Article

Philosophy of Religion: Taking Leave of the Abstract Domain

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Abstract: John Cottingham argues that traditional university modules in the philosophy of religion take us into a 'very abstract domain that is often far removed from religion as it actually operates in the life of the believer'. This paper makes four moves based on Cottingham. First, it argues that the application of Ludwig Wittgenstein's methods supports and facilitates a shift to the anthropological in the philosophy of religion (as evidenced in the work of Mikel Burley). Second, literature is examined as a tool for doing the philosophy of religion, following Danielle Moyal-Sharrock's notion of the literary text as surveyable representation. Three works are investigated, namely *Silence* by Shūshaku Endō, *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the Gospel of John. It is argued that, far from being merely illustrative of religion, story is (in its widest sense) constitutive of belief. Third, it is shown how Wittgenstein's remarks on mysticism in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* can be read as a transmutation of literary writing that creates a non-abstract mysticism of the world. Wittgenstein's remarks are placed in dialogue with Angelus Silesius's poetry and Leo Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief*. Fourth, the relevance of Wittgenstein to the current debate on cultural Christianity is brought out. Philosophers of religion must take leave of the abstract, if only to return to it and to view it differently. Wittgenstein's thought is too important to ignore in this venture.

Keywords: philosophy of religion; Wittgenstein; literature; mysticism; cultural Christianity

1. Introductory Remarks

This paper addresses the philosophy of religion in the context of the United Kingdom. My own teaching and research history limit what I can write about with confidence, which is why I look to the country where I teach and to examples taken from Christian traditions. It is also a paper about Ludwig Wittgenstein, who engaged with Christianity both in his life and writings, which is a further reason for its Christian focus. I hold that my approach would be of use in relation to other religious phenomena, even if that task is for others. I point out connections that can help us better to understand and better to practise the philosophy of religion, by examining the following four topics: calls for the subject to become less abstract; how the use of literature can help philosophers to make this move; how Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* takes leave of the abstract to advance a literary mysticism of the world; and how Wittgensteinian methods are of relevance to the contemporary debate about cultural Christianity.

2. The Abstract Domain

If asked what the philosophy of religion is, we might proceed ostensively by listing topics included on syllabuses at the university degree level, such as the nature of God; the nature of faith; the difference between faith and belief; the various arguments (ontological, cosmological, teleological) for God's existence; the relationship between religion and

morality; the significance of religious experience; the possibility of life after death; and so on. We could also name texts recommended to students on these courses, such as the excellent introductory overviews by Brian Davies (2004) and J. M. Mackie (1982), who adopt very different approaches to the subject. Davies writes from a theistic perspective, while Mackie holds that the great miracle of theism is that anybody should ever have been persuaded to accept it as true in the first place. We could point out that such disagreement is emblematic of the subject. Students are graded on how well they engage intellectually with issues, rather than on whether they can produce 'correct' answers according to some pseudo-scientific paradigm. Personal religious views and practices are to be left at the classroom door.

We have here a sketch of what Kevin Schilbrack calls the 'traditional philosophy of religion', which he attacks for its 'narrowness, intellectualism, and insularity' (Schilbrack 2014, p. xii). There are signs that the situation is changing in response to criticism. The title of Timothy Knepper's recent introductory overview, *Philosophies of Religion* (2023), is revealing, for example, because it marks a more pluralist approach. Knepper aims to be both 'global and critical' (Knepper 2023, p. 1) and surveys religious thought from a wide variety of traditions. Rather than cataloguing the debates that have dominated syllabuses, he structures the book through existential questions, such as, 'Who am I?' (Knepper 2023, p. 97). My paper support Schilbrack's call for change, but the following statement by John Cottingham should be read in the context of the 'traditional philosophy of religion':

> If we want to understand and evaluate religious belief we need to do more than analyse and dissect the truth claims involved: we need to make a serious attempt to understand the context of culture and practice that gives life to those claims. If we apply this insight to the typical university course on philosophy of religion, with its standard syllabus that works through the various traditional arguments for and against God's existence, we cannot but notice that these take us into a very abstract domain that is often far removed from religion as it actually operates in the life of the believer. (Cottingham 2014, p. 11)

The later methods of Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* (2009) support Cottingham, because they indicate the dangers of separating the speaking of a language from how people live (*PI* 23). In terms of philosophy of religion, looking to Wittgenstein would involve a more 'anthropological' approach, following Ray Monk's use of this term to describe how the *Investigations* is set in the world of people, employing examples, stories, dialogue, and concrete instances of the use of words to evoke the 'stream of life which gives linguistic utterances their meaning' (Monk 1990, p. 261). This anthropological aspect is missing from traditional philosophy of religion.[1] Without it, as Cottingham notes, students end up investigating an intellectualisation that caricatures religion as practised in a world where more than 80% of people still identify as religious (Crane 2017, p. 2). There is an analogy with the approach of the New Historicists in literary criticism, who advocate the necessity of reading literature *in* history (cf. Greenblatt 2004); only by placing a text in context may we hope to understand it. John Milton's 1667 epic poem *Paradise Lost* (Milton [1667] 2003), for example, should be read against such phenomena as the events of the English Civil War and its aftermath; Puritanism; Milton's own life-story as an anti-monarchist; the development of the English language; the King James translation of the Bible; and so on.

Anselm of Canterbury's ([1078] 1998) ontological argument for the existence of God can be taken as an illustration of Cottingham's point. It holds a key place on the sort of traditional syllabus named above, is discussed in detail by both Davies and Mackie, and seems to fascinate readers. It has undergone recent reformulations by Norman Malcolm

and Alvin Plantinga and will doubtless undergo others. Despite numerous attacks—the first of which came in Anselm's lifetime from Gaunilo of Marmoutiers ([1078] 1998)—, it is clearly not going away any time soon. Anselm was archbishop of Canterbury between 1093 and 1109 and is a canonised saint of the Catholic Church. However, very few of his co-religionists will be familiar with what is often claimed to be a deductive proof of God's existence. Commentators find two distinct formulations in Anselm's Latin *Proslogion* [Discourse], but the overall thrust can be summed up as follows: if God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, then God necessarily exists. Students typically read the argument abstracted from the original text in editorial summaries that give the relevant steps in the logic. They are expected to weigh up its strengths and weaknesses and to come to their own conclusions. Probably they will agree with most commentators that the argument is invalid. Thomas Aquinas, another philosopher-saint of the scholastic period, criticised it for starting with what is to be proved [*ST* 1a.2.1] (Aquinas 1993, p. 197), while Immanuel Kant—responding to an ontological argument independently put forward in the seventeenth century by René Descartes—argued, in 1781, that to use language in this way illicitly treats existence as a predicate (Kant [1781] 1964, p. 503). The students will then move on to the next topic on the syllabus. It is a long way from the experience of a worshipper at Sunday Mass.

And yet, it is not difficult to examine the ontological proof anthropologically. All that is needed is to return to the source text in full and to consider its genre, because Anselm composed a prayer. The following direct emotive address to God, for example, is not what we would expect to find in a piece of deductive reasoning, even if that is how the *Proslogion* is usually treated:

> Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you. (Anselm of Canterbury [1078] 1998, p. 87)

The literariness of Anselm's text is easily ignored when cramming for an examination, but these words exemplify the language of devotion, not of analytic philosophy. The *Proslogion* assumes commitment to God, as Cottingham (2014, p. 4) notes, and its language games are misrepresented when content and form are artificially divorced in the way typical of undergraduate primers, because no language game can be separated from its form of life (cf. *PI* 568). John Caputo thus argues that Anselm's text can only be appreciated if read with due reverence, with attention paid to the 'choreography of the scene' rather than to the 'logic of the argument' (Caputo 2001, p. 41). If we treat Anselm's text as a puzzle to be decoded, then something important is lost:

> God is brought before the court [of Reason], like a defendant with his hat in his hand, and required to give an account of himself, to show His ontological papers, if He expects to win the court's approval. In such a world, from Anselm's point of view, God is already dead, even if you conclude that the proof is valid, because whatever you think you have proven or disproven is not the God he experiences in prayer and liturgy but a philosophical idol. (Caputo 2001, p. 46)

By reading the text as literature, Caputo reveals how Anselm's words point not to a philosophical idol but to a living reality. Once this anthropological aspect is restored, Anselm is closer to the worshipper in the pew than often thought. The *Proslogion* is an exploration in transcendence, the awareness of which is viewed by Tim Crane as characteristic of all major religions (Crane 2017, p. 27). Read in context, the ontological argument makes sense as a problem that points to a mystery. Perhaps it is time to rename it.

Most Christian denominations today promote the philosophy of religion, which is usually a key part of formation for ministry. Yet Christian doubts about its value go back a

long way. Writing in the third century, the so-called father of Latin Christianity Tertullian asks two rhetorical questions:

> What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? (Tertullian [2002] 2015, p. 13)

For Tertullian, true faith stands in no need of intellectual justification and is devalued by it. Believers should look to the faith of Jesus of Nazareth's Jerusalem, not to the rationality of Plato's Athens. His attitude is echoed by leading Reformation thinkers such as Martin Luther, who stresses the primacy of faith and rejects the officially sanctioned thought of Aquinas and its synthesis of faith and reason (Holland 2019, p. 300). Certain remarks by Wittgenstein place him in this sceptical tradition, such as the statement that

> If Christianity is the truth, then all the philosophy that is written about it is false. (*CV*, p. 89)

Wittgenstein's words would have been approved by Tertullian and Luther but rejected by Anselm, who insisted that faith should seek understanding (Anselm of Canterbury [1078] 1998, p. 87). Writing within the Thomist tradition, Fergus Kerr admits that there is no reason why a great philosopher should 'have clear and consistent ideas about religion any more than about literature or politics' and goes on to condemn Wittgenstein's remark as 'quite idiotic' (Kerr 1986, p. 35). Is this harsh judgement warranted? A lot depends on how the term 'false' is understood. If we interpret Wittgenstein as seeing religious truth in terms of correspondence to reality, then his statement effectively contradicts itself, and is indeed idiotic. However, we do not have to read him in this way. An enlightening comparison can be made with the Russian novelist and thinker Leo Tolstoy, whose writings greatly influenced Wittgenstein. As Emyr Vaughan Thomas argues, both thinkers assert that genuine religious spirit involves an 'authentic orientation to the world', even if some forms of belief do appear to be directed at 'some apparently trans-empirical Being' (Thomas 1997, p. 363). In this sense, Wittgenstein can be read as wondering what the philosophy of religion has to do with authentic religious practice, which takes us back to Cottingham's point and is an eminently sensible thing to ask. Another statement by Wittgenstein can be investigated to make his position clearer. Here, he specifically addresses Catholicism, the faith system in which he grew up, and perhaps the one that has invested most heavily in philosophical exposition, but his claim has wider implications:

> The symbolisms of Catholicism are wonderful beyond belief. But any attempt to make it into a philosophical system is offensive. (Drury 1981, p. 102)

The use of the term 'offensive' shows that Wittgenstein is not speaking of truth-values but rather of how religious symbolism can impact forms of life. Following Caputo, the claim could be used to criticise how Anselm's argument has been divorced from its devotional context. For Wittgenstein, true religion is to be found in how people live, not in the abstruse debates of philosophers, as evidenced by this remark to Maurice O'Connor Drury:

> If you and I are to live religious lives it must not just be that we talk a lot about religion, but that in some way our lives are different. (Drury 1981, p. 94)

Like Tertullian, he looks to Jerusalem not Athens to find the true nature of Christianity. Like Cottingham, he takes aim against the abstract. His work offers both warrant and method for anthropological ways of doing the philosophy of religion (cf. Burley 2020, pp. 34–35).

3. Literature as Philosophy of Religion

One way to take leave of the abstract in the philosophy of religion is by turning to literature. Danielle Moyal-Sharrock argues that literary texts can function as surveyable

representations because of their power to engage readers' emotions through the connections they make (Moyal-Sharrock 2009, p. 165). Wittgenstein introduces the surveyable representation as an epistemological tool:

> The main source of our failure to understand is that we don't have *an overview* of the use of our words.—Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'. Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate links. (*PI* 22)

Lateral relationships are presented, as in Wittgenstein's example of the colour octahedron (as opposed to the colour wheel) (*PR* 51–52). A literary text can thus *show* what it feels like to be in a particular situation. For example, Shūsako Endō's Japanese novel *Silence* (Endō [1966] 2015) tells the story of Sebastião Rodrigues, a Jesuit priest on covert missionary work in seventeenth-century Japan, where the Catholic faith has been forbidden and its adherents brutally persecuted. After his capture, he is forced into a terrible dilemma: either he must renounce his religion or watch Japanese Catholics tortured to death. God, to whom he turns in prayer, offers no consolation, only silence. At last, the priest makes the decision to appease his persecutors by trampling on sacred images and renouncing his vocation. His action saves lives, at the cost of his integrity and—within the theological grammar of the novel—his own salvation.

Silence is based upon the historical persecution of the Japanese Catholic Church, but its function is not to inform readers about what happened. Wittgenstein's comment on poetry is apposite:

> Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information. (Z 160)

Silence places us imaginatively into the situation that Rodrigues faces. It functions as a thought experiment, like the story told by Bernard Williams and J.J.C. Smart, in which Jim is offered the opportunity of murdering one Amazon villager to stop twenty others being murdered (Williams and Smart 1973, pp. 97–99). Endō depicts how religion can lead down diametrically opposed paths. Faith can take its adherents to moments of great beauty and hope, for example, when the Jesuit is joyfully welcomed by the those who have managed to keep Catholicism alive in Japan despite sustained oppression. But it can also lead to moments of complete despair, for example, when he watches innocents murdered because of their acceptance of a foreign faith. Religion is portrayed as simultaneously necessary for human flourishing and as destructive of that flourishing. It is as if Søren Kierkegaard had rewritten *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard [1843] 1985)—his study of how Abraham's faith leads him to agree to sacrifice his son, from Genesis 23—as a novel. *Silence* could be set as reading on a module in the philosophy of religion, because it would take students out of the abstract domain and into 'religion as it actually operates in the life of the believer' (Cottingham 2014, p. 11). It would not replace intellectual engagement with religion but would complement and contextualise such engagement. As Cottingham makes clear, we need to 'do more' than we are currently doing (ibid.). He is advocating a different approach to the philosophy of religion, a more 'humane' one, not the subject's abolition.

If it is salutary to relate philosophical enquiry to religious practice, there is nonetheless a problem if only harmless or beneficent activities are highlighted. Philosophers of religion tend to describe such practices as petitionary prayer, fasting, the giving of alms, non-violent struggle for justice, and so on. Religion, however, has been and remains complicit in cycles of violence (cf. Crane 2017, p. 124), and many literary texts explore this dark side. Naomi Alderman's novel *Disobedience* (2018), for example, tells the story of Ronit Krushka, a bisexual woman of Orthodox Jewish heritage, who visits her home community in London

on the death of her father. Her subsequent rejection by that community (because of her sexual orientation) makes her realise how her co-religionists have been 'warped' and 'bent' by belief in God, to the point that they can no longer recognise that they have desires (Alderman 2018, p. 121). Philip K. Dick's esoteric science-fiction novel *Valis* (1981) includes the character Kevin, who is struggling to come to terms with the death of his cat. The narrator places this loss in philosophical and theological context by commenting that death and religion are 'synonymous' and emotively cataloguing some of religion's many crimes:

> they killed Mani worse than they killed Jesus, but nobody even cares; nobody even remembers. They killed the Catharists in southern France by the tens of thousands. In the Thirty Years War, hundreds of thousands of people died, Protestants and Catholics—mutual slaughter. (Dick [1981] 2001, p. 246)

The cat's death becomes emblematic of suffering at the hands of God or of God's representatives. The only answer that the narrator can give to Kevin as to why his cat died is 'Damned if I know' (ibid.). Abstract argumentation can obscure the fact that for many people religious practice is harmful. Alongside the beauty of Anselm's *Proslogion* we should place the shunning of Ronit and the death of the poor cat.

If novels can function as surveyable representations, that explains why literature does not only offer a visceral evocation of what is at stake in enquiry but can also *do* philosophy (see Burley 2020, pp. 67–76). A celebrated example that has made its way into the teaching of the philosophy of religion is an episode in Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1880 Russian novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, when Ivan Karamazov launches a tirade against the injustice of a world that is supposed to be under the care of a loving God (Dostoevsky [1880] 2003, pp. 309–21). Although placed in the mouth of a fictional character, the speech is a powerful evocation of what philosophers of religion call the problem of evil. Like the three novelists already referenced, Dostoevsky through fiction vividly portrays the cruelty of the world but goes further by setting this depiction within a debate between Ivan and his devout brother Alyosha. The reader is made into a third party in the debate, following Ivan's words alongside Alyosha as he pushes towards this radical and disturbing conclusion:

> It isn't God I don't accept, Alyosha, it's just his ticket that I most respectfully return to him. (Dostoevsky [1880] 2003, p. 320)

Some philosophers, such as David Hume, use the problem of evil as a way of undermining belief in God (cf. Hume [1779] 2008, p. 100). Ivan, however, does not appear to have lost his faith. As Alyosha comments, he is rather in a state of 'mutiny' (ibid.). There is a certain shock value here. What will the reader make of human mutiny against an omnipotent God?

The Brothers Karamazov is an extremely long novel, and the relevant chapter is often found excerpted in online sources and printed anthologies, thus becoming a self-contained entry on a reading list for the philosophy of religion. It is not an easy read. Ivan piles up details of human cruelty in ways that are almost unbearable. He tells, for example, of a boy who has through his carelessness injured a general's favourite hunting dog and is punished by being torn to pieces by the other dogs in front of his mother (Dostoevsky [1880] 2003, p. 317). Ivan refuses to accept a world in which God can allow such things to take place. The power of his diatribe comes from the way that it treats the problem of evil as existential rather than theoretical, even though the two men are debating. Dostoevsky makes Ivan's rebellion against the divine order seem reasonable, which is why it is a fitting text to cite in assessments, examinations, and research papers. Reading the story out of context can be misleading, however, because other voices are present in the novel. As Burley argues, Dostoevsky's literary riposte to Ivan's speech 'is not amenable to the sorts of criteria of evaluation that might be deployed in, for example, evaluating the logical validity of a

deductive argument' (Burley 2020, p. 80). If Alyosha had replied to his brother with the sort of theodicy that students encounter on philosophy of religion modules—that moral evil is the result of God creating people to be free; or that evil in the world allows us to develop as good people by fighting it—, then much of the power of the episode would be lost. Instead, Dostoevsky makes lateral connections across the book, such as Ivan's own endlessly baffling story of the Grand Inquisitor, which follows the brothers' dispute (Dostoevsky [1880] 2003, pp. 322–44); the saintly figure of Father Zosima, who particularly impressed Wittgenstein for his ability to 'see directly into people's hearts and direct them' (Drury 1981, p. 86); or Alyosha's affirmation of the resurrection of the dead at the very end (Dostoevsky [1880] 2003, p. 985). Different forms of life are presented as valuable. Like Ivan's diatribe, Dostoevsky's oblique replies to the problem of evil are existential not theoretical. The literary whole is more than the sum of its parts.

I now turn to a sacred text, the Christian New Testament. Sacred texts are fundamental to religious life and have been admitted to philosophical enquiry even by philosophers who reject the use of novels, plays and poems, as Burley (2020, p. 77) notes. The first-century Gospel of John recounts how one of Jesus's followers, Mary Magdalene, visits his tomb only to find it empty:

> 'They have taken my Lord away,' she said, 'and I don't know where they have put him'. At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus. He asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?' Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him'. Jesus said to her, 'Mary'. She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means 'Teacher'). (John 20, 14–17, New International Version)

The Gospels were written to confirm Christian believers in their faith. They maintain this function today through use in communal celebration and private devotion. It is easy to forget that they are highly literary artefacts. John sets the resurrection in a garden, in an intertextual reference to humanity's fall from grace in another garden, Eden, as described in Genesis 3. The implication is that Jesus's rising from the tomb is a reversal of that fall. He also contrasts, with great dramatic effect, Mary's initial inability to recognise Jesus with her profession of faith after she has come to see him for who he really is. Mary, witnessing the overcoming of death, becomes a new type of Eve, who ate from Eden's tree of the knowledge of good and evil and brought death into the world. Robin Griffith-Jones argues that the true meaning of John's story can be activated by readers who place themselves alongside Mary in this restored paradise:

> By Jesus's tomb, in the grey half-light, Mary Magdalene speaks for the readers of John who have understood his story as he hoped they would . . . Mary Magdalene has found her beloved. So have John's readers. The light is rising in paradise. (Griffith-Jones 2008, pp. 47–48)

John's text functions like a poem. Successful poems make their readers meet them halfway: if a poem is too simple, it will be rejected for its very obviousness; if a poem is needlessly abstruse, it will be rejected for making readers work too hard for too small a reward (cf. Clark 2013, p. 32). Everything lies open to view (cf. *PI* 126), so that an informative account of somebody returning from the dead can be transformational for the reader, just as it was for Mary. Of course, many people can and do read this story without converting to Christianity. It is always possible to refuse to play the poetic language game of the text. John is continuing the literary practice of Jesus himself, who, in the Gospels, is recorded as using parables rather than overt instruction when addressing his followers. As

George Bernard Shaw comments in the discussion of religious faith that prefaces his play *Androcles and the Lion*,

> When reproached . . . for resorting to the art of fiction when teaching in parable, he justified himself on the ground that art is the only way in which the people can be taught. (Shaw [1913] 1957, p. 29)[2]

Parable demands completion in the mind of the listener or reader. It is fully understood on its own terms only when somebody has been changed by it (Cupitt and Armstrong 1977, p. 66). This outcome will always be uncertain. As Burley argues, it is never possible to know whether any story will convince any reader because that 'will depend on any number of psychological and biographical features of the reader in question' (Burley 2020, p. 81). Shaw drives the point further to conclude that belief is 'literally a matter of taste' (Shaw [1913] 1957, p. 51), which is a disconcerting thought for anybody who hopes that philosophy can offer answers to religious questions, making it sound as if belief is akin to whether somebody prefers the music of Johann Sebastian Bach or of Lana Del Rey. Because literary texts are surveyable representations, they can indicate what Burley calls 'the *possibility* of religious sense', because the 'kind of coherence exhibited by a form of life consists as much in the lateral connections between its constituent features as it does in the patterns of inference that obtain within it' (Burley 2020, p. 81). In Shaw's sense, they offer readers an overview of what kinds of taste exist in the world, illustrating which ways it is possible to turn.

We can go further. Stories do not only illustrate religion but constitute it. Every religious form of life is held together by its stories, because story is not secondary but primary. In a study of what he terms the 'literary mind', Mark Turner argues that narrative is basic to the way in which the human mind functions, so that language results from story, a theory that reverses the common view that sees story as a product of language (Turner 1998, p. 168). As Paul Ricœur argues,

> it belongs to a hermeneutics of storytelling to initiate the return from the abstract representation of time as linear to the existential interpretation of temporality. Storytelling achieves that in a fundamental way by revealing the existential traits of within-timeness over and against the abstraction of linear time. (Ricœur [1978] 1991, p. 108)

Religious beliefs hinge on the hermeneutics of storytelling: Eve decides to eat forbidden fruit in a garden; Mary meets Jesus in a second garden. Religions supply narratives that people can find credible and liveable. The establishment of universal truths comes later and is a minority pursuit. For Shaw, religious faith is a 'subjective condition' that is 'not dependent on evidence and reason' (Shaw [1913] 1957, p. 50). Everything rather depends upon which stories we choose to listen to, to accept, and to tell in our turn. A Wittgensteinian investigation underwrites this primacy of story whilst simultaneously showing that story is never going to lead to the sort of firm conclusion beloved of philosophers, because it makes lateral rather than medial connections. Philosophers of religion, whether students, teachers, or researchers, can read literary texts like *Silence*, *Disobedience*, and *Valis* alongside Anselm, Aquinas, and Hume in this way. A lecture on life after death might be paired with a reading of Philip Larkin's (2008, pp. 208–9) poem 'Aubade', in which the sleepless and terrified narrator ponders how his extinction is now another day closer. Burley argues that Wole Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman* (Soyinka [1975] 2008) is a 'work of narrative fiction in the condition of philosophy of religion' (Burley 2020, p. 86). It tells of Elesin, the devoted servant of a Yoruba king, who is required by ancestral traditions to kill himself on the death of his master but gives in to pressure from the British colonial authorities and remains alive at the cost of his spiritual integrity, like Rodrigues in Endō's

novel. His son therefore assumes his role. The play could be used in a lecture on sacrifice. Wittgenstein's methods support the making of these and other literary connections.

Do such moves imply that traditional topics such as arguments for the existence of God should be removed from syllabuses? By no means. As we saw with Anselm, proofs can be reconfigured as stories rooted in human forms of life. They can be traced to human intuitions, such as Anselm's intuition that God must be ineffably great, or the intuition that the world did not create itself, which lies at the heart of all versions of the cosmological argument. Rebecca Goldstein's novel *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* (2010) places the debates around God's existence into an anthropological context. It tells the story of Cass Seltzer, a Jewish sociologist of religion who ends up in a public debate on the existence of God with a right-wing economist, Felix Fidley. Meanwhile, his erstwhile mentor, Jonas Elijah Klapper, is in the process of conversion to an Orthodox Jewish sect. At the debate, Seltzer makes a final point about religion that wins the day, asserting that it encourages moral childishness:

> We can do better than that. We can become moral grown-ups. And if there were a God, surely he would approve. (Goldstein 2010, p. 323)

The rhetoric here is powerful, because Seltzer is appealing to a God in whom he does not believe as the authority for what he is trying to prove, that is, the nonexistence of God. The term 'God' has a history and a taxonomy of use. His argument paradoxically shows the power of the concept of God in human imagination. It is only by looking at how the concept works in ordinary life that Seltzer feels able to reject it. The novel concludes with a catalogue of the 36 titular arguments for the existence of God, implying that they are taken from Seltzer's book on the topic (Goldstein 2010, pp. 347–99). Premises are set out and alleged flaws in argumentation are examined. It reads like an off-beat undergraduate primer but cannot be divorced from the stories of Jewish atheism and Jewish faith that have preceded it. Anselm's ontological argument is part of the catalogue, and its logical shortcomings are pointed out using Kant's criticism that existence is not a predicate, but there is more tellingly also a reference to Sidney Morgenbesser's comic comment that existence is such a 'lousy thing' that it is unimaginable why God would want to partake in it in the first case (Goldstein 2010, pp. 349–50). By looking at how arguments function anthropologically, we can see them not as quasi-mathematical moves in an intellectual game but as expressions of humanity. As Stephen Mulhall puts it,

> Philosophy constitutes the place at which finite human understanding endlessly attempts, and endlessly fails, to take itself in as a whole; and it thereby reveals that it is internal to the nature of finite beings to be subject to the mysterious, unsatisfiable desire to transcend their own finitude. (Mulhall 2015, p. 112)

This dilemma is the true subject of Goldstein's novel, and of the philosophy of religion: the innate human desire to capture the transcendent versus the impossibility of doing so. Will the reader follow Seltzer or Fidley? Or make a change in form of life, like Klapper? Or do nothing at all?

4. A Mysticism of the World

I now turn to mysticism, a topic that has been neglected by philosophers but is now gaining attention, with Simon Critchley arguing that it is a 'virus' that contemporary philosophy needs to catch (Critchley 2024, p. 5). I investigate remarks in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1990) to show how Wittgenstein engages with the literary in ways that push mysticism in a new direction that takes leave of the abstract. The *Tractatus* has been claimed as a foundational text of analytic philosophy, for example, by the Vienna Circle (Monk 1990, pp. 242 ff.). Such a reading, however, obscures how the work's concluding

sections move from the logical to the mystical, taking readers away from analysis to questions about the meaning of life. The shift can be explained in terms of Wittgenstein's biography: Bertrand Russell's disciple, who worked on logic in Cambridge, turns into Tolstoy's disciple, who faced death in the trenches of the Eastern front in the First World War. Wittgenstein's remarks on mysticism are viewed by some as irrelevant or even as a philosophical embarrassment. Russell, for example, in his introduction to the first bilingual edition of the *Tractatus*, writes of his 'sense of intellectual discomfort' on reading them (Russell [1922] 1990, p. 22). Notwithstanding the detractors, many commentators do take the remarks seriously (cf. Tyler 2011, pp. 189 ff.), and here I make the case that the Vienna Circle and Russell were missing something important.

Mysticism is found in (and outside) all major world religions and is often held to be the most abstract of phenomena. Many mystics conceptualise their quest through the grammar of ineffability, that is, as that which cannot be spoken of, contradictory though it sounds. The mediaeval Catholic mystic Meister Eckhart, for example, writes that

> there is no name we can give God so that it might seem that we have praised and honoured him enough, since God is 'above names' and is ineffable. (Eckhart 1994, p. 129)

William James's taxonomy accordingly includes ineffability as a distinguishing feature of the mystical (James [1902] 1985, p. 380). How, then, do mystical texts get written at all, if they are about what is beyond language? As Willis Barnstone argues, mystics write *indirectly* about the ineffable by using literary devices, such as metaphor or poetry (Barnstone 1993, p. 238). The concrete is thus used to point towards the abstract. Wittgenstein's comments in the *Tractatus* draw upon the highly literary German tradition in mysticism to which Eckhart belongs, but he simultaneously breaks from it by keeping the supernatural out of the text. As Andrew Weeks puts it, we have

> a kind of aftermath of structures shared by Hildegard [of Bingen], Eckhart, and [Jakob] Boehme, reduced now of its spiritual content. When Wittgenstein refers to *das Mystische* [the mystical], what is implied is not a personal union with God, not the union of subject and object. Wittgenstein's 'mysticism' is, in the German speculative tradition, a mysticism of the world. (Weeks 1993, p. 235)

Such a mysticism involves changing how we look at what is around us, rather than believing that a transcendent reality will make us one with it. Wittgenstein's own definition of mysticism is of key importance:

> There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical. (*TL-P* 6.522)

He retains the notion of the ineffable: the German noun he employs, *Unaussprechliches*, can be translated 'ineffable', 'unutterable' or 'unspeakable' as well as 'inexpressible'. But by locating the mystical *within* its showing, he changes everything. The concrete is not used to point to the abstract. Rather, the concrete is all we have. No examples are given in the text, but perhaps Wittgenstein means something like the beauty of a poem. In correspondence with Paul Engelmann, he describes Ludwig Uhland's German ballad 'Graf Eberhards Weißdorn' [Count Eberhard's Whitethorn] as 'magnificent' because it shows how 'the unutterable will be—unutterably—contained in what is uttered' (Wittgenstein [1967] 1993, p. 7), stressing that the mystical is accessible and is not a 'bluish haze surrounding things' that lends them 'an interesting appearance' (Wittgenstein [1967] 1993, p. 98). Peter Tyler uses the tools of the non-mystical *Investigations* to describe the mystical conclusion of the *Tractatus*:

Mystical discourse possesses meaning *qua* mystical discourse; its language-games are embedded in a practice or 'way of life' that enables reference to occur. (Tyler 2011, p. 52)

The mystical becomes a method. Theological language games are transmuted into a way of looking at the world. Mysticism is therefore 'as much a verb as noun' (Tyler 2011, p. 131).

I now make connections between Wittgenstein and two mystical writers with whom he was acquainted to exemplify how he uses mysticism as a verb in Tyler's sense. We cannot get into the mind of any mystic, which is why the best point of departure for discussing mysticism is textual engagement, 'not a universal, ineffable experience beyond literature' (Weeks 1993, p. 6). Nor can I recreate Wittgenstein's compositional process, but I can offer a surveyable representation by setting out conceptual links. I begin with the German Baroque poet Johannes Scheffler, better known as Angelus Silesius [Latin: Silesian Messenger], who holds an established place in the German literary canon for his 1657 poetry collection *Cherubinscher Wandersmann* [Cherubinic Wanderer] (Angelus Silesius [1657] 1984), in which short poems in tightly structured couplets both describe and provoke mystical experience.[3] Wittgenstein is known to have read him (Wittgenstein 2008, p. 112). Angelus Silesius was a believing Catholic, but the daring imagery of some poems seems to verge on heresy—quietism, pantheism, panentheism— even if the Trinitarian and Christological framework of the whole makes it clear that his intentions are orthodox. The following poem, given as example (1), illustrates his approach:

(1)

We must move beyond God

Where is my resting point, where you and I don't stand?

Where the destination? And where my final end?

It is where none is found. So where then, should I pass?

I must move beyond God into a wilderness. (*CW* 1.7)

The poem plays against the notion of pilgrimage that is found in the title of the collection. For Christians, pilgrimage is a metaphor:

to journey through life in the hope that at its end the pilgrim would be met by shining angels, and dressed in raiment that shone like gold, and led into heaven, a city on a hill. (Holland 2019, p. 363)

Angelus Silesius demands that his readers set out on a pilgrimage on which no end can be found and that will paradoxically take readers beyond God into a wilderness. The surrounding poems allow the inference to be made that this wilderness will be the place where we are transformed into God after being freed from idolatrous imagery. Wittgenstein, in contrast, *begins* in the wilderness. It is not so much that he moves beyond God as that he refuses to move to God in the first place. The mysticism of the *Tractatus* is completely consonant with its opening remark that the world is 'all that is the case' (*TL-P* 1) and with its assertion that 'God does not reveal himself in the world' (*TL-P* 6.432). There is no revelation in the wilderness for Wittgenstein.

The distinctiveness of his approach becomes clear if we compare two assertions about time from Angelus Silesius and the *Tractatus*, given as examples (2) and (3), respectively:

(2)

Time and Eternity

You say: now move yourself, time to eternity.

Eternity and time: what difference can there be? (*CW* 188)

(3)

If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present. (*TL-P* 6.4311)

In (2), there is a dissolving of time and eternity for the one who is reborn in God: the wanderer will see things from a God's eye view, as it were, and must learn that no human effort can attain this state. It is part of the grammar of God that time and eternity are the same. In (3), everything depends on how the grammar of eternity is understood, that is, in terms of human effort, not revelation. Christians have traditionally spoken of eternal life as 'life without end', but Wittgenstein advocates reconceptualising it as stepping outside time, which means that eternal life is available here and now. It is a mysticism that prefigures his later epistemological instruction not to think, but to look (*PI* 66). The poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, another writer whom Wittgenstein revered, makes for an interesting point of comparison. In the ninth of the 1923 *Duino Elegies*, for example, Rilke writes

Here is the time of the *sayable, here* is its home. (Rilke [1923] 2024, p. 252) [My translation]

Rilke's œuvre explores how far things can be said and how far they must be shown within a world that is all the poetic case. The angels of the *Elegies* would not hear us if we screamed (Rilke [1923] 2024, p. 30), and the eponymous birds of 'The Flamingos' stride into the imaginary, where we cannot follow (Rilke 1929, p. 236). It is another mysticism of the world.

We can make a further move by juxtaposing (3) with remarks made by Tolstoy in *The Gospel in Brief* (1997), his harmony of the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Wittgenstein came across this work in 1914, when on active service in Galicia, and read it obsessively, carrying it everywhere with him (Monk 1990, p. 115). Tolstoy's retelling of Jesus's life excises key supernatural elements that are foregrounded in the canonical accounts: Jesus is not born of a virgin; he does not perform miracles; and the narrative ends with his death on the cross, not his rising from the dead, even though most Christians —including Paul (1 Corinthians 15, 14)—see the resurrection as the cornerstone of Christianity. The drive of Tolstoy's work remains resolutely theistic, however. Jesus is the Son of God because of the sublimity of his moral teaching, rather than because of any quasi-magical abilities. He does the work of his Father in Heaven by revealing moral truths to his followers. In a paratextual comment, given as example (4), Tolstoy explains what Jesus's teaching implies:

(4)

And therefore, the true life is outside time; it is in the present. (Tolstoy [1896] 1997, p. 17)

The remark is very close to Wittgenstein's, cited as (3) above, because both writers advocate living in the present. Wittgenstein does *not* take things to a supernatural level, however, as Tolstoy does in the comment that immediately follows (4) in the source text, given here as example (5):

(5)

And therefore, he who lives by love now, in the present, becomes, through the common life of all men, at one with the Father, the source, the foundation of life. (Ibid.)

For Tolstoy, it is not enough to live in the present. We must live *correctly* in the present, through love, following the example of Jesus, as portrayed in *The Gospel in Brief*, which functions as a surveyable representation of the four canonical Gospels. For Wittgenstein, all we have is the present. He does not follow Tolstoy by bringing in other people,

or God, but passes over such matters in silence, in line with the concluding maxim of the *Tractatus* (*T-LP* 7). Whereas Angelus Silesius and Tolstoy offer a mysticism of union with God through love, Wittgenstein offers a mysticism of the world through looking (cf. Critchley 2024, p. 298). He uses the language of Angelus Silesius to reconceptualise the mysticism of Tolstoy and thus takes leave of the abstract. As F.A. Flowers III puts it.

> Both Wittgenstein and Tolstoy understood that the question of the meaning of life was not an academic question and that words were inadequate to explain the meaning of life. (Flowers 1997, p. 13)

We have come full circle. Words are inadequate because they fail to capture practices and philosophy of religion is inadequate when it ignores the fact that, for most believers, faith is not an academic question (see Shortt 2024, p. 28).

5. Cultural Christianity

Faith systems, like viruses, are not static. If philosophers of religion wish to take leave of the abstract and address the realities of belief, then they must take note of how 'organised religion in the West is undergoing a profound transformation' (Shortt 2024, p. 8). It is no good proceeding as if we were still living in the world of Anselm, Aquinas or Hume. It is necessary to ask what is happening here and now. In this section I examine 'cultural Christianity', the importance of which is evidenced by recent features in the secular political journals *The New Statesman* (23–29 August 2024) and *The Spectator* (14–28 December 2024). The term is used to describe a post-Christian society that is not yet deracinated from its Christian origins. Statistics indicate the speed and the scope of change. The number of practising Christians in the UK has declined rapidly since the 1960s, with only 1% of the population in 2024 regularly attending the services of the established Anglican Church (Davies 2024, p. 18). It would be wrong to write Christianity off, however, because the situation exhibits 'a paradoxical mixture of decline and renewal' (Shortt 2024, p. 32). Nick Spencer points to two aspects of such renewal: first, immigration is 'revivifying' congregations; second, a 'cacophony of prominent, if very different voices . . . have been saying positive things about the faith' (Spencer 2024, p. 35). He references nine figures: Jordan Peterson; Nick Cave; Ayaan Hirsi Ali; Russell Brand; Elon Musk; Louise Perry; Paul Kingsnorth; Tom Holland; and Richard Dawkins. There is indeed a cacophony here: Dawkins is an atheist; Peterson, Ali, Brand and Musk are politically controversial; Cave is a singer-songwriter; Perry writes about the sexual revolution; Kingsnorth is a novelist and environmentalist; and Holland (2019) is a historian, known for his work on the classical world and for a survey of Christian history, *Dominion*, which is starting to assume the status of the foundational text of cultural Christianity.[4] What links them is their insistence that faith positions are to be taken seriously in the face of the growing secularisation of the West.

Despite low levels of church attendance, 46.2% of the UK population still describes itself as Christian (Davies 2024, p. 18). More significantly, according to Holland, the Christian myth continues to underwrite the way we live now:

> To live in a Western country is to live in a society still utterly saturated by Christian concepts and assumptions. This is no less true for Jews or Muslims than it is for Catholics or Protestants. (Holland 2019, p. xxv)

For Holland, key foundational secular values of the contemporary UK—such as the inviolability of human rights or equality before the law—can be traced to the ideals of the New Testament and its interpreters across the centuries, and were never self-evident (Holland 2019, p. 524). To put it in Wittgensteinian terms, we are looking at language games and forms of life, not at objective truths accessible to disinterested reason. In an age of self-identification—a notion that not very long ago would have seemed bizarre to most

commentators—some people explicitly choose to self-identify as 'cultural Christians', even while they remain outside formal ecclesiastical structures of any denomination. Examples include the Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch (Gove and Balls 2024, p. 22) and Dawkins (Davies 2024, p. 18). How can a non-believer like Dawkins, who has savaged religion in best-selling texts such as *The God Delusion* (Dawkins 2006), see himself as Christian? Holland argues that he 'absolutely has the instincts of someone brought up in a Christian civilisation' (Holland 2019, p. 523), while Peter Ackroyd describes him as a 'cultural Anglican' on the basis that Anglicanism is a tradition that 'reveres the mind that reads as much as the Word that is read' (Ackroyd 2004, p. 306). Boundaries that once seemed solid begin to blur.

Wittgenstein can be described as a cultural Christian if it is remembered that the term was not current in his day and is being applied retrospectively. We have seen that he was a close reader of Tolstoy's retelling of the life of Jesus, and he famously said that although he was not religious, he could not help seeing things from a religious point of view (Rhees 1970, p. 94). Even though he did not attend religious services himself, he felt happy that people prayed for him (Drury 1981, p. 148). When staying with Drury's family one Easter, he was pleased to be given a chocolate egg (p. 129). Many other stories can be told to show somebody who engaged with Christianity without formal commitment.[5] It may be objected that it is unwarranted to cite such biographical information when addressing the philosophy of religion, because matters should be argued at an abstract level, which returns us to the point made by Cottingham above. If we are committed to taking leave of the abstract, then we must be prepared to look at how philosophers live, especially when discussing a thinker like Wittgenstein whose work exudes a feeling that it must relate to his life in some way, as James Klagge (2001, p. ix) argues. Certainly, commentators do consider biography alongside philosophy when discussing Wittgenstein, such as Kerr, who in his study of post-Wittgensteinian theology cites several of Drury's recollections (Kerr 1986, pp. 32–36). The anecdotal becomes part of the larger philosophical story that is told. Wittgenstein also philosophised *about* the circumstances in which he found himself. For example, when he heard that Drury, who had decided not to fulfil his plans for ordination, was no longer attending church services, he advised him to return:

> Though it may be that you have to learn that these ceremonies haven't the importance you once attached to them—but that doesn't mean that they have no importance. (Drury 1981, p. 129)

A key debate of cultural Christianity is crystalised in these words: is a religious form of life still important if its metaphysical dimension is no longer accepted? Wittgenstein suggests that there is significance in the role that religious ceremonies can play, perhaps because they are an integral part of what it means to be human, which is the line he takes in 'Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough' (1993). He suggests that things may be different in the future, however, once again using terms that can be applied to cultural Christianity:

> the religion of the future will be without any priests or ministers. I think one of the things you and I have to learn is that we have to live without the consolation of belonging to a Church. (Drury 1981, p. 114)

Interestingly, none of the people named by Spencer above is ordained, or even a teacher of theology. (Another figure cited by those who write about cultural Christianity is the Arsenal and England footballer Bukayo Saka, who offers a 'public display' of Christianity outside formal ecclesiastical or academic structures (Davies 2004, p. 22)). Wittgenstein's words exhibit his typical stress on having to *learn* something. His initial suggestion was that Drury should join the Quakers, who do not have a priesthood, but he retracted it because for him no one religious organisation was better than any other (Drury 1981, p. 114). The

'religion of the future' would have to be 'extremely ascetic', by which Wittgenstein stresses that he means more than abstinence from food and drink (ibid.). What, then, is the force of the adjective? One possible answer is that believers will have to do without the comfort of dogma, just as Wittgenstein argues that Augustine and an unnamed Buddhist saint are both right—despite their different religious backgrounds—as long as neither of them puts forward a theory (*RF*, p. 119). Agreement is to be found in the coherence of a form of life (*PI* 241). As Holland argues, nothing can be taken for granted:

> Today, at a time of seismic geopolitical realignment, when our values are proving not to be nearly as universal as some of us had assumed them to be, the need to recognise how culturally contingent they are is more pressing than ever. (Holland 2019, p. xxv)

If we want to understand why the language games of Christianity are still used and still make sense to people, both inside and outside the Christian churches, then we need to look at the larger context and at how words are used.

Wittgenstein shows the danger of words, how they can mislead us into positing abstract realities when we should be looking at practices. *The Danger of Words* is a text by Drury (1973), described by Monk as 'perhaps, in its tone and concerns, the most truly Wittgensteinian work ever published by any of Wittgenstein's students' (Monk 1990, p. 264). Wittgenstein is seldom referenced in its essays (although the intellectual debt is fully acknowledged in Drury's Preface). Rather, psychological terms are analysed grammatically to indicate how they are used in ways that cause confusion in the practice of psychiatry. The same procedure is needed when investigating cultural Christianity, to ensure that language does not obscure what is going on. Writers often describe contemporary religion in terms of polarities. For example, Steven D. Smith (2018) argues that there are currently two dominant forms of religious belief in the West, paganism, and Christianity: the former locates the sacred within the world, while the latter locates it outside the world. Wittgenstein's methods point out the danger of proceeding like this. He gives the example of dividing people into buyers and sellers; whilst this categorisation can be useful at times, it potentially captures only part of the whole situation, because buyers can also be sellers (*CV*, p. 26). A Wittgensteinian approach allows for the possibility *pace* Smith that boundaries might be blurred or that other forms of life might exist. In this case, it offers support for Holland's contention that the current 'culture wars' in the US are 'less a war against Christianity than a civil war between Christian factions' (Holland 2019, p. 514). Similarly, the contemporary tendency to self-identify as 'spiritual but not religious' (see Burton 2020, pp. 18–21) can also be questioned. It is 'far too easy an opposition', as Rowan Williams points out (Shortt 2024, p. 118), because religious forms of life are often intensely spiritual, while many secular spiritual practices such as meditation draw on some form of basic religious affiliation (Burton 2020, p. 19). It is necessary to avoid any essentialist understanding of cultural Christianity, following Wittgenstein's demand for clarity in the use of expressions (cf. *PI* 133). Important differences must be noted, because the term is used in at least three ways in the current debates. It can designate

1. Those who maintain some form of traditional Christian metaphysics in the growing secular gale, such as Ali or Kingsnorth.
2. Those who place themselves within the Christian tradition without taking up a Christian metaphysical position, such as Badenoch and Dawkins.
3. Those who do not identify with Christianity, but whose worldview has been formed by it, which would include most of those living in the UK today if we follow Holland.

Those in the first group might be better labelled 'counter-cultural Christians'. Wittgenstein himself can be—anachronistically—placed into the second group. And it is to those in the second and third groups that his thought is most relevant.

What is at stake can scarcely be higher. Charles Taylor argues that to adopt a 'stripped-down' secular outlook involves 'stifling the response in us to some of the deepest and most powerful spiritual aspirations that humans have conceived' (Taylor 1989, p. 520). It is difficult not to agree with him that this is too high a price to pay. However, is it possible to abandon Christian metaphysics and yet retain some sort of link to its sources? Madeleine Davies poses the question in non-abstract, intertextual terms:

> Can we, as Tolstoy did in *The Gospel in Brief*, remove the miracles while finding in its Scriptures guidance on how to live? (Davies 2024, p. 20)

I have noted above the importance of this Gospel harmony to Wittgenstein, which is a further reason for introducing him to the debate about cultural Christianity. For the religious to be reconfigured within the ethical, forms of experimentation may be necessary, as Wittgenstein contends (Drury 1981, p. 165). The mysticism of the world is one such possibility. As Critchley puts it,

> Mysticism is a theme that arouses intense curiosity, allowing people to combine their very real existential doubts, worries and idiosyncratic obsessions with the broad, deep, inviting but rather polluted sea of faith that surrounds us. (Critchley 2024, p. 291)

Can the remarks of the *Tractatus*, dismissed by analytic philosophers, become part of the way that Christianity can reconfigure itself in the twenty-first century? My suggestion is not that they should be taken dogmatically, which would be against the spirit of Wittgenstein. If, however, we follow Rainer Schürmann and see mysticism as an attitude required for successful thinking, what he calls a 'reciprocity between existence and thought' (Schürmann 1978, p. xv), then Wittgenstein's remarks can be seen as a starting point, not a finishing point (cf. Janik and Toulmin 1973, p. 261). The *Tractatus* can show that even if the world is all that is the case, that world may yet be a wonderful place. It depends on how you look at it.

6. Concluding Remarks

Scholars of Wittgenstein sometimes lament that his work has not had the effect that might have been desired. Gordon Baker, for example, was disheartened by the 'extensive (largely misconceived) criticism, consequent widespread rejection, and plain disregard of Wittgenstein's philosophy, especially by mainstream American philosophers writing in the Quinean tradition' (Hacker 2007, p. 116). Such disappointment can lead philosophers into detailed specialist exegesis that, like traditional philosophy of religion, inhabits a very abstract area far from the concerns of ordinary life and far from the 'rough ground' where Wittgenstein positions the *Investigations* (*PI* 107). Rupert Read, in contrast, comments that the true test of Wittgenstein's methods is 'to apply them where he did *not* much apply them' (Read 2007, p. 3). In this paper, I have applied Wittgenstein to the philosophy of religion, even though it is an area in which he wrote little. I have shown four things: that his approach supports Cottingham's demand for the philosophy of religion to become less abstract; that the use of literature can be viewed in terms of the surveyable representation as one way of fulfilling this demand; that he develops a mysticism of the world through literary engagement; and that the story told by his life and work is relevant to current debates about cultural Christianity. If I am right, and applying Wittgenstein does make things clearer, then his methods are vindicated by the testing. My approach avoids endless fruitless debates about Wittgensteinian fideism, which Mulhall defines as 'an unacceptable immunisation

of religious belief against rational criticism' (Mulhall 2011, p. 756). It simultaneously leaves open the possibility of further detailed investigation into the grammar of religious language, as carried out in the past by such philosophers as D.Z. Phillips (1970) or Gareth Moore (1998). Wittgenstein is too important to leave out of the philosophy of religion as practised in the UK in 2025. He prophesied in 1949 that perhaps people would really want what he was writing in one hundred years (Drury 1981, p. 160). Seventy-five years after that statement, his philosophy is certainly needed more than ever before.

It is highly unlikely that philosophers of religion will ever come up with deductive arguments that convince every interlocutor. Possibilities for faith can nonetheless be laid out, and stories about faith can be told. This plurality is a strength, not a weakness. Wittgenstein writes that his aim is to provoke his readers into thoughts of their own (*PI* p. 4), just as Shaw issues this challenge:

> And there I must leave the matter to such choice as your nature allows you. (Shaw [1913] 1957, p. 100)

Is this not fideism by another name? I do not think so, because it is possible to change our nature. We only need look at the difference between the thought of the early and the later Wittgenstein to see a thinker who was able to break out of the picture that held him captive (cf. *PI* 115). We need educated judgement, which for Wittgenstein is the result of work on oneself:

> Work on philosophy—like work in architecture in many respects—is really more work on oneself. On one's own conception. On how one sees these things. (And what one expects from them). (*CV*, p. 24)

If philosophers of religion are to work on themselves so that they see things more clearly, then they must take leave of the abstract. In one of his German sermons, Eckhart makes this startling claim:

> Taking leave of God for the sake of God is the greatest act of renunciation that someone can make. (Eckhart 1994, p. 177)

It sounds close to atheism, even though Eckhart was a believing Christian.[6] He is far from advocating the renunciation of religious belief, however. Citing Paul as a paradigm case, he argues that when Paul renounced God for the sake of God, he was left with God:

> as God exists in himself, not according to the manner in which he is gained or received but according to the being which he himself is. (Ibid.)

The point is to see past human imaginings and perceive the world aright (cf. *TL-P* 6.54), not to renounce belief as such. T.S. Eliot analogously writes in the poem 'Little Gidding' about the need to go back to where the journey begins and to know the place 'for the first time' (Eliot [1942] 1995, p. 43). The abstract can be revisited and seen for what it is.

If philosophers are to make space for the reader in the conceptual realm, then there is one final implication. Rather than leaving personal religious views and practices at the classroom door, we need to examine them carefully and realise that we are as much part of the scene as Mary encountering a mysterious figure in a garden. It is noteworthy how, at the end of *Dominion*, Holland introduces his personal background:

> I am a part of it myself. . . . I have sought, in writing this book, to be as objective as possible. Yet this, when dealing with a theme such as Christianity, is not to be neutral. (Holland 2019, p. 518)

He recalls being given chocolate eggs at Easter by his godmother, for example, who taught him that they symbolised something greater (ibid.). I am reminded of how Wittgenstein was pleased to be given an Easter egg when staying with Drury's family

(Drury 1981, p. 129). Chocolate eggs can be surprisingly important in context. To include them in philosophical enquiry is a highly non-abstract step, an infringement of all the analytic rules, but as Critchley asserts, 'we can do better than think of philosophy as some kind of police force' (Critchley 2024, p. 257). And what of my own position? I am not a religious believer, yet find the questions raised by religion to be some of the most important in the philosophical enterprise. I self-identify as agnostic. In terms of cultural Christianity, I see myself outside the Christian tradition whilst owing almost everything to it.

I conclude on a literary note, as befits a paper that stresses the value of literature to philosophy, by examining a Russian story that Wittgenstein revered, Tolstoy's ([1886] 1982) 'The Three Hermits'. It tells of three men who live on an isolated island, where they constantly recite a very simple prayer. A passing bishop is impressed by their devotion but dismayed that they do not know the foundational prayer of Christianity, the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6, 9–13). He therefore teaches it to them with considerable difficulty before resuming his voyage, confident that he has done a good deed and grateful to God for the opportunity to help such holy if simple men. To his astonishment the hermits pursue his boat across the water to say that they have forgotten their lesson. They plead with him to return to the island and resume their education. The bishop has a change of heart and refuses:

> Your own prayer will reach the Lord, men of God. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners. (Tolstoy [1886] 1982, p. 286)

Tolstoy, an implacable enemy of the Russian Orthodox Church, evokes the power of these uneducated hermits through the effect that they have on one of its prelates. The story parallels the account in John's Gospel of how Mary realises the identity of the figure in the garden and finds her life changed. Both the bishop and Mary come to see the world aright. Unlike the bishop when he first meets the three hermits, Tolstoy does not preach at his reader, and Wittgenstein writes as follows about his narrative style:

> You see, when Tolstoy just tells a story he impresses me infinitely more than when he addresses the reader. When he turns his back to the reader then he seems to me most impressive. . . . It seems to me his philosophy is most true when it's *latent* in the story. (Wittgenstein 2008, p. 385)

Again, it is necessary to look at how the word 'true' is used. Here, I interpret it terms of effectiveness rather than correspondence to reality. The connections made are lateral. Tolstoy's story is another parable that demands completion in the minds and lives of those who encounter it. The truth of what Wittgenstein has to say is similarly latent in the story that he tells. It does not get less abstract than that.

Notes

1   For a sustained anthropological approach to the philosophy of religion, see Burley (2020).
2   Shaw was not a professional philosopher but a very insightful commentator. I find it salutary to draw on a literary figure in a paper that emphasises the philosophical potential of literature.
3   Translations of Angelus Silesius are my own, following Angelus Silesius ([1657] 1984).

4   Another text vying for this position is Larry Siedentop's *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Individualism* (Siedentop 2014).
5   Wittgenstein's own background was Catholic, but he did not practise. His friends arranged, without his permission, for a priest, to pray over him as he lay in a coma, and for a Catholic burial (Drury 1981, p. 171).
6   Don Cupitt, who sees religion as a human construct, draws on Eckhart for the title of his anti-supernaturalist monograph *Taking Leave of God* (Cupitt 2001). Eckhart has also inspired the title of this paper.

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