Wittgenstein and Religious Discourse

Ian BROWNE

I want to look at certain uses of religious language in the light of Wittgenstein's two philosophies – the logical atomism of the Tractatus and the more complex approach Wittgenstein later adopted and which received its clearest formulation in the Philosophical Investigations. What I want to focus on is what might best be described as *fundamentalism* – which the Oxford English dictionary defines as "a form of a religion, that upholds belief in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture". And I want to examine the idea that we are able to uphold a belief in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture.

The particular example of Christian fundamentalism I'm going to look at is taken from Thelyphthora, a book published between 1780-1 and written by Martin Madan, an English Christian theologian. The reason for using this rather obscure work is not so much because I want to examine Madan's specific concerns, but rather because Madan actually makes some very clear remarks about what he takes the meaning of the language of the Bible to be. He makes explicit, so to speak, his theory of meaning. And in doing that, I think he makes clear what kind of theory of meaning must underpin the idea that we can uphold a belief in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture.

In the Tractatus Wittgenstein offers one theory of meaning, and, famously, in the Philosophical Investigations he offers a sustained critique of the theory he put forward in the Tractatus, and offers instead a very different theory of meaning.

I propose to show that on the theory of meaning Wittgenstein puts forward in the Investigations, there can be no possibility of returning to a strict, literal interpretation of scripture. If the fundamentalists want to maintain this conception, they must utilise a Tractarian theory of meaning.

Wittgenstein also famously said, philosophy leaves everything as it is. In using Wittgenstein's ideas to look at fundamentalism, it isn't my intention to show that fundamentalism is in some sense wrong, or that people who don't accept a fundamentalist account are wrong. It is rather to make clear where the locus of their disagreement lies, in terms of different conceptions meaning that are being used. Because, at the heart of the fundamentalist conception, a return to the strict, literal interpretation of scripture, is the idea that *there is such a thing* as the strict,

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

literal meaning of words and sentences – an idea which the Investigation did much to undermine.

Wittgenstein's logical atomism – The Tractatus

The theory of meaning that Wittgenstein put forward in the Tractatus arose out of his lengthy discussions and subsequent disagreements with Bertrand Russell, and behind it lay the imprint of Frege's conception of language. It is well beyond the purpose of this paper to go into all the complexities of Wittgenstein's theory, but what he was concerned with was the way language could depict a state of affairs in the world, or as Wittgenstein put it, how it provides a picture of the world[1]. As the term *logical atomism* suggests, Wittgenstein was concerned with what he took to be the simplest elements of language and the simplest elements of reality. Names, the simplest elements of language, stand for simple objects, which constitute the building blocks of reality. "A name means an object. The object is its meaning" (T, 3.203). Simple objects constitute the substance of the world, and are permanent and unchanging[2]. Combinations of objects are states of affairs, and a proposition depicts or pictures a possible configuration of objects. "What a picture represents is its sense... In order to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality." (T, 2.221, T,2.223). A true sentence provides an accurate picture of the world. This is its aim, and it accounts for what Wittgenstein calls the general form of the proposition. "The general form of the proposition is: This is how things are" (T, 4.5). Language is built out of the general form of the proposition, with more complex propositions being built out of simple propositions, and the essential function of language is to state what the world is like[3].

Wittgenstein never satisfactorily explained what the simple objects, atomic elements of the world, *are*, but nonetheless the basic structure of his theory has a strong intuitive appeal. Words refer to things in the world and the meaning of a word is the thing a word refers to. Wittgenstein talks about the unchangeable nature of these simple objects, "Objects are what is unalterable and subsistent; their configuration is what is changing and unstable." (T, 2.0271), and for him it is this unchangeable characteristic of simple objects which ensures that a proposition has a determinate sense.

He offers some clarification of what he had in mind in the Investigations. To readers unfamiliar with this work, it should be stressed that it takes the form of a dialogue – a new account of meaning is offered, but with interruptions and queries

[1] The idea of 'picturing' reality is a key element of the Tractatus, and is far more complex than I have indicated here.

[2] In this interpretation, I am following the account offered by Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch in Wittgenstein – a religious point of view. See Malcolm and Winch Chapters 2 and 3.

[3] For a statement of this view of Wittgenstein's philosophy in the Tractatus, see Baker, G. P., and Hacker, P. M. S.,Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning: Volume 1 of an Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations, Part I: Essays.

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

from Wittgenstein's former Tractarian self. One of Wittgenstein's interlocutors, who is finding it hard to give up the Tractarian perspective, makes the following comment " 'Something red can be destroyed, but *red* cannot be destroyed, and that is why the meaning of the word 'red' is independent of the existence of a red thing.' " (PI 57). The new Wittgenstein, the Wittgenstein of the Investigations, offers a clarification of this Tractarian idea, "It looks as if we were saying something about the nature of *red*... The same idea – that it is a metaphysical statement about *red* – finds expression again when we say such a thing as that red is timeless, and perhaps still more strongly in the word 'indestructible'." (PI 58). *Red*, according to the Tractarian view, is eternal and unchangeable, and the word 'red' picks out this eternal and unchangeable aspect of the world.

The idea that the meaning is fixed, that words are attached to the elementary features of the world in this way, ensures that meaning is determinate and unchangeable. Of course meanings *can* change in the sense that we can decide to use a different word to describe that same feature of the world, and use the old word for something else, but the nature of the world is fixed, and the relationship between words and the world is determinate, so any new word would simply have the same fixed relationship as the old one. For Wittgenstein, a proposition therefore has an exact, final and determinate sense, which is the possible state of affairs it describes.

Wittgenstein's rejection of logical atomism – the Philosophical Investigations

As is well known, Wittgenstein produced not one theory of language, but two. Twenty years after he wrote the Tractatus, he rejected the theory he had put forward in it, saying, "At the root of all this was a false and idealised picture of language" (PG p. 211). He wrote the Investigations to provide a comprehensive attack upon the theory of language he had offered in the Tractatus and thus created an entirely new philosophical account of meaning.

The Investigations opens with a lengthy quotation from St. Augustine in which Augustine describes how he learnt to speak as a child, when his parents would hold up an object and utter a sound, "I grasped the thing was called by the sound they uttered... I gradually learnt to understand which objects they signified[4]".

Wittgenstein then immediately comments, "These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. - In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" [5]. It is this idea, that the meaning of a word is the object for which it

[4] Augustine, Confessions, I. 8., quoted in Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, second edition, Blackwell, 1958, section 1.

[5] *Philosophical Investigations*, section 1.

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

stands, that is subject to sustained critical attack in the Investigations, and with it falls the idea that a proposition has a fixed, unchanging, determinate sense.

Rather than identify the meaning of a word with the thing for which it stands, Wittgenstein says we should focus instead upon the way an expression is used. “For a large class of cases – though not all – in which we employ the word 'meaning', it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language”[6].

If we look at word like 'belief', we can see how Wittgenstein's philosophy changed between the Tractatus and the Investigations. On a Tractarian account, a word like 'belief' stands for a thing, an item in the world, something which is perhaps hard to pin down, but nonetheless exists inside somebody's head as a piece of their mental 'furniture'.

If we look at a sentence like, “When Dinamo scored the first goal, that's when I started to believe that we could win the match, but when Rapid took the lead, I realised we weren't going to win,” what we are talking about when we use the word “believe” is a mental *item*, a thought that came into existence, lasted for half an hour and then was, so to speak, 'deleted' by out mind. But for 30 minutes it was part of the fabric of the world, an item which existed in the world, and to which the words “my belief that Dinamo would win” refer. In this picture, a belief someone has in their mind is like a spoon in a kitchen drawer. It was there for 30 minutes and then we took it out and it's not there any more. This is a very Tractarian account of what a belief is – an item that exists in the world.

In the Investigations Wittgenstein looks not for the thing that the word “belief” refers to, but instead examines how the word 'belief' is used. He shows that it has a variety of grammars, depending on the context in which it used and the purposes which expressions of belief serve – which is to say, it's meaning varies, depending on what one wants to say.

Wittgenstein gives various examples of how we use the word “belief” which make it clear that we don't always use it in that Tractarian way, to refer in a Tractarian way to items in the world, albeit in the mental world rather than the physical world.

“A proposition... can be the 'expression' of a belief, hope, expectation, etc... When I sat down on this chair, of course I believed it would bear me. I have no thought of its possible collapsing” (PI, 574, 575).

In this example, it makes no sense to ask when did I start believing the chair would not collapse and how long I expect to have this belief for. Having this belief is simply that one sits in the chair without any concerns, without giving it any thought. If someone asks you whether you had been worried about sitting in the chair, and whether on had believed it would bear one's weight, one would reply, “Of course I believed it would bear me. Why else would I have sat in it?” Wittgenstein's point is that in this example, “belief” doesn't refer to an item in the

[6] *Philosophical Investigations*, section 43.

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

world, a distinct thought existing inside someone's mental space in a similar way that a spoon exists in the physical space of a kitchen drawer, because there is no distinct thought for the words “the belief the chair would bear me” to refer to. But there's nothing wrong with using the word “belief”. It is just that in this context, in this kind of use, it means something like “I had no thought of the chair's possible collapsing”.

Other examples follow. If one suspects a friend of having cheated you of some money, and you hope this isn't true, one might say, “Despite the evidence, I'm sure it's just a mistake. I still believe he is honest.” Wittgenstein suggests that this does refer to something in the world, but not the sort of that item that we saw when examining the belief that Dinamo would win. In this case he says, “Here *is* a thought, and perhaps a constant struggle to renew an attitude.” [my emphasis], (PI 575).

Similarly, for someone plagued by doubt, religious faith may take the form of a “constant struggle to renew an attitude”. But nonetheless one would still speak of someone's enduring religious belief. If we talked about the religious belief of the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, as expressed in a poem like *Carrion Comfort*,

“Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
Not untwist — slack they may be — these last strands of man
In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more*”.
or, in translation;
“Mîngîierea stîrvurilor ”;
„Nu! Disperare, tu, a putreziciunii consolare, nu ma vei avea oaspete la al tău banchet,
nu voi desface, chiar de sînt slabe, aceste ultime, omenești legături
ce încă mai sclipesc în mine; si nici nu voi striga, în marea-mi osteneala, ca nu mai pot, ca e prea mult!”.

Perhaps the most appropriate way to describe Gerard Manley Hopkins religious belief would be to say it took the form of a “constant struggle to renew an attitude”, a struggle against despair and doubt. Belief here refers not to a discrete entity existing in Gerard Manley Hopkins' mental world, but to an entire attitude towards life and salvation, that shaped the way he lived and thought.

This marks the fundamental shift from a Tractarian perspective, where to understand the meaning of 'belief', we should try to identify the kind of item in the world that 'belief' refers to, to the perspective of the Investigations, where to discover the meaning of a word or sentence we need to look at how it is used, and at how its use varies from context to context.

To explain that different uses of the same word can vary from context to context and so have a different grammar, Wittgenstein introduced the idea of different language games. A language game covers what sorts of remarks it makes sense to make, what can count as the reason or grounds for making an assertion, what responses are appropriate etc., but not just that. The important thing is that

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

the different purposes which different language games serve means they are embedded in different sets of practices, and the words have a different significance because of the different roles they play in our lives. What counts as the correct use of a word like “belief” can change from context to context. The reason for one person saying “I still believe my friend is honest” may be quite different from that of a second person who says “I believe he is dishonest.” In the former case, one says it in spite of the evidence, in the latter case one says it because of the evidence, but neither sentence is wrong. The relation of the grounds for assertion to the evidence are different because they are not stating facts so much as expressing different attitudes.

Talk about believing in God and talk about believing the population of Romania is 20 million have quite different roles in our lives – their significance, or what we might call the point of their respective language games, is quite different. When Wittgenstein talks about understanding the meaning of a term by looking at its use, he means looking at what we use the term for, what point language of this kind serves in our lives. In the Lectures and Conversations Wittgenstein talks about the difference between belief as a state somewhere between ignorance and knowledge and the religious sense of belief. If we believe that, for example, the population of Romania is approximately 20 million, we mean that we think that figure is correct, but we aren't sure. In response to saying that we believe Romania has 20 million inhabitants, someone might reply, “Well, you only believe this to be the case, but I need an accurate answer. So I'd better find out the correct figure”. But if someone says they believe in God, this kind of response I inappropriate. We don't say “ 'Oh well, you only believe'... Here the use is entirely different”. Belief here is not a state of mind that falls somewhere between ignorance and knowledge, or a hypothesis which we can accept that we may be mistaken about[7]. As D Z Phillips said, Wittgenstein “is bringing out what a 'recognition' of belief amounts to here. It doesn't involve the weighing of evidence or reasoning to a conclusion. What it does involve is seeing how the belief regulates a person's life” [8]. No one is going to write, “Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee”, because they have doubts about the correctness of their belief that the population of Romania is 20 million. Religious belief fulfils a very different role in our lives, one linked to important questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life and because of that the use of “belief” in religious contexts conforms to an entirely different grammar. The purpose of expressions of belief within the religious language game, and its significance within our lives is quite different from the point of expressions of belief in everyday contexts.

[7] Wittgenstein, L., ed. Cyril Barrett, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1967, p. 59-60.

[8] Phillips, D. Z., *Religious Beliefs and Language Games*, in Phillips, D. Z., *Wittgenstein and Religion*, Swansea Studies in Philosophy, Macmillan Press, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 1994.

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

So, by focusing on how language is used in different language games, he rejected the idea that the meaning of a word or expression must be something in the world, that expressions must have a fixed determinate meaning and that there is a basic form of the proposition whose aim is to provide a picture of the way the world is. Instead he wanted to stress the multiplicity of ways words and sentences are used. Talking about the Investigations, Wittgenstein said, "...my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different. I was thinking of using as a motto for my book a quotation from *King Lear:* 'I'll teach you differences"[9].

Having shown how Wittgenstein's two approaches to language differ I want now to look at an aspect of Christian fundamentalism, using these two different approaches to offer an account of how fundamentalists and non-fundamentalists can understand and misunderstand each other.

Martin Madan's Thelyphthora

In 1780, there appeared in England a book written by the Rev. Martin Madan entitled Thelyphthora, which offered an argument for the introduction into English law of the death penalty for adultery. The basis for this he found in Leviticus, chapter 20, verse 10, "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife-with the wife of his neighbour-both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death" [10].

Madan's argument was based on the meaning of these words from Leviticus. He argued that the meanings of 'adultery' and 'death' and so on were fixed and determinate - that these words referred to specific things, which are found in the world. And no amount of equivocation or reinterpretation can alter those meanings. He added that the mind of God was fixed and unchanging, and that what God had commanded in Leviticus, He commanded now. Consequently, Madan argued, if the law of England was to be brought into conformity with God's law, adultery should be punished by the death penalty.

He states his argument in these words: "Arbitrary languages have always been subject to change... (and) are apt to acquire new meanings by length of time... for instance, the word knave, formerly meant a boy, a male child, then a servant boy, and by degrees any servant man. These meanings are obsolete and now it signifies a petty rascal, a scoundrel, a dishonest fellow... But the mind of God has been graciously delivered to us in a language as unchangeable and fixed as itself... If it could (change), it must cease to be the word of God and become the word, the uncertain word, of man... it would amount to the creation of new laws, which still must vary with the new use of words, and thus, from time to time, create new offences, in proportion to words acquiring new meanings. Therefore what the

[9] Drury, M.O'C., 'Conversations with Wittgenstein' in R. Rhees, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1981.

[10] Translation from the New International Version, https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Leviticus+18-20.

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

words meant when recorded by the sacred penmen, they mean to this hour, and will mean forever..." [11].

Madan's Fundamentalist theory of language

What I am interested in is not so much Madan's conclusions, as the theory of language which Madan is using to justify his fundamentalism, his belief that his conclusion follows from a "strict, literal interpretation of scripture".

Madan takes words to be the names of objects. And once a name is attached to an object, if that relationship between name and object is altered, then the meaning of the word is changed. So, as Madan pointed out, a word like "knave", which previously applied to one kind of person, now applies to a different kind of person. Using a Tractarian picture, the word "knave" now picks out a different kind of thing in the world, and since what it picks out is its meaning, it has changed its meaning.

But Madan was concerned not with what he called 'arbitrary languages' where meanings can be subject to change, but with the divine language, a language whereby the relationship between word and object is as "unchangeable and fixed" as the Divine mind itself.

The commands of God are not what Wittgenstein had in mind when he spoke about simple objects. But nonetheless, for Madan, these words of God have the same logical status as the simple objects of the Tractatus. They commands of God are unchanging, and the meanings that attach to the words and sentences are fixed and determinate. The fundamentalist's wish to uphold a belief in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture, relies on the idea that what the words once meant, they still mean and will mean for all time. What underlies this approach is a Tractarian picture of language.

Names

Names are paradigmatical examples of words whose meaning is fixed for all time[12]. The name "Maria Theresa" refers to Maria Theresa the Empress of Austria between 1745-65 and always will. The name is fixed to this person, this object in the universe, now and for all time. The meaning is, in a Tractarian way, fixed and determinate.

If we look at the two sentences,

(1) The Empress Maria Theresa has commanded the death penalty for adultery

(2) God has commanded the death penalty for adultery there appears to be a tremendous similarity between them. They both refer to the same command being issued. We have no difficulty imagining the first situation. The expression "Maria Theresa" is a name and it refers to a person, Maria Theresa, and she had the authority to issues decrees throughout her lands. The second sentence looks just

[11] Madam, M., *Thelyphthora*, p. 59-60.

[12] See on this Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1980.

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

like the first. God is the King of Heaven and has the authority to issues decrees throughout His universe.

Wittgenstein continued to use the idea of *picturing* after he had rejected the theory of the Tractatus. In the Lectures and Conversations Wittgenstein says, “In general, there is nothing which explains the meanings of words as well as a picture”. If someone wanted to know who Maria Theresa was, we could show them a painting of her in her state robes, wearing the crown of Austria and say, “That's who she was, the Empress of Austria.” Using the example of the painting *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo, Wittgenstein continues, “I take it that Michelangelo was as good as anyone can be and did his best, and here is the picture of the Deity creating Adam. If we ever saw this, we certainly wouldn't think this the Deity. The picture has to be used in an entirely different way if we are to call the man in that queer blanket 'God', and so on... I could show Moore the pictures of a tropical plant. There is a technique of comparison between picture and plant. If I showed him the picture of Michelangelo and said : "Of course, I can't show you the real thing, only the picture"... I've never taught him the technique of using this picture. It is quite clear that the role of pictures of Biblical subjects and role of the picture of God creating Adam are totally different ones” [13].

What Wittgenstein is getting at here is that in the sentence 'God has commanded the death penalty for adultery', the word 'God' doesn't function in the same way as the name 'Maria Theresa' does in the sentence 'The Empress Maria Theresa has commanded the death penalty for adultery'. It has to be used in entirely different ways. 'God' isn't the name of a being who is a bit like Maria Theresa, except he's far more powerful, and who like Maria Theresa rules over a kingdom, but it's a much bigger one than Austria and so on[14].

One of the ideas which I suspect underlies the fundamentalist's with to return to the strict, literal interpretation of scripture is the idea that God is, in terms of his 'logical status', just like Maria Theresa. He is the all powerful ruler of the universe, a sort of perfected version of an earthly ruler. Where Maria Theresa is fallible, God is infallible, where her powers are limited, his are unlimited and so on. And we'd better get on the right side of him because unlike Maria Theresa, who it is possible to deceive, there can be no deceiving God. His intelligence service is much better than hers – he knows everything. For the later Wittgenstein, the meaning of 'God' isn't given by trying to think of some sort of referent for the term, a being who is perhaps in the world, but somehow outside the world too – a peculiar version of the sort of thing one latches onto in the Tractarian conception of language. The meaning of the word 'God' is given by the way the word 'God' is used.

---

[13] Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, p. 63.

[14] For a contemporary reworking of this idea see Slavoj Zizek, The Big Other Doesn't Exist, *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, Spring-Fall 1997. Available online at *http://www.lacan.com/zizekother.htm*.

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

For Wittgenstein 'God' is not the name of a being who is, in contrast to Maria Theresa, all powerful, all knowing and so on. It may sometimes function in a referential way, picking out something in the universe, but the word 'God' isn't really referential in quite the same way that 'Maria Theresa' is. A part of the grammar, of the language game involving God-talk, involves sometimes treating 'God' as referential term, referring to an all powerful, all knowing being. But that is only part of the language game. The rest of the language game, the grammar of 'God', what counts as an appropriate response and what as an inappropriate one when talking to and about God, is not referential in that way. We don't think of God as being *in* the universe at all. He's not like the Sun, or the Solar System, sitting somewhere far away, but still a part of the universe. But nor do we think he its somewhere *outside* the universe. The language of location, of being here rather than there, just doesn't work in this language game.

Wittgenstein sees the purely referential conception of the word “God” as like the belief that God is a powerful ruler who will punish us if we break his laws. He sees this as akin to the belief we should obey Maria Theresa because she is a powerful ruler who will punish us if we break her laws. He thinks of this sort of conception of God as not religious at all. It is a secular belief with, perhaps with a bit of mystifying metaphysics added to it. Belief in God, for Wittgenstein, consists in adopting a spiritual attitude to one's life now, in this world and is shown in how one lives and thinks, in attitudes of the kind found in Hopkins' poem. Wittgenstein said that he would have liked to dedicate his Investigations “to the greater glory of God”, meaning by that something like, “This is the best of me. For all its faults and mistakes, my heart and soul are in this book.” The word “God” here is not referential in a Tractarian way, but is defined by its use. For Wittgenstein “to the greater glory of God” does not mean he wants to offer a present to a powerful ruler in the hope of obtaining a favour. It is an expression of his belief in the possibility of infusing one's life and work with an expression of one's spirituality.

Change of meaning in the Philosophical Investigations

As we saw, in the Investigations, Wittgenstein adopted a conception of meaning based on how a term is used rather than what the term picks out in the world. This has quite significant implications for what counts as a change of meaning. On a Tractarian picture, if the same word picks out the same thing, then nothing has changed and the meaning remains the same, no matter what else changes. But this isn't true on the account offered in the Investigations. Irrespective of whether the referent remains the same, the meaning of a word can change if the context in which it is embedded changes, because the meaning isn't solely the object for which it stands. A word or an expression is bound up in a variety of uses and by changing the way a word or expression is used, the meaning of the word changes.

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

We can look at an example of how the sentences in an area of discourse remained the same, but the point of the utterances changed, and hence the sentences lost their original meaning. Alasdair MacIntyre provides the striking example of the Hawaiian concept of taboo, of how a set of rules governing taboo which were once central to a culture lost their former meaning, though the word 'taboo' was still applied to exactly the same things. By 1820, although taboo continued to function as a system of rules and prohibitions, the rationale behind the rules had disappeared. The Polynesians, MacIntyre suggests, were by then "using a word which they themselves did not really understand". "Taboo" had become a term which had lost its original meaning. It was the point of the practice which gave the meaning of and the language of taboo: "Deprive the taboo rules of their original context and they at once are apt to appear as a set of arbitrary prohibitions, as indeed they characteristically do appear when the initial context is lost, when those background beliefs in the light of which the taboo rules had originally been understood have not only been abandoned but forgotten"[15].

When it comes to the sort of fundamentalism that Madan espouses - a return to the strict and literal meaning of the words of the Scriptures, from the perspective of the Investigations - one needs to ask, not is is possible to read the words as referring to the same things, but have the beliefs and practices that give the point of the practices enjoined by the Scriptures, that serve to shape the meaning of the Scriptures, changed. And if they have changed, then the meaning has changed.

Madan and change of meaning

On the picture we are presented with in the Investigations, a change of meaning is almost inevitable. It is over 2500 years since Leviticus was written down. What those words meant depended upon how the rules functioned within Jewish life at that time, on the language game of which they formed a part.

According to Mary Douglas, the context for the prohibition and punishment of adultery by death that is found in Leviticus is provided by the idea of a covenant between God and Israel. This covers the idea that the land of Israel belongs to God but has been given to the Jews by God. However certain sins, such as adultery, constitute a defilement of the land and a breach of the covenant, and in order to restore the covenant, some form of purification, such as stoning to death, is required[16]. The point of the prohibitions and punishments in Leviticus is bound up with this conception of a covenant, which established how society should behave, its ritual, moral and legal practices, what it is to break and restore a covenant, and the special character that a covenant with God has; and it has at it core a conception of a nation's relationship with God.

[15] MacIntyre, A., *After Virtue*, p. 112. University of Notre Dame Press (3rd edition), 2007.
[16] Douglas, M., *Leviticus As Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

To understand the meaning of the command, “If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife—with the wife of his neighbour—both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death.” is to understand not just the words, but an entire way of living[17]. For Wittgenstein, as we saw, religious belief is not like believing your football team are going to win.

He felt that religious belief should constitute a way of living. Speaking more for himself than as a philosopher offering an account of religious belief, he said, “It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of coordinates. Hence, although it’s *belief*, it’s really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It’s passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation”[18]. When Wittgenstein talks about a way of living or of assessing life that is a passionately seizing hold of a particular interpretation, this involves not simply accepting the truth of a set of beliefs, but immersing oneself in a way of seeing the world, in what Stanley Cavell has described as “routes of interest, modes of response, senses of humour and significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion when an appeal, when an explanation... ”[19].

This I would suggest is what vanished in the case of taboo. It ceased to be part of a way of living. Taboo ceased to matter and became merely a set of prohibitions that was not integrated with a whole way of seeing the world.

In the 2500 years that have passed since Leviticus, ways of living, both mundane and religious, have changed. The “routes of interest, modes of response, senses of humour ...” have all changed. We no longer have a conception of a covenant with God, of certain actions constituting a breaking of the covenant, and other actions, rituals, moral and legal practices, being able to restore the covenant. In short, although we can understand the point of the rules and prohibitions of Leviticus, we do not share those conceptions, and given the ways of living that are genuinely open to us, I suspect we *cannot share* those conceptions. It simply isn't open to us to adopt as a way of living, the beliefs, concerns, practices, and everything else that makes the way of life from the time of Leviticus.

I can't answer the question whether fundamentalists want to return not just, for example, to the rules of Leviticus, but also to all the other aspects of life 2500 years ago that make up a way of life, to the routes of interest, modes of response, senses of humour and significance ... and so on. But without such a return, from the perspective of the Investigations we can't speak of reinstituting the rules of

---

[17] “...the fact that we act in such-and-such ways, e.g., *punish* certain actions, *establish* the state of affair thus and *so, give orders,* render accounts, describe colours, take an interest in others’ feelings. What has to be accepted, the given - it might be said- are facts of living.” *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology,Wittgenstein (1980).* vol I, 630.

[18] *Culture and Value,* edited by G. H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 64e.

[19] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 52.

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

Leviticus with the same meaning as they had 2500 years ago. We can of course reinstitute the same rules, but without a return to the Biblical way of life their meaning would be totally different.

As Wittgenstein pointed out, it is not so much the words that matter, as how a religious practice informs a way of life. Two people may use the same expression and mean entirely different things by it, and one can tell they mean different things not by the words they utter but by the difference their belief makes to the way they live. "...what is important is not the *words* you use or what you think while saying them, so much as the difference that they make at different points in your life. How do I know that two people mean the same thing when each says he believes in God? ...And just the same thing goes for the Trinity. Theology that insists on *certain* words and phrases and prohibits others makes nothing clearer. (Karl Barth) It gesticulates with words, as it were, because it wants to say something and does not know how to express it. *Practice* gives the words their sense"[20].

For Madan the demand for the introduction of the death penalty for adultery was not linked with any sense that the meaning of Leviticus was bound up with the ways of living of the Jews in those times. Although he felt that merely by introducing such a law into the English legal system he would thereby recover the same meaning of the prohibition and punishments of Leviticus, it is clear that what he saw as the point of these prohibitions and punishments was quite different. The point of his proposal was bound up with the nature of the society he lived in, eighteenth century England. His concern was with the the maintenance of the existing order of society by ensuring the patrilineal inheritance of property. Where adultery is unpunished, he argues, "All genealogies must be confounded, inheritances obscured... For who could ascertain these things, so necessary to the existence of civil society? ... A total confusion as to offspring, a defeating of rightful heirs, an utter obscurity as to family descents and pedigrees; for where adultery is, no man can know his own children... for which reason it was made capital by the divine lawgiver. Adultery must in the very nature of it tend to the destrucion of every bond of civil and religious society, and make the world, in a moral sense, a mere chaos"[21].

These points of concern are quite different from the concerns of Leviticus[22]. Like the taboo rules, though the words continue to refer to the same items in the world, their meaning has changed nonetheless. On the picture of meaning presented in the Investigations, keeping the same prohibitions and punishments as are found in Leviticus still amounts to the creation of new laws. The laws of Leviticus designed to establish the rules for the restoration of the covenant with

[20] Madam, M., *Thelyphthora*.

[21] Madam, M., *Thelyphthora*.

[22] Amongst Madan's purposes was one highly political one. Part of the subtitle of Madan's book is "an examination of the principles and tendency of Statute 26, George II, c33 commonly called the Marriage Act", and he hoped to secure the repeal of this Act.

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

God, have become laws of Madan designed to ensure the inheritance of property and the continuity of the form of society found in eighteenth century England. The same words, the same rules, the same punishments now mean something quite different. To quote Wittgenstein again, "...what is important is not the *words* you use ... so much as the difference that they make at different points in your life. How do I know that two people mean the same thing... *Practice* gives the words their sense"[23].

It seems likely that Wittgenstein would not have regarded Madan's demand to return to the rules of Leviticus as a religious demand at all. He would see it as a secular demand, because its insistence on returning to the practices of Leviticus when offered as a practical demand, however unlikely it may be, shows an indifference to the function and point of those practices, and so invokes a formalistic conception of religious worship, in which it is the language and rules which guarantee that one is doing God's will, rather than the meaning and significance of the language and rules. The demand that we introduce into our legal codes a set of rules taken from Leviticus, and then assume that society will just go on as normal is, for Wittgenstein, more like a superstition, a belief that some sort of extra, religious power resides in the rules, even when these are disconnected from the meanings that give them a point. But the rules in themselves have no intrinsic spiritual or sacred content – they could be adopted by an avowedly atheist and secular society, without any attempt to see them as anything other than rules of conduct. The power lies not in the rules themselves but in their role within a religious practice. For the introduction of the rules of Leviticus into the legal code to have religious meaning, in Wittgenstein's conception of religion, would require a reorientation of society. It would require the fusion of the legal rules and practices of society with the will of God[24] in such a way that the purpose and meaning of such a practice was to free a people from the burden of sin. But by ignoring such a reorientation, Madan simply misses the point of the rules.

By focussing exclusively on the referent of a word as the determinant of meaning, the Tractarian conception of language ignores the point of a language game. And as we saw, for Wittgenstein attempts to treat the word "God" as being a name with a referent either end in confusion, or leave us thinking of God as being a sort of "super ruler", like Maria Theresa but better. For Wittgenstein this is the antithesis of a religious belief, as it simply moves our temporal ways of

[23] Wittgenstein, L., *Culture and Value*, p. 85.

[24] Such a possibility is discussed in The Brothers Karamazov, when Ivan meets the Elder Zosima and discusses an article he has written with him and Father Paisii. "If everything were integrated into the Church, the Church would excommunicate the criminal and the subversive, instead of chopping off their heads... Just think—where could the excommunicate go? Why, he would be cut off not only from men but also from Christ, since his crime would be a crime not only against his fellow men but also against Christ's Church... what would become of the criminal if the Christian community... rejected him and cut him off as the law of the State does?.. The answer is that there could be no deeper despair" (Trans: Andrew R MacAndrew).

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

thinking into a sort of metaphysical realm, and neglects the point of talking about and to God.

For Wittgenstein, religion was not a set beliefs about the ruler of the universe, it was something that had an impact here and now in one's life, which give shape to one's life. “Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For 'consciousness of sin' is a real event and so are despair and salvation through faith”.

Wittgenstein's later philosophy, as expressed in the Investigations isn't compatible with the fundamentalist desire to uphold a belief in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture. For the later Wittgenstein, such a project is simply impossible. We can re-institute the rules of Leviticus, but the meaning will be different. We know what the meaning of the rules of Leviticus was, but there is no way back for us – we can't mean with those same rules what the Jews meant 2500 years ago.

However for the Fundamentalist, the focus on reference as the sole element in meaning means that we can adopt the rules of Leviticus. When Leviticus says “If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death”, for the Fundamentalist, it means in Tractarian fashion, that *this* being, God, ordered that *this* sin, adultery, should be punished in this way, by death.

The language provides for the fundamentalist, a straightforward picture of the world, or to quote Wittgenstein in the Tractatus, it simply says, “This is how it is”.

Bibliography

Baker, G. P. and Hacker, P. M. S.,Wittgenstein, *Understanding and Meaning: Volume 1 of an Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations, Part I: Essays,* Blackwell, Oxford, and Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1980

Cavell, Stanley, *Must We Mean What We Say?,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976

Douglas, Mary, *Leviticus As Literature,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999

Kripke, Saul, Naming and Necessity, Blackwell, Oxford, 1980

MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue - A Study in Moral Theory,* University of Notre Dame Press, (3rd edition), 2007

Madam, Martin, *Thelyphthora or A Treatise on Female Ruin, in Its Causes, Effects, Consequences, Prevention and Remedy,* London, 1780-1

Malcolm, Norman and Winch, Peter, *Wittgenstein – a religious point of view,* Routledge, London, 1993

Phillips, Dewi Zephaniah, *Religious Beliefs and Language Games,* in Phillips, 1994

Phillips, Dewi Zephaniah, *Wittgenstein's Full Stop,* in Phillips, 1994

Phillips, Dewi Zephaniah, *Religion in Wittgenstein's Mirror,* in Phillips, 1994

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)

Phillips, Dewi Zephaniah, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, Swansea Studies in Philosophy, Macmillan Press, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 1994
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge, 2001
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, second edition, Blackwell, 1958
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, (ed. Cyril Barrett), *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1967
Wittgenstein, Ludwig (ed. G. H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch), *Culture and Value*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1980

BDD-A19525 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 07:10:33 UTC)