The *Philosophical Investigations* in Philosophy of Religion

Thomas Carroll
The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen), China

Abstract   Despite overlooking religious topics, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* [PI] has had a large impact in philosophy of religion. This article surveys that influence and the reasons for it. In what follows, I first describe the reception of certain key concepts from the PI in philosophy of religion. Second, I examine a few scattered remarks on religious topics in the PI. Third, I consider the relevance of the PI for contemporary philosophy of religion. I argue that the dialogical nature of the PI, allowing different generations of readers to engage it with their particular philosophical problems, is key to its long-term influence.

Keywords   Philosophy of religion. Religious language. Remarks on religion. Fideism. Metaphilosophy. Historical reception of Wittgenstein.

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1 Introduction

While Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* [PI] had an enormous influence on analytic philosophy generally, particularly in the third quarter of the twentieth century, the book also had a large influence on twentieth century philosophy of religion. Its role in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion was especially substantial as the text was one of the earliest and most authoritative sources available to philosophers of religion who did not know Wittgenstein personally. This is perhaps somewhat ironic since Wittgenstein barely makes reference to religiosities within the book. As Genia Schoenbaumsfeld remarks,

> Wittgenstein published next to nothing on the philosophy of religion and yet his conception of religious belief has been immensely influential. While the concluding, 'mystical' remarks in his early work, the *Tractatus*, are notorious, we find only a single allusion to theology in his *magnum opus*, the *Philosophical Investigations*. (Schoenbaumsfeld 2014, 162)

Schoenbaumsfeld rightly directs her readers' attention to other Wittgenstein sources since published, such as the *Lectures and Conversations on Religious Belief* (1967), the "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" (1993), and the miscellaneous collection of remarks known as *Culture and Value* [1977] (1998). Yet, as the first and most polished work in Wittgenstein's corpus dating from his later period of philosophical activity, the PI has long been seen as the most authoritative source for Wittgenstein's mature philosophy. Furthermore, as the earliest publication from Wittgenstein's more mature period – published now seventy years ago – the text has had a long time in which to make its impact felt across the subfields of philosophy, including philosophy of religion (Carroll 2014, 31).

As one of the most important texts of mid-century analytic philosophy, the PI was bound to influence many fields across the discipline, from philosophy of language and mind to aesthetics and even to some extent political philosophy. The text has continued to stimulate topics in philosophy of religion steadily over time, meaning that philosophers have drawn lessons from the book now across multiple generations. Naturally enough, the lessons drawn from the book have been shaped by the philosophical situations of respective eras of philosophers – from the lingering threat of verificationism to the meaningfulness of 'religious language' to the prospects for inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue.

In this article, I explore the influence of the PI in philosophy of religion in three ways. First, I explore the reception of certain key ideas from the text, such as 'language-games', 'forms of life', and

'family resemblances' by philosophers of religion. Second, I examine the trace references to religiosity in the PI and how these passages are relevant to philosophy of religion. Third, I conclude with some observations on recent developments of philosophy of religion that are influenced by the PI, especially concerning globally engaged philosophy of religion.

2 Themes in the Reception of the PI in Philosophy of Religion

2.1 Language-Games

This notion of a 'language-game' (*Sprachspiel*) could well be the most discussed topic in secondary literature on the PI. Thus, it is not surprising that it would be a major focus of work in philosophy of religion. The idea of a language-game is introduced very early in the PI (I, § 2). In that passage, just following the well-known opening remark on Augustine and his theory of language-learning, Wittgenstein introduces the simple or 'primitive' instance of the language use of a pair of builders and their routinised use of expressions by builder A to order builder B to produce a 'block', 'pillar', etc., in the joint activity of building a structure. In PI, I, § 7, Wittgenstein refers back to this localised instance of language activity as a "language-game".

A key reason for the appeal of this social picture of language in use is how it reframed what it is for language to have meaning. The lingering problem of verificationism persisted in some corners of philosophy well into the second half of the twentieth century. Reductive naturalistic metaphysics continued to prevail when it came to the consideration of language with supernatural and other sorts of unverifiable components: references to gods, spirits, and souls. From A.J. Ayer (1935) to Anthony Flew (1955, 98), scepticism about so-called 'religious' or 'theological' language because of the imperceptibility of its putative referents led many naturalists to suppose that such language was meaningless. The development of Wittgenstein's later philosophy along with ordinary language philosophy allowed for possibilities of understanding meaning in language that went beyond reference. This is not to say that Wittgenstein thought reference was unimportant. It is just that, as Wittgenstein develops through his remarks on Augustine, ostension is not how most language is learned or functions; language instead has a seemingly endless variety of possible uses. While other avenues, such as Alvin Plantinga's burden-shifting common-sense realism about theistic claims (cf. Plantinga 1967), would appear in the next decade,

the evident usefulness of the paired notions of language-games and
forms of life in the PI would open new avenues for the interpretation
of religions (Malcolm 1960, 56).

Following on the verificationist critique of theological expressions,
Wittgenstein's idea of language-games inspired philosophers of re-
ligion to consider the roles of 'religious language' within religious
practice. An early example relevant to philosophy of religion comes
from Peter Winch in *The Idea of a Social Science*:

> A religious mystic, for instance, who says that his aim is union
> with God, can be understood only by someone who is acquaint-
> ed with the religious tradition in the context of which this end is
> sought; a scientist who says that his aim is to split the atom can
> be understood only by someone who is familiar with modern phys-
> ics. (Winch 1990, 55)

Appearing a mere five years after the publication of the PI, Winch's
book helped inaugurate some core themes of Wittgensteinian phi-
losophy of religion. In conveying the importance of deep attention
to social context for the understanding and interpretation of reli-
gious language, Winch also highlights the importance of paying at-
tention to the end of the social activity in question. The idea here,
eventually commonplace in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion,
is that 'religious language' must be interpreted with an eye to the
religious activities in which the language is meaningful. P.F. Bloe-
mendaal observes that Winch's emphasis on the seemingly endless
variety of human "modes of social life" and the necessity of inter-
preting them according to their own criteria set the stage for accu-
sations of the epistemic isolation of instances of social life from one
another (Bloemendaal 2006, 112). While Winch's work is most clear-
ly relevant to anthropology of religion, it has also been highly im-
portant to the development of Wittgenstein philosophy of religion in
general. Indeed, due to the practice-oriented approach of Wittgen-
stein's philosophy – and the eventual publication of Wittgenstein's
"Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" ([1967] 1993) – links between
anthropology and Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion have fre-
quently been made.

Bloemendaal also identifies Norman Malcolm's early contribu-
tion to Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion as underlining simi-
lar themes drawing on ideas from the PI for philosophy of religion:
first, through reference to 'religious language' and second, through
conceiving of religions as language-games (Bloemendaal 2006, 199).
While 'religious language-games' have often been the focus of Witt-
gensteinian philosophy of religion, subsequent philosophers – such as
Rush Rhees and D.Z. Phillips – have added more nuanced or focused

analyses of the significance of conceiving of aspects of religions in light of the notion of a language-game (cf. Von Der Ruhr 2009, 223).

Wittgenstein's student, friend, and literary executor, Rush Rhees, is another centrally important figure in the early development of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. Because Rhees knew Wittgenstein personally, his reception of Wittgenstein's ideas and philosophical methods goes far beyond the PI; however, since Rhees co-edited the book with G.E.M. Anscombe, it is not surprising that one can see themes from the book appear in Rhees's writings. While many of Rhees's writings were not published until much later when they were edited by his former student and colleague D.Z. Phillips (and later literary executor), Rhees had a large influence along with other members of the Swansea School – including Winch and Phillips – on what Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion would become during the early decades after Wittgenstein's death. Notably, Rhees was a sympathetic critic of Wittgenstein's, especially when it came to the interpretation and use of the notion of a language-game (Rhees 1960). Rhees argued that Wittgenstein's remarks in PI lent themselves to the idea that language-games were autonomous smaller instances of language, rather than useful abstractions of actual language use. For this reason, Rhees preferred the notion of "conversation" to language-game when describing the use of language in the flow of life (Von Der Ruhr 2009).

Rhees's student and colleague D.Z. Phillips was also an early interpreter of Wittgenstein with respect to philosophy of religion. In his 1970 essay, "Religious Beliefs and Language-Games", Phillips seeks to defend his interpretation of Wittgenstein's bearing on philosophy of religion from numerous criticisms of an isolationist understanding of language-games (Phillips 1993). A key feature of criticism of isolationist readings of language-games is that they remove the role for religious argumentation (e.g., foundationalist versions of theistic arguments). To some philosophers of religion and Christian apologists, this renders the isolationist language-game view of religion to be absurd. Phillips counters that a language-game reading of religion should not be understood as isolating such language-games from other parts of life. In this respect, he echoes themes argued for by Rhees. In order for religious beliefs to have the importance they clearly have for those who hold them, they would need to be related to many aspects of a person's life. Yet, according to Phillips, a difference in the grammar of religion and those areas of language involved in giving proofs should be observed.

This Phillips essay offers an early example of a particular genre of writing on Wittgenstein and philosophy of religion, the correction of exaggerated or otherwise perceived inaccuracies in interpretation. It is of a piece with the critique of scientism one finds elsewhere in Wittgenstein's writings. Three years before the publication

of Phillips's essay, Kai Nielsen had published his highly influential article, "Wittgensteinian Fideism" (1967), which called into question what Nielsen saw as the isolationist, self-protective – or "fideistic" – character of Wittgensteinian approaches to understanding religious language. 'Fideism' is a term that has been used by philosophers and theologians to refer to a variety of viewpoints on the epistemic standing of religious beliefs. Most, but not all, uses are pejorative, signalling an epistemically defective approach downplaying the role of reason or enquiry in grounding faith (Carroll 2008, 19). In this way, Nielsen's understanding of 'fideism' was in line with that of many secular critics of theistic religious discourses, particularly Christianity; interestingly, this criticism was mirrored by traditional Protestant and Catholic philosophers who sought to maintain the viability of natural theology. The idea is that Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion presented a picture of religious discourse where its intelligibility rested on a commitment that could only be understood by those who held it. To the extent that it provided an accurate depiction of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion or not, Nielsen's article identified features of an excessively relativistic picture of 'religious language-games', something that both came to frame the philosophical lore about Wittgenstein and philosophy of religion and to provide an example of deficient interpretation of Wittgenstein vis-à-vis religion.

Brian Clack offers a helpful overview of the early history of the development of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, from Malcolm to Nielsen in his *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion* (1999). Clack observes that any tendency to think of religions as language-games misunderstands how Wittgenstein introduced and developed the notion:

> Though Wittgenstein never attempted a definition of a 'language-game', the examples he provides of these linguistic phenomena do not suggest that he had in mind anything as large as science or religion, or indeed any practice or institution whatsoever. Language-games seem, rather, to be quite small-scale units of language-usage which occur in various human contexts. (Clack 1999, 87)

This note of interpretive caution reflects the sorts of contributions Wittgenstein scholars would make by way of correction of early extravagances when it comes to the interpretation of religion.

2.2   Forms of Life

The expression "form of life" ("*Lebensform*") appears just a handful of times in Wittgenstein's corpus, and just five times in the PI; yet, the notion has had a quite significant influence in philosophy of religion. While the expression predates Wittgenstein's writings, it was the PI that brought the concept to the attention of a broad audience. While the narrow idea of a language-game conveys the uses of language in a specific social activity, the broad notion of a form of life suggests the comprehensiveness of the social life of a community of people that grounds or puts into motion the meaningfulness of language, including particular instances of language. It is notable that Wittgenstein uses the two expressions to inform each other. Yet, from the context of a few remarks in PI, it is not entirely clear what is to be understood by the expression:

> It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle. — Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering Yes and No — and countless other things. —— And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life. (PI, I, § 19)

Here, we have a relation between the local instances of language use – language-games – and a form of life: "[T]o imagine a language means to imagine a form of life". Juliet Floyd argues that this notion replaced Wittgenstein's earlier embrace of "culture" ("*Kultur*") as capturing what lay behind and informed the use of language (Floyd 2020). What one imagines in imagining language is all of the functions that language performs within the lives of people.

Winch's analysis of interpretation draws on the notion of a form of life to identify distinct discursive practices and traditions. Winch writes:

> [W]hereas the philosophies of science, of art, of history, etc., will have the task of elucidating the peculiar natures of those forms of life called 'science', 'art', etc., epistemology will try to elucidate what is involved in the notion of a form of life as such. (Winch 1990, 41)

That is, in order to interpret what it is to know something in a particular area, one must first attend to the social practices of conceiving and gathering knowledge in that area. Thus, Winch takes sociology and epistemology to be much more closely linked than is commonly thought.

As with language-games, Malcolm links religions with forms of life very closely, and likewise holds that understanding of a form of

life will be closely associated with participation *within* that form of life. Malcolm writes about Anselm and the ontological argument:

> At a deeper level, I suspect that the argument can be thoroughly understood only by one who has a view of that human 'form of life' that gives rise to the idea of an infinitely great being, who views it from the inside not just from the outside and who has, therefore, at least some inclination to partake in that religious form of life. (Malcolm 1960, 62)

While Winch allows that one well acquainted but as yet outside of the way of life being studied could still understand it, Malcolm's view seems to have been that participation is necessary to understanding. As mentioned above, the tendency towards aversion to theistic argumentation can be seen in Rhees's critique of natural theology (cf. Rhees 1969). While Malcolm defends a minimal role for ontological arguments – "it may help to remove some philosophical scruples that stand in the way of faith" – nevertheless, such arguments gain their force within the context of a religious form of life.

In an essay of Rhees's titled "Religion and Language", published in 1969 but written earlier as a philosophical letter, one sees the expression of numerous themes that would appear frequently in philosophical works on Wittgenstein and religion. First, there is the assertion that religious language and religious life are "internally related" (Rhees 1969, 120). In this vein, Rhees compares "religious language" with the "language of love". Rhees writes:

> And people who have tried to understand love – or explain it – by approaching it from biology have got nowhere; and they generally end by ignoring it. If men come to love women, and if men come to love God, this has to do with the life which they lead and in which they take part. (122)

Second, there is the focus on religion in the singular, which can be presented as abstract (potentially applying to all religions) or specifically, which is always synonymous with forms of Christianity. In this respect, Rhees is no different from most of his contemporary peers in philosophy of religion. Third, there is the idea that religious language is different in grammar than other forms of discourse. Rhees writes:

> "God exists" is not a statement of fact. You might say that it is not in the indicative mood. It is a confession – or expression of faith. (131)

This does not mean that "God" does not refer to something, but the reference will be different from ordinary physical objects because the grammar of the two is different. In saying that "God exists" is not in

the indicative mood, Rhees is opening the door to pragmatics in the analysis of religious language. Furthermore, Rhees lays the groundwork for an anti-scientistic argument. Fourth, there is the idea that language about God, spoken by religious people, is more confessional than referential. That is, religious language (understood prototypically as Christian) functions within liturgical contexts as well as moments of exhortation, prayer, and fellowship.

Some critics of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion have claimed that the emphasis on understanding local contexts of language use amounts to or potentially leads to "protective strategies" (Proudfoot 1987), "fideism" (Nielsen 1967), or "relativism" (Trigg 1983). The metaphor of combat in the first charge is notable, as it evokes the potentially competitive relationship between religious and philosophical forms of language. Admittedly, commentators such as Malcolm, Rhees, Winch, and Phillips emphasise a stark difference between scientific and religious modes of discourse. It is not surprising that these views were interpreted as conveying the incommensurability of religious and scientific discourses (even as a careful reading of the sources reveals more nuance than critics generally register). As Clack would remind us, embracing contextualism in interpretation need not lead to protective strategies; it can lead to atheism:

> This is not an atheism based on denying the existence of super-empirical realities (religion never was about that), nor is it the rebellious atheism of an Ivan Karamazov, nor yet is it the positivistic atheism of denying sense to religious propositions. It is, rather, a despairing, apocalyptic atheism that arises from Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion, the frustrated and bitter recognition that the passionate beauty of the religious life is no longer open to us. (Clack 1999, 129)

The decline in the plausibility of a mode of expression or form of life can happen as one comes to see religions as rooted in instinctual feelings (as Clack interprets the "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*") and not in a really existing God.

Patrick Sherry and Richard Bell are relatively cautious about the application of ideas such as language-games and forms of life to religions. This is because they both view these ideas as being highly local descriptions of the social activities with language, and the forms of agreement necessary for the social activities to work. Thus, it does not make sense to think of a whole religion – or, indeed, "religion" itself – being a language-game or form of life. Instead, these ideas, if they are to be applied to the interpretation of religions, should be applied to highly specific social aspects of religious activity (e.g., this form of worship in this tradition). Reminding his readers to turn again to Wittgenstein's texts, Sherry cautions against the enthusiasms of important and influential figures like Malcolm.

2.3 Family Resemblances

Wittgenstein introduces the notion of "family resemblances" ("*Familienähnlichkeiten*") a little bit later in the PI, just following his argument against language having an essential feature. The forms of language are varied, as Wittgenstein remarks in § 65:

> Instead of pointing out something common to all that we call language, I'm saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common in virtue of which we use the same word for all — but there are many different kinds of *affinity* between them. And on account of this affinity, or these affinities, we call them all "languages". (PI, I, § 65)

Wittgenstein then lists in § 66 many examples of things that we call games and their lack of a single uniting feature. Concerning 'family resemblances', Wittgenstein writes in § 67:

> The various resemblances between members of a family — build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and so forth — overlap and criss-cross in the same way. — And I shall say: 'games' form a family. (PI, I, § 67)

Wittgenstein uses the notion of family resemblance to convey the idea that there are similarities across the many uses of language without there being a single common essence across uses.

Where this notion has had its biggest influence in philosophy of religion is with understanding the concept of religion itself. John Hick endorses a family resemblance conception of 'religion' in his *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989). Hick writes of the family resemblance analogy:

> [I]t is, I think, illuminating to see the different traditions, movements and ideologies whose religious character is either generally agreed or responsibly debated, not as exemplifying a common essence, but as forming a complex continuum of resemblances and differences analogous to those found within a family. (Hick 1989, 4)

For Hick and others, 'religion' is thus an open interpretive concept, where its boundaries are contestable and where borderline cases are somewhat common.

Ninian Smart also advanced an approach to thinking about religion drawing on a family resemblance conception (1996). Instead of seeing any one feature of a religion as being a necessary condition (e.g., belief in a supernatural agent), of something being religious, Smart's approach explores a growing number of different

'dimensions' as together tending to express religiosity. And it is not that these dimensions jointly determine the religiosity of something. Rather, in Smart's view, religious worldviews (we might imagine he has something like 'form of life' in mind) generally manifest along these diverse dimensions; keeping these dimensions in mind helps the scholar not to overlook otherwise salient features of religious worldviews. Thus, noting the diversity of forms religions take is a help to noticing their features, to interpreting them.

Timothy Fitzgerald has argued against Wittgensteinian approaches to thinking about 'religion' as a family resemblance concept. Fitzgerald sees in these approaches either a back-door way of entry for a universalised Protestant conception of religiosity as private faith or an unclear and therefore academically inept analytical concept. Fitzgerald writes,

> The idea that English-speaking academics can be free to describe selected practices and institutions of other cultures as 'religions' or as 'religious' if they so choose, as though this can be simply a decision made for convenience of Western academics, seems dangerous when placed in the contemporary context of Anglo-American imperialism. (Fitzgerald 2003, 218)

Due to the danger of reifying designations imposed by powerful agents such as imperial states, Fitzgerald subsequently argues against the family resemblance use of the term in scholarly discourse.

Fitzgerald presents significant problems for proponents of family resemblance approaches to understanding the concept of religion. The danger of imposing from the outside a distorting category on local traditions and practices is real and is moreover a concern very much in line with some of Wittgenstein's philosophical sensibilities ("don't think but look!" (Wittgenstein 2009, 35)). How could a family resemblance conception of something be distorting? While the non-essentialist conception may give the impression of local sensitivity, in drawing connections of putative resemblance, to prototypical religions, cultures in which religions are conventional institutions or ways of life are privileged. Thus, Fitzgerald worries family resemblance approaches could crowd out local vocabulary for making sense of social life. So, if global use of a family resemblance conception of religion to describe ways of life of a certain sort is thus problematic, it should be avoided above all for Wittgensteinian reasons.

Yet, the concept, variously understood, *is used* in contexts around the world and there is, arguably, a family resemblance among these uses (Carroll 2019). There is very good reason to proceed carefully here and to avoid broad generalisations. When local discourses tend to agree that something is or is not religious, this should provide a strong reason to agree. However, histories are rarely so simple, as

the history of classification of Confucianism shows (Yang 2008; Sun 2013); disputation over religion-status may be motivated by a variety of factors, from the local cultural assimilation of Catholicism into Chinese culture (The Rites Controversy) to Marxist critique of Confucian revival following the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, in some social contexts, ascribing religion-status to Confucianism enables minority groups in particular societies, e.g., Indonesia, to satisfy government requirements that all citizens have a religion.

Notably, this avenue of influence of Wittgenstein in philosophy of religion cuts against the religion-as-form-of-life influence. While the latter tends to reify religions as distinct from non-religions, as distinct from each other, and as ahistorical entities, the former allows for the social construction of what are labelled as religions and builds in internal diversity within the category. Because of concerns raised by Fitzgerald, I agree there is good reason to proceed carefully when using the term in contexts culturally distant from the modern European contexts in which it first formed.

2.4   Grammar

Through the PI and in other works from this period, Wittgenstein uses the term "grammar" ("*Grammatik*") frequently in a specialised sense to refer to the possibilities of meaning for a piece of language. This is a philosophical or metaphorical extension of the term from its ordinary use. For Wittgenstein, clarifying grammar thus becomes the focal point of philosophical clarification. In § 90, he writes:

> We feel as if we had to *see right into* phenomena: yet our investigation is directed not towards *phenomena*, but rather, as one might say, towards the '*possibilities*' of phenomena. What that means is that we call to mind the *kinds of statement* that we make about phenomena […] Our inquiry is therefore a grammatical one. And this inquiry sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. (PI, I, § 90)

Grasping the grammar of an expression enables one to understand it, while confusion about the nature or application of grammar is a key source of philosophical problems. In § 122, Wittgenstein writes:

> A 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. (PI, I, § 122)

In Wittgenstein's view, there is no ideal metalanguage in which grammar may be definitively expressed. Instead, descriptions of the

possibilities of use of language take place within language. So, clarifications are local rather than global, as Wittgenstein writes in § 97:

> We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound and essential to us in our investigation resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language… Whereas, in fact, if the words "language", "experience", "world" have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door". (PI, I, § 97)

In this way, grammar is sometimes thought of as having a kind of ineffability; the actual possibilities of use may extend beyond what is described in any particular concrete description.

From the conception of grammar in the PI and the related modes of philosophical enquiry that Wittgenstein demonstrates and advises stems a model for philosophical enquiry into religions: grammatical investigations into the possibilities of concepts and practices such as prayer, faith, God, and liturgy. From D.Z. Phillips's contemplation of the possibilities of sense when it comes to prayer (Phillips 1965) to George Lindbeck's comparative study of Christian denominations and their doctrines (Lindbeck 1984), the Wittgensteinian notion of grammar has figured prominently in twentieth century philosophy of religion.

A well-known remark on grammar in the PI (§ 373) links it with theology. Wittgenstein writes:

> Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.) (PI, I, § 373)

If grammar is what established the possibilities of sense within language, then theology would seem to establish the possibilities of sense within a theistic religion (and here especially, Christianity). We might wish Wittgenstein had written more about the topic in the PI (or indeed elsewhere). How is theological clarification similar to philosophical clarification? How much can this idea be generalised beyond Christianity (and Protestantism, at that) to diverse religious traditions? As we saw in connection with the notion of grammar above, the idea that religious beliefs (especially of a foundational or central focus) could play a regulatory role with respect to religious ways of life and their accompanying language has had a considerable influence in philosophy of religion.

Perhaps because Wittgenstein refers at one point in the PI to conceiving of "theology as grammar", Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion of frequently focused their attention on the grammar of "God". William Brenner writes:

> This perspective highlights the fact that many of us first learned
> a theology in the course of learning the practices of a religion,
> much as all of us first learned a language in the course of learning
> how to speak… But 'theology as grammar' (PI, sec. 373): doesn't
> this comparison trivialize theology? Not if we understand that the
> grammar in question is for teaching and celebrating a new form
> of life. (Brenner 1999, 140)

While the remark of Wittgenstein is exceedingly brief, in concert with
other remarks elsewhere in the corpus, a developed viewpoint can be
reconstructed.

An approach known as Grammatical Thomism also takes inspiration
from these remarks, seeing a hybrid Wittgensteinian-Thomist point of
view as being intelligible and helpful for elaborating Christian theo-
logical commitments using contemporary philosophical parlance. Im-
portantly, while Grammatical Thomists find Wittgensteinian therapy
helpful for some unfruitful philosophical questions, they do not refuse
metaphysical claims entirely; they are not thoroughgoing non-cognitiv-
ists about God-talk. Simon Hewitt writes about Grammatical Thomism:

> The grammatical thomist invites us to consider a way-in to the use
> of the word 'God' which both secures the sense-making nature of
> the word and, under very minimal assumptions (the existence of
> anything whatsoever), the truth of canonical sentences containing
> it, whilst also placing severe constraints on what we are entitled
> to assert about God. In Wittgensteinian terms, they supply a way
> of understanding the grammar of the word 'God', which provides
> a basis for subsequent philosophical and theological enquiry and
> which does duty, in a fashion relatively uncommon in the analytic
> philosophy of religion, to the stress on divine ineffability so often
> found in living religion. (Hewitt 2021, 35)

In Hewitt's analysis of Grammatical Thomism, the ineffability of
grammar meets divine ineffability in a variation on apophatic the-
ology. "God" thus plays a grounding and determinative role within
Christian practice while not being an object among objects.

2.5 Aspect Perception

In the second part of the PI – now called by some "Philosophy of
Psychology. A Fragment" – another highly influential idea appears.
In connection with the famous duck-rabbit diagram, Wittgenstein
entertains what it is to see or notice an aspect of a thing. When it
comes to the perception of ambiguous objects, the perceiver must
introduce a framework to disambiguate the object. In a way, the

framework one applies to the interpretation of the perceptual object is similar to what the language user brings by way of grammatical understanding to a linguistic occasion in order to grasp possibilities of meaning.

While this idea has entered into philosophy of religion in more than one way,[1] an influential approach comes from John Hick. Hick explores the relevance of this idea to religious experience through his related notion of "experiencing-as". Hick refers to the role that faith plays in interpreting the world. The idea is that religious knowledge is a product of experience which is itself framed by a pre-existing interpretation, which according to Hick is what people commonly call "faith". Hick writes,

> To reach the religious case, however, we must expand the notion of "seeing as" into that of "experiencing as", not only visually but through all the modes of perception functioning together. We experience situations as having different kinds of significance and so as rendering appropriate different kinds of practical response. The Old Testament prophets, for example, experienced their historical situation as one in which they were living under the sovereign claim of God. (Hick 1966, 142)

While Wittgenstein was concerned in the PI with a narrow feature of the phenomenology of perception, Hick is interested in the broader picture of religious experience, which can itself be cashed out in a variety of ways. The shifting perspective that frames experience of the world is fundamental to narratives of conversion or spiritual transformation. Indeed, Wittgenstein himself uses similar narratives elsewhere when accounting for the existential character of religious faith (cf. PPO).

Aspect perception also appears periodically in work on Wittgenstein and ethics, especially when it comes to seeing the humanity in another person. In *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell considers the moral consequences of the failure to see another person as human; he terms this phenomenon, "soul-blindness". Cavell considers the topic of "soul-blindness" in connection with the moral psychological capacity for enslaving others. While this notion perhaps pertains to more directly to ethics than to philosophy of religion, it is relevant to work in religious ethics (an area overlapping with or otherwise adjacent to philosophy of religion) considering the spiritual dynamics involved in the identifying and overcoming racist bias to come to see the humanity in another.

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[1]   For example, Espen Dahl explores the relevance of these passages from the PI for the perception of purported miracles. See Dahl 2018, 106f.

2.6   Metaphilosophy

Another influential theme in the PI concerns Wittgenstein distinguishing his approach to philosophy from more historically influential approaches. The PI contains numerous remarks on the nature of philosophical problems and clarificatory philosophical practices. To some, the PI presents a revolutionary approach to philosophy – recasting the nature of philosophical problems in a way that sets the stage for a completely new way of doing philosophy. In § 123, Wittgenstein writes:

> A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about". (PI, I, § 123)

When we think about the philosophical problems of philosophy of religion, we may come to see a wide open field rather than a closed set of 'classic' problems in the field (e.g., theistic arguments, the problem of evil, the logic of divine attributes). We may see that philosophical problems concerning religions can appear anywhere the grammar of language having to do with religions has become confused. (cf. Carroll 2014, 2021).

In conceiving of philosophical method as grammatical investigation, it might seem to some readers that the aim would be complete and final clarification. Wittgenstein writes in § 91:

> But now it may come to look as if there were something like a final analysis of our linguistic expressions, and so a single completely analysed form of every expression. (PI, I, § 91)

Yet, some have interpreted this to mean that grammar is ineffable, while others call into question this very idea of any limitation on expression (Floyd 2007). The issue of the expressibility of grammar is pertinent to philosophy of religion insofar as ineffability (broadly construed) is a phenomenon in some traditions of religious philosophy – such as negative or apophatic theology in the Abrahamic traditions, emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism, and the instability of descriptions of the *dao* in the *Daodejing*. The question of the possibility of language expressing all meanings is directly related to the viability of these ineffable traditions of religious philosophy. What I take from this is the idea that clarifications are made in local contexts (i.e., actual) instances of language and not in some meta-language. Wittgenstein continues in § 122 describing his view of philosophical clarification:

> A 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, I, § 122)

Wittgenstein's picture of clarification does not offer a perspective claiming to be a theory (i.e., a final, factual picture of the grammar) but instead a description, a description using local vocabulary and potential linguistic moves.

Local clarifications find and provide those intermediate links, since grammar is difficult to survey. Moreover, Wittgenstein recognises something in human beings that makes them prone to make blunders. There is a tendency to reach beyond what is available and to offer a theory. Thus philosophy (in Wittgenstein's sense) is a mode of resistance to both human tendencies to go beyond what can be said and philosophical tendencies to develop theories. As Wittgenstein puts it in § 109, achieving clarify requires *striving*:

Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language. (PI, I, § 109)

Where perhaps the metaphilosophical remarks have had the most significant impact is in dialogue between Wittgenstein's philosophy and Buddhism. Chris Gudmansen write:

For Wittgenstein, getting people to understand is much more than presenting them with the facts. He is prepared to use any means in accordance with what works best. There are no irreducible acts of understanding and therefore no "ultimate explanations" [...] An explanation need not be the "presentation of facts" at all — it could be a gesture or pricking someone with a pin. In different cases, different measures are called for, if liberation is to be achieved. (Gudmunsen 1977, 71f)

In Buddhist philosophy, one often sees that practices aimed at enlightenment are not so much theoretically framed as practically structured. There is not a theory of non-thinking that a Buddhist adept should work towards; for example, in Zen it is through practising enlightenment that one may come to encounter it. Moreover, from the point of view of a teacher, liberatory explanations will be tailored to the particular person (a gesture, a pricking of a pin). In this way, Rupert Read's recent liberatory reading of Wittgenstein – and its implications for overcoming blocks in addressing our climate crisis – draws connections with Buddhist practice and values, especially concerning Mayahana Buddhism's emphasis on interdependence among people, as well as between humanity and nature (Read 2021).

3　References to Aspects of Religions in the PI

While concepts developed in the PI have been influential by way of interpretation in philosophy of religion, matters directly relating to religion are almost entirely absent from the text. Yet, if one looks closely, there are a handful of scattered remarks that seem to show how Wittgenstein would apply the central ideas in the PI to thinking about religiosities. So, these passages are relevant to philosophy of religion inspired by Wittgenstein and have at times been the focus of philosophical commentary. It is my objective in this section to describe them and account for their relevance to future philosophy of religion.

3.1　Prayer

When explaining what a language-game is in remark § 23, Wittgenstein includes as an example of prayer, perhaps to indicate just how varied the interpretive use of "language-games" can be when it comes to human life with language. Wittgenstein writes:

> The word "language-*game*" is used here to emphasise the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

Consider the variety of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

> Giving orders, and acting on them 🔲🔲

> [...] Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying. (PI, I, § 23)

Wittgenstein describes language as existing within a form of life, as part of an activity. Here, prayer is as much an instance of a human form of life as cracking a joke or forming and testing an hypothesis. Wittgenstein presents prayer here as being on a par with any other instance of language. This inclusion anticipates Wittgenstein's general humanistic attitude towards the wide variety of forms of language use and ways of life human beings may sincerely undertake.

　　For the philosophers of religion, it is unfortunate that Wittgenstein did not elaborate. Wittgenstein clearly thought much about religious matters, but the PI is a source that is nearly entirely missing explicit reference to religiosities. One more remark involving prayer occurs in the second part of PI. Wittgenstein writes:

> When it is said in a funeral oration "We mourn our...", this is surely supposed to be an expression of mourning; not to communicate

anything to those who are present. But in a prayer at the grave, these words would be a kind of communication. (PI, II, § 81)

In this passage, Wittgenstein contemplates the different meanings that the same expression can have, as one imagines shifting contexts. Different audiences reframe an expression so that it can be used in quite different speech acts.

Prayer can be thought of as an established form of using language to address God. One might think here of the Lord's Prayer or even the Serenity Prayer. Established forms of prayer may be communal or individual. Some are prescribed and/or liturgical, while others are spontaneous. And many forms of prayer do not only address a divine being but also secondarily address the speakers themselves and also fellow congregants (consider here the ways that prayers can function as instances of spiritual teaching, to form and reform modes of engaging God, other people, or oneself). Whether there are many language-games of prayer or if there is something that unites all instances of prayer, or whether forms of prayer will always be indexed to particular religious traditions is up to the analysis of philosophers of religion working in a Wittgensteinian mode. A comparative study of prayer activities both within and across religious traditions could be helpful explored by means of central ideas from the PI.

3.2   God

"God" appears rarely in the PI, and when it does, the word is invoked obliquely. In remark 342, Wittgenstein contends with William James and the idea that thought could be possible without speech. James recounts the story of a Mr. Ballard, a person who only learned to speak as an adult, reported having thoughts about God. Wittgenstein marvels at the notion but arrives at a sort of agnosticism about what it could mean to have such views:

> Are you sure — one would like to ask — that this is the correct translation of your wordless thoughts into words? And why does this question — which otherwise seems not to exist — arise here? Do I want to say that the writer's memory deceives him? — I don't even know if I'd say *that*. These recollections are a strange memory phenomenon — and I don't know what conclusions one can draw from them about the narrator's past! (PI, I, § 342)

Wittgenstein's respectful agnosticism does not mean that he rejects Mr. Ballard's testimony, only that he cannot imagine what it would mean to say such a thing. Thus, experiences and ideas of God are dependent on language and its use. In this way, this remark mirrors the

respectful agnosticism also on display in the "Lectures on Religious Belief". Wittgenstein cannot participate in the framework used by the religious person, but he maintains throughout his life and corpus a respect for the *sincerity* of expressions of religious faith.

Wittgenstein also invokes the idea of God again a few remarks later in the text when considering the law of the excluded middle. The specific scenario being entertained is whether in the expansion of the number π, the group of numbers "7777" should appear. Either it does or it does not, whether or not any human being is able to calculate that far: "That is to say: God sees — but we don't know". (PI, I, § 352). Here, Wittgenstein immediately launches into contemplation of the possibilities of meaning:

> But what does that mean? — We use a picture: the picture of a visible series, the whole of which one person can survey and another can't. Here the law of excluded middle says: it must look either like *this* or like *that*. So really — and this is surely obvious — it says nothing at all, but gives us a picture. And the problem is now supposed to be: does reality accord with the picture or not? And this picture *seems* to determine what we have to do, what to look for, and how — but it does not, precisely because we do not know how it is to be applied. (PI, I, § 352)

In this example, the reference to God is roughly similar to a philosophical concept of God (i.e., a concept used when necessary to make sense of some phenomenon that is otherwise the focus of the philosophical activity). Perhaps such a conception of God is metaphysically useful for stipulating the existence of an answer unknowable to human beings. The question is about the truth or utility of the logical principle rather than God. While the idea is invoked in this example one does not get the sense from Wittgenstein's later writings that he in any way thought of God as philosophically necessary; the only salient concept of God one finds in Wittgenstein's later writings is of God as a devotional focus for existentially engaged forms of religiosity, a concept of God that is quite distant from the "God of philosophy".

3.3 Soul

The word "soul" appears in a handful of remarks. Sometimes, Wittgenstein uses the idea as a commonplace notion indicating personhood rather than as a nonnatural reality to which Wittgenstein is committing himself. Consider this short remark from part two of the PI:

> My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul. (PI, II, § 22)

We can see immediately how this remark dovetails with the earlier examination of the aspect perception section. This is a matter of perception of another person, as would be relevant to ethics and as may or may not be influenced by religious ideas. Yet elsewhere, a different use appears. Wittgenstein continues:

> Religion teaches that the soul can exist when the body has disintegrated. Now do I understand what it teaches? — Of course I understand it — I can imagine various things in connection with it. After all, pictures of these things have even been painted. And why should such a picture be only an imperfect rendering of the idea expressed? Why should it not do the *same* service as the spoken doctrine? And it is the service that counts. (PI, II, § 23)

The picture here of a religious teaching concerning bodies and souls and personal identity after death does not present a propositional description of the doctrine as being most fundamental. Wittgenstein presents here the *artistic* as not being derivative or an "imperfect" duplication of the *doctrinal*. Wittgenstein instead challenges the idea that a pictorial representation would be inferior to a spoken teaching. In addition to acknowledging any one dimension to religiosity, this remark coheres with Wittgenstein's tendency to downplay any particular description of a grammatical feature of language as being definitive. What is crucial is that which enables people to learn how to play the game.

4 Globally Engaged Philosophy of Religion

In the opening chapter of D.Z. Phillips's *The Concept of Prayer* (1965), Phillips remarks on the diversity within the field of philosophy of religion, comparing it to the Biblical Tower of Babel. Phillips writes:

> To work in the field of philosophy of religion is like working on the Tower of Babel: one cannot take for granted that one's colleagues understand what one is saying. The position, if anything, is worse for the philosophers, since the builders at least were engaged on a common task, they were trying to do the same thing. No such agreement exists among philosophers of religion: the nature and purpose of their subject is itself a philosophical controversy. It becomes essential, therefore, to try to give some indication of what I think philosophy can say about religion. (Phillips 1965, 1)

An interesting thing about this metaphor is that Phillips imagines philosophers of religion continuing to work on the Tower of Babel *after*, one supposes, God has confused the people's language and scattered

them. In this circumstance, any builders remaining would have a difficult time communicating with each other. It is not clear from Genesis, at least, how *extensive* the linguistic confusion is among the people, but if one reads the passage as a polemic against Babylonia, then perhaps the point is not so much that God confuses the languages as that God disperses the univocal Babylonian tower builders. Perhaps Phillips's passage and the myth it invokes simply registers the idea of human beings having diverse projects, languages, and societies (and, of course, worldviews). Yet, however varied the approaches to philosophy of religion were in 1965, they are vastly more varied in today's universities and interconnected world. This is also arguably true for approaches to Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, where scholars take quite different lessons from the text in addressing philosophical problems.

From the preceding overview of the influence of the PI in philosophy of religion, there is no one definitive way in which philosophers of religion have contended with the text. The PI has tended to inspire, in one way or another, hermeneutically rich interpretations of religiosities; some emphasise the meaningfulness of "religious language" within its social context, others argue for the lack of a common core to all things that are called religions, some readers see in Wittgenstein's remarks resources for understanding differential cognitive responses to the same objects or world, and still others consider the relevance of Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical remarks to philosophy of religion. While there are scant remarks on religiosities in the PI, those that do appear cohere with themes found elsewhere in the PI or in Wittgenstein's corpus (e.g., respect from a distance for sincere belief, a tendency to downplay the importance of intellectual aspects of religions, seeing religious belief as being related to the framework, or grammar, to which one is philosophically committed). Perhaps *because* of the near absence of religious topics in the PI, the text has inspired a wide variety of approaches in philosophy of religion. Thus, the dialectical features of the text stand out, questions and provocations that get to the heart of the assumptions that readers may bring to the text and to their philosophical projects.

The use of Wittgenstein in work aimed at hermeneutically rich encounters between people identifying with different religious and/or cultural traditions also exemplifies recent work on Wittgenstein and the PI. For example, Wittgenstein has been used by scholars interested in interreligious dialogue for many decades (e.g., Lindbeck 1984), but recent years have seen a new generation of scholars develop these resources. In more recent times, Gorazd Andrejč (2016) has explored the resources in Wittgenstein for making sense of religious differences in religiously diverse social contexts. While Andrejč makes use of notions like "grammar" in appraising religious differences, he also draws on Wittgenstein's shifting focus across various works from grammar to instinct to existential concerns as he contemplated religions.

In recent years, there has been a push to diversify philosophy of religion beyond its historical preoccupation with Christianity. Often paired with comparative philosophy, this strand of philosophy of religion seeks to open the field to address philosophical problems concerning a wide diversity of religious and nonreligious philosophical traditions. To some extent, this thread has a long history with work done by Gudmunsen in the 1970s and Hick and Smart in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. John Clayton beginning in a series of articles published in the 1980s and 90s and culminating in his posthumous book *Religions, Reasons, and Gods* (2006) intentionally drew on Wittgensteinian themes such as family resemblances and forms of life in his contextually-sensitive approach to cross-cultural philosophy of religion (Clayton 2006, 83). Brian Clack has written on atheism in connection with Wittgenstein's philosophy. In more recent times, Mikel Burley has written numerous articles and books on Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion and religious pluralism. His primary focus has been on understanding South Asian religions, but he has also written on indigenous American and African religions. Burley describes his project thusly:

> [I]t aspires to do conceptual justice to the radically plural character of religious phenomena themselves, aiming to deepen understanding of the variegated nature of religious – and indeed nonreligious – forms of life without rushing to evaluate them in terms of some supposedly universal standard of truth or rationality. (Burley 2020, 2)

Even as Burley is looking forward to diversifying the field, we can see readily how this approach is linked with themes we have encountered while surveying the history of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion.

5   Conclusion

Having been published seventy years ago, the PI is no longer a contemporary work of philosophy. It is through the work of multiple generations of scholars that audiences now encounter the text and/or the ideas within it. While the first wave of influence of the PI happened in the 1960s, since then scholars have had access to so much more of Wittgenstein's corpus, which is especially important for philosophy of religion given the relevance of sources such as the "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*", the "Lectures on Religious Belief", the "Lecture on Ethics" (2014), and the miscellaneous remarks included in *Culture and Value*, as well as personal writings and memories of conversations. Yet, the PI looms large over all these other sources when it comes to constructing a philosophy of religion inspired by Wittgenstein.

Despite the seventy years of philosophical encounters with the PI, the book will likely continue to exert a significant influence on twenty-first century philosophy of religion – even as *On Certainty* (1969) is having an extended moment (e.g., hinge epistemology and religion). The PI's emphasis on the micro-level of social context for understanding uses of language linked with these things we call religions has not yet really been plumbed to the extent that is needed to understand our culturally and religiously diverse societies and world. With the expansion of many areas of philosophy to approaches and traditions that have been marginalised or otherwise overlooked, this work retains great potential for dialectical engagement as philosophers ask metalevel questions about the nature and boundaries of philosophies, religions, and ways of life.

While there is no one way to do Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion after the PI, several lessons recur that provoke the present author to consider a more sustained integration of different elements from the text into a particular philosophical response. Wittgenstein directs his reader's attention to the uses of language over against pictures of language use that rely entirely on ostention and reference for anchoring meanings of expressions. The text reminds readers that linguistic activity takes place within a form of life. The book problematises attempts to boil it down into simple analyses by introducing, for example, anti-essentialist ideas like family resemblances. The text considers the role of cognitive framing to the interpretation of ambiguous objects and redefines philosophical problems in such a way that the focus of philosophy could radically shift to instances of conceptual confusion rather than some notion of "classic" problems. A synoptic reading of the PI might be out of keeping with the spirit of Wittgenstein's philosophy; he was much more of a reactive philosopher than a system-builder. In that spirit, letting oneself be provoked by Wittgenstein's varied philosophical lessons enables one to develop a hermeneutically rich approach to philosophising about religions that answers to a wide variety of philosophical problems.

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