Don't ask for the meaning: Wittgenstein and Religious Language

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This article is the continuation of such important subject matters as language of religion a tool for philosophy and theology communication. It was considered in my article about philosophical and cultural discourse in the post-secular epoch. We tried to examine the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein from three points of view: a philosophical, theological and linguistic. Wittgenstein tried to give an answer on the question how to speak about God today when different philosophers and theologists have divergent opinions on such important definitions as belief, secularization, religious tolerance and pluralism. Wittgenstein's heritage challenges much that is taken for granted in philosophical theological thinking as well as in the theoreticizing art, religion, science and culture. For Wittgenstein in every kind of human activity practice gives the words their sense. His general idea is that language seeks to generate a map of reality that was supplemented by radical conclusion that every sentence, which cannot be verified, is meaningless and is embodied in the theory of language-game, which includes different types of religious practices. The article considers the question about his personal attitude to religion and confessional belonging.

Keywords: Barth, belief, God's hiddenness, language game, private language, religious language, Wittgenstein.

Introduction

This article is the continuation of analyses of such important subject matters as language of religion as a tool for philosophy and theology communication which was started in my article *The Religion' Return (?) to Philosophical and Cultural Discourse: Introduction to the Problem*.[1] The article attempted to determine whether such processes as leaving and return of religion to philosophical and cultural discourse are closely connected with the problem how to speak about God today when different philosophers and theologists have divergent opinions on such definitions as belief, secularization, religious tolerance and pluralism. Yves De Maeseneer raises such questions: "How to speak about transcendence today? How to represent the transcendent in the context in which God seems to have no place anymore? Neither a philosopher of religion nor a theologian can avoid this fundamental question. And not a few of them end up being paralyzed by its enormous weight"[2]

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1 Nikiforova, Basia. *The Religion' Return (?) to Philosophical and Cultural Discourse: Introduction to the Problem*, *Sovijus, Tarpdalykiniai kultūros tyrimai*, 2018, T. 6, Nr. 2, p. 86–97.

2 *God out of Place?* A Symposium on L.P. Hemming's Postmodernity's Transcending: Devaluing God. 2005. Edited by Yves De Maeseneer. Utrecht: Ars Disputandi, p.8.

In the XXth century the subject of religious language was very important. What they have to say is of intense interest to all who concern themselves with these problems of language and meaning. The analysis of religious language was really complicated by the transformation in the thought of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), who in his later thought was very far removed from his early treatment of language.

Faith defends its own, particular "situation" by fighting for the purity and sanctity of its language. "This peculiar 'religiosity' is obliged to ally the reactivity of the primitive and archaic return or to hypercritical vigilance. This "hypercritical vigilance can displace the traditional structures of national citizenship; they tend to efface both the borders of the state and the distinctive properties of languages."[3] The history of religious language evolution constitutes a progressive deterritorialization of the existential "situation" of faith, the grand subsumption of all the world's "sacred" texts and traditions under the umbrella of the scientific or theoretical approach and in the fact connote a "de-territorialization" of those faith coding that had already been re-territorialized as the general concept of the religious. The postmodern theory at all and its concept of religion includes the idea that is close to an immanent sort of eschatology, proclaiming the *end* of all that went before it. Most of researchers understand necessary that philosophy and theology should resume intelligent and fruitful communication, even when there are grave and far-reaching differences of judgment.

Barth and Wittgenstein as "transcendental signifiers"

Karl Barth as most distinguished modern representative of evangelical theology, possibly was the first who started possibly to talk on a problem, which evokes interest in circles far removed from traditional theological aspiration. He noted that prior to all human attempts to articulate God in language human being should have some kind of experience of God. Barth and Wittgenstein dramatically changed the way that we now approach religious language and "much of the theology written in the past half century has been spent trying to come to terms with their contributions"[4]. Karl Barth's concept about religious language includes some general points:

- prior to all human attempts to articulate God in language, human being should have some kind of experience of God,
- he prefers to speak of man's readiness to know God rather than his experience of God,
- the personification of the concept of the Word of God does not signify any lessening of its verbal character,
- the personality of the Word of God is not to be played off against its verbal character and spirituality, but at the same time,

3 Derrida, Jacques. 2002. *Acts of Religion*. Edited by Gil Anidjar. New York, London: Routledge, p.92.

4 Hoking, Jeffrey. *Liberating Language: Rubem Alves, Theopoetics, and the Democratization of God-Talk*. P.1. https://www.academia.edu/1395368/Liberating_Language_Rubem_Alves_Theopoetics_and_the_Democratization_of_God-Talk

the "ordinariness" of religious language is a mark of its humanity, a mark of its unfitness to convey the word of God.

- our knowledge of God in revelation does not abolish God's hiddenness, and that human language as such is quite inadequate to its object, namely God,
- God's transcendence implies that he cannot be clearly revealed to men, clearly represented by human words, which are fallible, may from time to time "become" the word of God.

Barth asserts, "The pictures in which we view God, the thoughts in which we think Him, the words with which we can define Him, are in themselves unfitted to this object and thus inappropriate to express and affirm the knowledge of Him."[5] Barth underlines the importance of the words of revelation that God reveals Himself in propositions by means of language. Human language from time the words of prophets and apostles becomes his word.

Russel F. Aldwinckle describes that Barth "goes a very long way indeed in admitting that our knowledge of God in revelation does not abolish God's hiddenness, and that human language as such is quite inadequate to its object, namely God"[6]. Barth words that "God's hiddenness is not the content of a last word of human self-knowledge" does not mean the fact that "God is invisible, ineffable, and incomprehensible, that he cannot be defined and therefore limited by human knowledge" and "theology and proclamation must be completely silenced."[7]

In this point we can find similarity with Wittgenstein' concept of religious language and that is extremely popular both in philosophy and in theology today.

Neil MacDonald in the book "*Karl Barth and the Strange New World within the Bible: Barth, Wittgenstein, and the Metadilemmas of the Enlightenment*" compares Wittgenstein and Barth and finds some other close similarities.[8] The first is between Barth's theological epistemology and Wittgenstein's private language argument, the second deals with those common views on "the metadilemmas of the Enlightenment," which negate the idea that exists, a criterion outside the phenomenon of revelation or language by which they could be judged.

For Austrian writer and philosopher Ingeborg Bachmann, Wittgenstein is "the mentor of a commandment to silence". His words: "Of that which one cannot speak, one must remain silent" are a very close to Barth concept of ineffability.[9] Definition of ineffability is "indescribable" or "unspeakable." Silvia Jonas defines the ineffable as

5   Barth, Karl. 1957. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. II: The Doctrine of God, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Trans. T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, H. Knight, and J. L. M. Haire. New York: Scribner, Pt. 1, p. 188.

6   Aldwinckle, Russel F. Karl Barth and Religious Language. *Canadian Journal of Theology A Quarterly of Christian Thought*. 1965, Vol. XI, No. 3 p.168. https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/cjt/11-3_164.pdf

7   Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. II: The Doctrine of God, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Trans. T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, H. Knight, and J. L. M. Haire. New York: Scribner, 1957, Pt. 1, p. 193.

8   MacDonald, Neil, B. 2002. *Karl Barth and the Strange New World within the Bible: Barth, Wittgenstein and the Metadilemmas of the Enlightenment*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.

9   Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1961. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. § 7.

a nonlinguistic item, which is in principle impossible to express in conceptual terms or to communicate to others by the use of language. She divides ineffability into four types: objects, like 'the Absolute', truths, contents, mental and epistemic states that are not linguistically communicable.[10] Additionally, the analyses of similarities or Barth-Wittgenstein common approach is fruitful possibility to look on Barth from contemporary intellectual climate.

Don't ask for the meaning; ask for the use.

Wittgenstein's concept of language and philosophy of religion extremely influential today. Wittgenstein's heritage challenges much that is taken for granted in philosophical theological thinking as well as in the theoretizing of art, religion, science and culture. Many years discussions go on about his impact to theology and two radically different opinions can be differentiated: "theologians now stand in the shadow of Wittgenstein" or "it is unclear what might happen to a theology given the full Wittgenstein treatment" or "his influence is not limited to one "school" of theologians, but includes Thomist, liberal, postliberal, and evangelical theologians.[11]

His unorthodox style of writing in many ways difficult for theologies largely hampered the recognition of his religious philosophy. Next problem is related to private Wi-

ttgenstein relations with religion. Bertrand Russell named these relations as a *blindness*. Wittgenstein's statement that "The ways in which people express their religious feelings differ enormously" has partly clarified his explanation about own religious believe.[12] Wittgenstein's view of the Christian religion was complicated: Wittgenstein wrote that he "did not believe that Jesus would come to judge him [doctrine of the Second Coming and Last Judgment], although about Jesus' Resurrection he felt inclined to believe".[13] Continuing this passage, he emphasizes that the way you use the word 'God' shows not whom you mean – but instead what you mean. For Ralph Blumenau, "it is clear that Wittgenstein had strong religious feelings, but also that these resist any confessional formulations"[14]. For him 'belief' means 'religious belief', which is not belief that a hypothesis is more or less probable; it concerns the foundations of our life. He never committed himself to any formal religion. Wittgenstein believed in mystical truths and it is very important to him, but he thinks that we have no possibility to meaningfully express and analytically explain it.

In *Recollections of Wittgenstein* Maurice O'Connor Drury reminds Wittgenstein's conclusion: "I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a

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10 Jonas, Silvia. 2016. *Ineffability and Its Metaphysics: The Unspeakable in Art, Religion, and Philosophy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

11 Ashford, Bruce R. Wittgenstein's theologians. A survey of Ludwig Wittgenstein's impact on theology. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 2007, 50/2, p.357. https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/50/50-2/JETS_50-2_357-375_Ashford.pdf

12 *Recollections of Wittgenstein*: Hermine Wittgenstein, Fania Pascal, F. R. Leavis, John King, M. O'c. Drury. Edited by Rush Rhees. Oxford: Oxford: University Press, 1984 p. 102

13 Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1980. *Culture and Value*, translated by Peter Winch. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 33

14 Blumenau, Ralph. Wittgenstein and Judaism by Ranjit Chatterjee. *Philosophy Now*.2006, Issue 56, July/August. https://philosophynow.org/issues/56/Wittgenstein_and_Judaism_by_Ranjit_Chatterjee

religious point of view".[15] In this case, Wittgenstein used the word 'religious' equivocally: as adherence to a particular religion's doctrine and as a passionate capturing to a last particular point of retention. It will be very difficult not to regard Wittgenstein as a religious man: a religious ethics was the central point of his life.

Wittgenstein "was himself an enigma", which was very complicated and controversial. His personal religiosity, his Christianity, his Jewishness was an enigma, first, for himself. In the search of Wittgenstein's Jewishness Ranjit Chatterjee follows Robert Wistrich's view that Wittgenstein as a descendant of converts and of such people eliminated the convert identity problem, but rather intensified it[16]. For Chatterjee, the case of Wittgenstein Jewishness is occasion to speak about Postmodernism, which "Judaism gave birth"[17]. It is difficulty to agree with this conclusion from the reason that Jewish origins of Wittgenstein, Levinas or Derrida have different influence and consequences on the formation of philosophical concepts of each of them.

At the same time, some commentators and researchers raised other questions: Was Wittgenstein an Anti-Semite? On what level anti-Semitism was inherent for Wittgenstein's philosophy? (Béla Szabados, Ranjit Chatterjee, Brian McGuinness, David Stern and other). Most discussions of this topic are contradictory. Not going into details, I agree with David Stern's position that "before rushing to judgment, we need to consider what it could mean to say that Wittgenstein was, or was not, a Jew, or an anti-Semite. This is not just a matter of tabulating various possible definitions of these expressions, but of considering the different contexts - cultural, social, personal - in which those terms can be used, and their significance in those contexts"[18].

Béla Szabados in the book "Ludwig Wittgenstein on Race, Gender, and Cultural Identity..." emphasized that nowadays Wittgenstein's treatment of religion has many new moral and political dimensions. "Wittgenstein's treatment of religion, with specific attention to Judeo-Christianity, is an exemplary attempt at a possible reinterpretation and retrieval of our moral resources in the wake of the moral vacuum left by the ideologies of Fascism and Communism. It strikes me as ironic that one of the deepest philosophical critics of our culture, concerned with its re-animation, is charged with complacency and 'quietism'.[19]

Religion, it seems, is without ground or explanation. It just is.

Bruce R. Ashford answering on the question: what the nature of Wittgenstein's influence is, divided it into some general

15 *Recollections of Wittgenstein*: Hermine Wittgenstein, Fania Pascal, F.R. Leavis, John King, M. O'c. Drury. Edited by Rush Rhees. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984 p.79

16 Ranjit Chatterjee. 2005. *Wittgenstein and Judaism: A Triumph of Concealment*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005, p.163

17 Ibid, p. 139.

18 Stern, David. Was Wittgenstein a Jew? *Wittgenstein Biography and Philosophy*. Edited by James C . Klagge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.238.

19 Szabados, Béla. 2010. *Ludwig Wittgenstein on Race, Gender, and Cultural Identity: Philosophy as a Personal Endeavour*. New York, Walls Edwin Mellen Press, p.237.

directions: a selected theologians who are fully Wittgensteinian, the certain theologians who are selective in their adoption of Wittgenstein's insights and theologians who oppose Wittgenstein, but nonetheless are affected by his influence is, on the discipline as a whole. For him, summary of the central themes of Wittgenstein's writings plus these general directions can allow to show the overall picture of Wittgenstein's influence.

Wittgenstein's conception of religion looks as mirrors, which reflect his philosophical views more generally. For him, *belief* is very important term in religious concept. From this reason, Wittgenstein says: "It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it is belief, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of this interpretation".[20] In the search the answer on such question as "how do I know that two people mean the same when each says he believes in God? Wittgenstein gave statement that "practice gives the words their sense".[21]

Religious language looks like what Wittgenstein once called "running against the limits of language". His general idea is that language seeks to generate a map of reality and language is "laid across reality like a ruler". The importance of this way of thinking starts to be visible in 20th-century discussions of God. Wittgenstein popularized the idea that the meaning of a sentence can be found in the process of verification how much this meaning is in opposition to reality. Every sentence, which cannot be verified, is meaningless. From his view, theological statements like those that "God loves the world" being rejected as meaningless precisely because they are unverifiable. But in the early 1930s, Wittgenstein found that his past ideas are not applicable to philosophically and theologically "ideal world". His conception about religion as a language game connected with word understanding as a tool and can be used for very different goals and ways.

Wittgenstein believes that all scientific questions, regarding state of affairs in the world, may be understudied and answered without having touched the transcendent problems of life. Nevertheless, he affirms that metaphysical propositions lack a meaning because they do not refer to verifiable in the world facts. Wittgenstein admits that the nonsensicality of religious expressions is their very essence from the reason that they are beyond limits of language significance. It means that every our attempt to write or talk about religion makes it run against the boundaries of language and is hopeless. Although religion can be no science and it adds nothing to our knowledge in any sense, Wittgenstein states that "the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life (...) is a document of tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it". [22]

20 Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1980. *Culture and Value*, trans. P. Winch, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p.64e

21 Ibid, p. 85e

22 Wittgenstein, Ludwig. A lecture on ethics. *The Philosophical Review.* 1965, Vol. 71(1). P. 12.

To think that one was following a rule would be following the rule

The well-known concept in Wittgenstein's later writings is "language game," which he used for showing the complexity of language and its close relationship with people lives. Wittgenstein' maxima "practice gives the words their sense" was exteriorized in the theory of language-game, which included different types of religious practices: praying, church attendance, lighting candles, going on pilgrimage. The rules of language are analogous to the rules of games. The meaning *rule* was a very important from the reason that "following a rule is *fundamental* to our language game," and "following a rule is a practice" and "so the use of [a] word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands"[23]

For Wittgenstein, language-use is predicated upon the practices of rule following. This means that even the solitary inventor of the language is accountable to the normative constraints that make the language a language at all. From this reason, everybody who invented a language is banded oneself by the norms of the language.

The idea of *a private language* was another important meaning in Wittgenstein philosophy. He explained it thus: "The words of this language are to refer to what can be known only to the speaker; to his immediate, private, sensations. So another cannot understand the language"[24]. For him, language conceived as *necessarily* understandable only to its single originator because the things that define its vocabulary are not necessarily understandable to others. Wittgenstein characterizes *private language* as applicable only to the private, immediate inner sensations of the inventor of that language. According him, a *private language* is putatively impossible for any other language speaker to understand and often to translate own idea. It "describes my inner experiences and which only myself can understand" and is "for [the inventor's] private use".[25] Wittgenstein emphasized that private language often looks as a language, which sealed-off in interior privacy and can be intrinsically unintelligible to other languages.

The religious language-games, same as others, should be built on reasons and justifications. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein has concluded that justification as such should be close related with what we actually do. From this reason, religion is in no way unlike any other language-game. He writes: "Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we should see the facts as primary phenomena. That is where we should say: this language game is played."[26]. The development of this idea empowered him to make such conclusion: "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; in the end it can only describe it. Nor can it give it any foundation. It leaves everything as it is."[27]

Conclusion

As noted earlier, the nature of Wittgenstein's influence can be divided into some general

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23 Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1963. Philosophical Investigations. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, §261.

24 Ibid, § 243.

25 Ibid, § 256

26 Ibid, § 654

27 Ibid, § 124

directions: selected theologians who are fully Wittgensteinian, the theologians who are selective in their adoption of Wittgenstein's insights and theologians who oppose Wittgenstein, but nonetheless are affected by his influence. It provided a significant amount of situations in which theologians are now compelled to give careful attention to Wittgenstein's work by three reasons: for his influence on the field of theology, for their own constructive work, or being prepared to rejection of those insights.

Gareth Moore pessimistically concluded that "on the whole, most philosophy of religion goes on as if Wittgenstein never existed ... one sometimes gets the impression from non-Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion that what Wittgenstein and his followers have to say ... is simply irrelevant to their concerns".[28] For Wittgenstein philosophical truth was an intellectual value and he researched such religious insights that can be developing to his philosophical concept.

Wittgenstein's approach about religious language helps us to deeper understand such terms as *religious pluralism* and *secularization*. The idea itself that religious belief can be described in such definitions as *ineffability, indescribable, unspeakable* leaves a place to religious diversity. Wittgenstein underlines that religious ethics was the central point of his life, but does not connect himself with confessional and denominational limits. The fact that individuals hold conflicting or different belief claims may be connected with different cultural-linguistic frameworks, which are close to the idea of *language games.* Theologian and philosopher Tomas Halik in his essay *The Afternoon of Christianity: Church and Theology for a Post-Secular Age* asks a question: "Does the "linguistic turn" in philosophy (Wittgenstein) support the renewal of religious language?" and mostly he gives positive answer on this question.[29]

28 Moore, Gareth, O.P. 2005. Wittgenstein's English parson: some reflections on the reception of Wittgenstein in the philosophy of religion, in *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy.* Edited by Dewi Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr. Aldershot: Ashgate), p. 210–211.

29 Tomas Halik. *The Afternoon of Christianity: Church and Theology for a Post-Secular Age.* A Templeton Colloquium at the NDIAS, November 15–17, 2015 https://ndias.nd.edu/assets/181243/tomas_halik_colloquium_introductory_essay.pdf

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