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Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy as Foundation of Comparative Theology

Klaus von Stosch

There are two streams of reception of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion and his contributions to interreligious communication. On the one hand, his contributions are greatly appreciated because he seems to be in favor of religious pluralism. For example he says to M. O'C. Drury that "[a]ll genuine expressions of religion are wonderful, even those of the most savage peoples" (Rhees 1984, 93). Moreover, in his whole philosophy he tries to highlight and appreciate differences and diversities. It is paradigmatic for his way of thinking that he considered the expression of the Earl of Kent in Shakespeare's *King Lear* as an epigraph for his *Philosophical Investigations*: "I'll teach you differences!" Thus, the respect for religion and for religious diversity seems to be a central concern for Wittgenstein.

On the other hand, this respect seems to be grounded in neglecting the cognitive dimension of religious beliefs. Although Wittgenstein wants to approach religious phenomena in a purely descriptive way, he emphasizes not so much the cognitive dimension of religions. For example Wittgenstein states, "Was Augustine mistaken, then, when he called on God on every page of the Confessions? Well – one might say – if he was not mistaken, then the Buddhist holy-man, or some other, whose religion expresses quite different notions, surely was. But *none* of them was making a mistake except where he was putting forward a theory." (Wittgenstein 1979, 1e). In most interpretations of Wittgenstein's philosophy, this critical attitude towards theories in the realm of religion has been understood as a defense of a non-cognitivist interpretation of theology. However, Wittgenstein's critique of theories does not only concern religions but also every kind of philosophy and has roots in a specific understanding of philosophy (von Stosch 2001a) and of religious language. If we want to understand his concern here, we have to take a closer look at his investigations concerning religious beliefs. In my contribution I try to develop a closer look at Wittgenstein's later philosophy, in which I will argue for the possibility of a cognitivist interpretation of religious beliefs. This interpretation will open up a peculiar dimension of interreligious communication through its sensitivity for the expressive dimension of religious beliefs. Both, the awareness of expressive dimensions of religious beliefs and the respect of its cognitive elements, will be the foundation of the methods of comparative theology which I try to develop in the last part of this article.

1. Religious beliefs as elements of world-pictures?

Many Wittgensteinian philosophers seem to claim that Wittgenstein's reflections on religious belief lead to a relativistic or fideistic understanding of religious beliefs (cf. von Stosch 2010). This way of understanding Wittgenstein is, unfortunately, a kind of 'canonical view' in many circles of Wittgenstein's interpretation. If this interpretation is correct, Wittgenstein would not be of much help for interreligious communication, as his approach would disrespect the self-understanding of most religious believers.

The main argument for this 'canonical view' – or at least the most powerful one in my view – is that Wittgenstein seems to treat propositions expressing religious belief as grammatical propositions or even as hinge propositions. And it is true: religious beliefs, or at least some elements of them, are, as Wittgenstein supposes, part of our grammar or our world-picture (cf. Wittgenstein 1992a, §107, 239f., 336; Lütterfelds 1998, 143). If at least the basic elements of religious beliefs belong to the world-picture of a religious person, it would seem to be absurd to give any reasons for them. Likewise, it would appear to be impossible to discuss them with people who do not share one's own religious form of life. For it makes no sense, in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, to give reasons for the world-picture, as it is the instance which is presupposed in all reasoning. My world-picture as "the substratum of all my enquiring and asserting" (Wittgenstein 1992a, §162) is "the inherited background against which I do distinguish between true and false" (ibid., §94). It is impossible to lay a foundation for it because it is the ground of all foundation. You cannot argue for or against it because it is, as Wittgenstein puts it, "the element in which arguments have their life" (ibid. §105).

However, the grammatical propositions of our world-pictures do not only give a framework for the question of the validity of all arguments, but they are also the basis of their meaning. The striking point in this context is that the meaning of the grammatical propositions themselves is not accessible without reference to our practice, and our practice is not accessible in isolation from our language-games. Thus, we only understand the meaning of our world-pictures by referring to their embedding in our language-games, since, in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, our ways of acting and their understanding are originally connected (cf. Schulte 1987, 26, 31). For this reason, the grammatical propositions of our world-pictures cannot be understood without reference to these language-games as enacted in practice. It also explains

how people who use the same terms cannot contradict each other when these terms play different roles in their language-games, especially when these terms are embedded in the (often tacit) level of grammatical propositions of the world-pictures.

Accordingly, understanding the main elements of religious belief as participating in our grammar or world-picture allows us to see why Wittgenstein, in his *Lectures on Religious Belief*, claims that believers and non-believers are often unable to contradict each other. They are not only playing different language-games, but the meaning of the hinge propositions, which ground all possible argumentation between them, differ. They can, at least, differ to such an extent that they are simply talking about different things, although using the same terms. A lack of awareness of the regulative role of religious belief can lead to complete darkness in philosophical enquiry. According to the later Wittgenstein, ignoring the difference between grammatical or regulative propositions, on the one hand, and encyclopaedical or empirical propositions on the other hand, is not only the “congenital defect” of metaphysics (cf. Wittgenstein 1994, §949; Wittgenstein 1992c, §458), but also and especially the main cause of errors in philosophy of religion.

Insight into the grammatical or regulative status of at least some elements of religious belief also explains why Wittgenstein criticizes any foundation of religious belief that is not aware of this status.¹ Wittgenstein makes clear that any giving of a reason already presupposes belief or unbelief, so that there cannot be any reason which forces somebody to change his religious (un)belief, since the change of an element of a world-picture cannot be forced by arguments on the encyclopaedical level.

As religious belief, considered as part of our world-pictures, sets the parameters of our actions, it seems possible to have access to it only by changing one’s life. Religious belief in Wittgenstein’s view is not pure doctrine, cold wisdom or superficial repetition of formulas, but rather passion, since “life ... and religion are full of colour” (Wittgenstein 1992b, 538); in religion, as he puts it, one has to be “*Ergriffen und Umgedreht werden*” “sized and turned around” (Wittgenstein 1992b, 525). As a “passionate commitment to a system of reference” and as a “way of assessing life” (Wittgenstein 1980, 64e), it cannot be founded on a neutral independent grammar shared by everybody. Instead, it lies at the ground of all argumentation for and understanding of religious belief. The only possible way to access it seems to be a leap of faith, making any argumentation about it superfluous and useless.

If this account of religious belief was the last word on it from a Wittgensteinian perspective, it would be silly to argue in favour of the truth of religious belief, and interreligious

¹ Cf. the attack against Father O’Hara in Wittgenstein’s lectures on religious belief.

communication would be very difficult. At least notions like “truth” or “rationality” would not have a language game independent meaning any more. Any claim to absolute truth and any question as to its universal validity would be a complete misunderstanding of religious belief which would have to be cured by philosophical investigations (cf. Kroß 1998, 287). However, at the very core and origin of monotheism there are claims to universal validity (cf. Stosch 2011) which seem to understand themselves as true in all circumstances, times and contexts. Therefore a philosophical theory which makes it impossible to have rational universal claims is not very helpful in the religious realm. It is, furthermore, also contrary to the descriptive attitude which the later Wittgenstein adopted in his philosophy.

2. Propositions expressing religious belief as hinge propositions?

Having examined this ‘canonical view’ of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion, let us take a closer look at the grammatical status of propositions expressing religious belief. This will clarify if it is really useless to try to give reasons for religious belief and to communicate across the borders of different religions. For any further approach, it is first necessary to clarify whether all grammatical propositions of our world-pictures are unable to be doubted within their religious framework, because it is precisely this undoubtability which is the foundation of our world-pictures in Wittgenstein’s approach.

Naturally, it is not possible to doubt the rules of a language-game while playing it. For instance you cannot play soccer and at the same time doubt its fundamental rules within the game. At the very least, if your doubt manifests itself practically and you pick up the ball with your hands (while not being the goalkeeper), you would not be asked whether you have good motives for your actions. Instead you will be punished according to the rules of the game. Hence you cannot stop following the rules and still be taken to be playing the same game. Nonetheless you can, in other circumstances, start a discussion about the most fundamental rules of soccer; when discussing them you are playing a different language-game. These discussions can lead to new rules, whereas within the language-game of ‘soccer’ the grammar is fixed and cannot be doubted in a practically relevant way without stopping the game.

Now, the rules of soccer are (at least usually) not part of our world-pictures, but the status of all regulative or grammatical propositions is similar. Normally you cannot doubt regulative or grammatical propositions in a practically relevant way at the same time that you follow them in all your actions. You are not playing soccer when you do not follow its rules,

and you do not have certain elements of a world-picture except if you live by them. The regulative status of a sentence depends on whether it regulates your life or not. If it regulates your life, any practically relevant doubt is excluded because otherwise it no longer actually regulates your life.

At this stage the given factors lead to an important distinction – there are regulative propositions which only regulate certain language-games and which can be doubted in other language-games. Concerning these grammatical propositions it is possible to ask, in a practically relevant sense, whether we should follow them or not. This is so, as there are situations in which you do not follow them and in which you can ask, even if you are currently following them, whether you should really do so. This means you can doubt these propositions without changing the central features of your world-picture. For example, in Germany you shake hands when you meet somebody or you say “Enjoy your meal” before eating with somebody, whereas many Americans tend to think that these particular conventions are not very important. Thus, as a German you can stop following those rules when you are in America. Maybe this becomes more difficult when you go to Iran and realize that men are shaking hands with each other, but that as a man you are not allowed to shake hands with a woman. Nonetheless, it is possible for a German to follow those rules as well, and at the same time to reflect which rules are better and which rules you prefer.

Conversely, however, there are other regulative propositions that you cannot doubt in a practically relevant sense without doubts arising concerning your entire world-picture. These propositions are normally called ‘hinge propositions’ and this use of the term refers to the propositions Wittgenstein discussed with George E. Moore in *On Certainty*. For instance, no matter what, I am not able to doubt the fact that I am a man, that the earth already existed long before I was born and that I have never been to the sun. Such propositions belong to our system of reference and are presupposed in our language-games. It makes no sense to give reasons for them because they are presupposed in all reasoning. It is not possible to isolate one of these beliefs without shaking the world-picture as a whole. The crucial element here is to note that not all grammatical or regulative propositions are hinge propositions in the sense of propositions introduced by Moore in order to refute scepticism. Thus, it can be useful to give reasons for regulative propositions in instances in which they are not hinge propositions. For example, it is a regulative proposition for me that men and women should be allowed to shake hands with each other if they want to do it. Arguments could be made for this from the perspective of gender equality. At the same time both rules are deeply conditioned with culture and can be doubted. If you were raised in Iran and had never seen a man and a woman shaking

hands, it might be a hinge proposition that such a rule is followed by everybody. However, as a European who has been in the U.S. and Iran, the rule is still important but you accept its contingency.

With this distinction in mind, we can take a closer look at our topic by asking whether propositions expressing religious belief are hinge propositions or not. Regardless of whether Wittgenstein himself accepted such propositions as hinge propositions,² I intend to give the following answer in a purely descriptive way (cf. Wittgenstein 1993, §109, §124). The question is whether it is true (or even more radically: *possible*) to say that religious believers *cannot* doubt their religious convictions in a practically relevant way. Can religious convictions be part of our world-picture in the sense that they regulate the entire life of religious believers? Are they such a fundamental part of the grammar that religious believers have no other alternative than to follow them?

Obviously, the answer for contemporary believers is ‘No’, and this is why we should not think that they are hinge propositions. Religious believers sometimes doubt their religious beliefs, just as they also know that they have alternatives to turn to. They are aware of the possibility of doubting propositions expressing religious belief even without changing their grammatical status. At least in our pluralistic society this is obviously the case. Both religious and ethical convictions are not only shaken and endangered by the ‘paper doubts’ – the doubts which are expressed in an academic context but not lived – of some hard-core skeptics; in addition, the forms of life establishing ethical and religious values and convictions in our postmodern world are so diversified that nearly no greater diversification can be conceived. Diversification is not a sign of the absence of truth but it clearly indicates the absence of necessity. If rules are different in different cultures and language games, it is clear that they are contingent, and it is possible to have doubts.

That is why I would like to speak of a factual contingency of the regulative status of propositions expressing religious belief, but facts can and perhaps should change.³ As such, in a philosophical enquiry, it would not be enough to demonstrate contingency on an empirical level. It is therefore important to see that, at least for a religious belief articulated in the tradition of Western philosophy, there are good reasons to speak not only of a factual, but also of a

² Regarding the evaluation of Wittgenstein’s point of view to this question I agree with Hilary Putnam’s view presented in Putnam (1992). But as it would be next to impossible to give sufficient reason for this position in a short paper, so I prefer to exclude this question here.

³ Undoubtedly, you can imagine a society in which there do not exist any alternatives for a certain religious belief. In this sense Anthony Kenny tries to establish the possibility of a society in which the belief in God “is deeply embedded in everyone’s noetic structure in such a way as to be implicit in every kind of inquiry” (Kenny 1992, 35). As I will try to show immediately it is not possible to imagine this situation when you consider the notion of God as it is conceived in the tradition of Western philosophy.

grammatical contingency of the regulative status of religious belief (cf. von Stosch 2001b, 269-275).

Central to my approach here is the fact that not all actions of a human being can be regulated by the belief in God in a manner that excludes internal doubts on the matter. If the propositional expression of belief in God were a hinge proposition, it would be impossible to even question from an internal perspective that you always follow it. This means it would be impossible to doubt the regulative proposition in a practically relevant sense without converting it into an encyclopaedical proposition. For instance, a man, having consumed a good amount of Belgian beer, finds himself in the middle of a drag-show at 2 o'clock in the morning in a London night-bar with everybody around him claiming that he is a woman. Perhaps then he himself – at least at this very moment – will become uncertain of his sexual identity. In that case the (undoubtable) hinge proposition “I am a man” has been converted into a (doubtable) encyclopaedical proposition. The striking phenomenon with propositions expressing religious belief is that it is possible to doubt them without leaving the language-game which is regulated by them.

At this point it has occasionally been objected that a world-picture-*internal* doubt on elementary religious beliefs is not possible⁴. From this point of view doubts are an indication of the absence of assurance of faith and therefore an indication of the fact that religious beliefs lost their regulative, world-picture-constitutive status. Concerning this thought it is certainly proper that doubts can be a sign of religious beliefs having lost their regulative status. However, there are acts of faith which include these doubts without invalidating the regulative status of the religious components of one's world picture. As an example one could mention the act of praying, which certainly has a constitutive status for a whole set of religious beliefs.

It seems to me that in our context it is an important characteristic of Jewish and Christian prayers that one can doubt essential religious beliefs without them losing their regulative status. “Also the prayer has been affected by doubt. It cannot and may not deny its place of living; the faith founded by praying cannot abolish the doubts in God. The prayer is the place of truth, the hour of truth – and precisely therefore not a place of unquestionable and questionless assurance.”⁵ Thus, prayer is not the removal of doubts concerning fundamental religious beliefs. In contrast, it helps to articulate those doubts without invalidating the world-picture-constitutive meaning of religious beliefs. It would be a great misunderstanding of religious beliefs to consider them undoubtable in their regulative status. On the contrary, it seems – as the example

⁴ Cf. Brümmer 1999, 446; Herck 1998, 223. The following paragraph has been published already in Stosch 2010, 129f.

⁵ Werbick 2001, 32, own translation.

of the doubtfully-searching praying man shows – characteristic to have regulative status without abolishing the internal possibility of doubting.

The peculiarity of religious beliefs seems to have all characteristics of world-picture-constitutive, regulative beliefs without taking part in their internal undeniability. Indeed, it is possible to doubt all sort of regulative sentences regarding their semantic meaning. In those (internally not doubtable) regulative sentences, such a doubt results in either a pure *paper doubt*, or the doubt leads to a change of status heading towards encyclopaedical belief. For instance, the proposition ‘that is a hand’ gains encyclopaedical status temporarily when pointing at one’s own hand after a traffic accident. Usually such a regulative sentence is only doubtable in scepticism. Such a doubt can indeed be used methodically but loses its power when used in real life because it deprives itself of its own grammatical foundation. On the contrary, even without turning to a general scepticism and without being in extreme situations you can always internally doubt religious beliefs.

This internal questionability is, for example, shown in the act of praying. It shows that religious beliefs – because of their universal demand to state something about the last reality – do not endure anything which is not arrangeable with this demand. A religious proposition can only be valid if it is arrangeable with everything we know about reality. Hence, problems emerge from two points of view. On the one hand, the religious view of life is questioned when it is confronted with alternative ways of the overall interpretation of reality. This factual plurality of religious and non-religious views of life means that no view of life can be accepted unquestioned in its regulative importance⁶.

On the other hand, religious beliefs are not only doubtable because of their factual plurality. They are doubtable because their universal need of compatibility with our experiences makes it possible to question them again and again. Religious beliefs want to be compatible with all experiences and all ideas of the world; doubt can never be forced to come to an end because there can always be new ways of perception of reality. Said in a more technical way, religious beliefs represent last orientations in relation to the last reality. They want to refer to something unconditioned in a conditioned life and world. This correlation cannot be unambiguous because the unconditioned cannot be unambiguously expressed in the

⁶ However, there are other subjects without reasonable alternative approaches, for example the idea that the world did not exist before my birth. Perhaps in a certain discussion we will have no more arguments against this idea and – after three years in the dungeons of a king, who thinks that the world started with him – we will be so brittle that we would admit anything to him. However we cannot help calling such a king mad while taking alternative religious or naturalistic interpretations of the (last) reality seriously.

conditioned world. That is why in religious matters there is a never ending possibility and need of interpretation and why doubt can never be excluded⁷.

Thus, the strategy to explain religious beliefs as undoubtable parts of our world-pictures not only fails because of the factual plurality of religious beliefs but also because of their grammatical structure. From this it does not follow that religious beliefs do not have or should not have a constitutive role in our world pictures. It only reminds us of the contingency of this role. The insight in this contingency of the regulative status of religious belief and in the contingency of religious language games leads us to the task of rational justification of religious belief.

3. Interreligious communication in the awareness of double contingency

As I have shown, a purely philosophical-descriptive way of dealing with the grammar of propositions expressing belief in God conceived as an unconditional being reveals something I suggest to call the *double contingency* of the regulative status of religious belief. I speak of a double contingency because the validity of the regulative power of a religious conviction is contingent not only for empirical reasons in our postmodern world but also for grammatical reasons within all conceptions of God in the tradition of Western philosophy. The regulative status of religious convictions is unextinguishably contingent, but it does not follow that they all have to be transformed into empirical or encyclopaedical propositions. As we learned above, it is the peculiarity of religious beliefs that they can be doubted without eliminating them from our grammar. What can be seen is that their regulative status is not free from the possibility of doubt, or from the necessity of foundation or from a check through communication.

This necessity of foundation becomes even more obvious when propositions expressing religious belief are taken as empirical or encyclopaedical propositions. In Wittgenstein's descriptive approach to philosophy the question whether they are grammatical or encyclopaedical propositions cannot be answered without reference to the language-game-practice of religious believers. It seems to be clear that religious believers sometimes treat a religious conviction as a regulative element of their world-picture and sometimes as an encyclopaedical proposition. Since philosophy leaves everything as it is (Wittgenstein 1993, §124), it makes no sense to try to teach religious believers that their belief cannot have a cognitive-propositional dimension. In a similar manner as Wittgenstein scholar Severin

⁷ Cf. Stosch 2001b, 268-274; Stosch 2003, 124-139.

Schroeder (cf. 2000, 150), I will try to go beyond the opposition of grammatical or expressive dimension of religious belief on the one hand and encyclopaedical or cognitive-propositional dimension on the other. Religious belief can have both dimensions, and as a philosopher one has to take a very close look at the respective language-game in order to clarify its status in a concrete situation. Philosophical insight into the grammatical structure of propositions expressing religious belief can only be gained through a turn of focus to the individual case and to the concrete language-game. Therefore philosophy of religion, like every philosophy that seeks to follow Wittgenstein, has to be established as a collection of examples.

Unfortunately I cannot develop such a collection here. Let me simply briefly mention one example which I tried to develop elsewhere in more length (cf. von Stosch 2016, von Stosch 2018). The discussion of the problem of evil has obviously a cognitive dimension. Theology has to show how belief can be defended against the logical and the evidential argument from evil. Theology has to explain in which way the belief in an almighty, omniscient and benevolent God can be reconstructed if we face evil. However the attempts of theodicy lead to challenges from the perspective of practical reason. For a convincing defense of religious belief in the face of evil it is not enough to refer to theoretical arguments. We also have to look at the moral and practical implications, i.e. at the regulative dimension, of religious beliefs. This will also shape our look at the cognitive meaning of our theoretical concepts. Hence theoretical and practical reason have to work hand in hand. A defense of religious belief has to be aware of the different dimensions of the meaning of religious belief.

I cannot explain my example more in this context here and I cannot add others. But what I will try to do is to give some formal hints for such a collection and to exclude certain evaluations of religious belief and its relationship to reason. So far it can be concluded that the given insight into the grammatical structure of propositions expressing religious belief helps to avoid four mistakes when investigating the possibility of giving reasons for religious belief.

1. First, *fideism* contradicts the grammar of propositions expressing religious belief. In other words, in my definition fideism is a position that claims the regulative status of propositions expressing religious belief without considering the necessity of grounding this regulative status. Such a position has to be avoided because of its unawareness of the double contingency of the regulative status of religious convictions. Although religious convictions are often correctly treated as parts of our world-pictures, fideism mistakenly concludes from the regulative status of many propositions expressing religious belief that they can be considered as hinge propositions.

2. Second, neither can we approve of the opposite conception taking all propositions expressing religious belief as encyclopaedical, empirical or cognitive propositions, therefore supporting the illusion that religious belief can be defended or offended in a neutral grammar. I call this conception *rationalism*. Its problem is that it does not consider that religious convictions often have a regulative status in the life of religious believers. This means the validity of religious belief cannot be evaluated on a purely cognitive-propositional level. The regulative-expressive level needs to be looked at as well. Otherwise one fails to understand the meaning of the cognitive propositions of religious believers because the meaning of all encyclopaedical propositions depends on the used grammar, i.e. on the regulative level.
3. The third conception we have to exclude from a philosophy of religion following Wittgenstein is *relativism*. Relativism, in a Wittgensteinian perspective, is a position which from the double contingency of the regulative status of religious belief draws the conclusion of its arbitrariness. However contingency, as I suggest, does not mean the end of a possible well-founded choice. On the contrary contingency demands and enables well-founded choice and is the presupposition of a free and ethically significant relation to religious belief and to what we call God.
4. Finally *fundamentalism* has to be rejected within my approach because it contradicts the grammar of religious belief. There are two forms of fundamentalism which try to eliminate the contingency of religious belief. One strategy is an individual fundamentalism that attempts to ignore the diversity of religious beliefs and world-pictures by withdrawing into a sort of (intellectual) ghetto. The other takes the form of an attempt to eradicate contingency by enforcing a certain religious belief, as system of reference, onto a society or a sub-part of it. Even if fundamentalism did succeed in eliminating the empirical contingency of religious belief, it could not eliminate the contingency of the regulative status of religious belief. Grammatical reasons will not allow it.

To sum up, in a philosophy of religion that builds upon Wittgenstein, one has to avoid any position that ignores two grammatical insights concerning the structure and status of propositions expressing religious belief:

- a) insight into the regulative status of at least some religious convictions, or rather their being-embedded in the bedrock-level of our world-pictures and
- b) the notion of the double contingency of this regulative status (that is to say this embedding), opening religious convictions to rational evaluation and ethically significant free choice.

If one is cognizant of these points, it is not only possible but *necessary* (cf. b) to give reasons for religious convictions, and it makes a lot of sense to discuss them in interreligious communication. It is clear that these reasons are highly menaced by errors or misunderstandings. First, the meaning of religious convictions cannot be understood without reference to our diversified language-game-practice and, second, because it is often dependent on tacit elements of our world-pictures. Thus, interreligious communication can shape religious beliefs and is therefore a complicated enterprise. If we want to be rational in our religious beliefs, it can be extremely helpful to have communication across the borders of our world pictures and religions, because interreligious communication in many situations can help to gain awareness of the tacit elements of one's own world-picture. If interreligious communication is so important for the better understanding of one's own position and world-picture, it is important to use appropriate methods for it. In the following pages, I try to develop six methods which should be followed in interreligious communication if it wants to lead to a significant and meaningful self-articulation in theology. These methods are identical with the basic methods of comparative theology and can be developed with the help of Wittgenstein.

4. Methods of Comparative Theology developed from Wittgenstein⁸

If we take Wittgenstein's considerations seriously, it is clear that each philosophical and theological enterprise has to start from a concrete case study (1)⁹ and has to deal with real problems (2). It is also clear that a lot of work has to be done to understand the religious beliefs within their language games and forms of life (3) and that all theological investigations have to be correlated with practice (5). A Wittgensteinian enquiry will always be vulnerable to revisions because it is highly dependent on the fallible insights of our language games (6). Therefore it is decisive to take into account different perspectives and language games from different contexts and cultures (4). Thus, the following six-point methodology for comparative theology and interreligious communication can be developed from Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

⁸ In the following chapter I am using some passages from my article *Comparative Theology as Challenge for the Theology of the 21st Century* (von Stosch 2012a). For further explanations cf. von Stosch 2012b.

⁹ The numbering corresponds to the six methodological points expanded in the continuation of this section.

(1) Comparative theology is characterised by its micrological approach and the attention to the particular.

One of the basic insights of Wittgenstein's philosophy concerns the dependence of the meaning of religious beliefs on the use of religious language, or language-games. The understanding that the meaning of religious convictions depends on a particular language-game compels the dialogue between different religious traditions to refer to concrete examples and interrelations. Since the sentence "God is love" can point to different meanings depending on whom and in what context it is said, one can understand it adequately only by perceiving it as embedded in particular language-games and integrating it in dialogue. Therefore, comparative theology can never result in a universal theory about religions and truth.¹⁰ Since the meaning of basic religious beliefs within particular traditions are heterogeneous and can lead to fruitful discussions (only if related to single cases and language-games), comparative theology focuses on a cautious observation of selected details within particular case studies.¹¹

Comparative theology is also recognizable by a focus upon an interreligious and intercultural comparison of exactly-specified theological, literary or confessional writings, concrete rituals, defined beliefs, certain theological concepts within limited contexts and historical appointed eras.¹² Every act of comparison follows an interior logic and provides theology with interesting insights by addressing the concrete.¹³

In order to respect people in their fears, afflictions and queries, it is vitally important to remember the question of truth even within this micrological approach. Considering this, the second basic principle follows suit.

(2) Comparative theology is concerned with contemporary problems and intends to give an orientation on actually posed questions.

Although comparative theology has compiled different examples of contemporary problems, the selection of questions is not supposed to be arbitrary. It must be geared toward

¹⁰ Cf. Clooney 2001, 14: "Working by examples also has the advantage of making it clear that I am not attempting a general theory about theology and religion nor about Christianity and Hinduism in order to explain everything, all at once."

¹¹ Clooney talks about a "careful consideration of some details of a few particular cases" (2001, 15). Respectively, he requires that every kind of critique on his ideas and statements are illustrated with examples (ibid.). Clooney's critique on Dupuis' strongly apriorically arranged critic of religion is symptomatic (cf. ibid., 23).

¹² Cf. Knitter 2004, 207: "They (comparative theologians; author) generally try to limit themselves to comparing specific texts, concrete rituals, focused beliefs, particular theologians, limited contexts, or historical periods."

¹³ Cf. Hintersteiner 2007, 484, with reference to Clooney: "Each act of comparison bears its own internal logic and reveals intriguing insights into Christian theology."

theological and existential problems, concerned with lay questions about sense, salvation and truth in addition to critical challenges by specialists. Otherwise, comparative theology would then become a playground for detail-loving eccentrics, those who meticulously compare totally irrelevant subjects. Just as it is not analytic philosophy if one comments arbitrarily on some random detail of our language, commenting capriciously upon correct observations in order to compare religious traditions is not automatically comparative theology.

Therefore, it is important that, as a first step in comparative theology, problems are drafted according to the different viewpoints of religious and non-religious traditions, and in so doing the critiques of religion appear quite meaningful. Of course, one should not expect that there will be a uniform canon of questions for all comparative theologies in the world. In the least, at the point of concrete research, one should identify shared problems and assess the given examples with a view to their competence of clearly arranged solutions.

In relation to this important problem of choice and the need of orientation towards real problems, we can learn a lot from Wittgenstein. His philosophical starting points are always existential or intellectual problems. He starts with the insight, “Ich kenne mich nicht aus” (Wittgenstein 1993, §123) and tries to show “der Fliege den Ausweg aus dem Fliegenglas” (Wittgenstein 1993, §309). Thus, the aim of comparative theology cannot be an abstract overview on a comparison of religions, but it has to realize how it is shaped by questions of religious believers. It has to show how these questions can be addressed instead of perpetuating metaphysical debates within the battle-fields of abstract theories (as exclusivism, inclusivism or pluralism) (cf. von Stosch 2007).

(3) Comparative theology wants to appreciate differences and tries to learn from them for its own development.

If we want to have meaningful interreligious communication, we have to take seriously the internal perspectives of the language-games of our conversation partners. A precondition would thus be a detailed knowledge of one’s own theological position in addition to those of others. This knowledge is opened up only if theologians not only try to understand another position from a (religiously examined) external perspective but also look at it from the dialogue partner’s inner-confessional theology. The ideal case would involve a comparative theologian who has studied more than one theology and would be able to switch back and forth between inner-confessional perspectives. At the least, he or she should have experiences within the ideas and rules of other religious traditions almost as well as his or her own tradition and should be able

to develop an adequate inner perspective in dialogue with other beliefs.¹⁴ Since a factual statement of the other is only adequately understood within the context of his or her own world-picture, the meaning of the different elements of belief will remain indistinct if the theologian abstains from referencing an inner perspective.

Thus, in interreligious communication we need a significant amount of time simply to understand the meaning of the words and signs of people who use other language-games. This venture seems to be complicated enough, but this enterprise becomes even more difficult because of the fact that religious convictions are often embedded in the regulative level of our language-games. Since many elements of our world-pictures are tacit and since the rules we follow in our language-games are only visible in our actions – sometimes without explicit knowledge about them¹⁵ – different interpretations of our actions are possible. So the first step must be to search for a common interpretation of actions embodying religious convictions between the dialogue partners in a concrete situation – an enterprise which sometimes seems to be hopeless because it is so difficult to understand religious convictions of people from another culture.

However, it is not the case that no link between different world-pictures or language-games exists. In Wittgenstein's philosophy language-games are not completely autonomous and they are never inaccessible. Language-games as forms of life and world-pictures are not hermetically separated from each other. Instead, they are constituted by their "open boundaries and fuzzy borders" (cf. Schneider 1999, 145). This permeability is the reason for our ability to move between different language-games without appealing to a sort of super-language-game or a transcendental level. The only instance we can refer to in these movements is what Wittgenstein calls the "gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise" (Wittgenstein 1993, §206). This common human way of acting is not a distinct pattern of actions shared by everybody (cf. Hintikka and Hintikka 1990, 244, note 8). It is the praxeological reason for the possibility of moving between language-games. Wittgenstein does not claim that there are certain ways of acting common to all human beings. Instead, in our understanding of foreign language-games and forms of life, we refer to those ways of acting in the foreign form of life that are analogical to our own (cf. Kober 1993, 322). For this process of understanding is sufficient to understand the "gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise" as a notion of family resemblance in the sense in which Wittgenstein uses it in 1993, §65-67, i.e. it is necessary to find only (partly different)

¹⁴ Cf. Hintersteiner 2007, 478, with reference to Clooney: "To understand and evaluate a religious text of another tradition requires a reader to become deeply and holistically engaged in that tradition."

¹⁵ Cf. Wittgenstein 1993, §219: "Ich folge der Regel *blind*."

similarities and analogies in the different forms of acting to be able to speak of the common way of acting as a ‘system of reference’.

In Wittgenstein’s view it is not a philosophical, but an empirical, question whether there are culture-invariant patterns of human behaviour. He points out that it is an interesting and important fact that we all think it is possible to understand people who speak another language (cf. Wittgenstein 1994, §644). Nevertheless, there is no guarantee neither for the possibility of this understanding nor for the common way of human acting. Furthermore, the praxeological grounding of understanding has to be discovered each time anew. The universal validity of it as a ‘system of reference’ cannot be secured a priori, but it can only be *shown* by successful mutual understanding.

In actuality, we sometimes fail in our attempt to understand each other and then simply give up on understanding. These failures are the basis of Lyotard’s objection to any reasoning that tries to ignore or to eradicate “*le différend*” (cf. Lyotard 1983). Unlike Lyotard, Wittgenstein does not believe that it is philosophy’s task to show “*le différend*” but to search for ways of moving from one language-game to another without ignoring its individual characteristics and without eradicating any “*différend*”.

Showing this kind of respect for the variety and diversity of language-games (cf. Wittgenstein 1993, §23) does not mean giving up the idea of understanding the other. It only makes clear how careful we have to look at his/her practice if we want to understand. The outcome of the attempt to articulate one’s own position and beliefs within a foreign language-game is unpredictable and success cannot be guaranteed by a super-language(-game).

Expressed in the biblical language, humankind does not succeed in building the tower of Babel; people have been dispersed throughout the world and are forced to communicate within the context of a large diversity of languages and forms of life. Universal truth or validity cannot be established by building a tower or a super-language(-game). The only way is to speak many different languages and to live in many different forms of life. Is it not this story of being able to articulate personal experiences with God in each language that paved the way for the first Christians to leave their hiding-places at Pentecost?

It is not only the confidence in the Holy Spirit which invites us to turn over to other language-games. It is also a very simple philosophical insight which we can learn from Wittgenstein – only if we deal with the otherness of other people and live with them can we identify blindly followed rules of our grammar and thus understand the meaning of our convictions better and more easily. Therefore, the meaning and certainty of religious convictions are rooted in culturally and individually determined (various, particular) practical

dimensions which you have to look at if you want to get the meaning of religious convictions – of other people as well as your own.

Even if one is aware of all of Wittgenstein's insights, it will still be difficult to put oneself in the theological position of the other, and the result of this attempt will be unpredictable. As Wittgenstein seeks to teach us differences, this attempt remains indispensable. Hermeneutically it appears equally difficult to the problem every apologetic theology has to face if it is willing to make its claims understandable even beyond the borders of its own language-games (cf. von Stosch 2001b, 307-320) – a challenge that should not be neglected as long as theology is expected to look for the truth. Just as Catholic apologetics – for example, Melchior Cano emphasized the meaning of *loci alieni* as an epistemological source of theology and thus always made an effort to comprehend the thoughts and concepts of philosophy and the humanities within contemporary interreligious and intercultural contexts – theology as a whole cannot forget including the religious and cultural self- and world-interpretation of others as *locus alienus* into one's own epistemological concept.¹⁶

According to a statement from James Fredericks, to practice comparative theology means to raise oneself from the armchair of one's own tradition, to find a way into the world of the other and to become elated and enriched by their discovered truths.¹⁷ At the same time one is supposed to remember that the other is equally legitimized to put him or herself in my position and appreciate my truth from his or her own perspective. Therefore, theologians must expose themselves to a mutual-including process of understanding by the continuing attempt to value the perspectives of the other with particularity and without neglecting to understand them from one's own position.

(4) Comparative theology needs the instance of a third position

The mutual-including processes of understanding bear the threat of making reciprocal arrangements and agreements in order to exacerbate certain problems. If two religious inner-perspectives deal with similar strategies with a particular problem, the risk of trivializing the problem on a basis of shared convictions grows. As Franz Kafka puts it, they run the risk of becoming a 'community of scoundrels'.

¹⁶ Cf. the respective recordings to modern *loci alieni* at Hünemann 2003.

¹⁷ "Doing theology comparatively means crossing over into the world of another religious believer and learning the truths that animate the life of that believer. Doing theology comparatively also means coming back to Christianity transformed by these truths, now able to ask new questions about Christian faith and its meaning for today" (Fredericks 2004, xii.). Cf. *ibid*: The religious other would help to pose new questions and thus would enrich our way to Christ. "I propose that Christians get up out of the armchair and cross over into another religious tradition" (*ibid.*, xiii).

Modern theology tends to underestimate this threat with reference to the autonomous philosophical reason and the attempt to develop a religion-external criteriology. Although as a Wittgensteinian I think of metaphysical and transcendental-philosophical oriented attempts to develop such a criteriology as rather unhelpful, since from my point of view they can be destroyed philosophically, I still would recommend that on a very formal level such criteriology can and should be developed. At least to some extent, the instance of a third position could, in fact, be established by the position of a philosophical, autonomous, critical, external perspective.

Unfortunately, two opposing problems appear. On the one hand, this criteriology is too pluralistic since it cannot answer orientation problems and has to permit contradicting truth claims as being equally rational. On the other hand, this criteriology is not pluralistic enough since it is based upon a reasonable understanding within a certain philosophical tradition, therefore rejecting religious positions from a philosophical point of view which actually should be taken more seriously than the philosophical perspective would allow.

The third position therefore cannot simply be an abstract philosophy or criteriology, but must be concrete and able to observe the dialogue of the other two as a controlling instance. To avoid an expanded ‘community of scoundrels’, it seems essential that the third position is elected to hold a continuing moment of critique on the processed problems. This third position thus could be either atheistic or agnostic. Depending on the dialogue context, a follower of a third religious tradition could be consulted if the first holds a sufficiently different basic idea of the processed question and the second is able to confront it with critical and skilled arguments.

One way that Wittgenstein uses the instance of the third is the way he develops his case studies. It is important to present them in a way that we can get an overview (“*übersichtliche Darstellung*”/“perspicuous representation”, Wittgenstein 1993, §122). At the same time, we can be in the danger of simplification through an “*einseitige Diät*”/“one-sided diet” (ibid., §593) in the choice of case studies. Thus, the only way out seems to be interreligious communication with different partners within and outside religions. Such a communication is the only way of becoming aware of our simplifications and biases. The case studies and investigations presented in comparative theology should witness these movements across religious borders.

(5) Comparative theology always needs the return on religious praxis.

Comparative theology follows the idea that the cognitive content of religious convictions is understood fully only if debriefed for its ‘depth grammar’. A substantial part of comparative theology methodology is to clarify the connection between the regulative-expressive and the

encyclopaedic level of religious convictions. In this way, comparative theology can point to functional equivalences and regulative homogeneity beyond semantic differences.¹⁸ For this, a return to the praxis of different religious traditions and a reflection upon further developments within the interreligious dialogue is needed.

“A religious question is either a ‘life question’ or (empty) chatter”, Wittgenstein states (cf. 1997, 91). Hence, the return on religious praxis is absolutely necessary to give meaning to religious struggles. Insisting, in the Wittgensteinian sense, that religious doctrines and theological theories have to refer to life and practise does not imply that there is no cognitive dimension in religious beliefs. Alternatively, as Kellenberger has already put it, “having the truth of doctrine is religiously nothing, while living the truth of a godly life is all. This lesson ... is not the noncognitivist’s lesson that there is no truth or falsity to religious belief” (1972, 275). It just wants to make clear that there is no truth in religious belief which has no implications for practise.

Therefore, if we want to understand religious convictions in interreligious communication we always have to check how they are rooted in practise. Comparative theology is not a theology *for* dialogue, but a theology *of* dialogue, as Michael Barnes (cf. 1994) states. It is a cooperative concept wherein followers of other religious traditions are to be included.¹⁹ It is not simply reduced to writings and scriptures but requires a concrete dialogue between people of other world-pictures in order to find and develop adequate access towards their own level of world-pictures along with those of others. This makes the consistent return and re-reference to the basic elements of religious praxis within different traditions indispensable.

(6) Already on the basis of this dialogical open-mindedness, comparative theologians are aware of their own vulnerability and the reversibility and fallibility of their judgements.

This vulnerability, which can be reasoned christologically,²⁰ is related to the language-game bondage of all speech and thought. It reaches beyond general hermeneutic self-relativization in the context of eschatology or the admission of an epistemically ambivalent reality reasoned by religious and philosophical coherences. According to Wittgenstein’s

¹⁸ This way, it is possible to find – despite the huge differences between Bhartrhari and Bonaventura – on the level of explicit revelation theories that both, according to their historical context, have similar reason and aim for the same intentions. Cf. Carpenter 1995, 176: “They are in fact *doing* some very similar things, relative to their own respective historical contexts”.

¹⁹ Cf. Ward 2000, 339: “Comparative theology is a co-operative enterprise. It is a way of doing theology in which scholars holding different world-views share together in the investigation of concepts of ultimate reality, the final human goal, and the way to achieve it.”

²⁰ Cf. Knitter 2004, 209, with reference to Fredericks and Clooney: “For to be *loyal* to Christ, one must be *vulnerable* to others.”

previously mentioned notion, we follow the important parts of our religious ‘depth grammar’ unconsciously. Furthermore, the relation between the regulative level which is presupposed within religious speech, and the cognitive level structured by that, is contingent in two ways and is thus exposed to human fallibility as well as human freedom (cf. von Stosch 2001b, 268-274). Therefore, there is no end to comparative theology which makes this enterprise very similar to the way how Wittgenstein conceives philosophy. As Fredericks correctly diagnoses, within this moment is not a weakness but a great chance.²¹

5. Epilogue: Enabling the appreciation of otherness

I started this paper with the observation of how much Wittgenstein wants to teach us to see and appreciate differences. During my investigations I tried to argue that, from Wittgenstein, we can appreciate diversity without giving up our own claims to validity. Let us summarize how Wittgenstein can help to appreciate the otherness of the religiously other people without giving up the standards and criteria of your own world picture.

First of all we can learn from Wittgenstein that we are not aware of all parts of our world pictures. Our world pictures are not identical with our religion, and the contact with people from other religions and cultures can help us to get a better understanding of our deepest beliefs and shed new light on our forms of life. Through this better understanding we can get a fresh look at our own religious beliefs and their connection with the beliefs of others. Thus, the first way to appreciate the difference of other religions is mediated through the dynamic understanding of our world picture. Tacit elements of it can become conscious and can help us get a deeper understanding of other religions. They can also help us establish criteria which are independent from our own religion and can lead to appreciate something which I alone cannot understand from my religious framework.

Then, as a second important point, the insight in the regulative role of religious beliefs can help us appreciate parts of other religions, helping religious believers lead a good life even if the encyclopedical understanding of their beliefs is something which I am not in favor of. Thus, Wittgenstein encourages us to have a pragmatic look at other religions and their impact on the lives of religious believers without giving up our interest in the cognitive dimension of religious speech acts. However, this cognitive dimension is not the only dimension of religion. Especially

²¹ Cf. Fredericks 1999, 179. In Fredericks there is no reference to Wittgenstein’s concept.

in non-Christian religions, the aspect of the impact of religious law and of regulative-expressive dimensions of religion is very important. Thus, the appreciation of claims to validity in the realm of life-governing rules is one of the most fruitful means of acknowledgement of religions. There is no problem in being fascinated by the Muslim way of practicing ritual prayer without following those rules in your own language-games and without agreeing on the cognitive claims which are connected with these practices for Muslims. It is possible for me to respect the rule-following practice of the other without giving up the dignity of the rules I am following myself. Through looking at the praxis of the other and through learning to appreciate it, we can discover the hidden convergences on the level of depth grammar; we can learn to see functional equivalences on the regulative level of religious beliefs without eliminating encyclopedical differences.

Finally, as a last point which I would like to mention here, consistent intense contact with people of other religions and committed intense interreligious communication sometimes leads to overcoming obstacles between us. Better knowledge can help one to understand and understanding can help one to appreciate. In this respect there is no automatism. If interreligious friendships begin to arise, those friendships can teach us to love how the other person is living and how his religion rules his or her life. They can also help us look with appreciation at the cognitive dimension of other religions – especially if we are aware of the fact that there is no cognitive dimension (no meaning) without reference to our language-game-praxis. Thus, friendship of theologians can help to find ways of mutual understanding and appreciation of theologies of different religions.

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