in Wittgenstein’s example, it would appear to be a still more understandable response to find dubious reasons why past experience might after all yield some evidence for a better future (such as a Hegelian law of historical progress), than to
believe in a better future flatly against all the evidence; that is, in effect, to expect a miracle.

Of course, the religious case is a little less problematic thanks to the transcendence of what is believed. There will be no conflict as to what one should expect to happen in this world (cf. IV. 4. & 6. above). Still, there is the same psychological problem. On Wittgenstein’s account, the respectable theist is the one who is knowingly not reasonable in his religious beliefs (LC 58f.). But how can one believe what, at the same time, one believes is not likely to be true? – This is the unresolved tension in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion. The tightrope walker’s carefully limited abeyance of reason may not be objectionable; but is it possible? Hume famously claimed that ‘whoever is moved by Faith to assent to [the Christian Religion], is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding’ (131). With regard to the majority of religious people that is certainly not true; but it may be true of the consciously not reasonable believer Wittgenstein envisaged.17

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