

WITTGENSTEIN AND THE 'FACTORIZATION MODEL' OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

GENIA SCHÖNBAUMSFELD

University of Southampton

Abstract. In the contemporary literature Wittgenstein has variously been labelled a fideist, a non-cognitivist and a relativist of sorts. The underlying motivation for these attributions seems to be the thought that the content of a belief can clearly be separated from the attitude taken towards it. Such a 'factorization model' which construes religious beliefs as consisting of two independent 'factors' – the belief's content and the belief-attitude – appears to be behind the idea that one could, for example, have the religious attitude alone (fideism, non-cognitivism) or that religious content will remain broadly unaffected by a fundamental change in attitude (Kusch). In this article I will argue that such a 'factorization model' severely distorts Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief.

I.

The myths surrounding Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief are tenacious and enduring. In the contemporary literature, for example, Wittgenstein has variously been labelled a fideist (Nielsen 2005), a non-cognitivist (Hyman 2001, Schröder 2007) and a relativist of sorts (Kusch 2011). The underlying motivation for many of these attributions seems to be the thought that the content of a belief can clearly be separated from the attitude taken towards it. Such a 'factorization model' which construes religious beliefs as consisting of two independent 'factors' – the belief's content and the belief-attitude – appears to be behind the idea that one could, for example, have the religious attitude alone (fideism, non-cognitivism) or that religious content will remain broadly unaffected by a fundamental change in attitude (Kusch). In the present contribution

I will argue that such a model faces insuperable philosophical and exegetical difficulties, and, consequently, that the conceptions that spring from it are mistaken.

II.

Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief in many ways mirrors his philosophical concerns more generally. Just as Wittgenstein rejects the idea that philosophy is a theoretical exercise whose purpose consists in developing explanatory hypotheses about the hidden workings of language and the world, so, too, he jettisons the thought that Christianity offers us a philosophical theory about what goes on in a celestial realm. Instead, he shares Kierkegaard's insight that truth 'in the sense in which Christ is the truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition etc., but a life' (Kierkegaard 1991: 205).

One does not, Wittgenstein believes, come to Christianity through argument and intellectual deliberation; it is rather the shape of one's life and experiences that will (or will not) teach one a use for the Christian concepts. The exigencies of life may, as it were, thrust these concepts upon one. It is for this reason that Wittgenstein says:

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation (1977: 64e).

This passage has been subjected to an enormous amount of misinterpretation. So, for example, Wittgenstein is often berated, by believers and unbelievers alike, that by emphasizing faith's 'existential' dimension – that is to say, its embeddedness in religious *practice* – Wittgenstein has thrown out the baby with the bathwater: once all the philosophy that is written about Christianity is put aside,¹ one would seem to be left with nothing more than adherence to a 'doctrineless' form of life. As Kai Nielsen (2005: 116), for instance, says: 'The most crucial error common to both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein is to argue that Christian practice is everything and Christian belief, belief that involves doctrines, is nothing.'²

¹ Wittgenstein once wrote: 'If Christianity is the truth then all the philosophy that is written about it is false' (1977: 83e).

² Compare also John Hyman (2001) and Severin Schroeder (2007).

John Hyman takes a similar view. He glosses Wittgenstein's remark in the following way: 'If a religious belief is something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference – as opposed to a passionate commitment to the truth of an empirical proposition – then a religious belief cannot be *true* or *false*. And Wittgenstein held that religious beliefs cannot be *reasonable* or *unreasonable* either, if that means that they can or cannot be justified' (2001: 6).³

But the matter may be much more complicated than these criticisms would suggest. I have previously argued, for example, that, as in his philosophical practice more generally, the point of Wittgenstein's remarks is to challenge the very terms in which the debate is cast. In other words, Wittgenstein wants to show that it is itself an illusion to suppose that we are confronted by two exhaustive alternatives here: either adherence to a set of metaphysical beliefs (with certain ways of acting following from these beliefs) or passionate commitment to a way of life; there is no third way.

The thought that there cannot be any middle ground here is fuelled by the fact that we are naturally prone to suppose that it is possible neatly to separate the meaning of words from their use, and so we might be tempted to believe, as many commentators do, that it is possible to inspect the words alone in order to find out whether they make sense or not. John Cottingham (2009: 209) picturesquely calls such an approach applying the 'fruit juicer' method to modes of thought of which one is sceptical: to require 'the clear liquid of a few propositions to be extracted for examination in isolation from what [one] take[s] to be the irrelevant pulpy mush of context'. It is this tendency, Cottingham argues, that Wittgenstein's emphasis on praxis – in both religious and other contexts – is supposed to preclude.

Stephen Mulhall, who criticizes Hyman's paper in his (2001), would concur, arguing that Wittgenstein's whole approach consists of showing that 'no one can so much as understand what a belief in God's existence amounts to without grasping the location of that concept in the grammatical network of religious concepts that Wittgenstein here describes as a system of reference' (Mulhall 2001: 101). If this is correct, then it makes no sense to think, as Hyman does, that one can first establish the truth of the proposition that God exists and then use it as a reason for adopting the system of reference. Rather, one could not acquire a belief

³ Compare also Severin Schroeder (2007).

in God's existence 'without both understanding and committing oneself to the broader grammatical system in which the concept of God has its life' (ibid.).

Martin Kusch has recently followed Nielsen in arguing that this kind of conception renders religious language incommensurable⁴ with ordinary discourse: '[On this account] Wittgenstein is unable to pick out the propositional contents of religious beliefs since he cannot translate religious language into his own ... the languages of the believer and the non-believer are, in important respects, incommensurable' (Kusch 2011: 38). Kusch attributes this view to Cyril Barrett and myself:

Barrett and Schönbaumsfeld hold that for Wittgenstein religious language involves a 'reorientation' of ordinary language. Moreover, they imply that the non-believer can come to grasp the meaning of religious language only by converting. And they suggest that the non-believer suffers from a kind of conceptual aspect-blindness (Kusch 2011: 39).

In spite of this, Kusch is aware that I do not wish to attribute the incommensurability thesis to Wittgenstein. Quoting from my (2007: 193):

Religious discourse cannot ... be 'self-contained' or 'sealed-off' from other linguistic 'domains', for it is precisely the quotidian senses of words that make possible the 'renewed' uses of applications of these words in religious contexts. In this respect, religious discourse, like artistic language-use, involves an *extension* or *transformation* of everyday discourse and consequently can't be 'incommensurable' with it.

Nevertheless, Kusch (2011: 40) claims to be unconvinced by this response for the following reasons. Firstly, he thinks that the fact that religious discourse 'renews' ordinary words does not establish that this discourse is translatable into those words. Secondly, Kusch contends that if God's intervention is needed to give the religious believer 'almost new words', then what – short of a conversion – can enable the non-believer to understand these words? Finally, Kusch believes that the parallel that I draw between artistic and religious language-use cannot demonstrate commensurability, since grasping religious discourse for the first time seems to amount to a fundamental change in form of life, while understanding an artistic metaphor does not. In the next sections, I will respond to Kusch's critique of my conception and raise some worries for his alternative view.

⁴ In my (2007) I show that Nielsen's objection misfires (see pp. 191-6).

III.

I argued previously that in order to grasp the sense of religious expressions, one not only needs to understand what the ‘atoms’ – that is, the individual words comprising the utterance – mean in *other* contexts (in contexts, say, in which one has first learnt the uses of these words), but what the sentence as a whole means, and this can only be done if one understands how the words are functioning in *this* specific context; one must, as it were, understand their technique of application *here*. This is why Wittgenstein says in the *Lectures on Religious Belief* (1966: 55) that in one sense he understands all the religious person who believes in a Last Judgement says, because he understands, for example, the ordinary words ‘God’ or ‘separate’,⁵ but that, in another sense, he doesn’t understand the sentence *at all* for, in this particular context, he has no grasp of how these familiar words are used: ‘my normal technique of language leaves me’ (*ibid.*).

Does this imply, as Kusch (2011: 40) seems to believe, that religious language is therefore incommensurable with other forms of discourse? No. The reasons for this are as follows. One cannot, for example, explain what ‘God’s eye sees everything’ means to someone who does not understand the habitual senses of the words comprising the sentence. Neither could one explain what ‘eye’ means in this context by pointing, say, to God’s ‘anatomy’, since it is obvious that the word ‘eye’ in the sentence ‘God’s eye sees everything’ is not functioning in the same way as the word ‘eye’ does in the sentence ‘a racoon’s eye can see in the dark’. It is equally obvious that one could not apply the word ‘eye’ to God, if one could not employ the word ‘eye’ in everyday contexts – if, that is, one could not understand ‘a racoon’s eye can see in the dark’ and similar sentences. So, religious discourse cannot be radically discontinuous with ordinary language-use, since it is parasitic upon it.

Of course Kusch is right that it does not follow from the fact that there cannot be radical discontinuity here, that one is therefore able fully to translate religious discourse into another idiom. But I have never claimed that this is either possible or necessary. For, arguably, many linguistic domains are ‘irreducible’ (not incommensurable!) in this

⁵ It is unclear why Wittgenstein speaks of ‘separate’ in connection with a discussion of a Last Judgement, but I presume he is thinking of sentences such as ‘the soul is separate from the body’ or some such thing, but of course this is only a guess. What exactly Wittgenstein meant is irrelevant to our discussion, though.

way – aesthetic, ethical and even psychological language-uses springing immediately to mind. Many unsuccessful philosophical attempts have been made to ‘translate’ these forms of discourse into another, primarily into a kind of ‘language of science’ perhaps.⁶

To be fair to Kusch, he claims to agree that learning about the grammar of religious expressions involves learning about the religious form of life. But it is not easy to see how that can be compatible with the ‘factorization’ model that he espouses.⁷ For if the grammar of religious expressions can only be learnt from their context – that is to say, their embeddedness within the religious form of life – then one has to immerse oneself in that practice if one is to have any hope of understanding religious language. This does not imply, as Kusch mistakenly seems to assume, that one actually has to *convert* in order to be able to learn the grammar of religious expressions – for example, one does not have to be a religious believer to understand that the depth grammar of the concept ‘God’ is not akin to that of a super-empirical object (on Wittgenstein’s view) – but it does mean that a lot of familiarity with and sensitivity to the practices in question is necessary.

Furthermore, there may well be *some* aspects of religious discourse that will continue to remain opaque to one, quite possibly regardless of whether one is a religious believer or not. As Wittgenstein says:

In religion every level of devoutness must have its appropriate form of expression which has no sense at a lower level. This doctrine, which means something at a higher level, is null and void for someone who is still at the lower level; he *can* only understand it *wrongly* and so these words are *not* valid for such a person (1977: 32e).

In other words, the greater one’s spiritual development, the more sense some religious doctrines might make. But, again, this does not radically distinguish religious from other forms of discourse, because it is also true in art, ethics and philosophy that the greater one’s abilities and understanding, the greater the horizons of significance that will open themselves up to one. Indeed, when coming to see or to experience something for the first time, one often calls this having an ‘epiphany’ – something that seems very close to the conceptual ‘reorientation’ or transformation that I speak of in the religious domain. In fact, it seems

⁶ One need only think of Mackie’s view of ethics here or Churchland’s attempt to reduce ‘folk psychology’ to the ‘language’ of neuroscience.

⁷ For more on this, see the next section.

very close to how Wittgenstein thinks of his own philosophical activity, which he at one time describes as being like the shift from alchemy to chemistry.⁸

So, transitions are fluid here: the basic grammar of religious expressions can be learnt by believers and unbelievers alike by attending closely to the religious form of life and the use to which religious expressions are put in them. But *some* aspects of religious doctrine and practice may remain closed to one if one is not a religious believer. This should not be surprising. Actual participants in a practice always have a different perspective from outsiders to the practice – it is one thing to *learn about* driving a car, and quite another actually to drive it.

Wittgenstein seems to have this distinction in mind when he says that he could only utter the word ‘Lord’ with meaning, if he lived completely differently:

I read: ‘No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost’ – And it is true: I cannot call him *Lord*; because that says nothing to me. I could call him the ‘paragon,’ ‘God’ even – or rather, I can understand it when he is called thus; but I cannot utter the word ‘Lord’ with meaning. *Because I do not believe* that he will come to judge me; because *that* says nothing to me. And it could say something to me, only if I lived *completely* differently (1977: 33e).

What Wittgenstein is saying here is that some religious expressions can be understood even if one doesn’t share the perspective of the believer, while others will remain opaque or meaningless if one is not a participant in the religious form of life, and hence lives ‘completely differently’. This already gives a fairly clear indication that Wittgenstein would reject a ‘factorization’ model of religious belief, for the significance of this passage precisely consists in bringing out that the meaning of religious contents is not independent of one’s ‘belief-attitude’, which, in turn, cannot be specified independently of the way in which one lives one’s life.

IV.

On Kusch’s alternative conception, on the other hand, a distinction can be drawn between what he calls ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ belief-attitudes that are directed towards the same propositional content:

⁸ Quoted in Monk (1991: 298).

Ordinary belief-attitudes are found in empirical and scientific beliefs; extraordinary belief-attitudes are characteristic of religious beliefs. [The *Lectures on Religious Belief* allow] that one and the same proposition – for instance, *that there will be a Last Judgement* – can serve as a propositional content for both an extraordinary and for an ordinary belief-attitude (Kusch 2011: 37).

Kusch claims that ‘ordinary’ beliefs have the following five features. 1. They tend to be described as ‘opinions’, ‘views’ or ‘hypotheses’. 2. They are more or less reasonable; more or less well supported by evidence. 3. They are candidates for knowledge. 4. ‘I am not sure’ or ‘possibly’ are often someone else’s responses to a profession of such beliefs. 5. They don’t normally have the power to change our lives. ‘Extraordinary’ beliefs, on the other hand, differ in all these respects:

‘Faith’ and ‘dogma’ rather than ‘opinion’ and ‘hypothesis’ are the non-technical terms commonly used for extraordinary beliefs; extraordinary beliefs are not on the scale of being confirmed or falsified by empirical evidence; although ‘extraordinary’ beliefs are the ‘firmest’ of all beliefs, they are not candidates for knowledge; they are tied to strong emotions and pictures; they guide people’s life; and their expression can be the culmination of a form of life (Kusch 2011: 38).

For example, the person holding an ‘ordinary’ belief that God exists takes the same attitude towards the belief’s propositional content as he would towards an ordinary empirical prediction – i.e. he will regard it as more or less probable or as more or less well-supported by evidence – whereas the person holding an ‘extraordinary’ belief that God exists has a completely different, entirely ‘firm’, attitude not grounded in empirical evidence at all (Kusch 2011: 38; 2012: 12).

It is hard to see how this can be right. For, among other things, it is difficult to square with the central Wittgensteinian notion that meaning is use and that practice gives words their sense. Compare, for example, the following remarks:

Actually I should like to say that ... the *words* you utter or what you think as you utter them are not what matters, so much as the difference they make at various points in your life. How do I know that two people mean the same when each says he believes in God? ... *Practice* gives the words their sense (1977: 85e).

For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language (1953: §43).

If Wittgenstein is right, one struggles to make sense of the idea that the attitude one takes towards a belief makes *no* (or little) difference to the belief’s propositional content. For taking an ‘ordinary’ belief-attitude towards the proposition that God exists seems to have obvious implications for what ‘God exists’ means. So, for instance, the person who, like Wittgenstein’s Father O’Hara from the *Lectures on Religious Belief*, thinks that there is ‘scientific’ evidence for the existence of God, and consequently, in Kusch’s parlance, has an ‘ordinary’ belief-attitude, will take the proposition that God exists to be a claim about a super-empirical object, while for Wittgenstein this is a misguided way of thinking about God. As Wittgenstein says in *Culture and Value*: ‘The way you use the word “God” does not show *whom* you mean – but, rather, what you mean’ (1977: 50e). On Wittgenstein’s conception, in other words, ‘God’ does not denote some *thing* that one could encounter independently of having the concept in the sense that one could encounter a unicorn or the Loch Ness monster, say, if there happened to be such things. That is to say, Wittgenstein believes that while the surface grammar of the word ‘God’ functions in many ways analogously to that of an outlandish person, its depth grammar is actually quite different. This is shown, for example, by the fact that one cannot ‘overhear’ God talking to someone else – something that religious believers do not explain by reference to God’s either being mute or out of earshot. But, if this is right, it seems that Father O’Hara and Wittgenstein’s religious believer cannot, *pace* Kusch, believe the same things. For Father O’Hara believes that ‘God’ denotes a super-powerful entity for which there can be scientific evidence, whereas Wittgenstein’s religious believer thinks it does not make sense to conceive of God in this way. *A fortiori* the propositional content of their respective beliefs must be different, even if O’Hara and Wittgenstein’s religious believer use the same words to describe their beliefs.

If this is correct, then ‘content’ and ‘attitude’ cannot be divorced from each other in the way that the ‘factorization’ model requires. And this, in turn, means that understanding religious discourse is not as straightforward as one might, perhaps, at first imagine. For if belief-attitude and content are not distinct ‘factors’, it cannot be taken for granted that the religious believer and the atheist will be able to understand each

other simply in virtue of using the same words. As Wittgenstein says in the *Lectures on Religious Belief*:

If you ask me whether or not I believe in a Judgement Day, in the sense in which religious people have a belief in it, I wouldn't say, 'No. I don't believe there will be such a thing. It would seem to me utterly crazy to say this.' And then I give an explanation: 'I don't believe in ...', *but then the religious person never believes what I describe* (1966: 55, emphasis added).

If this is right, no clear distinction can be drawn between 'living in a certain way' and 'believing certain things,' as *genuine* beliefs can never be divorced from and understood completely independently of the difference they make in one's life. So, Wittgenstein would reject the idea that beliefs are composed of two independent 'factors' – the belief's content and the belief-attitude. Rather, for Wittgenstein, 'content' and 'attitude' are mutually interdependent, since it is not possible to make sense of one without the other.

This also helps one to see why, *pace* Hyman and Nielsen, Wittgenstein cannot be a non-cognitivist who seeks to reduce the content of religious beliefs to the expression of emotional attitudes. For if one cannot 'factor out' the attitude from the content, neither can one reduce one to the other. When Wittgenstein, therefore, says, for example, that 'Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life' (1977: 28e), he does not thereby mean that Christianity has no cognitive content. Rather, what he is suggesting is that being able, say, to recite the Creeds or Catholic dogma is not sufficient for having a proper understanding of religious concepts, as this requires being able to see religious utterances non-instrumentally, that is to say, it requires being able to see their *point* and aptness rather than their ability, as it were, to convey 'information' about God. And being able to see this is not possible, if Wittgenstein is right, independently of having some familiarity and grasp of the Christian form of life and the phenomenology of experience that gave rise to it. Hence, when Wittgenstein says that the important thing with regard to the Christian 'doctrine' is to understand 'that you have to change your *life*' or 'the *direction* of your life,'⁹ he is not implying that it is somehow possible to

⁹ 'I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your *life*. (Or the *direction* of your life.) ... The point is that a sound doctrine need not *take hold* of you; you can follow it as you would a doctor's

do this *without* committing oneself to the Christian claims. For to say that much more than rote-reciting is required, is not to say that therefore the ‘doctrine’ – the Christian claims – are irrelevant, as this would be as absurd as thinking that because a song can be sung both with and without expression, one could have the expression without the song (1966: 29).

Consequently, it is not the case, as is often supposed, that Wittgenstein denies that religious people believe different things to non-religious people. What he *is* denying is that any sense can be made of *what* those things are independently of paying attention to the form of life (or practice) which gives them sense.

V.

It is an upshot of Kusch’s view that a criticism, on the basis of shared standards, of the very adoption of extraordinary standards, is ruled out. Following Bernard Williams, Kusch calls this a ‘relativism of distance’ (2011: 52). A ‘relativism of distance’ implies that ‘disagreements’ between people who hold extraordinary beliefs and those that do not, can be ‘faultless.’ I agree that there can be ‘faultless *difference*’ between religious believers and those who lack religious attitudes, but I think it is misleading to call this a form of relativism.

The reason why I would prefer to talk of ‘faultless difference’ rather than ‘faultless disagreement’ is of course that, contrary to Kusch, I do not think that the content of ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ beliefs is the same. Consequently, believer and unbeliever do not necessarily have a ‘disagreement’ at all, for this presupposes that one can deny what the other affirms. But if, as I have argued, one first has to learn the grammar of religious beliefs before one can have disputes about them with the believer, then one cannot criticize religious beliefs by inspecting the words, or the putative ‘propositional’ content, alone. Rather, what Wittgenstein’s view entails is that in order for disagreement to be possible, a shared common background must first be acquired that enables one to understand what, exactly, it is that the other is committed to. Without this being in place, one would not be able to contradict what the religious person says:

prescription. – But here you need something to move you and turn you in a new direction ... Once you have been turned round, you must *stay* turned round. Wisdom is passionless. But faith by contrast is what Kierkegaard calls a *passion*’ (1977: 53e).

Suppose that someone believed in the Last Judgement, and I don't, does this mean that I believe the opposite to him, just that there won't be such a thing? I would say: 'not at all, or not always' ... 'Do you contradict the man?' I'd say: 'No' (1966: 53).

On Kusch's conception, Wittgenstein is not contradicting the religious believer, because while the latter has an 'extraordinary' belief-attitude to the proposition that there will be a Last Judgement, Wittgenstein merely has the 'ordinary', 'empirical' belief-attitude towards there not being such a thing. Since these belief-attitudes are distinct, there is no conflict between what the two parties say. The reason why Kusch is nevertheless happy to speak of an 'extraordinary' disagreement here is that even though the two parties do not straightforwardly contradict each other (since they have different belief-attitudes), they do 'disagree' about the *content* of their beliefs (since one of them believes that there will be a Last Judgement, while the other doesn't):

To fully appreciate the contingency of having or lacking extraordinary beliefs is to recognize that the 'extraordinary disagreement' between the believer and the unbeliever may well be faultless: neither side need have made a mistake. This faultless epistemic peer disagreement is *not fully reasonable* – neither side is able to identify its evidence fully, not even to himself or herself. But this disagreement is *not altogether unreasonable either*: each side may well have done its best on the basis of its historically contingent sensibility (Kusch 2012: 22).

This is convincing only if one can make sense of the idea of 'extraordinary' evidence that Kusch invokes earlier on (2012: 14). For *prima facie*, one might wonder why, if 'extraordinary' beliefs have exactly the same content as 'ordinary' beliefs, but are just held more firmly on what seems to be flimsier evidence, one should so much as allow 'extraordinary' beliefs any kind of epistemic credibility. As Wittgenstein says:

They [religious believers] base things on evidence which taken in one way would seem exceedingly flimsy. They base enormous things on this evidence. Am I to say they are unreasonable? I wouldn't call them unreasonable. I would say, they are certainly not *reasonable*, that's obvious (1966: 57-8).

If you compare it [religious belief] with anything in Science which we call evidence, you can't credit that anyone could soberly argue: 'Well, I had this dream ... therefore ... Last Judgement.' You might say: 'For a blunder,

that's too big.' If you suddenly wrote numbers down on the blackboard, and then said: 'Now, I'm going to add,' and then said: '2 and 21 is 13' etc. I'd say: 'This is no blunder' (1966: 61-2).

What Wittgenstein seems to be saying here is that if one believes that religious beliefs are based on 'evidence' in the way that scientific beliefs, for example, can be said to be based on evidence, then one is either, like Father O'Hara,¹⁰ cheating oneself, or irrational. For, if one *really* believed that it made sense to argue 'dream – therefore Last Judgement' or 'miracles – therefore Son of God', then this is no ordinary mistake – that is to say, no simple blunder for which there is a place in the 'system'. Since Wittgenstein, unlike the author of *The Golden Bough*, for example, does not want to come to the conclusion, however, that 'the whole of mankind does all that [i.e. engages in religious practice] out of sheer stupidity',¹¹ he tries to find an alternative explanation: 'There are cases where I'd say he's mad, or he's making fun. Then there might be cases where I look for an entirely different interpretation altogether' (1966: 62). The 'entirely different interpretation' might comprise, for example, a refusal to interpret religious beliefs as being in any way *analogous* to scientific beliefs. That is to say, the believer isn't necessarily mad, but might rather be engaged in a different kind of activity: 'Whether a thing is a blunder or not – it is a blunder in a particular system ... You could also say that where we are reasonable, they are not reasonable – meaning they don't use *reason* here' (1966: 59). But it is a mistake to think, as Kusch does, that adopting such an approach is not going to have serious implications for the *content* of what is believed, but will merely affect one's belief-attitude.

For instance, when Wittgenstein is criticizing Father O'Hara's conception of religious belief, he isn't *merely* criticizing his *attitude*:

Father O'Hara is one of those people who make it a question of science ... I would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable. I would say, if this is religious belief, then it's all superstition. But I would ridicule it, not by saying it is based on insufficient evidence. I would say: here is a man who is cheating himself. You can say: this man is ridiculous because he believes, and bases it on weak reasons (1966: 57-9).

¹⁰ Father O'Hara was a professor of physics and mathematics at Heythrop College London, who participated in a BBC debate about science and religion in the 1930s.

¹¹ Wittgenstein (1993: 119).

Wittgenstein is here taking issue with the very idea of trying to make Christianity probable. That is to say, Wittgenstein thinks that it is ‘a confusion of the spheres,’ a kind of category mistake, to speak with Kierkegaard,¹² to treat a religious question as if it were a scientific question that could be settled by appeal to empirical evidence. It is this confusion that, according to Wittgenstein, turns religious belief into mere superstition – that is to say, into a form of false science.

Kusch agrees that Father O’Hara’s religious belief is unreasonable:

Superstition is unreasonable religious belief; in O’Hara’s case it is religious belief falling way short of the appropriate extraordinary belief attitude ... Put differently, what might be convincing evidence (even for the believer) against religious belief taken as ordinary, is not at all evidence against extraordinary belief (2012: 13).

The reason why Kusch believes that ‘ordinary’ evidence is not evidence against ‘extraordinary’ belief is the following:

Wittgenstein is adamant that one does not develop an attitude of extraordinary belief in response to mere ordinary evidence. Instead, it is the course of one’s life as a whole that either causes one to have extraordinary beliefs or causes one not to have them. This cause is not a ‘brute cause’: it does not bring about extraordinary belief in the way a hit over the head or a drug might bring about a headache. It is a cause in terms of which the religious believer is able to make sense of his extraordinary beliefs, at least partially. And hence it seems appropriate to speak of this cause as ‘extraordinary evidence’ (2012: 13-4).

I agree with Kusch that ‘Wittgenstein is adamant that one does not develop an attitude of extraordinary belief in response to mere ordinary evidence,’ but I’m not sure it is appropriate to speak of this cause as ‘extraordinary evidence.’ Consider, for example, the following remark:

Life can educate one to a belief in God. And *experiences* too are what bring this about; but I don’t mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us ‘the existence of this being,’ but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows us an object, nor do they give rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts – life can force this concept on us (1977: 86e).

¹² See Kierkegaard (1998: 5).

If 'life' can educate one to a belief in God or 'force' this concept upon one, is it therefore correct to say that 'life' provides 'extraordinary' evidence for the existence of God? For how, one might wonder, can *life* provide *evidence* for anything? One might just as well say that life provides one with 'extraordinary evidence' for animism, the truth of scientology, or witches. And if, furthermore, animists, scientologists and witch-worshippers can 'faultlessly' disagree, then one would have, not a 'relativism of distance', but *rampant* relativism.

Kusch himself admits (in an email exchange) that one cannot take an extraordinary belief-attitude to just anything – for instance to Wayne Rooney's being a fool (Kusch's example). But, if so, then some criteria are needed that allow one to draw a line here, and it is hard to see where they might plausibly come from. What is more, it seems that such criteria would have to be driven by the *content* of what is believed, and this appears to be in tension with Kusch's contention that one can take both an 'ordinary' and an 'extraordinary' attitude to the same propositional content. For if certain contents are, as it were, more 'extraordinary attitude-apt' than others – which they would have to be if one wants to rule out that one can take an extraordinary attitude to 'just anything' – then all sorts of 'new' forms of 'unreasonable' belief will become possible. For example, one can take up an 'ordinary' attitude to something that is, in itself, an 'extraordinary' proposition, or take an 'extraordinary' attitude to something that 'really' only has empirical content. It is difficult to see either how one could make sense of such 'errors', or what it might mean to ascribe an 'intrinsic' content to a proposition. For the latter is clearly inconsistent with Wittgenstein's idea that meaning is use and therefore context-dependent.

For these reasons, the better option is to read Wittgenstein as rejecting altogether the notion that faith rests on an evidential basis.¹³ Does that imply, though, that, on my conception, religious belief is utterly *groundless*? If by 'groundless' one means 'not based on any reasons whatsoever', the answer is 'no'; if by 'groundless' one means that belief in God is not 'evidentially grounded' in the way that satellite pictures of the Earth, say, provide evidential grounds for the proposition 'the Earth is round', the answer is 'yes'. In other words, one's life experiences might give one reason to believe in God, but those reasons are not *evidence* – not even 'extraordinary' evidence – for God's existence. For 'evidence'

¹³ For more on this point, see my (2007), chapter 4.

ought to be something that everyone can independently appeal to as a justification, but this is not possible in the religious case. For example, one cannot extract a general rule from experiences that might motivate religious belief – i.e. one cannot reasonably argue that personal suffering proves the existence of God or will make one religious. Consequently, the overall shape of one's life might give one (personal) reasons to believe in God, but it is misleading to call this a form of 'evidence'. As Wittgenstein says:

Unshakable faith. (E.g. in a promise.) Is it less certain than being convinced of a mathematical truth? – (But does that make the language games any more alike!) (1977: 84e)

Analogously, one might say: it is possible to employ the phrase 'extraordinary' evidence in the religious context, but that does little to make it any more similar to what one ordinarily calls 'evidence'. The language-games are very different here. It is for these reasons that Wittgenstein thinks that religious believer and atheist do not necessarily have a disagreement at all, but are rather engaged in different activities.

VI.

If what I have argued in this essay is correct, Kusch's 'factorization' model severely distorts Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief. It is possible to make sense of Wittgenstein's remarks without either having to ascribe an 'incommensurability' thesis or a form of relativism to him. Religious grammar can be learnt by the non-believer, but is 'irreducible' – i.e. it cannot be translated into ordinary discourse (or, indeed, into a 'language of science') without 'remainder'. This also implies that standard interpretations of Wittgenstein that attribute fideism or non-cognitivism to him are wide of the mark. Wittgenstein has no wish to do away with religious content and to reduce it to the expression of emotional attitudes. Consequently, he is not an expressivist. Wittgenstein's reflections on religious belief are ground-breaking precisely because they cannot be pressed into preconceived moulds. Hence, wouldn't it be odd if a philosopher who otherwise challenged the philosophical orthodoxy, came no further, in his reflections on religion, than the Logical Positivists?

Acknowledgment. The author would like to thank Acumen for agreeing to a republication of this paper that will first appear in Graham Oppy (ed), *Acumen Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (forthcoming); and Martin Kusch for helpful comments and discussion. This paper was originally presented in Mainz, Germany, at a conference for the Analytic Theology Project, generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

REFERENCES

- Arrington, R. L., and M. Addis (eds.). 2001. *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge)
- Barrett, C. 1991. *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell)
- Cottingham, J. 2009. 'Wittgenstein, Religion and Analytic Philosophy', in Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman (eds.), *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 203-227.
- Hyman, J. 2001. 'The Gospel According to Wittgenstein', in Arrington and Addis (eds), pp. 1-11
- Kierkegaard, S. 1998. *The Book on Adler*, edited and translated by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
- Kusch, M. 2012. 'Wittgenstein and the Epistemology of Peer Disagreement' (unpublished)
- Kusch, M. 2011. 'Disagreement and Picture in Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Religious Belief*', in R. Heinrich et al. (eds.), *Image and Imaging in Philosophy, Science and the Arts* (Frankfurt am Main: Ontos), pp. 59-72
- Mackie, J. L. 1982. *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Monk, R. 1991. *The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage)
- Mulhall, S. 2001. 'Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Religion', in D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave), pp. 95-118.
- Nielsen, K. and D. Z. Phillips. 2005. *Wittgensteinian Fideism?* (London: SCM Press)
- Schönbaumsfeld, G. 2007. *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Schönbaumsfeld, G. 2009. 'Ludwig Wittgenstein', in Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis (eds.), *History of Western Philosophy of Religion* (Durham: Acumen), pp. 61-74
- Schröder, S. 2007. 'The Tightrope Walker', *Ratio*, 20 (4): 442-64
- Wittgenstein, L. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell)

- Wittgenstein, L. 1966. *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Blackwell)
- Wittgenstein, L. 1977. *Culture and Value*, edited by G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell)
- Wittgenstein, L. 1993. *Philosophical Occasions*, ed. by James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett)