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Review Of "Wittgenstein And Natural Religion" By G. Graham

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Wittgenstein and Natural Religion. Gordon Graham. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 219 pages, \$55.00 hardcover.

Reviewed by Richard Eldridge, Swarthmore College

Once upon a time, a number of philosophers both influenced by Wittgenstein and interested in religion argued that ontological commitments are at best secondary within religious life. What is instead of primary importance is whether there is anything meaningful in religious practice, that is, in what religious people say and do. As D. Z. Phillips put it,

To ask whether God exists is not to ask a theoretical question. If it is to mean anything at all, it is to wonder about praising and praying; it is to wonder whether there is anything in all that. . . . “There is a God”, though it appears to be in the indicative mood, is an expression of faith. (1976, p. 181)

This stance has the virtue of not condescending to ordinary pious worshippers from a position of assumed intellectual authority (often scientific) with respect to ontological questions that are taken — or mistaken, Phillips argues — by the opponents of religion to be both addressable apart from practices of worship and crucial to religious life. Sadly, that kind of condescension is found, for example, in Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (2006) and Christopher Hitchens’ *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2009). Both these writers focus primarily on reference and existence, and they (mis)take materialism for granted as a metaphysical stance that is mandated by modern science. Neither makes a serious effort to imagine what non-idolatrous religious people might mean by what they say and do. Happily, Phillips and other religious thinkers influenced by Wittgenstein have avoided this condescension.

Phillips’ view also resonates with broad Wittgensteinian ideas about the meanings of words as functions of their uses, not only of their senses and referents thought to exist apart from their uses. But it is otherwise not a fully happy stance. Just how is one to go about figuring out whether there is anything at all in praising and praying? Are the words of religious believers as they are used in their prayers and praises simply to be accepted as meaningful without any inquiries into reference? Is it reasonable to regard belief as wholly secondary within religious life and as insulated by its involvement in religious practices from external criticisms? To think of belief in this way at least verges on a form of religious quietism that is complacent in its rituals in virtue of being detached from the sorts of critical reflections about beliefs that are normal both within other practices

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and where divergent practices and their ontological commitments bump up against one another. By this standard, astrology might pass muster as a meaningful enterprise as long as its practitioners are sufficiently sincere and consistent.

In his new book, *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion*, Gordon Graham undertakes to avoid this kind of religious quietism and to do so by developing a more complex and accurate picture of Wittgenstein's views about meaning and their relevance to questions about religious life. According to this richer reading of Wittgenstein, practices and uses matter: Platonist and Fregean conceptions of abstract entities as eternal senses of expressions are rejected, and meanings are instead understood as established by commitments in practice to criteria for the uses of words. These semantic commitments are, however, neither isolated nor self-standing. Instead they are complexly bound up with significant ranges of epistemic and practical commitments, and critical questions both can be raised and will naturally arise about whether any given ensemble of commitments is coherent and stably livable over time. This is a significant theme in Hegel, most prominent in the transition from Chapter V to Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel argues that epistemic commitments must be understood as figuring essentially within the larger ensembles of shared practical commitments that form a *Sittlichkeit* or form of ethical life. Similarly, Graham argues that we must acknowledge "the interplay between action, emotion, and belief" [p. 10]¹ in forming, living by, and testing any ensemble of commitments. As Hume saw, there are "distinctive roles within religion as it appears in the lives of human beings" for each of "the faculties of intellect, emotion and will" [p. 10]. Hence "philosophical understanding of religion as a human phenomenon" [p. xii] must be neither an abstract, intellectual theology, nor a form of physical-material science that denies the existence of will and commitment, nor a non-critical acceptance of all sincerely passionate ritual. Instead it must investigate "the proper place [— if any —] of religion in well-ordered human lives, on both a personal and a social level" [p. 7]. This will require distinguishing what Graham calls "true religion" (comparable to "true" or "genuine" friendship) or healthy religion, on the one hand, from superstition, idolatry, or otherwise unhealthy religion, on the other, so far as this distinction can be drawn [p. xiii].

But how is this distinction to be drawn? It is, again, not to be taken for granted that any sincere and passionate practices of worship contribute to healthy and well-ordered human life. Contra what Kai Niesen dubbed the "Wittgensteinian fideism" often associated with Phillips, Fergus Kerr, and Peter Winch, among others,

"surface" [or pointlessness] and "depth" [or significant point] cannot be simply read off the things religious believers say. Religious believers say lots of things, and the judgment that some of these are ridiculous, blasphemous, or obsolete requires us to relate them to the point of the activity, and to show how they could be changed or abandoned without loss to what [— if anything —] is essential. [p. 53]

Likewise, then, for establishing that what religious believers say has depth or point: it must be shown that what they say cannot be changed or abandoned without a loss of genuine significance in life. And here it will not do to say that what is essential to religious practice is *simply* the expression of a religious attitude. Instead, expression, attitude, and practice must be critically tested to see whether or not they contribute to healthy and well-ordered human life. (Toward the end of his life, Phillips himself disavowed fideism and held along the lines Graham favors that a genuinely Wittgensteinian conception of the relations among practices, beliefs, and meanings *does* leave room for the rational criticism of religious practices [Phillips, 2005].)

¹All page references to Graham will be placed in brackets.

Graham dubs critical inquiry into the point, if any, of religious practices a philosophy of natural religion, that is, of religion as it lived and practiced in ways that involve complexly entangled beliefs, emotions, and attitudes. Does any such ensemble of commitments have a point in contributing to well-ordered human life? To ask this question is in fact to engage in a kind of critical philosophical anthropology: anthropology insofar as the question is focused on the complex sayings, doings, feelings, and beliefs of human beings, together with their objects; philosophical insofar as the question attempts to characterize these sayings, doings, and so on not simply descriptively or as matters of cultural fact alone, but instead in relation to broad, general, philosophical conceptions of human well-being, health, and interest; and critical insofar as the question is prepared to compare and assess the point in furthering human well-being of a variety of human religious practices, including entertaining the possibility that none of them in the end has a healthy point.

Rightly and importantly, Graham argues that Wittgenstein was both arguing for and practicing an inquiry of this kind, guided significantly by the thought that distinctively philosophical-intellectual practices of inquiry may themselves not have a point. Whether they do is to be assessed by considering to what extent, if any, talk of Platonic forms, sempiternal objects, fixed frameworks of language, inner states of consciousness, rules established absolutely apart from human propensities and projections, and all the other favored objects of the discourses of the philosophers itself makes sense and contributes to healthy human life. Mostly, it turns out, it does not, and we would be better off to engage in critical reflective surveys of uses of words, as well as of larger practices and commitments in relation to human needs and interests, than to try to ground any of them absolutely by reference to something eternal. ("Survival" is a term introduced by G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker in their commentaries on *Philosophical Investigations* roughly to translate Wittgenstein's *übersichtliche Darstellung* or "perspicuous representation" and to give a positive characterization of the reflective activity that the text both practices and urges on us [Baker and Hacker, 1980, p. 531ff].) It is both a considerable advance in Wittgenstein studies and an important point in the philosophy of religion on Graham's part to see Wittgenstein as showing us how to ask similar questions about religious talk and practice rather than as defending what came to be called Wittgensteinian fideism.

In order, however, actually to carry out the critical philosophical anthropological inquiry with respect to religion, there are a number of dangers that must be avoided. First, the inquiry must avoid fideism or religious autonomism; that is, it must reject the thought that religious language and practice are in principle immune to all possible external criticism. Graham both makes the case for avoiding this and successfully avoids it. Second, while rightly broad church in spirit, the inquiry must not be too ecumenical. That is, it must reject the thought that all religions are at bottom the same in functioning essentially as vehicles for the expression of a relatively uncontentful responsiveness to the divine or sense of the sacred. Arguably, John Hick makes this mistake in his interpretation of religious practices. Hick writes: "Seen in historical context these movements of faith — the Judaic-Christian, the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Muslim — are not essentially rivals. . . . The suggestion that we must consider is that these [movements of faith] were all movements of the divine revelation" (1989, p. 136). Since these traditions are in fact at odds with one another both practically and ontologically, to be this broadly ecumenical is to take none of them seriously. Hick responds to this worry by arguing that all major religious traditions involve responsiveness to God conceived of as an ultimate reality or *Dingansich* (along Kantian lines) whose nature we cannot know empirically. Hence there may be more consistency among these traditions than there appears to be at first glance. In order, however, to uphold the possibility of practical consistency across divergent traditions, Hick is forced to hold that "the question . . . whether belief, or disbelief, in incarnation [is] essential for

salvation/liberation. . . . is not soteriologically vital" (1989, pp. 368–369). Since, however, in many traditions it is orthodox that salvation does depend on specific kinds of actions motivated by specific kinds of beliefs, Hick's view threatens to amount to an ecumenicist and in fact non-religious defense of the moral life along Kantian lines. Graham effectively avoids this second danger of excessive ecumenicism by focusing primarily on the question of the worth of specifically Christian practices and commitments. Third, the inquiry must also not be too exclusivist and uncritical. Instead it must subject any religion to genuinely critical investigation in relation to a broad conception of healthy human life to which it may or may not contribute, pending the results of the investigation. It is less clear that Graham avoids this third danger.

The risk of falling into exclusivism is due in significant part to the fact that Graham focuses his critical anthropology only on the ritual of Christian communion. Despite the passage already cited in which he acknowledges that the inquiry must take up "the proper place [— if any —] of religion in well-ordered human lives, on both a *personal and a social level*" [p. 7, emphasis added], Graham pays no significant attention to the daily personal lives of practitioners of Christianity outside their participation in worship, to the forms of social life that are distinctive of Christians, or to non-Christian religion. In one way, Graham's concentration on the Christian order of worship is salutary: it allows him to develop a rich account of just what its practitioners might be doing in using its specific words. But it also has the disadvantage of drawing attention away from the issue of what a personal and social religious life outside the worship service might look like. No doubt there are no strict entailments from participation in the Christian order of worship to a particular way of life, personal or social, just as there are no strict entailments from professions of faith to personal and social daily life in other religions. There are, after all, both fundamentalists and liberals of many religious stripes. But if the issue is — as Graham takes it to be and as it should be — the role of religion (if any) in a healthy human life, then failing to consider and assess overall shapes of religious life, personal and social, is a large omission. One wants to know more here than Graham provides about whether and how participation in Christian worship might contribute to justice, decency, tolerance, and human flourishing in daily life, individual and joint. Traditionally within Christianity, participation in worship (as well as prayer) and working appropriately for justice (helping to prepare for the kingdom of God) are thought to reinforce each other. Thus it is at least an important empirical question whether this is true. It is to the credit of Dawkins and Hitchens that they do take up this issue in detail with respect to a variety of religions, even if one might wish for less heavy-handedness in their accounts. For example Hitchens argues that Martin Luther King was a good person whose activism improved countless human lives, but who also was not a Christian, given that he rejected the idea of a merciless and vengeful God (Hitchens, 2009, pp. 173–176). Here Hitchens shows less awareness of and respect for centuries of development of Christian thought and practice than he ought.

Graham's effort to fill in the required critical philosophical anthropology (or, in his terms, a philosophy of natural religion: that is, an account of religion's point and significance) of specifically Christian religious practices of worship comes in three steps. First there is the fact that many human beings, perhaps even the majority, possess "a sense of the sacred" [p. 113]. This is best understood not as a form of sense perception, but rather as a form of sensibility or a broad "feel" for what is to be done in certain circumstances, comparable to having a musical ear or a sense of hospitality. Such "a sense of the sacred can be perverted and distorted in ways that give rise to superstition and idolatry," Graham acknowledges, and some people may simply lack it, just as some people lack a musical ear [p. 113]. Nonetheless, there is, Graham argues, some "reason to regard those who lack [it]

as people whose lives are seriously impoverished" [p. 113]. Rather, having a sense of the sacred that is expressed legitimately, non-superstitiously, and non-idolatrously is at least a significant dimension of human flourishing.

Second, a sense of the sacred can be fitly expressed in worship as a form of ritual. Drawing on Giambattista Vico and Roger Scruton, Graham suggests that religious rituals arise as responses to the awe-inspiring presences in human lives of birth, sex, and death [pp. 180–181]. Participation in worship is "practical, but also purposeless" [p. 162]; that is, worshippers do things, but do not act instrumentally in order to achieve an end. (While one might accept Graham's rejection of intercessory prayer directed at worldly ends, one might also wonder whether prayer to receive and act according to grace or prayer for the kingdom of God to come quite fit this characterization.) That is, participants express their sensibility for the sacred; they "mark or shape time" through activities with plotted beginnings, middles, and ends that enable "acknowledgement of the infinity within which human finitude is set" [p. 165]. More specifically, the rite of Christian communion stands to spiritual identities and to the participants in the rite as a theater script stands to characters and to actors [p. 168]; by participating in the rite, agents take on a spiritual identity that they would not otherwise have, and they do so corporately, as a united body, not as merely cooperating individuals. "Christian communion . . . is thus to be seen as a ritual in which the faithful corporately enact the cosmic drama of the world's salvation" [pp. 168–169]. This ritual, however, is not merely expressive. "At its heart lies symbolic meaning rather than practical purpose or emotional expression," where the use of symbol involves "grapp[ling] with the edges of existence" [p. 178].

Third and most crucially, none of this is best understood merely psychologically as a function *only* of merely human needs and interests. Graham endorses the arguments of Alvin Plantinga and John Earman that propose that laws of nature are genuine, necessary, and govern the course of nature only on the condition that they are made by a divine will. "The will of a Supreme Being is a necessary pre-condition of the law-governed world disclosed by science" [p. 190]. And likewise for the sense of being governed non-idolatrously by the laws of (Christian) religious ritual. "A sense of the sacred, even if properly called 'natural' to human beings, must be God given and God guided" [p. 190].

Given these three crucial points — that (many) human beings possess a sense of the sacred; that this sense is (best) expressible non-idolatrously in Christian rituals of worship, especially in the rite of communion; and that the intelligibility of this ritual requires that it have been ordained to us by God — Graham's case is complete. As Graham puts it, citing Aquinas, the laws of the Christian worship service that specify its ritual acts (together, as well, with "revelation in Christ . . . and the legal and moral codes that societies promulgate") "enable human beings . . . to 'participate' in the eternal law of God . . . and to do so in an 'intellectual and rational manner,' in contrast to the way that 'irrational animals partake of the eternal reason'" [pp. 194–195]. The rituals of Christian worship stand as reasonably formed, self-conscious, and centrally apt forms of distinctively human responsiveness to God's ordonnance.

How persuasive is this argument? It is not intended as a proof or demonstration from premises that any reasonable person should accept, but rather as a reading of religious practices carried out from the point of view of someone passionately interested in what some of them might mean, that is, someone who is attempting to work through wonder and puzzlement at religious life in the hope of finding sense in it. Is this effort at working through wonder and puzzlement compelling?

It is not clear that it is. The third step, drawing on Plantinga and Earman, is distressingly theological, given Graham's effort to avoid "the distractions of metaphysical theology" [p. 201]. It involves conceiving of laws of physical nature as necessary and as

governing events in senses that can and must be explicated by whatever best account we can construct and specifically by the account according to which God made them. But why should we accept this account of laws of nature? Perhaps we ought to regard them as in some sense necessary, but why should we accept the thought that we are able to explicate the nature of this necessity? Why not say instead, as Newton said about the metaphysical nature and source of the law of gravitational attraction, “hypotheses non fingo”? Necessity may attach to this law, but we are not in a position to grasp and explain its nature. On this conception, laws of nature are descriptive of a necessity whose nature we cannot grasp; pointedly they are not, or not necessarily, laws that are legislated by a divine will. With this weaker conception of the nature of laws of nature than that favored by Plantinga and Earman, the third step collapses, and Graham is unable to establish that God is the creator of human beings, together with their needs and interests, and their fittest modes of response to those needs and interests in religious rituals that He has ordained. And without the undergirding theology provided by this questionable third step, Graham’s effort to establish the distinctive point and intelligibility of (Christian) religious worship comes dangerously close to collapsing back into the kind of fideism that he is rightly concerned to avoid.

Second and more broadly, Graham’s reading of human life arguably establishes persuasively that a sensibility for the infinite and involvement as a member in corporate, not merely cooperative, activity are things that enrich a human life. Absent the metaphysical theology, however, what makes the Christian rite of communion an especially central and apt mode of expressing that sensibility and engaging in corporate activity? For example, why cannot a passionate sensibility for the infinite be expressed in the corporate activities of a musical, literary, scientific, or political life? Wonder at shared finite human existence within a larger infinite order is certainly discernible in some reaches of these activities, as well as, of course, within quite disparate religious traditions. If these are all ways of expressing this sensibility equally aptly, then the argument lapses into a non-critical ecumenicism; if they are supposed not to be equally apt, and only the Christian rites are fully exemplary for this expression, then the metaphysical theology — specifically the theology according to which God ordained the specific laws of the rite of Christian communion through the teachings of His only begotten Son — is necessary in order to uphold this supposition and avoid an arbitrary exclusivism, and it is not clear that that theology can stand.

Finally, one wants, as already noted, to know much more than Graham provides about connections between participation in Christian worship and healthy individual and social daily life (familial, moral, political, economic, cognitive, and so on), beyond simply having a sensibility for the sacred. Graham might hope to evade this issue by arguing that participation in Christian worship and in other forms of non-idolatrous worship is per se an enrichment of human life comparable, again, to having a musical ear or sensibility. No matter whether a given individual life is virtuous or vicious, it will nonetheless be richer if it includes participation in some non-idolatrous form of worship than an otherwise identical life that does not. This reply, however, loosens the connection between participation in worship, on the one hand, and the activities of daily life, on the other, that is central to many religious traditions, including Christianity. In these traditions, participation in worship is typically taken to provide both understanding and motivation for transformed action in daily life. Hence two questions remain open: which specific forms of worship are non-idolatrous, and is a life that includes participation in them in fact made better overall by that participation? The possibility that participation in worship, even if per se enriching, might also motivate evil, complacency, arrogance, insensitivity or other forms of viciousness in daily life must be faced head on and defeated, if the overall value of religious ritual is to be defended. One might make a similar point about the overall value

in life of having a musical ear. It takes time, money, work, and contexts of interaction in order to develop a musical sensibility within a particular musical tradition, and it could turn out that participation in such a tradition distorts the lives of its members overall. Prima facie, having a musical life may seem more abstract and innocent than having a religious life, in that unlike religion it does not urge specific moral, economic, or political practices on its participants, but there is still an empirical question about the shape and value of a developed, specific, individual musical life as a species of overall human life.

It is, however, unclear where these objections to Graham's argument leave the question of the truth of Christian religion. Graham's effort to uphold Christianity's distinctive intelligibility and point is passionate, deeply informed, and argumentative. This effort bears comparison with the greatest argumentative effort to establish via metaphysico-interpretive means the distinctive truth of Christianity: Hegel's — in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Hence the thought that the case is nonetheless not settled by metaphysico-interpretive means might be regarded as Kierkegaardian, where Kierkegaard, and pointedly not Hegel, was a figure of major importance to Wittgenstein.

If the argument fails, even when taken as a reading of Christian religious practices rather than as a proof, that does not mean that its conclusion is false. Nor does it mean that Christian practices of worship are without some important point and value that might also be realized within other practices. Going further, however, to accept the truth of Christianity and the distinctive value of its ensemble of beliefs and practices may require not only argument in a broad, interpretive sense, but also the workings of grace. As Alan Donagan once observed, "From a contemporary naturalist point of view much of what we all reasonably believe about ourselves [e.g., that we have freedom of the will, a sensibility for the infinite, and possibilities of meaningful corporate activity] is unexplained, and the misery of the condition in which serious inquirers take themselves to be would have no remedy. In this situation, faith may seem to inquirers possible, and not irrational. And then, by some means they do not understand but which the church teaches is the operation of grace, it may become actual" (1999, p. 32). Or it may not: grace, if it exists, has its mysteries when seen from the standpoint of the intellect. Perhaps this is why Wittgenstein, lacking grace, was not able himself to embrace Judeo-Christian religion. In the words of Paul: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (Coogan et al., 2010, p. 1996; 1 Corinthians I: 22–24).

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