

<https://doi.org/10.53656/phil2022-01-01>

*History of Philosophy  
История на философията*

## PRAGMATIC FOUNDATIONS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY

**Prof. Dr. Andrii Synytsia**

*Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (Ukraine)*

**Abstract.** The article shows that in matters of philosophy of religion, when the sphere of interest of Wittgenstein went beyond logical and linguistic analysis, he attached special importance to a pragmatic approach to the interpretation of religious experience. Wittgenstein's philosophico-religious studies were largely inspired by the events of his own life, as well as the ideas of individual thinkers, including the pragmatic philosopher William James. In Wittgenstein's work one can find both a substantiation of the originality of religion and its impossibility of analysis from the standpoint of science, and a conviction in the expediency of religious experience in human life. It is revealed how Wittgenstein, analyzing the main manifestations of religious experience, pragmatically eliminated contradictions in the comprehension of knowledge about God (as unspeakable), pointed out the importance of transition from skepticism to belief as a basis for experience of absolute safety, took into account socio-practical aspects of various ethico-religious experiences such as feeling guilty. The author finds out how Wittgenstein interpreted the practical value of religious experience, analyzed the language of religion, as well as revealed its socio-psychological and ethical aspects.

*Keywords:* religious experience; God; belief; feeling guilty; Wittgenstein

### Introduction

The peculiarities of Wittgenstein's analysis of religious issues have long been the subject of philosophical debate. However, the conclusions of researchers often differ significantly. In particular, researchers could consider Wittgenstein only as a person who does not reject the possibility of religion as a form of life (Malcolm 2001, 60); could develop the concept of Wittgensteinian Fideism, i. e. the special priority of faith over reason and the belief that it is impossible with the help of science to analyze religion (Nielsen 1967), or, conversely, criticize this concept as unfounded and harmful (see: Nielsen & Phillips 2005); could consider his reasoning about religion almost as a form of "theology for atheists" (Glock 1996, 321), even though these ideas are acceptable to believers; could allow the possibility of interpreting the Wittgensteinian as "a theist, deist, pantheist or

agnostic, but certainly no atheist” (Hengstmengel 2010, 12). If in the beginning the ambiguity of the conclusions could be explained by the lack of sources, now, on the contrary, Wittgenstein’s philosophical legacy is well studied, but the diversity of interpretations has not disappeared. And the point is not only that Wittgenstein’s position on religion has evolved throughout his life and is not entirely clear, but also that from the very beginning his analysis of religious experience has been based on pragmatic foundations.

This pragmatism (openness to change and reconciliation of conflict situations and avoidance of dogmatic positions, moving from doubt to belief, emphasis on the human dimension of truth and its connection with human activity and way of life) is found in Wittgenstein’s way of interpreting various manifestations of religious experience, namely “... exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world; and the experience of absolute safety...; [and] feeling guilty” (Wittgenstein 1965, 10). In fact, the first of these examples concerns the question of knowing God, the second is the possibility of belief, and the third concerns experiences of an ethical nature, as such experiences arise from dissonance that occurs when human behavior does not conform to social (in this case religious) precepts. In the light of these questions, the pragmatic features of the interpretation of the nature of religious experience that were inherent in Wittgenstein’s philosophy will be revealed below. It is clear that these examples are unlikely to exhaust the diversity of religious experience as such, but in accordance with Wittgenstein’s logic, they are quite representative for understanding this phenomenon. To make the proposed analysis more holistic, we first look at how Wittgenstein outlines pragmatically the essence of religion and, accordingly, its expediency in human life, because an experience that is religious arises when there is an understanding of what religion is. Under other conditions, such an experience will be only psychological or ethical.

### **The expediency of religious experience**

Wittgenstein gradually came to the need to comprehend religion. According to biographers, Wittgenstein had little interest in religion until about the age of 21 – 22 (McGuinness 1988, 94; Monk 1990, 43 – 44). However, under the influence of the play “Die Kreuzelschreiber” (“The Cross-Signers”) by the Austrian playwright Ludwig Anzengruber, Wittgenstein changed his attitude. He was especially impressed by the idea that adversity in the world does not matter to someone who is not dependent on the vagaries of fate and is focused on higher ideals. Wittgenstein realized that religious experience is useful in that it relieves anxiety (*Sorge*) (see his letter to Russell dated June 22, 1912 in: McGuinness, & von Wright (eds.), 1980, 231). In addition, religious experience is one way to achieve the experience of absolute safety and peace in this changing world. The whims of fate will not affect the peace of mind of the believer.

Wittgenstein needed such peace of mind the most in the trenches of the First World War. At that time, he found solace in reading Leo Tolstoy's "The Gospel in Brief". As soon as he got acquainted with its contents, he remarked (September 2, 1914): "Ein herrliches Werk. Es ist mir aber noch nicht das was ich davon erwartete" / "A wonderful work. But it is not yet what I expected from it" (WAB, Ms-101, 12r). However, the next day Wittgenstein added that he was reading this book "mit großem Gewinn" / "with great profit" (WAB, Ms-101, 13r). In fact, in reading this kind of book, which emphasizes primarily the practical aspect of the teachings of Christ, rather than theological generalizations, Wittgenstein saw a clear benefit, i. e. a chance to find meaning and advice that would be useful in difficult life situations. For a time, this book became a kind of mascot for him and he even recommended reading it to others, in particular, Ludwig von Ficker in a letter dated July 24, 1915 (Zangerle et al. (eds.) 1988, 98). This book, as Bill Schardt and David Large argued, influenced Wittgenstein's ethical conception (Schardt & Large 2001). However, not only this book. At older age, the formation of the theoretico-practical foundations of his ethico-religious views was significantly influenced by William James' "Diversity of Religious Experience" (see: Goodman 2007).

In this book, James defended religious truths in every possible way against attempts to analyze them from the standpoint of science, because "Humbug is humbug, even though it bear the scientific name, and the total expression of human experience, as I view it objectively, invincibly urges me beyond the narrow 'scientific' bounds. Assuredly, the real world is of a different temperament, – more intricately built than physical science allows" (James 1917, 519). In fact, religious experience makes it possible to comprehend things that remain outside of science. Wittgenstein later expressed a similar view in his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" (1931), in which he criticized Fraser's scientific approach to the analysis of religion: "Frazer's representation of human magical and religious notions is unsatisfactory: it makes these notions appear as *mistakes*. Was Augustine mistaken, then, when he called on God on every page of the Confessions? But – one might say – if he was not in error, then surely was the Buddhist saint – or whoever else – whose religion expresses entirely different notions. But none of them was in error except where he was putting forth a theory" (Wittgenstein 2020, 32). Attempts to formulate a religious theory and build it on the basis of rational arguments and explanations would be obviously wrong. Not because primitive religious practices were based on ordinary ignorance, but because they were full of symbolism and appealed to a different worldview. These practices were not absurd, as they played a significant role in the lives of communities. In general, religious practices do not need to be developed as scientific; they are self-sufficient.

Wittgenstein later developed the idea that religion is a unique form of life and a set of specific language games. Moreover, religious and scientific ontological hypotheses that state the homogeneity of nature coincide. Any religious experience

(including primitive religions) is a socio-cultural practice that organizes human cognitive experience. Religion as such does not need scientific-theoretical explanations and generalizations. Religious statements and actions are neither true nor false. They are full of their own meanings, and religious experience is valuable in itself (at the level of the individual) and does not need to be compared with the realities of the objective world.

### **Elimination of contradictions in the comprehension of knowledge about God as unspeakable**

Moreover, there is what is beyond this world and what people seek to comprehend. Trying to know something higher than the realities of everyday life is one of the defining features of religious experience. Human beings intend to discover the traces of God's providence within the world and, accordingly, to comprehend the nature of God's existence. This often happens during dramatic periods of life. It is no coincidence that, being on the Eastern Front, on June 11, 1916, Wittgenstein abruptly interrupted his logical research with a simple question: "What do I know about God and the purpose of life?" (Wittgenstein 1961, 72). The answer he came to then was somewhat unexpected: "The meaning of life, i. e. the meaning of the world, we can call God" (Wittgenstein 1961, 73e). The person does not so much reveal the nature of God as comprehend it. God is known through the comprehension of meanings – they, like ethical values, are outside the real world. As we can see, even in such a difficult period of his life, Wittgenstein cautiously interpreted the religious experience of understanding the nature of God. He reasoned logically and reasonably.

For example, in "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus" Wittgenstein gave the well-known opinion that "God could create everything except what was contrary to the laws of logic" (Wittgenstein 1922, § 3.031). The creation of an "unlogical" world is impossible as such. Accordingly, if in some world there are a number of true propositions, it would be impossible to create a world in which the logical conclusions from these propositions would not be true. However, a person makes any conclusions about God indirectly, because "God does not reveal himself in the world" (Wittgenstein 1922, § 6.432). By stating the impossibility of knowing God directly, Wittgenstein in fact avoids potential disputes, which are quite often due to the misuse of the meanings of words. God is outside this world, that is, beyond our language. Our attempts to think about God are something else. It is impossible to say for sure whether our thoughts correspond to the true state of affairs.

The only analysis that can be done is an analysis of the language of religion, not religious experience. Wittgenstein clearly distinguished between these two concepts. The language of religion is full of allegories. Each term and the accompanying action are associated with some hidden meaning. The language of religion is allegorical and according to him its interpretation should not be difficult.

In particular, in a situation where people kneel before God in prayer, he saw a clear allegory in which God is likened to a powerful human being whom they try to please (Wittgenstein 1965, 9 – 10). However, from the standpoint of religion, such an analogy is hardly valid. Such considerations are only one of the interpretations of certain actions which we ourselves ascribe meaning to.

In any case, each religious practice aims to form a certain effect (religious experience). This experience affects the general psycho-emotional state of the person and forms a worldview based on belief in God. According to Wittgenstein (record of July 8, 1916), belief in God makes it possible “to understand the question about the meaning of life... to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter... to see that life has a meaning” (Wittgenstein 1961, 74e). Thus, belief in God overwhelms us with essential meanings. In a pragmatic way, Wittgenstein preferred to focus on these meanings and especially on the practical aspects of belief, which allows the experience of understanding them, rather than on the corresponding entities.

#### **Belief as the basis of the experience of absolute safety**

Belief is formulated as a result of an appropriate way of life, when we gain practical experience, including the experience of suffering. God is not revealed to the believer by theory, but by life itself. The words do not yet indicate what is really there. Therefore, it is impossible to compare belief in God as a manifestation of the religious experience of two different people on the basis of their statements alone. People’s actions, their behavior, state of mind in this aspect are much more eloquent.

Perhaps the most significant feature and, accordingly, the advantage of religious experience is that it gives people certainty. When Wittgenstein asserted the experience of absolute safety, he, like Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of pragmatism, interpreted a state of belief that enables this kind of feeling as the opposite of a state of doubt, i. e. “an uneasy and dissatisfied state” (Peirce 1934, 5.372). And it is clear why. The fact is that doubts affect our behavior – they make us indecisive and significantly complicate our usual way of perceiving things. Belief, on the other hand, is a means of gaining confidence in one’s actions, and thus a way to achieve a state of peace and contentment. Certainty in the case of belief is similar to certainty in the case of knowledge, however, the epistemological basis of each state is different. Both in the case of religious belief and in the case of scientific knowledge (Synytsia 2020), human beings express truths, in which they are convinced, but the nature of the justification in each of these cases will be different. The fact is that science always appeals to the realities of the objective world, which can be verified and reproduced. If there is any new evidence, that refute the previous theory, it will immediately have to be rejected. In the case of religious experience, factual truth is not crucial. Wittgenstein (recorded in 1937), reflecting on the original sources of

Christianity as a religion based on belief, explained: “The historical accounts in the Gospels might, historically speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this: *not*, however because it concerns ‘universal truths of reason’! Rather because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief. This message (the Gospels) is seized on by men believingly (i.e. lovingly). *That* is the certainty characterizing this particular acceptance-as-true, not something *else*” (Wittgenstein 2006, 32e).

Such a pragmatic approach to the analysis of the subject of belief, however, raises the question of how far a thought based on belief is detached from reality? The thesis that “religious discourse is essentially self-referential and does not allow us to talk about reality” (Amesbury 2017) as one of the basic for Wittgenstein’s attributed fideism seems to be incorrect for several reasons. Firstly, human belief is not just a belief in one thing – it is a system of interconnected ideas. This kind of narrative is quite logical and meaningful. It is closely intertwined with many facts, the truth of which can be partially verified. Only the integrity of the narrative and the ability to use it to explain the various phenomena of human life can guarantee an experience of absolute security; otherwise, there will always be a sense of uncertainty about the correctness of the narrative. Secondly, people’s beliefs about the truth of certain statements are supported by the practical experience of others, not just by their own observations. That is to say the experience of others strengthens one’s own belief. Thirdly, the very need for belief as such is an integral part of our life practices, because “learning is based on believing” (Wittgenstein 1969, § 170). Progress in learning would be impossible if students did not initially trust the teacher. Checking all the textbook information would take too much time and hinder the intellectual growth of students. In addition, the process of proof itself can not last indefinitely – the basic statements of a particular doctrine must be taken for granted. Common sense tells us that such statements are true. Belief in the certainty of the basic principles allows us to be sure that the whole system of knowledge based on them is certain (see more: Synytsia 2020).

However, everything that concerns the substantiation of statements whose truth does not meet the criteria of scientific accuracy and reliability of knowledge is only an epistemological component of belief. In the case of belief (especially in its religious dimensions) as a phenomenon that allows an experience of absolute security, we are also dealing with psychology. As Wittgenstein noted, “believing is a state of mind” (Wittgenstein 1968, ch. X). Similarly, according to him, religious experience (as well as ethical knowledge in general) can be considered “a document of a tendency in the human mind” (Wittgenstein 1965, 12).

Certainty formed on the basis of religious belief is connected not so much with rational conclusions as with the feeling of love (it is passion) and it is the passionate feeling that makes the object of belief undoubtedly true. Such belief is trust. Religious experience based on it should have nothing to do with fear. Religious

experience is also psychological: in order to better understand the nature of belief or the sensations it enables, the researcher's attention should also be focused on studying the mental states associated with it, such as doubt, hope, fear, and so on. One way to know them is to study human behavior. However, it must be understood that not all mental states are clearly expressed and intentional. Human behavior is related to the understanding of the relevant psychological states. If a person feels safe, then his/her behavior is not noticeable anxiety. It is another thing when in some situations the anxiety will be barely noticeable and little realized. In such cases, the boundaries of mental states will be blurred.

### **Socio-practical aspects of feeling guilty**

Anxiety as such, in the case of religious experience, is very often associated with the formation the feeling of guilt in the face of breaking God's commandments. And this experience is related to two other examples of religious experience that have already been considered. It is no coincidence, as Norman Malcolm mentioned: "... Wittgenstein did once say that he could understand the conception of God, in so far as it is involved in one's awareness of one's own sin and guilt" (Malcolm 2001, 59). Experience of this kind is needed not so much to explain the nature of things as to improve the spiritual nature of the individual. In this case, the religious experience has a strong ethical direction.

Religious experience in itself is not based on expediency, it is rather characterized by selflessness. However, this does not mean that certain pragmatic elements are not related to religious experience. They are an integral part of human life practices. As Maurice Drury recounted, Wittgenstein once stated that "... only if you try to be helpful to other people will you in the end find your way to God" (Drury 1981, 129). For Wittgenstein, the awareness of religiosity begins with the awareness of responsibility for one's actions. And if a person realizes that he/she behaved irresponsibly, the experience of feeling guilty in this case is quite natural.

Of course, at first glance, it is not entirely clear how the feeling of guilt can be reconciled with an experience of absolute security. They do not seem to be completely compatible. In Wittgenstein we even find the opinion (record circa 1944) that: "People are religious to the extent that they believe themselves to be not so much *imperfect*, as *ill*. Any man who is half-way decent will think himself extremely imperfect, but a religious man thinks himself *wretched*" (Wittgenstein 2006, 45e). In fact, the emergence of the experience of guilt is intended to bridge the gap between what is and what should be. Describing the situation of religious experience, people use similes. Without them, when the fact is described in itself, the religious experience will lose its meaning. Religious knowledge is practical knowledge. It is not enough to just know how not to act, you also need to strive not to want to do it. Feeling guilty causes a natural intention to stabilize the relationships, to return them to the right course in accordance with ethical precepts. In this way,

the religious experience and the feelings associated with it allow the believer to independently control his/her own behavior and regulate it in accordance with the chosen ethico-religious doctrine.

In general, religious experience, based on the experience of different feelings and knowledge of different meanings, forms a special picture of the world, as well as affects the perception and worldview. However, it can hardly be said that the believer and the unbeliever will not be able to understand each other at all. Bob Plant rightly remarks: “Although the conceptual-linguistic-practical space between theist and atheist may often be vast, it is not unfathomable. For despite such differences, both believer and nonbeliever remain united by certain primitive, natural human activities” (Plant 2004, 455). It should be added that quite often these or those feelings or intentions that arise as a result of performing certain practices will be quite similar to those mental states or processes that arise in other circumstances. Thus, religious experience on a practical level can be useful for understanding, because it will not be difficult to understand others, abstracting from certain meanings that determine human behavior or, conversely, to interpret them correctly.

### **Conclusions**

Thus, the questions that Wittgenstein developed in the process of studying religion had a clear practical direction. They were often inspired by the events of his life, and therefore had a direct practical value for him. At first, Wittgenstein conceived of religious experience as unspeakable, that is, beyond the capabilities of our language. However, he certainly considered religious experience as ethical knowledge an important part of our lives. Over time, Wittgenstein tried to analyze linguistic means of expressing religious experience. Influenced in particular by the pragmatist William James, Wittgenstein was well aware that disputes over religious experience were futile because such a life practice was unique to each person. However, this experience allows us to establish our relationship with the world and God as its creator, to get rid of doubts and strengthen our belief in order to achieve an experience of absolute safety and certainty, to overcome the experience of feeling guilty and to improve spiritually. The expediency of such an experience is substantiated by life itself and the totality of human experiences in the process of cognition, self-knowledge and comprehension of the nature of being and the supernatural, the logical and the ethical, the one that is in language and the one that goes beyond its possibilities.

### **REFERENCES**

AMESBURY, R., 2017. Fideism. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [online]. EDWARD N. ZALTA (ed.). [viewed 10 May 2021]. Available from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/fideism/>.



- DRURY, M., 1981. Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein. In RHEES, R. (ed.). *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections* (pp. 112 – 189). Oxford: Blackwell.
- GLOCK, H. J., 1996. *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- GOODMAN, R. B., 2007. *Wittgenstein and William James*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HENGSTMENDEL, J. W., 2010. Philosophy to the glory of God. Wittgenstein on God, religion and theology [online]. 1 – 12 [viewed 10 May 2021]. Available from: <https://hengstmengel.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/wittgenstein-on-god.pdf>
- JAMES, W., 1917. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- MALCOLM, N., 2001. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir with a Biographical Sketch by G. H. von Wright and Wittgenstein's Letters to Malcolm* (pp. 21 – 84). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- MCGUINNESS, B. F., & VON WRIGHT, G. H. 1980. (Eds.). Briefe. [Von Ludwig Wittgenstein]. Briefwechsel mit B. Russell, G. E. Moore. J. M. Keynes, F. P. Ramsey, W. Eccles, P. Engelmann und L. von Ficker. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- MCGUINNESS, B. F., 1988. *Wittgenstein: A Life: Young Ludwig 1889 – 1921*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- MONK, R., 1990. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. New York: The Free Press.
- NIELSEN, K., 1967. Wittgensteinian Fideism. *Philosophy*, **42**, 191 – 209.
- NIELSEN, K., & PHILLIPS, D. Z., 2005. *Wittgensteinian Fideism?* London: SCM Press.
- PEIRCE, C. S., 1934. The Fixation of Belief. In C. HARTSHORNE & P. WEISS (Eds.), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce: Vol. V and VI: Pragmatism and Pragmaticism and Scientific Metaphysics* (Vol. 5, pp. 223 – 247). Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- PLANT, B., 2004. *The Wretchedness of Belief*. *Journal of Religious Ethics*. **32**(3), 449 – 476. DOI:10.1111/j.1467-9795.2004.00174.x.
- SCHARDT, B., & LARGE, D., 2001. Wittgenstein, Tolstoy and The Gospel. In Brief [online]. *The Philosopher*. **89**(1) [viewed 10 May 2021]. Available from: <http://www.the-philosopher.co.uk/2001/04/wittgenstein-tolstoy-and-the-gospel-in.html>.
- SYNYTSIA, A., 2020. Pragmatic Interpretation of Knowledge in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy. *Filosofiya-Philosophy*. **29**(3), 231 – 239. *The Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen* (WAB) [online]. [viewed 10 May 2021]. Available from: <http://wab.uib.no/index.page>.

- WITTGENSTEIN, L., 1922. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. by C. K. OGDEN. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.
- WITTGENSTEIN, L., 1961. Notebooks, 1914 – 1916. Trans. by G. E. M. ANSCOMBE. In: WRIGHT, G. H. von & ANSCOMBE, G. E. M. (Eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Notebooks, 1914–1916* (pp. 2–91). New York: Harper and Brothers.
- WITTGENSTEIN, L., 1965. I: A Lecture on Ethics. *The Philosophical Review*. 74(1), 3 – 12. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183526>.
- WITTGENSTEIN, L., 1968. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. by G. E. M. ANSCOMBE. Oxford: Blackwell.
- WITTGENSTEIN, L., 1969. *On Certainty*. Trans. by D. PAUL & G. E. M. ANSCOMBE. Oxford: Blackwell.
- WITTGENSTEIN, L., 2006. *Culture and Value*. Trans. by P. WINCH. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- WITTGENSTEIN, L., 2020. Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough / transl. by Stephan PALMIÉ. In: COL, G. da, & PALMIÉ, S (Eds.). *The Mythology in Our Language Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* (pp. 29 – 73). Chicago: HAU Books.
- ZANGERLE, I., METHLAGL, W., SEYER, F., & UNTERKIRCHER, A. (Hrsg.), 1988. *Ludwig von Ficker: Briefwechsel 1914–1925*. Innsbruck: Haymon, copyr.

✉ **Prof. Dr. Andrii Synytsia**

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-0983-7187

Department of History of Philosophy

Ivan Franko National University of Lviv

Lviv, Ukraine

E-mail: andrii.synytsia.edu@gmail.com