Wittgensteinian Logic of Religious Language: Faith, Practice and Meaning

Nganbi Haobam

Abstract

This paper explores Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language concerning religious belief, particularly focusing on the logic of religious language, ritual practice, and the concept of certainty. Drawing from *On Certainty*, *Philosophical Investigations*, and *Lectures on Religious Belief*, the paper analyses how Wittgenstein's approach redefines religious discourse as a non-cognitive, practice-based form of life. The study further discusses Wittgensteinian fideism, the rejection of evidentialist apologetics, and the implications of his thought for interreligious dialogue and religious pluralism through engagements with scholars such as D.Z. Phillips and Norman Malcolm, in this article, assert that Wittgenstein offers a framework wherein religious belief is meaningful, though not in propositional or empirical terms.

Keywords: Religious Language, Language Games, Fideism, Religious Pluralism, Interfaith Dialogue

Introduction

For ages, philosophers of religion have been puzzled by the dynamics and significance of religious language. Most classical attempts have sought to defend or criticise religious belief employing metaphysical techniques, empirical proof, or a theological system. However, Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy offers a radical shift in perspective. Rather than asking whether religious statements are true or false in the conventional sense, Wittgenstein invites us to examine how such statements function within particular human activities—what he famously terms *"language games"* and *"forms of life"* (Wittgenstein, 1953, §23).

This paper explores how Wittgenstein's views reframe our understanding of faith, religious dogma, ritual, and pluralism. His approach resists the demand for empirical justification of belief. Instead, it emphasises that religious language derives meaning from its place in a religious life. This move challenges evidentialist critiques while also providing a robust response to fideism by showing that faith is neither reducible to irrationality nor explicable by reason alone.

Religious Dogma and Certainty in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy

Wittgenstein's discussions regarding language, faith, and the concept of certainty particularly give him a unique approach to understanding religious dogma. Rather than treating religious doctrines as empirical claims or speculative metaphysical assertions, Wittgenstein regards them as embedded features of a form of life. The meaning and function of religious belief are thus inseparable from the practices and attitudes of the communities in which such beliefs are lived. *"Religious language functions in a specific context or form of life. Its meaning is tied to practices of worship, rituals, and moral commitments, rather than to factual descriptions"* (as cited in Phillips, 1976, p. 27). With this perspective, Wittgenstein redirects the focus of philosophical inquiry away from the truth conditions of religious propositions and towards their use in the fabric of lived human experience.

Wittgenstein's remarks on certainty, particularly in *On Certainty* (1969), illuminate how deeply religious dogma can be rooted in life without being justified by evidence. His notion of *"hinge propositions"* is especially pertinent here. These beliefs stand fast for us, not because they are self-evident or demonstrably true, but because they form the background against which all doubt and justification occur. As Wittgenstein explains, *"At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded"* (§253). In religious contexts, such foundational beliefs include doctrines like the resurrection or divine providence—not as scientific hypotheses, but as the conceptual scaffolding upon which religious life is constructed.

It would be mistaken to view these dogmas as lacking meaning or relevance because they cannot be proven. Wittgenstein does not suggest that such beliefs are epistemically worthless or irrational. Rather, they belong to a distinct category of certainty that resists the norms of empirical

verification. Religious dogmas are not held by virtue of evidence but are enacted within a form of life where they guide perception, conduct, and ethical response. Adopting religious dogma is not primarily about accepting a set of propositions but about participating in a lived orientation towards the world.

Wittgenstein's conviction can be best illustrated by delineating empirical certainty from religious certainty. The former depends on observation, repetition, and consensus: for example, the belief that "the sun will rise tomorrow" is grounded in habitual experience and serves as a paradigm of scientific predictability. Religious certainty, however, is not of this kind. It is not a probabilistic expectation grounded in past evidence. Rather, it is what Wittgenstein might call a framework conviction—something that stands outside the game of questioning and justification and instead conditions that game's possibility.

Such a view does not imply that religious belief is impervious to challenge or critique. What it does suggest is that the criteria for assessing religious belief cannot be the same as those used for empirical or scientific claims. The demand for evidence in religion is a category mistake if it assumes that religious utterances are meant to function as hypotheses or descriptions. Wittgenstein challenges this assumption by emphasising that religious utterances are typically not expressions of opinion but expressions of commitment. *"The truth of certain expressions of religious belief is an attitude towards a system of reference, not a proposition to be judged true or false by ordinary empirical criteria"* (as cited in Rhees, 1970, p. 112).

Within this framework, dogma takes on a role akin to grammar—it sets the limits of meaningful discourse within a religious form of life. The doctrinal statements of religion, such as the belief in divine omniscience or the immortality of the soul, function not to report facts but to regulate how believers respond to life's ultimate questions. These beliefs are expressed in practices such as prayer, worship, confession, and ethical conduct, and their significance lies in the role they play within these practices. To understand a religious belief is thus not merely to comprehend its propositional content but to grasp the life within which that belief makes sense.

Wittgenstein's insistence that "what has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—forms of life" (*Philosophical Investigations*, §226) reinforces the idea

that beliefs cannot be abstracted from the social and practical settings in which they are embedded. The religious form of life includes not only doctrinal commitments but also rituals, moral attitudes, and communal narratives. In this context, religious dogmas are not speculative constructs but expressions of an existential orientation. They give structure and meaning to the believer's world and are enacted through a specific kind of life.

By situating dogma within a form of life, Wittgenstein redefines the role of certainty in religious belief. Certainty here is not the product of argument but the precondition for it. One does not arrive at faith through logical deduction; rather, faith constitutes the framework within which certain kinds of reasoning and experience become possible. This conception resists both the rationalist demand for justification and the sceptic's charge of irrationality. Religious certainty is not irrational; it is extra-rational—it operates outside the domain where evidence and argument typically function.

This reframing has profound implications for how philosophers of religion might approach the question of belief. Instead of asking whether religious doctrines can be rationally justified, Wittgenstein urges us to investigate how they are lived and what role they play within human life. Religious certainty, in his view, is not something one argues into or out of—it is something that shows itself in the life one leads. Thus, his work calls for a deeper attentiveness to the lived experience of religious belief and a corresponding humility in approaching it from the outside.

Ritual, Practice and the Logic of Faith in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy

Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion provides a compelling change in how religious belief is understood, but its nature is also redefined (as belief is not a set of propositions that require verification) but as a lived mode of existence constituted by ritual, ethical action, and communal life. This reconfiguration is not simply descriptive but transformative. It transforms the very logic we have in interpreting religious commitment, which dismisses evidence, metaphysical abstractions, and presuppositions.

Wittgenstein's concern with the connection between language and life leads him to focus on the ritual dimension of religion. In his view, religious doctrines derive their meaning not from isolated propositions

but from the practices in which they are embedded.[8] Just as words acquire meaning through use in specific contexts, so too do religious beliefs find significance within forms of life. This notion displaces the assumption that religious claims are intelligible independently of the life worlds in which they function.

This communal basis of meaning also explains why Wittgenstein resists attempts to universalise or abstract religious statements. Just as the rules of a game define what counts as a valid move, the form of life defines the intelligibility of religious beliefs. Without a grasp of the internal logic of religious life, outsiders may misinterpret its symbols, practices, and statements. We are engaged in a struggle with language*; Wittgenstein* writes, *"Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language"* (Wittgenstein, 1953, §109). The task of the philosopher, then, is not to refute religious belief but to dissolve the confusion caused by applying the wrong criteria of assessment.

Faith, for Wittgenstein, is inherently practical. It does not purport to answer empirical questions or establish theoretical claims. Instead, it structures how one lives, perceives, and responds to the world. In *Culture and Value*, he remarks that the mystical issue is not how things are in the world but that there is a world (Wittgenstein, 1998). This claim signals that religious faith concerns orientation, not information. It is an ethical stance rather than an epistemic judgement. Faith, as such, is irreducibly first-personal, lived rather than demonstrated.

In this respect, Wittgenstein's position has been interpreted as a form of fideism, though he himself never adopted the label. Fideism, broadly construed, maintains that religious belief does not require rational justification and may, in fact, be undermined by it. While Wittgenstein never systematically develops a fideist doctrine, his rejection of evidentialist assumptions and his emphasis on practice over proposition bear clear affinities with fideistic thought.

Indeed, his later writings have significantly shaped what is often called *"Wittgensteinian fideism"*. This approach holds that religious beliefs are intelligible only within the context of a religious form of life and

8 Wittgenstein's discussion of private language in ***Philosophical Investigations***, §§243–271, where he argues that meaning must be grounded in public criteria and communal practices.

cannot be validated or invalidated by external epistemological standards. This claim articulates a crucial aspect of his thought: religious belief is not a defective form of empirical reasoning but an alternative mode of understanding altogether.

Scholars such as D.Z. Phillips has developed this aspect of Wittgenstein's work into a full account of religious discourse. Phillips contends that to demand justification for religious belief is to misunderstand its nature. To seek an explanation where none is required is to misunderstand the religious discourse entirely (Phillips, 1976, p. 14).[9] Religious declarations, according to Phillips, are not truth-claims in the ordinary sense but expressions of a moral and spiritual outlook grounded in tradition and practice.

Wittgenstein's thought has implications that reach well beyond the philosophy of religion. His account of meaning as use and belief as practice invites reconsideration of how we confront issues of moral, aesthetic, and spiritual significance at a more fundamental level. Faith, for Wittgenstein, is not a matter of inner assent but of outward form—something shown rather than said. It is displayed in ritual, sustained in community, and grounded in a life lived according to particular values and convictions.

In sum, Wittgenstein's reflections on ritual and belief resist both reductive naturalism and abstract metaphysics. He offers a vision of religion that is neither provable nor irrational but expressive of human life in its ethical and existential fullness. In this view, belief is not an epistemic burden but a form of ethical orientation. It is not what one claims to know but how one lives. By emphasising action, community, and tradition, Wittgenstein provides a grammar of religious faith that remains profoundly influential and deeply humane.

Misinterpretations and Criticisms of Fideism in Wittgenstein

The association of Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy with fideism—a view that elevates faith over reason or denies the relevance of reason in religious belief—has attracted both endorsement and critique. While Wittgenstein never explicitly identified himself with fideism, his later writings, particularly his *Lectures on Religious Belief* and remarks in

9 The influence of Wittgenstein on D.Z. Phillips and the so-called Swansea School has been widely acknowledged in secondary literature on the philosophy of religion.

Philosophical Investigations, have been interpreted as defending a form of religious belief that is immune to rational justification or evidential support. Yet this interpretation is not without its complications. Several commentators have argued that to read Wittgenstein as a fideist is to misrepresent the scope and subtlety of his reflections on religious discourse.

Wittgenstein's later work is characterised by a move away from the search for metaphysical explanations or universal definitions and towards an analysis of how language is used in concrete human practices. Central to this outlook is his concept of *"language games,"* where the meaning of a word is rooted in its use within particular forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1953, §23). When applied to religious language, this implies that the statements of faith—such as belief in divine judgment or the resurrection—are not propositions that describe empirical reality but expressions embedded in ritual, community, and ethical orientation.

The Charge of Fideism

Critics of Wittgenstein, such as Kai Nielsen, have argued that this is true. Some critics, like Kai Nielsen, defend the position of rationality and empirical standards underpinning religious discourse, claiming that it protects religious faith from scrutiny. The Wittgensteinian criteria isolate religious beliefs way too far beyond the reach of reasoned discourse (Nielsen, 1982, p. 160). According to Nielsen, such a stance could reduce religion to a kind of private language that is inaccessible and incommensurable with broader philosophical or ethical analysis.

This criticism stems in part from Wittgenstein's resistance to treating religious belief as a theory about the world. In the *Lectures on Religious Belief*, he remarks that religious belief might best be described as a kind of *"passionate commitment to a system of reference,"* and that *"although it's belief, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life"* (Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 53).[10] On this account, faith is not the product of inference, nor is it grounded in demonstrable evidence. Rather, it is a worldview—a form of life inclusive of one's actions, attitudes and practices.

It is precisely this shift from a propositional attitude to commitment that brings accusations of fideism. If religious belief is beyond the reach of

10 Ibid., p. 53.

rational examination, does that not mean that we are saying it does not fall within the domain of reason at all? Does Wittgenstein not reduce religion to irrationality, or at least to arbitrariness?

While such concerns are understandable, they may mischaracterise Wittgenstein's intentions. Wittgenstein does not argue that reason has no place in religion, nor does he assert that religious beliefs are irrational. Rather, he maintains that they are rational within their frameworks. That is, they operate according to a different set of criteria than those governing empirical or scientific reasoning.

Thus, while Wittgenstein does indeed separate religious belief from empirical discourse, this is not to say that religious belief is nonsensical or meaningless. On the contrary, it has its internal logic rooted in a way of life. What Wittgenstein resists is the attempt to subject religion to alien standards—standards that do not arise from within its practices.

Faith and the Absence of Evidence

Wittgenstein's opposition to evidentialism is often cited as evidence of his alignment with fideism. In the *Lectures on Religious Belief*, he observes that the search for evidence may be misguided when it comes to religious commitment:

"If someone is ill and he says: 'This is punishment,' do you say: 'Science has shown there is no such thing'? I'd reply: 'But do you believe the opposite?'" (Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 56)[3]

The point here is not to suggest that faith contradicts science but rather that it operates outside the sphere where such confirmation or contradiction applies. The believer's claim is expressive, not explanatory. It reveals a way of seeing the world and one's place in it.

This idea resonates with Søren Kierkegaard's conception of the *"leap of faith."* In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard argues that faith is not the result of rational deliberation but begins where reason ends. He famously writes, *"Faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off"*.[11] While Kierkegaard presents a more individually existential take, the parallel with Wittgenstein rests in the notion that religious belief cannot be forced nor justified with reason.

11 Kierkegaard, S. (1983). ***Fear and Trembling***. Princeton University Press, p. 68.

To read Wittgenstein as a fideist in the narrow sense is to overlook the depth and subtlety of his reflections. He acknowledges the value of reason but challenges its dominance in areas where it may not apply effectively. Faith, for Wittgenstein, is not an inferior form of experience but a distinct mode of life—one that cannot be reduced to evidence or argument without distortion.

Contemporary Responses and Applications of Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religious Language

"Language games" and *"forms of life"* are concepts of Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy, which still impact modern discussions regarding the nature and role of language in religion. By redefining meaning as rooted in use, Wittgenstein (1953) disputes the claim that religious utterances are empirical or metaphysical claims which need to be proved or disproved. He proposes that religious language operates within certain rituals or practices which afford it meaning and, more often than not, defies the expectations of traditional epistemology.

One of the most influential interpreters of Wittgenstein in the domain of religious philosophy is D.Z. Phillips. Drawing extensively on Wittgenstein's later work, Phillips insists that religious discourse should not be understood as a series of truth claims to be justified or refuted but as part of a broader form of life. For Phillips, *"to seek for an explanation where none is required is to misunderstand the religious discourse entirely"* (Phillips, 1976, p. 14). His central thesis is that religious language cannot be judged by empirical or scientific standards because it does not function in the same way as descriptive language.

This Wittgensteinian insight is further illustrated in Phillips's *The Concept of Prayer*, where he argues that it is not the sort of evidence that we are prepared to adduce that makes a religious statement true or false but whether the person involved in that statement is making a certain kind of a living (Phillips, 1981, p. 36). This reflects Wittgenstein's view that religious belief is not reducible to intellectual assent; it is best understood through the practical and existential commitments of the believer.

Wittgenstein himself makes this point vividly in his *Lectures on Religious Belief*, where he draws a distinction between empirical and religious discourse:

"Suppose someone were a believer and said: 'I believe in a Last Judgement,' and I said: 'Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly.' You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us… It isn't a question of my being anywhere near him, but on an entirely different plane…" (Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 53).

This passage underlines Wittgenstein's contention that religious language is not on the same "plain" as a factual assertion. Rather than expressing theoretical commitments, religious statements articulate a form of life—a deeply embedded way of responding to the world.

Contemporary applications of Wittgenstein's religious philosophy thus stress the inseparability of belief from practice. This focus is especially helpful in contemporary theology and interfaith dialogue, where traditional dogmatic or apologetic frameworks are often at odds with pluralism. Wittgenstein's framework calls for a move from propositional debate to the articulations of faith in practice. Instead of asking whether different religious beliefs are logically compatible, one looks at how these beliefs operate in the lives of their followers.

However, even with these observations, rational religious philosophy is still accepted by some critics. Kai Nielsen (1982) has famously criticised Wittgenstein for making religious faiths immune to rational scrutiny. He describes a fortress of protective dependability that surrounds religious language, prioritising it and preventing rational evaluation, thus rendering it philosophically unassailable. This kind of protection, he claims, is dangerous when religious faiths carry public responsibilities with them that have consequences in the social sphere.

Yet defenders of Wittgenstein, such as Phillips, counter that his approach does not shield religion from all scrutiny but relocates the standard of understanding. Instead of applying inappropriate scientific or logical criteria to faith, one is asked to understand belief within the practices that sustain it. Wittgenstein (1953) himself recognises that at some point, justifications come to an end, and action begins: *"If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do'"* (§217). Such a claim is not a blind defence of irrationalism but rather an affirmation of the existence of certain practices, including religion, that are foundational in nature.

Wittgenstein offers an interesting alternative to the philosophy of religious language, which is in contradiction to rationalist theology and sceptical critique. By framing belief as embedded in life rather than abstractly theorised, his work opens the door to richer and more respectful forms of dialogue across worldviews. While his perspective may limit the scope of traditional apologetics, it also deepens our understanding of what it means to believe—not as a hypothesis to be proved but as a life to be lived.

Wittgenstein on Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Understanding

Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language offers a powerful lens through which to reconsider the nature of religious belief, particularly in pluralistic and interfaith contexts. Through his concepts of *"language games"* and *"forms of life,"* Wittgenstein (1953) shifts attention away from doctrinal correctness and towards the practical contexts in which religious utterances acquire meaning. This framework presents a valuable alternative to universalist or doctrinally rigid accounts of interreligious engagement.

Rather than treating religious statements as empirical claims or metaphysical assertions to be judged by a single standard of truth, Wittgenstein argues that their meaning lies in their use. *"For a large class of cases of the employment of the word 'meaning'—though not for all—this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language"* (Wittgenstein, 1953, §43). Applying this principle to religion indicates that terms like "submission," "nirvana," or "salvation" cannot be divorced from the contexts in which adherents utilise them.

This has important consequences for issues of religious pluralism. Instead of trying to fit all traditions into one set of beliefs, Wittgenstein believes we should appreciate the unique logic and reasoning of each religious practice. For example, "submission" in Islamic tradition and "liberation" in Buddhist tradition are deeply rooted in their respective practices, rituals, and soteriological frameworks. To understand these concepts, one must attend to the form of life in which they are embedded, not abstract them for external comparison.

This attitude sets apart Wittgenstein's thoughts from those of other contemporary thinkers who tackle religion. Take, for example, Paul Tillich, who is equally criticised for framing religious faith within *"ultimate*

concern." This, too, places religion within the boundaries of an existential commitment. Nevertheless, Tillich remains bound to a systematising theological approach grounded in metaphysics. *"Philosophy,"* he writes, *"ought really to be written only as a poetic composition"* (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 24e), suggesting that philosophical insight comes not from theorising but from the attentive description of the forms of life we inhabit.

Some critics, including Kai Nielsen (1982), have argued that Wittgenstein's model of religious belief risks insulating faith from rational criticism. If religious beliefs are grounded solely in a form of life, is there any room for rational adjudication between them? Nielsen contends that Wittgenstein's perspective potentially renders all critique external and irrelevant. However, this objection may conflate immunity to empirical scrutiny with unaccountability altogether. Wittgenstein's point is not that religious beliefs are exempt from all forms of criticism but that they must be understood by criteria internal to the life in which they are lived.

Wittgenstein also warns against misusing language by imposing alien standards upon it. When it comes to religion, seeking theoretical justification in the form of evidential support misapprehends the role faith plays. In *Lectures on Religious Belief*, he observes*: "If someone is ill and he says: 'This is punishment,' do you say: 'Science has shown there is no such thing'? I'd reply: 'But do you believe the opposite?'"* (Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 56). Here, Wittgenstein resists the impulse to adjudicate religious meaning through scientific language, reminding us instead to respect the internal logic of religious expression.

His vision has continued relevance for contemporary religious studies. It allows scholars to move beyond simplistic attempts to compare faiths or engage in one faith's competition of truth claims against others toward more meaningful interdisciplinary work about the mechanisms of faith in various societies. It underscores the ethical and sociological dimensions of faith, that is, how religion is not only proclaimed but practised, lived, and passed on.

Conclusion

Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy reshapes how we approach religious language, belief, and pluralism—not by offering a new theology or metaphysics but by providing a method for examining the use of

language within the fabric of life. His notion that meaning arises from use within specific *"language games"* (Wittgenstein, 1953, §23) compels us to understand religious utterances not as abstract metaphysical propositions but as expressions of a lived commitment deeply embedded in community, practice and form of life.

Across this article, we have seen how Wittgenstein's approach resists both reductionist critiques and apologetic defences of religion. In rejecting evidentialist models, Wittgenstein does not dismiss reason but instead redirects our philosophical attention to how religious belief operates. It is a way of seeing, acting, and engaging with the world—a point emphasised by thinkers such as D.Z. Phillips and Norman Malcolm developed this line of thought to underscore the ethical and communal dimensions of faith. At the same time, critiques such as those by Kai Nielsen are instructive in ensuring that Wittgenstein's framework is not used to evade all scrutiny but understood as offering different standards of intelligibility rooted in context.

Wittgenstein's enduring legacy is the insistence that the philosophical impulse avoids intruding into areas that require more illumination than they provide, for it distorts rather than clarifies. To him, religious belief is not something to be proved or disproved; it is something to be lived and appreciated from within. By illuminating the moral and cultural dimensions of faith, his work remains relevant by reminding us that contemporary thought is shaped and, at its best, philosophy does not explain; it aids us in seeing.

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