

Book reviews

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Mikel Burley (ed.) *Wittgenstein, Religion and Ethics: New Perspectives from Philosophy and Theology*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). Pp. 266. £58.04 (Hbk). ISBN 9781350050211.

The relationship to Wittgenstein of philosophy of religion in the analytic tradition is curious. By any reckoning he was a towering figure in the early history of the subject, of profound and ongoing influence. Unlike his sometime mentor Russell, moreover, and unlike a likely majority of contemporary analytic philosophers, he possessed a profound religious sensibility, taking religious lives and feelings seriously, and famously declaring that he saw every problem ‘from a religious point of view’. A concern with the mystical and the ethical – Wittgenstein took there to be a connection between the two – persisted from his early to his late philosophy, and all periods of his thought contain reflections on religious themes and (more obviously in the work intended for publication) methodological reflections and arguments whose value for the philosopher of religion looks obvious.

Why then is Wittgenstein *persona non grata* within mainstream circles? Part of the explanation might lie with a certain impatience with the style of the later Wittgenstein. Condemned too often as obscurantist, it is more aptly described as meditative (Wittgenstein himself said that he didn’t want to write anything that could be read *quickly*). It requires the reader to think, to pay attention to uses of language in her experience and imagination, and so come to see how snares set in the field of language can trap us in philosophical perplexity. Another part of the explanation lies in the sociology of philosophy: the revival of philosophy of religion within the analytic tradition has centred on the US, where a post-Quinean metaphysics hostile to Wittgensteinian insights dominates, whereas the influence of Wittgenstein has been more marked in Britain and in continental Europe.

However, undoubtedly the main cause of the wariness of Wittgenstein among philosophers of religion is a tradition of reading him and certain philosophers influenced by him as *Wittgensteinian fideists*. For the Wittgensteinian fideist, if

such a character ever in fact walked the earth, religions are distinct forms of life, giving rise to language-games existing in splendid isolation from the rest of language. These cannot be understood and assessed from a perspective external to religion (whence the charge of fideism). Religious statements ought not to be read, moreover, in a realist fashion, as susceptible to substantial attributions of truth or falsity, but rather as doing something like expressing an attitude.

None of this is in Wittgenstein, and much of it was explicitly disowned by the philosopher usually ranked as first among the Wittgensteinian fideists, D. Z. Phillips (see, for example, his contributions to D. Z. Phillips and Kai Neilsen, *Wittgensteinian Fideism* (London: SCM, 2011)). Mikel Burley's welcome edited collection, which begins with a dedication to Phillips, will, one hopes, go some way towards setting the record straight. The papers collected are from the British Wittgenstein Society's annual conference in 2017, which I attended. It drew together philosophers and theologians, and the enthusiasm and diversity of the contributors is reflected in the present volume. It is sadly rare to find theologians and philosophers cooperating on a project of this sort. This alone ought to give us pause – if philosophy of religion is truly to be philosophy *of religion*, why does it so often feel able to disregard those within religious communities charged with the task of developing what Aquinas termed 'a sacred science'? Rowan Williams's contribution is a masterclass in just such a science, even as it demonstrates a command of Wittgenstein's work. And if John Milbank's piece on Wittgenstein and Cantor is dubiously Wittgensteinian in spirit, it is nonetheless good that the kind of conversations are happening which made it possible. (Wittgenstein was never *opposed* to grand metaphysics of the sort Milbank has made it his business to rehabilitate in theology, in the way a nominalist might be. Rather he sought to draw us away from the kinds of confusion where we are even so much as tempted to ask the questions to which they purport to be answers.)

Burley's own contribution is a useful introduction both to Wittgenstein's thought about religion and to the volume. Drawing our attention in particular to the Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*, Burley wants to present a Wittgensteinian treatment of religion as a form of natural history. He quotes *On Certainty* approvingly, 'I want to regard man here as an animal, as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), S475), and argues that Wittgenstein seeks to 'disabuse us, . . . especially those of us with a certain academic bent, of an overly intellectualistic picture of what human beings are' (6). Philosophers of religion have not paid nearly as much attention to bended knees and lighted candles as they have to statements about God.

Still, words about God are indispensable to most, if not all, religions and Burley's introduction is complemented by Michael Scott's piece on Wittgenstein on religious language. This, helpfully for the reader more familiar with contemporary debates than with Wittgenstein, attempts to situate Wittgenstein with respect to

the contemporary literature. It also, helpfully, contains a wealth of extracts from *Culture and Value* and the *Lectures and Conversations* on the topic. Scott is unconvinced that Wittgenstein is properly Wittgensteinian here, overgeneralizing about religious language, its purpose and function, in tension with the method he propounds in, say, the *Investigations*. This reviewer was not convinced: these were not remarks ever intended for publication, and one would have to be very sure that context didn't serve to disambiguate terms like 'religion' here to be convinced that there is a real problem. However, as in his book *Religious Language*, Scott is doing good work to make Wittgenstein an ongoing reference point in conversations about religious language.

There is much else of value in this collection. The early Wittgenstein gets due notice in Chon Tejedor's piece, making the work of an innovative *Tractatus* scholar readily available. Gabriel Citron's paper on what Wittgenstein termed 'the problem of my life' is an excellent piece of scholarship, as well as moving in its subject matter. There is an engaging mini-debate around *grammatical Thomism*, the Wittgenstein-inspired engagement with Aquinas by the likes of Herbert McCabe, brought to prominence by Stephen Mulhall's writing. And there is much more.

This book will be of use to anybody interested in Wittgenstein and religion. It ought to be read by anyone interested in the philosophy of religion, providing as it does a window into a way of philosophizing about religion which is so often left off the undergraduate syllabuses and conference programmes of the English-speaking world. Wittgenstein's manner of thinking about religion is not a threat to rigorous philosophy, nor to the substantivity of debates about God or theology. It is, however, a needed reminder that, whatever else religion might be, it is a practice engaged in by certain language-using animals. Too often philosophy of religion has concerned itself with systems of belief fit only for angels. A good dose of Wittgenstein is just what we need to bring us back down to earth.

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Kate Kirkpatrick *Sartre on Sin: Between Being and Nothingness*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Pp. xii + 258. £44.68 (Hbk). ISBN 978 0 19 881173 2.

This book examines the lineage of Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of 'nothingness', suggesting that it owes a substantial debt to the Christian doctrine of original