Wittgenstein and Religion

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The concept of religion stands for a belief in a superhuman controlling power or belief in a personal God or gods. It abides by a particular system of faith and worship. Any religious belief adheres to any of the formulations under reference. Semitic religions are found to be theistic bound in some form or other. Non-theistic religions like Confucianism, Taoism, Jainism and Buddhism have in certain sense, the acceptance of spiritual faith too. In a broad sense, belief and faith in some supernatural power/being is found to be the foundation of any religious framework. To stick to such beliefs-structure and to surrender to such power and give it an occult/divine coating in some way or other, have been acknowledged almost as the defining mark of religion. That has to be sincerely adored/revered/worshipped/meditated upon in certain manner and, in no case, such belief-structure is allowed to be impaired. Such claim of religion remains almost undisturbed throughout the ages.

The concept of ethics stands for the study of morals in human conduct and it is often identified as moral philosophy. There is a subtle difference between ethics and morality. While ethics deals with the subject-matter of morals, rules of conduct from the scholarly point of view, morality consists of practice and application of principles of a particular system of morals, not necessarily probing into the theoretical constructs of such principles. Despite all such subtle differences, both the concepts are closed logical neighbours, in the sense that both are based on emphasizing the role and significance of morality on both thought and action in human life within socio-empiric framework.

So far as morality and religion on one band, ethics/moral philosophy and religious studies/philosophy of religion on the other hand are taken into consideration, it may be noted that the two pairs have been found as related in certain sense. It is sometimes viewed that no religion can afford to be immoral and thereby can bypass man's needs and expectations in social setting. This is, no doubt, appealed and advocated in many major world religions.

But, even then, such advocacy is also noticed to be only somewhat external and apparent. As a matter of fact, religions also are found to have been confined to certain groups or communities and their advocacy for universal well-being is never at the cost of interest of their own particular sect/group/community.

For instance, the initiation of some person to Islamic faith is institutionally sanctioned by way of making a religious oath (*kalma*) which stands for acknowledging that Allah is the only God and Mohammad is the only prophet[1]. So far as the practice of conversion in other religions is concerned, it is found to have the adoption of similar practice, *mutatis mutandis*. In other words, the sanction and legitimization of such type of rites and rituals found in different religions reveal the pertinent point that religious belief-structure is embedded with some form of dogma and rigidity. It is conspicuously not free from the stigma of groupism, communalism and fundamentalism in one way or the other. In this sense, it is logically bound to be sectarian than secular.

On the contrary, morality that is adopted and followed in the social set-up does exhibit a sense of universality, having striking human significance. However, religion, in certain circle, seems to have favoured for a morally scrupulous living. On some occasion, it is definitely noticed that relgio-spiritual leaders evince profound moral concern. On the basis of all such instances, some are led to conclude that ethics and religion converge at the same point,

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i.e. they belong to the same domain'.

But, it seems that such similarity between morality and religion is only extraneous and not inherent. As is already indicated, the aim and purpose of religion is always found to have been directed towards the preservation and sustenance of its own spiritual belief/faith and is never to accept or accommodate other rival belief/faith in this respect.

It is not committed for any compromise or reconciliation. Mutual harmony between diverse religious faith/belief is advanced only when one moves beyond the parochial framework of its own religion and moves further for a trans-religious integrative setup for socio-practical necessity. It is a meta religious thinking which can consistently advocate for the inter-religious harmony, social integration and ethical universaliability. From this perspective, it can be seen that the ethical view is bent upon secular outlook, while a religious view is bent on sacerdotal foundation. The spiritual transcendence is the foundational goal around which different religious ideas and concepts encircle and no deviation is permissible so long as one diligently sticks to that domain. In this way, it can be marked that religious belief-structure does have the prevalence of a closed circuit, whereas the concept of morality in itself promulgates some sort of openness and liberality. It is never construed in a trans-social framework. Religion, on the otherhand, is found to be committed for some sort of noumenal transcendence. There is neither logical necessity nor factual compulsion for a religious believer to be moral and one irreligious non-

believer to be immoral. Religious belief and moral sense are not necessarily related. One can be both a spiritualist and moralist. But to be a spiritualist, one is not bound to be a moralist and *vice versa*. It is as good as a fact that a musician may be an actor; but his proficiency in music does not entail his being as an actor. Both the activities are also not causally related.

With this preliminary appraisal of the concepts of both morality and religion, let there be a probe into the philosophy of Wittgenstein that is available through his numerous writings, both posthumous and non-posthumous. The religionists or the theologians, specially belonging to the Christian faith maintain that religion is one way of life that is intelligible only to the participants. Such a view leads to the emphasis of faith in the realm of religion. It is held that unless one has faith one cannot take part in rational discussion of the Christian religion. So in order to comprehend the significance of religious way of life, one has to follow it first on the basis of sheer faith without raising any query or point for clarification. So faith becomes the necessary pre-condition of any form of rational discussion so far as religion is concerned.

It seems that the term faith in this context needs some elucidation. It is quite clear that when one moves for understanding any issue, one needs to be aware of its basic features, their points of reference and so on. Unless one is clear on those matters, raising questions, or doubts at the initial stage becomes almost ineffectual and redundant. Even in order to be critical about the claims of religious belief, one has to be clear about what it stands for. So,

in this sense, tentative form of acceptance or supposition is a prerequisite. In a loose sense, here this preliminary point of acceptance may be treated as a sort of faith; but it needs also to be made clear here that such faith or acceptance is only provisional for enquring into the religious-claim, nothing more. It should be noted, however, that for any rational discussion or for advancing any critical assessment, it is not unconditional faith but its proper understanding is necessary. If this point is well taken, then it becomes fairly clear that the prior acceptance or supposition in this regard is not to be assimilated with any sort of unconditional or unquestionable blind faith. For, if unconditional faith is insisted, then that would challenge the very foundation of religion itself and the charge that religion, in some way or other, is grounded on dogmas and prejudices, cannot be gainsaid.

Wittgenstein has regarded religion as a form of life.[2] Because of his introduction of the conceptual construct 'language-game', and attempting its application in resolving certain issues/problems in the philosophy of language, some have moved on to relate both 'form of life' and 'language-game' and thereby make an attempt to trace its implication in the realm of religion and religious belief. If religion is a form of life, then any religious talk would confine itself to a specific field of its own. It would then 'constitute a distinctive and autonomous 'language-game' which outsiders could not understand'.[3] In that case, without being able to understand, the outsider has no justification of rejecting the religious claim as invalid and improper. The religion-ist, perhaps being encouraged with

such remark, move further to suggest that Wittgenstein is not opposed but is a great defender of religious belief.

But such a reading of Wittgenstein's view is not that simple and clear as it appears initially. True, Wittgenstein has treated religion to be a form of life and has viewed 'language-game' having a sense of autonomy. It is worthwhile to get into the details of these two expressions within the context of language in which Wittgenstein has coined such expressions. Religion has never been viewed as *the* form of life but *a* form of life. Thereby there is ample scope of viewing other affairs as forms of life like art, culture etc. Even the scientific temper or attitude can be held as contributing to a form of life. So in order to be consistent with the anti-essentialistic approach which Wittgenstein has advocated in the context of his talk on 'language-game', one need not move for any fixed and rigid stand in the matter. Only one has to be careful and vigilant to note that taking one stand at a particular occasion, one should not switch over to some other stand in the same context. For that would give rise to logical inconsistency and rational incompatibility.

The autonomous and distinctive character of religious language does make room for its technicalities. But that does not suggest that it would be reduced to a private world of its own and it would be free enough to employ the ordinary common words and expressions, completely rubbing out its set meanings and uses. For instance, there is a legitimate and valid distinction between faith and knowledge. In case of faith, the concerned person has a strong attitudinal and persuasive psychological boosting for acceptance of certain point, even if it is not independently validated or justified. In case of knowledge-claim, the person does not simply remains content in firmly believing it but is prepared to justify it by means of certain ground. And, in case the ground of justification is later on found to be shaky and weak, there is no hesitation in withdrawing the knowledge-claim. But in case of a religious belief/faith, even after the exposure of shaky ground of justified belief, the religious believer having unconditional dependence on faith cannot forsake the religious-claim. So rational validation, in some way or other, plays a vital, distinctive role in case of knowledge which is not insisted upon in case of faith/belief.

Wittgenstein himself has expressed that he is not a religious man, but he cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.[4] Malcolm, while writing a *Memoir*, opines that Wittgenstein has not accepted any religious faith. Though he has looked religion as 'a form of life', he has never participated in it. However, Malcolm still feels that Wittgenstein has sympathy with religion and that is of interest to him. [5] That Wittgenstein has no faith in religion, and specially in Christianity is more or less not only clear from his writings but it is also shared by many of his admirers and exponents. But, then, some have tried, to press upon the point of his inclination for seeing every problem from religious point of view.

It seems that the Wittgensteinian stand, at least from the philosophical angle, cannot consistently be conceived as supporting any religious claim. The reference about religious point of view, in tune with his philosophical setting, only suggests with all probability that he has never been one such philosopher who is just eager or impatient enough to reject the religious stand outright without any proper analytical investigation. The attempt made in certain circle (notably among certain logical positivists) that only because religious claim cannot be up to the observation-cum-experiment based scientific standard of justification, it is to be abandoned forthwith. Such a hasty way of dispensing with religious belief is never approved by Wittgenstein. But, that does not necessitate the other radical view that religious stand has to be conceded as flawless. Wittgenstein's philosophical position, as will be briefly touched upon hereafter, would reveal that he is not at all prepared to swallow the claim of religious belief based on dogmas and prejudices. His advocacy of anti-essentialism, arguments against privacy of experience and private language cannot consistently accommodate the truth-claim of religion that there is the deeper and trans-empirical reality attainable by genuine religious belief through mystical intuition. His talk of 'language-game' only suggests that religious form of life is governed by a language-game that is not to be assessed by the parameters of the language of science. So, in that context, the sympathetic attitude towards religion does not mean that it is not to be critically assessed and investigated at all. The rational assessment of religious belief-structure has to be advanced taking into consideration the rules of its language-game and not borrowing uncritically the rules of other language-game.

But from this it does not follow that the religious claim or belief-structure is beyond all rational scrutiny. And, it is to be admitted

only as an article of blind faith or dogma. The claim of religion on the basis of revelation/gospel truth/ obscurant speculative construction does not appear to be consistently fitted with Wittgenstein's philosophy. Such a reading seems to be expecting too much from his philosophy which it perhaps has never held.

Wittgenstein's famous expression that what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what cannot be talked about must pass over in silence[6], need not be construed as somewhat oracular. It is virtually a suitable check against all sorts of airy speculative constructs or transcendental vagaries. It is interesting to note that there is a clear sense of continuity between this caution introduced in TLP and the pronouncement made in later posthumous work, PI. The word 'I' that is to say was already in the list of words that needed to be brought back from their metaphysical application to their home in everyday conversation[7]. The philosophy of Wittgenstein, it seems is though carefully kept itself away from the early positivistic onslaughts, it is found to be specifically distinct from the acceptance of metaphysical sweeping speculations, it is not for the acceptance of mysterious entity of pure Self ('I') which is the primitive and basic point of emphasis in all theological discourse. Wittgenstein's critical note on solipsism is quite pertinent in this regard. It is well acknowledged in this context that in PI, the first move is to secure a focal significance of the human body and thus to inaugurate a radical critique of the 'traditional drive to spiritual purity'.[8]

According to Wittgenstein, the idea that thought is a hidden process and it is the task of philosopher (in the sense of speculative metaphysician and not analytical philosopher) to penetrate, is vague and futile. He holds that there is no more direct way of reading thought than through language. 'Thought is not something hidden; it lies open to us.'[9] This is purely indicative of the vital point that Wittgenstein does not move for any compromise with metaphysical transcendence of anti-intellectualism or any sort of religious mystical obscurantism. Through the analysis of language in its ordinary setting, he comes forward to avoid the privacy of thought or what he calls as 'hidden process'. In this way, the mythical conception of soul which remains almost as the cornerstone of all religious belief seems to have been precisely set aside in his philosophical outlook.

It is interesting to note that Wittgenstein's expression, at certain stage, seems to be, at least apparently, perplexing. For instance, though he urges to come back 'to everyday conversation' from 'metaphysical application', he also does not fully favour the commonsensical approach in matters of philosophizing. He has held that one should not try to avoid a philosophical problem by appealing to common sense. He rather recommends that one is to allow himself 'to be dragged into the mire, and get out of it'.[10] But it can be noted that here Wittgenstein, so far as his philosophical position is concerned, is not found to be averse to ordinary usage at the commonsensical platform. Only he does not move to avoid all genuine philosophical issues or problems simply because it is uncommon and far from common sense. The enigmatic nature of philosophical issues is not, according to him, to be rejected outright but is to be analyzed and investigated in order to be resolved and to get out of the conceptual muddles. So, in this sense, his approach seems to be against theologico-metaphysical obscurantism and not against philosophical analysis.

Wittgenstein is also not allergic to the use of 'nonsense'. In his own language, he is for the avoidance of 'patent non-sense'. The aim of philosophy, to him, is 'the disclosure of one or other piece of plain nonsense and bumps that the understanding has received in colliding with the limits of language.'[11] Of course, his use of 'nonsense' is different from Ayer's use of nonsense with regard to metaphysics[12] and also Strawson's use of nonsense in respect of revisionary metaphysics.[13] But, even then, any attempt of transgressing the limits of language does not seem to have been approved by him. The classical metaphysicians' eagerness to transcend the limits of language and to roam in the world of speculative constructions or the world of 'might have been' criss-crossing the limits of plausibility and intelligibility, is very much critically dealt with as per Wittgenstein's philosophical position. Only, as stated before, he has not shown any mark of impatience or iconoclastic intolerance for its rejection; on the contrary, he has taken care to probe into it carefully and diligently. However, in the end, it is set for the dissolution of such metaphysical-cum-theological issues by means of penetrating into the conceptual framework itself.

It is evident that Wittgenstein's philosophical position is quite critical about religio-metaphysical illusions in general. Though he does not obvertly side with any such

atheistic or irreligious stand, his own position seems to be much away from the acceptance of any religious claim either. He is rather close to a non-committal and agnostic position. His attitude towards religious belief can never thus be justifiably character-ised as affirmative and positive. But that does not suggest also that his stand is vague and unsettled. Reco-gnizing the religious surmises as the output of 'metaphysical illusions', he clearly seems to have recommended to have an analytical re-look to the claims and assertions of religion and theology.

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Śukra: The Defender of Freedom of the Disadvantaged

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The history of pre-vedic India is, more than anything else, a history of intermittent wars between the *Devas* (gods) and the *Asuras* (demons). In these wars the great seer Śukracarya (hereafter Śukra), the descendant of Bhrigu, was the advisor and spiritual master of the *Asuras*.[1] A very signi-ficant dimension of the role that he played in these *Asura-Deva* wars during that epoch-making phase of the Indian history in remote antiquity, has neither been properly analyzed, nor fully appreciated, nor has its relevance in the present-day political context been considered. In order to do so two separate but some-what interrelated questions need to be asked; one, who were the *Asuras*

whose cause he was defending; and two, what precisely was their cause? Conversely, who were the *Devas* and why were they perpetually at war with the *Asuras*? There are, of course, some larger questions involved. For instance, how was this whole *Asura-Deva* conflict finally resolved and with what consequences? Were the *Asuras* the real sinners as they have been made out by their adversaries, the Devas, or, were they more sinned against than sinners? To what extent it is appropriate to continue to study the vedic and pre-vedic India from the Aryan perspective only?

In the *Vedas, Puranas* and other Indian scriptures of antiquity, there are two major formulations about

the identity of the *Asuras* and the *Devas*—mythological and historical. These two formulations are so closely intertwined as to render it difficult to separate one from the other, even though the *Vedic* accounts are pre-dominantly ritualistic and theo-logical; while the *Puranic* accounts are more legendary and episodal, hence more in the nature of his-torical narratives. Therefore, for understanding their real import one has to move from narrative to inter-pretation in such a way that each event is seen not as a discrete one but as intimately interwoven with the others so as to constitute a pattern where individuals and events fall in place and events become episodes

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