

Is There Such a Thing as Religious Belief?

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Whether there is such a thing as religious belief has been queried by philosophers who think the attitudes that get called religious beliefs are radically different from standard types of belief. It is sometimes claimed that so-called religious beliefs are, for example, resistant to experiential evidence in ways that genuine types of belief are not. A recent proponent of this contention, Brian Clack (2016), has argued that the lack of connection between religious attitudes and the world of everyday experience entails that these attitudes should be classified as “belief-like imaginings” rather than as bona fide beliefs. While admitting that contentions such as this prompt useful reflection upon the specificities of religious belief, I argue that the view that what are ordinarily called religious beliefs are not *really* beliefs amounts to an unwarranted linguistic stipulation. The concept of belief has a diversity of applications rather than being restricted to the narrow subset which dubious empiricist assumptions might lead us to privilege.

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“Is there such a thing as religious belief?” is a question raised by the philosopher Simon Blackburn in the opening chapter of his book *Truth: A Guide* (2005, 13–14). Blackburn himself describes it as “a surprising question” (13), and it will indeed strike many readers, including many who are philosophically minded, as surprising, given the prevalence of talk of religious belief not only in everyday parlance but also in academic scholarship relating to

religion. After all, it remains commonplace to characterize various religions in terms of their respective “beliefs and practices.”¹

There are, however, certain quarters of the study of religions in which Blackburn’s question may not seem surprising at all, for the concept of religious belief has been under suspicion since at least the 1960s. A number of anthropologists, for instance, have voiced scepticism about the viability of discussing the beliefs, whether religious or otherwise, of the people they study. This is sometimes on the epistemic grounds, reminiscent of behaviourism in psychology, that beliefs are “inner psychological attitudes” (Leach 1967, 40) to which an observer has no access; by implication, we cannot know anything about these “attitudes,” even whether they exist. At other times, it is because the concept of belief is presumed to be a culturally specific “contrivance” that is too fragmentary—too incoherent—to have “any empirical value as an index to the inner life of men” (Needham 1972, 150, 234).

My purpose in this article is to critically examine certain lines of argument that, according to their proponents, lead to the conclusion that there is indeed no such thing as religious belief. Blackburn himself, though evidently partial towards this conclusion, does not develop the argument very far. It has been developed further by the philosopher Brian Clack, who argues that so-called religious beliefs are not really beliefs but are better described as “belief-like imaginings” (Clack 2016, 207). My approach will be to analyse Clack’s argument with a view to unearthing its underlying assumptions. While admitting that the argument is useful insofar as it prompts us to consider the specificities of religious belief, I argue that the contention that what are ordinarily called religious beliefs are not *really* beliefs amounts to little more than a linguistic stipulation; it begs the question against those who are willing to take seriously actual uses of language. The concept of belief in fact has a diverse repertoire of

1. See, for example, the volumes in the Routledge book series “Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices” (<https://www.routledge.com/The-Library-of-Religious-Beliefs-and-Practices/book-series/SE0031>).

applications rather than being constrained to a narrow subset which philosophers such as Clack, operating with empiricist assumptions, treat as not only paradigmatic but also exhaustive.

To contextualize and identify the particularities of Clack's style of argument, it will be helpful to consider it in the light of two related spheres of academic discussion. The first of these—already alluded to above—is the critique of the concept of religious belief that has been advanced over recent decades in the study of religions. I adduce examples of this critique, along with possible responses, in the first section after this introduction. The second contextualizing sphere concerns the work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose ideas about religion are viewed by some philosophers—and also by certain non-philosophical scholars of religion—as supporting the view that there is a radical dichotomy between (so-called) religious beliefs, on the one hand, and other kinds of belief, on the other. I draw attention to this Wittgensteinian background in the second section after this introduction, before turning to a more focused examination of Clack's argument.²

The Critique of the Concept of Religious Belief

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2. An area of recent debate that, despite its intrinsic interest, I do not have space to discuss in this article concerns arguments in the cognitive science of religion over whether what are ordinarily called religious beliefs would be more aptly termed “religious credences” to distinguish them from “factual beliefs” (see, e.g., Van Leeuwen 2014; idem 2017). In the same general area are discussions about whether, or to what extent, psychological studies, involving sentence completion tasks and similar methods, show that ordinary people (whether religious or not) tend to use different terms for religious beliefs, on the one hand, and beliefs concerning “matters of fact,” on the other (e.g. Heiphetz et al. 2021; Van Leeuwen et al. 2021). Curiously, Neil Van Leeuwen, who has made substantial contributions to these areas of research, maintains both that “credences” is to be preferred over “beliefs” in the case of religious attitudes (e.g. Van Leeuwen 2017, S52) and that ordinary people, when presented with relevant sentence completion tasks and suchlike, are typically more inclined to apply the phrase “believes that ...” in the case of religious attitudes and to apply the phrase “thinks that ...” in the case of nonreligious attitudes related to “matters of fact” (e.g. Van Leeuwen et al. 2021). Hence it would seem that Van Leeuwen, for one, is not concerned to reflect actual linguistic usage in his technical vocabulary. This is one among several respects in which my approach in this article diverges from the cognitive scientific studies cited in this footnote.

Besides anthropologists, the aversion to the concept of belief has rubbed off on other scholars of religion, generating what Kevin Schilbrack (who does not share the aversion himself) has dubbed an “eliminativist position” in the study of religions (Schilbrack 2014, 56).³ “Eliminativist,” in this context, need not mean straightforwardly denying that religious beliefs exist; rather, its emphasis is conceptual and linguistic, holding that we would be better off dispensing with the concept of religious belief. Some scholars who reject talk of “belief” prefer to speak of “discourse” instead. In the case of the historian of religions Bruce Lincoln, for example, this is partly because he espouses the view that we have “no unmediated access” to anyone else’s beliefs, and partly because “discourse is both logically and chronologically prior to belief,” in the sense that, he thinks, people’s beliefs are “internalized” versions of what others have told them (Lincoln 2003, 111 n. 15). A further motivation for eschewing talk of “belief” in religious studies stems from the idea that the reason why belief is commonly assumed to be central to religion is merely that belief has a prominent place in Christianity, and Christianity is routinely treated by Western-centric scholars as exemplary of religion in general (see, e.g., Lopez 1998, 33). Even certain scholars of Christianity, however, are inclined to ask “what’s belief got to do with it?” (Orsi 1996, xxi), challenging the assumption that belief must be what undergirds religious participation. Such challenges have led to “belief” being styled a “discredited category” in the study of religions (Bivins 2012, 58).

We might wonder, though, what conception of belief is being rejected when would-be eliminativists call into question its use in the study of religions. It is notable, for instance, that Donald Lopez, in an influential essay on this topic, does not consider the problem to be that of “whether belief exists” (Lopez 1998, 34). But this is not because he readily accepts that there are such things as beliefs; he thinks this issue “is difficult to determine” (34). The

3. For a recent defence of eliminativism about belief in general (rather than in the context of religion specifically), see Jenson 2016.

purported problem, rather, is “whether religion must be represented as something that derives from belief, as something with external manifestations that can ultimately be traced back to an inner assent to a cognitive proposition” (34). It thus becomes evident that what Lopez is rejecting is a specific conception which regards belief as some “inner” act of “assent.” Instead of questioning whether this conception is fitting, Lopez accepts it (assents to it?) and then questions whether religion is well thought of as being founded on belief. It is his acceptance of this “inner assent” model that underlies Lopez’s assumption that it is difficult to establish whether beliefs exist. One may well think this is difficult if one assumes that beliefs are private mental acts of assent, or “inner psychological attitudes” (to quote Leach again), to which no one other than the believer can have access. Even then, however, we might reasonably suppose that those, such as Lopez, who are tempted by this view, would notice (and hence be able to “determine”) that they themselves have beliefs. No doubt we do often hold beliefs that we keep to ourselves, but recognizing this fact is very different from assuming that all our beliefs are, necessarily, inaccessible to anyone else.

Lincoln is also presupposing an “inner assent” model of belief when he denies that we can have “unmediated access” to a person’s beliefs. But do we have a clear understanding of what “unmediated access” means in this context? Even in one’s own case, are one’s beliefs something to which one has “access,” whether “mediated” or “unmediated”? Or is this notion of access leading us down a conceptually dubious path? In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes: “A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe that his master will come the day after to-morrow?” (1958, Part II, 174e). This remark is a prompt to notice certain characteristics of the concept of belief. We can and do apply the concept to some nonhuman animals: there is nothing confused about describing a dog as believing a

particular person is at the door or that food is in the cupboard and so on.⁴ Nonetheless, there are certain types of belief that it would be odd to ascribe to a dog. Beliefs, we might say, come in many varieties. Yet is our knowing whether the dog believes its master is at the door a matter of our having *access* to something? Or do we simply see it *in* (rather than *mediated by*) the dog's behaviour? Would even Lopez or Lincoln suppose that the dog has "unmediated access" to something (namely, its own beliefs) to which we have, at best, only a secondary or "mediated" access? It is far from obvious that "access" is a helpful term, whether we are talking about the beliefs of dogs or of human beings; it is liable to obscure rather than clarify the issue.

To propose that, in many cases, we see beliefs in behaviour—whether in the behaviour of people or in that of nonhuman animals—is not to reduce beliefs *to* behaviour. It is not a form of behaviourism. It is merely to point out a logical or conceptual connection between what we believe and what we do. C. S. Lewis makes an observation relevant to this point when he says, "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you" (Lewis 1966, 21). He gives the example of believing that a rope is strong: it is easy to say that one believes this when using the rope to tie a box, but what if one were reliant upon the rope to support one's weight when descending from a clifftop? The strength of one's belief manifests in the confidence with which one performs the action. As Lewis implies, it is not only someone who witnesses one's action who comes to learn the strength of one's belief: in many instances, one may come to learn it oneself. But we are not forced to envisage this learning process as equivalent to gaining "access" to some hidden corner of one's mind. Although Lewis is concerned primarily with deep existential beliefs—beliefs about life after death, for example—the point about the

4. Some philosophers (e.g. Davidson 1975, 1982) have denied that it makes sense to ascribe beliefs to creatures that are not language-users, such as animals and prelinguistic human infants. I do not have space to discuss those arguments here. For the opposing view, which I favour, see, for example, Routley 1981, Glock 2010.

connection between belief and behaviour applies more broadly. One sees that the child believes the dog to be dangerous in the nervousness with which she approaches it; one sees that the man believes it to be cold outside by observing that he puts on extra layers of clothing before leaving the house; and so on. In any such case, one may turn out to be mistaken about the person's belief. But this is not because the conceptual connection between belief and behaviour is absent: it is normally because one needs further contextual information—a thicker description—to understand the behaviour more fully.

As for the contention that “discourse is both logically and chronologically prior to belief,” Lincoln takes this to be the case because, as he sees it, we generally acquire our beliefs as a consequence of hearing what influential people around us say—people such as family members, friends, religious teachers, among others (Lincoln 2003, 111 n. 15). Although it is surely right that many of our beliefs are acquired in social contexts, we might legitimately ask what it is that the influential people around us are articulating in their discourse. If the answer—or at least part of the answer—is that they are articulating their *beliefs*, then it looks as though we have a chicken and egg situation: beliefs are acquired as a result of being exposed to human discourse, yet the discourse itself conveys beliefs, which may in turn have been acquired through exposure to belief-conveying discourse, and so on ad infinitum. The case for discourse being “logically and chronologically prior to belief” is therefore no stronger than the case for belief being logically and chronologically prior to discourse. As a starting point, it would make more sense to regard certain beliefs and their linguistic articulations as being logically intertwined or internally related. In other cases—such as Wittgenstein's example of the dog—there is no obvious role for discourse at all: the reason why the dog believes its master is at the door is not that someone told it that this is the right thing to believe.

Much more could be said about the critique of the concept of religious belief in the study of religions than I have space to say here. In response to the charge that “belief” is a peculiarly Christian or Western category that ought not to be universalized, for example, one could argue that the provenance of a concept tells us little or nothing about the scope of its application (see Schilbrack 2014, 73–4). If it is true that we can see that the dog believes its master is at the door *in* the dog’s behaviour, then it would seem that at least some applications of the concept of belief have nothing to do with whether those to whom a belief is being attributed use the concept of belief themselves. To put the point provocatively, we might consider it condescending to suppose of a religious community that its members must possess a given concept of belief (perhaps one that is construed in terms of “assent to a cognitive proposition”) if they are to be able to evince their beliefs in or through their behaviour. Beliefs can be seen in what people say and do, regardless of whether they use the term “belief” (or some equivalent or near-equivalent term in their own language). But this is a large and complicated area of debate, to which I cannot expect to do justice in this article. My main target in what follows is the specific argument put forward by Brian Clack. Given that Clack takes certain remarks of Wittgenstein’s as his point of departure, I devote the next section to outlining what Wittgenstein says.

The Wittgensteinian Background

Brian Clack is not alone among philosophers of religion in deriving inspiration from aspects of the philosophy of Wittgenstein. There are, however, various ways of inheriting Wittgenstein’s thought, for Wittgenstein offers not a theory but a set of tools or methods that may be developed for different purposes. Wittgenstein’s most sustained treatment of religious belief comes in the form of lectures delivered at Cambridge in 1938 and written down, with inevitable inaccuracies and lacunae, by some of his students (Wittgenstein 1966, 53–72). The

ideas contained in these lectures, though often perceptive, should be recognized as instances of Wittgenstein thinking matters through on the spur of the moment, rather than as well-honed lines of argument.

Central to the lectures on religious belief is a distinction that Wittgenstein draws between religious beliefs and what he in one place calls “ordinary everyday beliefs” (1966, 54). “There are instances where you have a faith,” Wittgenstein says (as reported in the notes of his students), “where you say ‘I believe’—and on the other hand this belief does not rest on the fact on which our ordinary everyday beliefs normally do rest” (54). What especially interests Wittgenstein is the way in which people of strong religious faith are often willing to risk a great deal, even their lives, on the basis of beliefs that, by “ordinary” standards, are not well grounded. These beliefs appear to be “unshakeable”—they regulate everything in a person’s life—yet there is a sense in which they lack firm evidential support (54).

At one point in the lectures, Wittgenstein observes that some religious believers do speak of evidence. Christians who believe in the resurrection of Christ, for example, may describe this as a historical event and regard their knowledge of it as resting on historical evidence. Without denying this, Wittgenstein maintains that a distinction can still be drawn, between this type of religious belief and “belief in ordinary historic facts” (1966, 57). In cases of the latter sort, the strength of one’s belief is liable to depend on the strength of the available evidence. One may think in terms of probabilities. But even the most probable—the most indubitable—of historical facts (of an “ordinary” kind) is unlikely to be such as to make one aspire to transform one’s life. In the case of religious beliefs, by contrast, the available evidence may be very weak by ordinary historical standards, without thereby diminishing the likelihood that true believers will be willing to orient their whole lives in relation to it (57).

Wittgenstein’s admission that there is room in the discourse of actual religious believers for talk of evidence and of historical events being relevant to their religious beliefs, should

alert us to the fact that the distinction which Wittgenstein is making requires a degree of subtlety. His initial contrast, according to which religious beliefs appear to be a sui generis category distinguishable from all the types that are lumped together under the label “ordinary everyday beliefs,” is apt to appear crude to philosophically discerning eyes. Some readers of Wittgenstein, however, have thought that if there is a fault in his lectures on religious belief, it lies in his reluctance to jettison so-called religious beliefs from the category of beliefs altogether. One such reader is Brian Clack, to whose ideas we now turn.

Religious “Beliefs” as Mere Imaginings

Unlike certain scholars in the study of religions (including anthropologists such as Leach and Needham but also historians such as Bruce Lincoln), Brian Clack is not suspicious about the concept of belief in general. He is therefore not an eliminativist about belief per se. He is, rather, suspicious about the concept of religious belief in particular. He can rightly be described as an eliminativist about religious belief, not because he thinks these beliefs are “inaccessible” or Christian-centric or logically subordinate to discourse, but because he thinks the very concept of religious belief is confused. Clack takes this view, in large part, because he is working with an unabashedly empiricist understanding of belief, according to which a belief, if it is to be a real or genuine one, must bear a sufficiently robust connection to experience. More specifically, for Clack, “a central property of belief” is that it must be *responsive* to experience (Clack 2016, 198), by which he means that it must wax or wane in accordance with the evidence for it, and it is in the form of perceptual experience that the appropriate sort of evidence comes. Clack thus approvingly quotes Cheryl Misak’s assertion, “Beliefs are such that they automatically resign in the face of recalcitrant experience” (Misak 1995, 160, quoted in Clack 2016, 196).⁵

5. Clack gives the page number in Misak 1995 as 173; it is in fact 160.

What Clack is deriving from Wittgenstein is not this empiricist bent. Indeed, Wittgenstein once wrote of his own method, “Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing” (Wittgenstein 1978, 325). Exactly what Wittgenstein means by this remark is a matter of interpretation. Given his aversion to theory building in philosophy, it is unlikely that, by “realism,” he has in mind the construction of a metaphysical theory about what exists (or is real) independently of human experience. It is more likely that, as Cora Diamond has conjectured, Wittgenstein is aiming to be realistic in a non-theoretical sense. By philosophizing in “the realistic spirit,” as Diamond puts it, one strives to avoid clinging desperately to dubious ideas in the face of the realities that surround us; one instead seeks to be attentive “to detail and particularity,” in something comparable to the way in which we expect a realistic novel to be attentive to the particularities of characters and situations (Diamond 1991, 40). But so too does this realistic spirit involve relinquishing the supposition that everything that is real can ultimately be reduced to what is amenable to empirical investigation: “Wittgenstein is suggesting that what is difficult in philosophy is to be realistic without going in for such reduction” (Diamond 1996, 256). Replacing the reductive spirit with the realistic spirit thus opens up conceptual space for applying the concept of belief to regions of human life that are not limited to sensory experience. Important among these are the regions that involve values, including moral and religious values.

What Clack is deriving from Wittgenstein is thus not the empiricist orientation to which Clack himself is sympathetic, but rather the distinction, which we saw in the previous section, between religious beliefs and “ordinary everyday beliefs.” Noticing “Wittgenstein’s frequent reservations and hesitations about describing religious ideas as ‘beliefs,’” Clack takes this as his springboard “for an argument that denies belief-status to such ideas” (Clack 2016, 193 fn. 5). Let us now examine Clack’s argument.

Beginning with the commonplace observation, borrowed from Bernard Williams, that “beliefs aim at truth” (Williams 1973, 136, quoted in Clack 2016, 196), Clack supposes that there should be little if any disagreement about this. In response, however, we might note that any credibility that this latter supposition possesses relies on our setting aside a whole class of uses of the concept of belief. When philosophers say that beliefs aim at truth, they are typically not thinking of the sense of “belief” that is in play when someone claims to believe *in* someone or something. Believing in oneself, for example, can mean having confidence in one’s abilities; believing in a friend can mean having trust in her; believing in democracy is likely to mean not merely believing that democracy can exist but also valuing it as the optimal form of government; and believing in God typically amounts to far more than endorsing the proposition that “God exists.” To say, in cases such as these, that “beliefs aim at truth” is, at most, only indirectly pertinent. If I continually fail at the tasks I am trying to perform, my confidence—and hence my belief in myself—may weaken, and if my friend betrays me, I may come to see my earlier belief in her as having been misplaced. But these are not the kinds of cases that philosophers predominantly have in mind when they assert that beliefs aim at truth. Rather, such philosophers are normally assuming, as paradigmatic of “belief,” what H. H. Price (1965) famously called “belief-that” (i.e. belief that such-and-such is the case), as distinct from “belief-in.” And this is what Clack is assuming as well. Indeed, he assumes that believing that such-and-such is the case—or, in other words, believing that such-and-such is *true*—is “the essence of belief” (2016, 196).

Clack’s next move is to claim that this essential quality of truth-directedness implies that beliefs “must be sensitive to” what is real, and that this in turn implies that “Beliefs must rise and fall [...] with experience of that reality” (2016, 196). Citing Misak again, Clack commends the view that someone who claims to believe a given proposition regardless of whether the evidence supports it is mistaken about the nature of her own “propositional

attitude”; believing something on the basis of the evidence is standard practice, whereas deciding to believe it regardless of what the evidence shows is, according to Misak, not merely epistemically suspect but perhaps not even possible (Misak 1995, 160; Clack 2016, 197). By “possible” here, Misak seems to have in mind something like conceptual possibility: whatever we call the “attitude” that results from such a flagrant disregard of the evidence, it cannot be *belief*, for on this view belief must, by definition, be responsive to evidence, and “evidence” here means specifically empirical evidence.⁶

Having adopted from Misak this scepticism about whether an attitude that is unresponsive to empirical evidence could count as belief, Clack then revisits the question of whether so-called religious beliefs satisfy the essential criterion. At this juncture, he returns to Wittgenstein’s characterization of religious beliefs as “unshakeable.” If they really are unshakeable—and, as Wittgenstein puts it, they do not show up in someone’s life in response to “reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief” but instead as that by which the person’s life is regulated (Wittgenstein 1966, 54)—then we have reason to suspect that they are “something other than beliefs” (Clack 2016, 198).

To illustrate how so-called religious beliefs are resistant to evidence, Clack cites the notorious problem of evil. Those who claim that God loves the world and all of humankind routinely disregard the fact that a loving creator for whom anything is possible would, as a matter of course, prevent the horrors of suffering, death and destruction that are all too prevalent across the globe. Given that, it seems, no event is considered by those who view God as loving (or as love itself) to be so atrocious as to falsify their religious commitment, the commitment, according to Clack, should not be classified in terms of belief (2016, 198).

6. It is notable that what Misak doubts to be possible is not simply *believing* such-and-such irrespective of the evidence, but “*deciding* to believe [such-and-such], irrespective of evidence” (1995, 160, my emphasis). The term “deciding” here unnecessarily introduces complicated issues concerning doxastic voluntarism, i.e. whether beliefs can be deliberately chosen. The topic of doxastic voluntarism exceeds the scope of my discussion in this article; for an overview, see Ryan 2010.

If, then, we are to deny that what are generally called religious beliefs really are beliefs, what should they be called instead? In addressing this question, Clack borrows the phrase “belief-like imaginings” from work by Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft, who have deployed it to identify various imaginative states that, as they see it, evade the constraints—such as those of mutual consistency and justification by appeal to perceptual experience—that apply to beliefs (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, esp. Ch. 1; Clack 2016, 207). For Currie and Ravenscroft, psychopathological delusions are paradigm cases of belief-like imaginings—delusions such as supposing that thoughts have been implanted into one’s mind, that external forces are controlling one’s body, that members of one’s family have been substituted by doppelgängers, and so on (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, 15–16). Although Clack does not want to go so far as to assert that all religious “beliefs” are simply delusions, his view is that they belong to the “the same broad class as delusions” (2016, 207).

Having now expounded the principal components of Clack’s argument, let us move, in the next section, to a critical evaluation of it.

Resisting the Narrow Empiricist Account of Experience and Belief

Of the various objections that might be advanced against the kind of empiricist account, exemplified by Clack, which results in the denial of there being any such thing as religious belief, two important ones are the following. One approach would be to accept that it is indeed a conceptual truth that beliefs must be responsive to experience, but to contend that Clack, following Misak, is operating with an unduly restricted conception of experience. The second approach would be to deny that all beliefs *must* be responsive to experience (although it may be true that *some* beliefs must be so responsive), and to argue that Clack—again following Misak—is neglecting the capacious and internally variegated nature of the concept of belief. In view of the fact that ideas from Wittgenstein are cited with approval by Clack, it

is noteworthy that both of these objections can be elaborated with reference to Wittgenstein. I shall expound each approach in turn.

First, then, let us consider the contention that, although belief is undoubtedly tied closely to experience, “experience” encompasses much more than is allowed by the narrow empiricist position espoused by Clack and Misak. A relevant remark from Wittgenstein occurs in one of his notebooks from 1950, the year before he died. Reflecting upon the role in a religious life of natural theological arguments for the existence of God, Wittgenstein observes that such arguments may well be devised for the purpose of defending and analysing one’s faith by intellectual means even though believers in God are unlikely to have arrived at their conviction through being convinced by such arguments (Wittgenstein 1998, 97). The conviction that God exists, Wittgenstein avers, is far more likely to arise through one’s being brought up in a way that orients one’s life in a particular direction (97). The next portion of Wittgenstein’s remark is worth quoting in full:

Life can educate one to “believe in God.” And it is also *experiences* [*Erfahrungen*] that do this; but not visions, or other sensory experiences that show us the “existence of this being,” but e.g. various kinds of suffering. And they do not show us God like a sensory impression of an object, nor license us to *conjecture* about him. Experiences, thoughts, – life can force this concept on us. (Wittgenstein 1998, 97, my translation, Wittgenstein’s emphasis)

Wittgenstein is here giving expression to an expansive conception of experience. Rather than limiting ourselves to the assumption that experiences must always take the form of sensory perceptions—and hence that undergoing an experience of God could only be something like receiving “a sensory impression of an object”—Wittgenstein is encouraging

us to think in terms of the panoply of experiences that constitute a human life. He offers only “various kinds of suffering” as an example, but the list could be expanded indefinitely: reading novels and contemplating their significance; having conversations with friends and enjoying their company; falling in love; playing and listening to music; participating in religious ceremonies and acts of worship; praying; feeling inexplicably elated; sliding into a deep state of depression; bringing up children; losing a loved one. All of these may *involve* sensory impressions, but an adequate description of any of them would not be reducible to an account of a string of such impressions. Life is a complex *mélange* of cognitive, conative, affective and behavioural aspects, and experiences can incorporate all these aspects at once. It is this rich complexity—the trajectory of a life—that, Wittgenstein is suggesting, “can educate one to ‘believe in God’.” The concept of God can be forced upon one in the sense that, given one’s upbringing and cultural surroundings, one finds oneself ineluctably deploying the concept in one’s thought and discourse.

A key implication of these considerations for our evaluation of Clack’s argument is that they call into question any straightforward assumption that religious beliefs are *not* responsive to experience. Although there is nothing in what I have just been outlining that should lead us to endorse without qualification Misak’s view of beliefs, that they simply do “automatically resign in the face of recalcitrant experience” (Misak 1995, 160), an appreciation of the fact that experiences come in many varieties allows conceptual space for a more nuanced understanding of how experience can bear upon beliefs, including religious beliefs.

We might, for instance, usefully revisit Clack’s example of the problem of evil. Clack himself recognizes that religious people often do undergo crises of faith in the face of tragedies of a personal or a more far-reaching character (Clack 2016, 209). To develop this point further, we might note that, under such circumstances, some people find their faith

slipping away from them; they struggle with grief and despair. In other instances, the crisis may engender a strengthened faith, a confidence that one's relationship with God has been deepened in the wake of a "dark night of the soul." In still other instances, faith may waver, the person's life becoming a perpetual site of "wrestling with doubt" (Rees 2001). None of these reactions is inevitable, yet they all represent changes to belief in response to experience. They thus provide grounds for affirming that religious beliefs exist even if we accept that responsiveness to experience is essential to belief.

Anticipating this line of criticism, Clack proposes that unshakeability in the face of experience is not the only characteristic of religious attitudes that preclude their counting as beliefs; other factors include their lack—or merely "attenuated" possession of—features such as "an origin in observation and experience, explanatory power, [and] intersubjective testability" (Clack 2016, 209). A thorough critique of this proposal would require more space than I have here, but talk of "origin in observation and experience" could be viewed as begging the question against the broader conception of experience that I have just been sketching. Meanwhile, phrases such as "explanatory power" and "intersubjective testability" give the impression that not only is an unduly narrow sense of "experience" being invoked, but that the context of scientific hypothesizing or theory construction is being assumed as the paradigmatic environment in which the concept of belief has its place. What is needed to counteract such an assumption is a more well-rounded analysis—what Wittgenstein would call a "perspicuous representation" (1958, §122; 1993, 133)—of the concept of belief. This brings us to the second main objection to the narrow empiricist account of belief exemplified by Clack.

The second main objection rejects the totalizing pronouncement that a belief, to be a belief at all, *must* be responsive to experience in the ways that Clack insists upon; it instead seeks to provide an account of the concept of belief that does justice to its diverse uses across

different, albeit in many instances overlapping, spheres of human activity. Clack again anticipates this objection, admitting that his own approach, which posits “a normative conception of belief” and excludes religious attitudes from that category on the grounds that they fail to conform to the posited conception, is apt to strike many readers as profoundly un-Wittgensteinian (Clack 2016, 210). Responding to the objection, Clack returns to Wittgenstein’s lectures on religious belief from 1938, for those lectures are one place in which Clack finds not an analysis of a spectrum of uses of the concept of belief, but rather a sharp bifurcation between “ordinary” uses, on the one hand, and the peculiar uses typified by the term “religious belief,” on the other. This dichotomous treatment of the topic, Clack surmises, indicates that Wittgenstein “was himself reticent to think of *religious* convictions as being in the nature of beliefs” (2016, 210).

This response of Clack’s does not really deal with the objection, for two reasons. One reason is that even if Wittgenstein was indeed reticent in the way that Clack suggests, nowhere in the lectures or anywhere else does Wittgenstein overtly deny that there are such things as religious beliefs. Rather, his purpose in the lectures is to bring out the particularities of that type of belief. In service of this objective, some of the contrasts that Wittgenstein draws do come across as excessively dichotomizing. In making this observation, however, we should recall that these were lectures, not polished essays; it would be rash to assume that they represent Wittgenstein’s mature and settled views on the matter.

The second reason why Clack’s response does not deal with the objection is that, for the objection to go through, it is unimportant whether Wittgenstein’s lectures exhibit a reticence to treat religious beliefs as genuine beliefs. What is important is whether, regardless of anything Wittgenstein says in one place or another, a rigorous examination of the concept of belief would yield the result that what are commonly called religious beliefs should be excluded from the category. What Wittgenstein gives us in the most thoroughly worked out

of his later writings is not a definitive answer to a question such as whether there are religious beliefs or what types of belief there are; instead, he proffers a method, or set of methods, designed to facilitate responses to theories, especially philosophical theories, that tend to funnel our thinking down paths that distort the meanings of words and concepts.

As Clack well knows, a philosophical approach influenced by Wittgenstein's later work would be apt to take seriously the possibility that uses of the term "belief" are various, constituting an assemblage united not by any one essential property but by multiple "family resemblances" (to borrow Wittgenstein's well-known term (1958, §67)). When confronted with the denial that there is any such thing as religious belief, one among numerous places where a Wittgenstein-influenced enquiry might look for a counterexample is recitations of the Apostles' Creed. "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord [and so on]" ("The Apostles' Creed" 1970, 9)—the Creed appears to express a belief, or rather a series of beliefs; reciting it constitutes a significant part of the liturgy of many Christian churches.

Recalling the distinction between believing-that and believing-in, the speaking of the Creed in a liturgical setting would seem to be a clear instance of expressing a belief-in. The theologian Nicholas Lash, applying terminology from J. L. Austin (1975), has proposed that reciting the Creed is best understood as a *performative* utterance: rather than voicing an opinion or describing how things stand, it "enacts what it announces, like 'I promise' or 'I pledge'" (Lash 1992, 18). In historical terms, this performative use of "I believe"—which, in the Apostles' Creed translates the Latin *credō* and the Greek *pisteúō*—precedes other uses, such as expressing uncertainty ("I believe this is the road to Abingdon but I'm not sure") or expressing a conviction ("I believe there is life on other planets"). As Wilfred Cantwell Smith reminds us, "Literally, and originally, 'to believe' means 'to hold dear': virtually, to love" (Smith 1979, 105). Needless to say, etymology is not necessarily a reliable guide to current

usage, and hence we should be wary of Smith's assertion that "to hold dear" is the *literal* meaning of "to believe"; what counts as the literal meaning of a word or phrase can change over time. Yet it remains relevant to our present considerations that the connections between the concepts of belief and love—and of having faith or trust in someone or something—go back a long way.

A defender of Clack's position might worry that this performative sense of "I believe"—where the phrase is used to verbalize one's allegiance or devotion to someone or something—is too distant from the "truth-aiming" sense to count *these days* as an integral component of the concept of belief. Reflecting upon an example from Wittgenstein, of someone confessing a belief in the Last Judgment, Clack maintains that this purported belief belongs to a different conceptual category. "As we have seen," Clack writes, "a belief [...] must be anchored to the world by means of experience; it arises from experience, and must be sensitive to experience," but all of these characteristics are absent from the "belief" in a Last Judgment (Clack 2016, 203).

One way of responding to this worry would be to admit that there is indeed a conceptual gap between the religious—in this case, confessional or performative—sense of "belief" and what Clack and others are calling the "truth-aiming" sense, but to then insist that this provides no reason to suppose that only the latter of these senses deserves to be associated with the term "belief." An alternative response, however, would be to look for conceptual connections—what Wittgenstein calls *Zwischengliedern* ("intermediate links" (1979, 9e; 2009, §122) or "intermediate cases" (1958, §122))—between the different uses. In other words, one may seek out the resemblances between the various members belonging to the "family" of the concept of belief.

One type of intermediate case would be uses of the phrase "I believe in" where what is expressed is, or includes, a belief that such-and-such exists or that such-and-such is the case.

“I believe in ghosts,” someone might say, or “I believe in the Loch Ness monster.” Although the details of what is meant would depend on contextual factors, it is at least likely that when phrases such as these are uttered, the “believe in” construction conveys not trust or devotion but something more like what Clack has in mind when he invokes the notion of aiming at truth. To believe in ghosts, in this sense, is equivalent to believing that there are ghosts—that ghosts exist.

These are intermediate cases because, while being plausibly describable as aiming at truth—or as “existential” versions of belief-in, in the sense that they are beliefs *in the existence of something* (see MacIntosh 1994)—they also, at least typically, require some degree of faith or trust, which might be characterized as a leap beyond what the empirical evidence presents one with. In the case of a belief in ghosts, there may also be a close connection with a religious worldview, for believing in ghosts is apt to be bound up with other beliefs about the place of physical death in human life. A more extensive investigation than I can provide here might proceed to consider such things as beliefs in angels, in demons, in miracles, and so on—beliefs that, in many or perhaps most cases, will be partially constitutive of a religious perspective on the world, but which involve, minimally, believing in the existence or occurrence of *something*.⁷

The purpose of such an investigation would be to release us (to release oneself) from the grip of a picture of what “belief” must mean, of what belief “must” be (cf. Wittgenstein 1958, §115)—a picture that starts with a definition of what belief does (e.g. that it aims at truth) and makes assumptions about the best or even only way of fulfilling that purpose (e.g. by being

7. It is because of these *conceptual* connections between religious perspectives, on the one hand, and beliefs that certain events have happened or that certain things exist, on the other, that the distinction which is assumed in some of the cognitive scientific literature, between “religious” and “factual” beliefs (or “cognitive attitudes”), is questionable (see, e.g., Heiphetz et al. 2021, 29). As I hope has been clear from my own discussion, there are important distinctions to be made between different varieties of belief, but a sweeping distinction between “religious” and “factual” beliefs provides a mere starting point, at best.

responsive to experiential evidence, where “experience” and “evidence” are construed in narrow empiricist terms).

Concluding Remarks

Raising Simon Blackburn’s question, of whether there is such a thing as religious belief, is fruitful insofar as it prompts reflection upon the concept of belief in general and upon whether, or to what extent, that concept applies to religion. The same goes for Brian Clack’s way of pursuing the question, which results in the answer that there is no such thing as religious belief: in the religious sphere, there are, at most, merely “belief-like imaginings.” Although the sharp demarcation that Clack draws between what he thinks of as genuine beliefs, on the one hand, and what are commonly but (in his view) misleadingly called religious beliefs, on the other, is in part inspired by certain reported remarks of Wittgenstein’s, we have seen that there are other thoughts and methods in Wittgenstein’s corpus that may prompt the enquiry to go in a very different direction.

By acknowledging this alternative direction in his own discussion, Clack’s treatment of the topic contains the seeds of a critical response to his own conclusion. In this respect, Clack’s style of argument is refreshing; it pointedly refrains from trying to pull the wool over the reader’s eyes. Nonetheless, the conclusion is based on dubious premises concerning the nature of belief. In effect, Clack exemplifies an approach that takes a specific category of belief—a category that ties belief to what looks very much like scientific hypothesizing or theory construction—and privileges this category over all others. The position according to which there is no such thing as religious belief thus turns out to be a house of cards, of the sort that Wittgenstein was keen to knock down (Wittgenstein 1958, §118). The position may remain appealing to those who share its empiricist assumptions, but for those whose philosophical methods involve taking seriously how terms such as “belief” and “religious

belief” are used in actual discursive contexts, it is liable to come across as an unwarranted linguistic stipulation.⁸

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