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# ‘Objectively there is no truth’ – Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard on Religious Belief

*Genia Schönbaumsfeld*

Kierkegaard’s influence on Wittgenstein’s conception of religious belief was profound, but this hasn’t so far been given the attention it deserves. Although Wittgenstein wrote comparatively little on the subject, while the whole of Kierkegaard’s *oeuvre* has a religious theme, both philosophers have become notorious for refusing to construe religious belief in either of the two traditional ways: as a ‘propositional attitude’ on the one hand or as a mere ‘emotional response’ with no reference to the ‘real world’ on the other. This refusal to play by the orthodox dichotomies, as it were, has led to gross misrepresentation of their thought by numerous commentators. Neither Wittgenstein nor Kierkegaard has been immune to allegations of both ‘relativism’ and ‘fideism’, although neither charge could be wider of the mark. It is not that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard reject the role that reason has to play in both religion and philosophy, but that they try to undermine from within certain common assumptions about the nature of both religious faith and the point of philosophical activity that make us believe that the traditional dichotomies exhaust all the available options.

What I hope to show in this paper is that more sense can be made of Wittgenstein’s controversial remarks on religion, if we juxtapose them with Kierkegaard’s religious thought, especially that of Kierkegaard’s pseudonym,<sup>1</sup> Johannes Climacus, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The focal point of this paper is going to be the attempt to read what little Wittgenstein has to say about this topic through the lens of

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<sup>1</sup> Given space constraints, I cannot address the problem of how to read Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms here.

Climacus' claim that 'objectively there is no truth; an objective knowledge about the truth or the truths of Christianity is precisely untruth.' I will begin by giving a brief exposition of Climacus' views, will then sketch out what Wittgenstein has to say on the matter and will then attempt to bring the two together. In the remainder of the paper I will assess the implications of Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's conception as well as address some of the problems that their account might be said to engender.

## I. Concluding Unscientific Postscript

Climacus is well known for claiming in the *Postscript* that in religious matters 'truth is subjectivity'. What he means by this is that because for him, as for Wittgenstein, the question of faith is not an 'objective', 'empirical' issue which can be resolved by appeal to evidence, historical or otherwise, we have to concentrate instead on the 'existential' or 'personal' significance that this question has for us. This is what Climacus means by 'subjectivity'—i.e. pertaining to the 'subject'—and this has nothing to do with relativism or 'irrationalism', as commentators often suppose. Climacus says:

The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way to objective truth goes away from the subject, and while the subject and subjectivity become indifferent, the truth becomes indifferent, and that is precisely its objective validity, because the interest, just like the decision is subjectivity. (Kierkegaard 1992, 193)

In other words, precisely because religious belief does not, on this view, consist of assenting to propositions, it follows that in order to resolve the question of faith I must be *infinitely interested* in it as an existing person, not as a lofty scholar. For religious belief, on this conception, is something much more fundamental than simply being of the *opinion* that God exists. Therefore, even if evidence could be had, then on Climacus' and Wittgenstein's view, it would no longer be *religious* belief, and the belief in the Last Judgement, for example,

would not be fundamentally different from the secular belief that one will be put into prison for certain crimes. Of course the very concept of 'belief' would then become obsolete too, as, on this conception, it makes no sense to say that I believe in something that is, as it were, before my 'very eyes'. That is, in a world where 'God' could 'empirically manifest' himself, our concept of a 'God' to be believed in would lose its point. Climacus puts it like this:

Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast to the objective uncertainty, see to it that in the objective uncertainty I am out on 70,000 fathoms of water and still have faith. (Kierkegaard 1992, 204)

What Climacus means by 'objective uncertainty' isn't, therefore, *empirical* uncertainty, but rather the kind of uncertainty that accrues to making certain 'existential' choices. The '70,000 fathoms of water' do not refer to the extreme degree of 'empirical uncertainty', then, but to the intellectual and existential risk you take when you stop pondering a question 'objectively' and rather want to resolve it by making a decision, i.e. by changing the way you live in the relevant way. What Climacus is consequently referring to is the *risk of commitment* – and that is always a risk, be it in the religious domain or in other walks of life where you cannot remain dispassionate and disinterested (what Climacus means by 'objectivity'). Where something *can* be resolved objectively, however, faith, on this view, becomes conceptually impossible and passion becomes madness. Hence, someone, says Climacus, who clings to something finite that could be settled objectively with the passion appropriate only to faith is on the brink of insanity (which is just what happens in the case of religious fanatics or religious fundamentalists).

According to Climacus, taking God to be amenable to some kind of empirical investigation or thinking that some sort of 'direct' relationship with Him is possible, is really nothing more than paganism. As he puts it:

If God had taken the form, for example, of a rare, enormously large green bird with a red beak, that perched in a tree on the embankment and perhaps even whistled in an unprecedented manner — then our partygoing man would surely have had his eyes opened. [...] All paganism consists in this, that God is related directly to a human being, as the remarkably striking to the amazed. (Kierkegaard 1992, 245)

Therefore, if it is the latter that people take Christianity to be, then, for Climacus, they are either pagans in disguise or hypocrites.

Consequently, on Climacus' conception, Christianity is not a philosophical theory and the apostles are not a little professional society of scholars. This means that the question of whether to have faith in Christ (the Incarnation, what Climacus calls the 'absolute paradox') only genuinely arises for someone who wants *to be a Christian*, not for someone who is merely pondering this issue from an 'objective' point of view:

Objectively there is no truth; an objective knowledge about the truth or the truths of Christianity is precisely untruth. To know a creed by rote is paganism, because Christianity is inwardness. (Kierkegaard 1992, 224)

Hence, the attempt to relate to Christianity 'objectively', as if to a metaphysical theory, is the worst possible misunderstanding. As Climacus says:

Suppose that Christianity does not at all want to be understood; suppose that, in order to express this and to prevent anyone, misguided, from taking the road of objectivity, it has proclaimed itself to be the paradox. Suppose that it wants to be only for existing persons and essentially for persons existing in inwardness, in the inwardness of faith, which cannot be expressed more definitely than this: it is the absurd,<sup>2</sup> adhered to firmly with the passion of the infinite.' (Kierkegaard 1992, 214)

The emphasis on 'existence' is crucial here, because Climacus believes that it is impossible for any finite, existing being to apprehend truth *sub specie aeterni* (which is just what the Hegelians against which Kierke-

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<sup>2</sup> By 'absurd' Climacus means something resistant to 'objectification' (and consequently 'mediation').

gaard was reacting denied). The reason why Climacus is emphasizing the finitude of human beings is, I think, because it is an awareness of finitude that tends to draw people out of and away from themselves, as it were, in the search of an objective point of view — of the God's eye view. Christians are just as finite as anybody else. Therefore Christians too exhibit this tendency, and this is why the figure of Christ represents a continuing challenge even from the perspective of the Christian way of living. The challenge, or the on-going struggle, is continually to reaffirm oneself, as a Christian, as someone with the relevant unconditional commitments, sustained in the face of the temptations to objectivity with which one's finitude presents one. Thus, getting away from seeing the Incarnation as an intellectual or philosophical problem is not something that one can do once and for all. Rather, it is something that one has to keep on doing, and it is in *that* process that the authentically Christian relation to the understanding (and indeed to the relation between faith and the understanding) can be recognized.

From the non-Christian perspective, then, the paradox cannot be understood. From the Christian perspective, the paradox is Christ, the God-Man, the 'sign of contradiction', who is a mere human being to non-believers but God to the faithful. But precisely because Christ is such a 'sign of contradiction', whether He is *in deed* God, is not something that can be settled by theoretical means and consequently faith does not consist of saying 'yes' or 'no' to the 'thesis' that 'Christ is the Son of God'. When Climacus therefore speaks of the paradox as 'absolute', what he means is that only an existential ('subjective') response to the question is possible in the sense that I either become a follower of Christ or I reject Him: offence or faith. No theoretical ground is available here to determine whether the 'thesis' or its converse is philosophically defensible or not. And as long as I am in the faith and have an existence-relation to Christ, the very idea that I should regard my religious commitment as commitment to a theoretical claim which may stand in the need of proof, will strike me as ludicrous and absurd. In moments of doubt, however, which are generally moments of detachment, I may indeed begin to see my faith

in such terms, and from such a perspective it may seem to me that Christianity is a bizarre metaphysical doctrine about the ‘two natures’ of Christ<sup>3</sup>, say. But this is a temptation, a sign that I am beginning to lose my faith, not the ‘correct’, because ‘objective’, point of view. Thus, the difficulty of becoming a Christian consists, among other things, of the ever-present struggle against the temptation to view the claims of Christianity objectively — a struggle so intense that Climacus calls it a ‘martyrdom’.

## II. Culture and Value and On Certainty

In *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein makes the following remark:

Life can educate one to a belief in God. And *experiences* too are what bring this about; but I don’t mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us “the existence of this being”, but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows us an object, nor do they give rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts — life can force this concept on us. *So perhaps it is similar to the concept of “object”*. (last italics mine) (CV 1950, 86)

What Wittgenstein is suggesting here by drawing an analogy between the concept ‘God’ and the concept ‘object’ is that the former functions more like the *formal* concept ‘object’ (*Gegenstand*) than like a word referring to a particular thing, such as a table, chair, white elephant or what have you. In other words, the two concepts are grammatically similar, according to Wittgenstein, in the sense that they would both make for nonsense when employed in the subject-place of ontological assertions: it would make as little sense, on Wittgenstein’s view, to assert (or to deny) that objects exist as it does to assert (or to deny) that God exists. The reasons for this, initially perhaps rather baffling, claim are as follows: contrary to Moore, who insisted on the truth of this proposition against the sceptic, Wittgenstein thinks that the proposition ‘there are physical objects’ is a piece of philosophical nonsense,

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<sup>3</sup> Of course I can also have moments of being, as it were, ‘existentially’ offended at Christ à la Nietzsche.

as, according to him, it is not an empirical proposition for which one could have evidence. Wittgenstein says:

But can't it be imagined that there should be no physical objects? I don't know. And yet "there are physical objects" is nonsense. Is it supposed to be an empirical proposition? – And is this an empirical proposition: "There seem to be physical objects"? (OC, 35)

In order for the proposition 'there are physical objects' to make sense, it would have to be possible to know or to explain what would have to be the case if there were *no* physical objects. Should the proposition make sense, then it would have to be a kind of *hypothesis*, for which one could have evidence. But what would such evidence look like? Moore held the view that it is possible to infer 'there are physical objects' from the proposition 'here is a hand', but this was an illusion. For the latter means no more than that a hand *is* a physical object, and far from being an ontological hypothesis, this, according to Wittgenstein, is no more than a grammatical proposition that tells us what kind of thing a hand is. If this were an ontological hypothesis, then we would have to be able to indicate what would count as evidence for it, what as evidence against it, how the question could be settled beyond any reasonable doubt. But it is just this that is impossible, for we cannot explain what would be different if there were *no* physical objects, and, consequently, we also cannot explain what is the case when physical objects *do* exist. Furthermore, it is even less possible to give criteria for what would have to be the case if physical objects only *seemed* to exist, but do not actually do so (the classical sceptical scenario). All of this indicates that the proposition 'there are physical objects' is not an empirical one. No sense-perception or impression of an object (such as a hand) can lead us to the conclusion that there are physical objects, for the concept of 'physical object' is not a theoretical one, nor is it employed in the same way as the concept of a particular object. Therefore it makes sense to say 'there are frogs' or 'there are no unicorns', as the opposite of these sentences also makes sense, but not to say 'there are physical objects'.



In other words, it only makes sense to doubt whether there are physical objects, if it also makes sense to assert it. But it only makes sense to assert it, if, at least in principle, there exists a means of settling the question. In the case of physical objects in general, we have no such means. For we might, for example, have evidence for the existence of life on Mars, but we couldn't have evidence for the existence of physical objects in general, as neither 'sense-data' nor Quinean 'surface irradiations' constitute such evidence. *Pace* Moore, I don't infer the existence of an object from the sense-impression. Of course I know that someone or something is present inasmuch as I see them. But to see an object is not a 'surface irradiation' or 'sense-datum' and although it involves perceptual stimuli, I am ignorant of them and make no inferences from them. That is to say, perceiving an object is not evidence for its existence in the way that fingerprints, for example, are evidence for someone's having been at the scene of a crime. Consequently, there is no such thing as 'demonstrating' that my hand exists.

Of course, there are cases where it makes sense to speak of having evidence for the existence of something — life on Mars, distant planets, Great Pumpkins etc. — but where it is a matter of being directly confronted by something in ordinary circumstances, such as by a hand, say, it does not make sense, since in such cases doubt is logically excluded: talk of evidence is only meaningful if there is also logical space for being wrong and here there is none. As Wittgenstein says:

If Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those propositions which he declares certain, we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented. (OC, 155)

Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard therefore agree that it is a mistake to want to demonstrate God's existence. In Climacus' words:

To demonstrate the existence of someone who exists is the most shameless assault, since it is an attempt to make him ludicrous, but the trouble is that one does not even suspect this, that in dead seriousness one regards it as a godly undertaking. [...] A king's existence or presence ordinarily has its own expression of subjection and submissiveness. What if one in his most majestic presence wanted to demonstrate that he exists? Does one demonstrate it, then? No, one makes a fool of him, because one demonstrates his presence

by the expression of submissiveness. [...] And thus one also demonstrates the existence of God by worship – not by demonstrations. (Kierkegaard 1992, 545f.)

Two objections to this conception might suggest themselves at this point. First, we would not regard someone who was not religious as demented and second, if it makes sense to speak of having evidence for non-directly-perceivable things, then, given that on Climacus’ view, God is not directly perceivable, why can we not talk of inferring the existence of God in the way we might infer the existence of black holes, say? I will take these objection in turn.

#### (i) Objection One

While someone who pronounced the opposite of those propositions that Moore declares certain would be regarded as demented, someone who declared the opposite of what the religious person affirms, would not. This is indeed so, but this isn’t fatal to Wittgenstein’s account. For of course Wittgenstein holds in *On Certainty* that declaring either Moore’s propositions or their converse *certain* is misconceived. If it is the case that ‘there are physical objects’ is grammatical and not empirical, then neither the proposition nor its converse can be affirmed or denied. For grammatical remarks are neither true nor false, as they assert nothing (no state of affairs). Rather, they function as conditions of sense (rules) without which the form of life they are grammatical to would become unintelligible or lose its point. What Wittgenstein is therefore saying when he says we would regard someone as demented who affirmed the opposite of what Moore said is that if someone said this and actually *meant* it – i.e. wasn’t just, say, engaging in a philosophical dispute about realism – then this person would become unintelligible to us and we could no longer understand him or make any sense of him.

Naturally, in the religious case, we are confronted with ‘pluralism’ in the sense that there is not just one way of looking at human life. That is to say, while losing one’s religious faith would neither wholly under-

mine one's ability to act in and think about the world, nor leave that ability entirely unaltered, denying that there are physical objects would (either undermine one's ability or leave it completely unaltered). In this respect there is indeed a significant disanalogy between the concept 'God' and the concept 'object'. But this is compatible with the view that Wittgenstein's analogy nevertheless shows something important, namely, that just as one can't make an inference from the existence of tables and chairs to the existence of physical objects, so one can't make an inference from the existence of the universe (or of religious experience etc.) to the existence of God. 'There is a God' is consequently just as little an ontological (hypo)thesis as 'there are physical objects'. So there are no *a priori* reasons why a community should possess the concept of 'God', any more than a society need have our abstract concept of 'physical object'. That is to say, a tribe could perfectly well have the concepts 'chair', 'turnip', 'pigeon' etc. and treat these things in the way that we do without thinking that they all have one property in common, namely, that they are all *physical objects*.

Does asserting any of this deny 'the reality of God'—something that 'orthodox' Christians are often worried about? Not at all. Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard are only saying that the 'reality of God' is not on a par with the 'reality of empirical objects' and that consequently, it makes no sense to approach God 'objectively'—as if relating to an empirical concept or to a metaphysical theory. Hence, it is *only* if we desire the 'reality of God' to be akin to that of (super-)empirical objects (something that both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard would call conceptually confused) that their account could legitimately be accused of denying anything.

## (ii) Objection Two

There are two possible responses to the second objection. First, 'evidence', in the religious case, does not play the role it usually does when we are dealing with evidence for the existence of empirical objects. Second, if it made sense to ask for evidence of God's existence, then the proposition 'God exists' would have to be a hypothesis for which we

would have to be able to specify what would, at least in principle, count as confirmation or disconfirmation of it. But this is just as impossible as in the 'there are physical objects' case.

What Wittgenstein is trying to bring out by way of the analogy is that, just as we cannot infer the proposition 'there are objects' from the proposition 'here is a hand', in the case of religious belief it is also not a matter of making inferences from certain sense-perceptions. For religious experiences do not stand to the proposition 'there is a God' as, say, satellite pictures of the earth (or of Loch Ness monsters, black holes or what have you) stand to the proposition 'the earth is round' (as Wittgenstein says, we did not learn the concept 'God' by being shown pictures of him, nor 'could' we be shown pictures of him and the nature of this 'could' is logical). There simply is nothing that we would ordinarily call an 'evidential basis' here. Would seeing Christ rise from his grave constitute such evidence? But if we are not religious, would we be seeing *Christ* as opposed to, say, some bizarre and hitherto unexplained phenomenon?

The main reason why I think that Wittgenstein would want to insist that 'God exists' is grammatical is that, if we are not religious already, *nothing* would count as 'evidence for the existence of God' for us, even if we could, *per impossibile*, have any. For we could always explain even the most outlandish events simply as strange natural phenomena. This is also the reason why no one, even in principle, bothers to mount a search for God (which would really be the sensible thing to do, if one thinks that 'there is a God' is similar to 'there is a Loch Ness monster'). That this idea seems ludicrous, even funny, shows, I think, that language is idling when we try to construe religious belief analogously to empirical beliefs.

Furthermore, it is possible to describe what would be different, or what would have to be the case, if there were unicorns, or if there were a Loch Ness monster, but not how it would be if there were a God, or how it would be if God existed. For nothing would change *in* the world if God existed — at least nothing that would be cashable out in propositions. This is, I think, the significance of Wittgenstein's remark in the *Tractatus* that 'God does not manifest himself in the world'

(TLP 6.432). Of course the world of the religious person is in some sense a different world to that of the atheist, just as Wittgenstein said in the *Tractatus* that the world of the happy person is a different *world* to that of the unhappy. But this ‘difference’ does not show up on a ‘propositional’ level — the empirical world remains the same and yet the atheist would say other things about it than the religious person. Wittgenstein says:

God’s essence is supposed to guarantee his existence — what this really means is that what is at issue here is not the existence of something.

Couldn’t one actually say equally well that the essence of colour guarantees its existence? As opposed, say, to white elephants. Because all that really means is: I cannot explain what ‘colour’ is, what the word ‘colour’ means, except with the help of a colour sample. So in this case there is no such thing as explaining ‘what it *would* be like if colours *were* to exist’.

And now we might say: There can be a description of what it would be like if there were gods on Olympus — but not: ‘what it would be like if there were such a thing as God.’ And to say this is to determine the concept ‘God’ more precisely. (CV 1949, 82)

The reason why it is possible to describe what it would be like if there were Gods on Mount Olympus is because in pagan religions the deities are on a par with other empirical objects, just vastly more powerful. There is therefore no grammatical difference between talk of, say, Poseidon and talk of an ordinary human being, except that Poseidon has super-human powers. But this is ultimately not qualitatively different from encountering, say, a new species from a distant planet who have powers surpassing our own. In Christianity (and other monotheistic religions) talk of God is not like that, however. The grammar of the word ‘God’ does not function analogously to talk of some empirical object, as any state of affairs in the world is taken by the religious person to be compatible with God’s existence (and the converse is probably true of the atheist). One could perhaps therefore say that during the transition from paganism to Christianity the word ‘God’ underwent a grammatical shift and changed from being some kind of super-empirical concept to a grammatical one. When some-

thing becomes a grammatical remark, of course, it is *ex hypothesi* impossible to describe what the world would have to be like, were the grammatical remark to be true, as grammatical remarks function as conditions of sense and cannot therefore themselves be either true or false.

### III. Implications of Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's Conception

Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard agree that religious belief is non-rational: it is neither reasonable nor unreasonable, as faith is not the result of philosophical deliberation or the consequence of weighing up empirical evidence. But in this respect the religious form of life is not, in the end, so very different from other language-games or forms of life, for as Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty*, 'You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there — like our life.' (PI §559) Faith cannot be objectively justified (for if it could, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard would agree, it would *eo ipso* not be *faith*), but ultimately, what Wittgenstein is saying in *On Certainty* is that none of the concepts that lie at the heart of our forms of life can be so justified. In this respect use of the word 'object' can no more be justified than use of the word 'God', and yet the employment of these terms need not, for all that, be in the least *arbitrary*. As Wittgenstein keeps reiterating: *life forces these concepts on us*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Now in the case of physical objects one might think that one is more 'forced' than in the religious case, although I am not entirely sure what that is really supposed to mean. If this means only that physical objects can be perceived, but God cannot and direct perceivability is the criterion of 'forcedness', then Wittgenstein would agree (as would any religious person) that in the case of physical objects one is more 'forced'. If it means that one cannot in all seriousness doubt that there are physical objects, while one can doubt whether there is a God, then, naturally Wittgenstein, I take it, would also agree. If one, however, takes this to imply that therefore the former is more 'true' and more 'certain' than the latter, then I think that Wittgenstein would object. For as he has argued, neither belief is a hypothesis and even if it were one, there would not

While it seems fairly clear, however, how life forces the concept of ‘object’ on us, it is far from clear how this happens in the case of God. Given that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard have both repudiated all ‘objective’ approaches to religion, one might wonder how one can come to have faith at all. In *Practice in Christianity* Anti-Climacus perhaps gives a rather surprising answer to this question which Climacus had left hanging in the *Postscript*:

But if the essentially Christian is something so terrifying and appalling, how in the world can anyone think of accepting Christianity?” Very simply and, if you wish that also, very Lutherably: only the consciousness of sin can force one, if I dare to put it that way [...], into this horror[...]. Considered in any other way Christianity is and must be a kind of madness or the greatest horror. (Kierkegaard 1991, 67)

Now Wittgenstein doesn’t speak of ‘consciousness of sin’, but in the foregoing quotation from *Culture and Value* he says that life can educate one to a belief in God and he cites, for example, ‘sufferings of various sorts’.

What Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard seem to be saying here is that the shape of one’s life and the experiences one has can teach one a *use* for certain religious concepts. This is why all of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms keep stressing the *existential* (i.e. ‘subjective’) dimension of faith. Being religious means living life according to the Christian teachings and examining one’s life according to the Christian categories. One simply has to find *these* concepts appropriate in despite of any problems they may cause, as Anti-Climacus keeps emphasizing. It is only within the life of a religious person, then, that religious concepts become properly meaningful. Taken out of context, as it were, these concepts cannot but strike one as part and parcel of some obsolete metaphysical doctrine. How one therefore comes to have faith must, in the end, remain a ‘subjective’ matter. Just as there is no ‘recipe’ for how to live,

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be any absolute justification for it. As he puts it: “Well, if everything speaks for an hypothesis and nothing against it – is it then certainly true? One may designate it as such. – But does it certainly agree with reality, with the facts? – With this question you are already going round in a circle.” (OC, 191)

there is no ‘recipe’ for how to have faith. This is ultimately the significance of Climacus’ remark that as regards Christianity ‘objectively there is no truth’.

#### IV. Conclusion

By way of concluding, I will briefly address a criticism that is frequently made of both Wittgenstein’s and Kierkegaard’s conception of religious belief. Many commentators have taken the foregoing to imply that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard are equally guilty of reducing religion to simply living life in a certain way, which, they think, can do no justice to what religious people actually *believe*. This, I think, is erroneous and in part a result of being mesmerized by two exhaustive seeming dichotomies: either religious beliefs can be cashed out propositionally (realism) or they reduce merely to taking up a certain kind of attitude (anti-realism). However, there are many domains of discourse, where this stark either/or is simply inappropriate, ethics and aesthetics also being cases in point.

I think that one of the main motivating factors behind Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is to show that there is no such thing as ‘simply living life in a certain kind of way’ as opposed to ‘believing certain things’. *Genuine* beliefs can never be divorced from the consequences they have in one’s life. That is why Wittgenstein, for example, holds that idealism or global scepticism is really a non-starter, for all it reduces to, in the end, is talking in a certain way without this making any practical difference at all. As Wittgenstein says:

For there *are* people who say that it is merely extremely probable that water over a fire will boil and not freeze, and that therefore strictly speaking what we consider impossible is only improbable. What difference does this make in their lives? Isn’t it just that they talk rather more about certain things than the rest of us do? (OC, 338)

Beliefs and the forms of life which are their home cannot be divorced from each other. There is no such thing as believing something *in vacuo* – without a context – unless one thinks that believing is tanta-



mount to holding a certain mental image before one's mind.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, it is not the case that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard deny that religious people believe different things to non-religious people — far from it. What they are denying, however, is that any sense can be made of those beliefs completely independently of the form of life which gives them sense. That is to say, stating that Christians believe, for example, in the forgiveness of sins, is, as yet, not to have said anything apart from, as Climacus would undoubtedly say, reciting a formula by rote.

In this respect it is interesting to note that Wittgenstein, contrary to Kierkegaard, who, on all accounts of him, was obsessed by his 'sins', nevertheless could not become a genuinely religious person. So, it seems that Anti-Climacus' claim that only 'consciousness of sin' can force one into Christianity leaves something rather fundamental out. It is not only consciousness of sin that is necessary, but also the belief that one's sins will ultimately be forgiven by Jesus Christ, the Redeemer.<sup>6</sup> It appears to be the latter that Wittgenstein could not bring himself to accept. As Wittgenstein puts it:

I read: "No man can say that Jesus is the *Lord*, but by the Holy Ghost." — And it is true: I cannot call him *Lord*; because that says nothing to me. I could call him the 'paragon', 'God' even — or rather, I can understand it when he is called thus; but I cannot utter the word "Lord" with meaning. *Because I do not believe* that he will come to judge me; because that says nothing to me. And it could say something to me, only if I lived *completely* differently. (CV 1937, 33)

This quotation, I think, illustrates very well that Wittgenstein does not hold that religious people don't believe different things to non-religious people. Consequently, he is not advocating some form of 'anti-realism' about religion. However, he does agree with Kierkegaard that the Christian teaching addresses primarily the individual's life and the

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<sup>5</sup> I cannot go into the reasons why Wittgenstein takes this to be a misguided conception of belief here. For a detailed exposition, see my *A Confusion of the Spheres*, chapter four.

<sup>6</sup> This is an issue that Anti-Climacus discusses in *The Sickness unto Death*.

way the individual thinks about and assesses his life, not the mind of the speculative philosopher, as ‘formal’ proofs or ‘evidence’ (if there could, *per impossibile*, be such things) would never exert motivation enough for a life-change as drastic as that required by Christianity. Therefore, both philosophers would agree that the way of ‘objectivity’ leads only into darkness, or, what for Climacus would amount to the same, reduces Christianity to paganism<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Peter Momtchiloff for permission to draw on material from *A Confusion of the Spheres* and Aaron Ridley for comments on previous drafts.