

# BELIEF OR 'BELIEF': RUSH RHEES ON RELIGIOUS BELIEF LANGUAGE

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The recent book *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy* contains a stimulating collection of writings by Rush Rhees on a variety of topics in the philosophy of religion.<sup>1</sup> Comprising accounts of personal, religious and moral struggles, these essays provide a refreshing change from the often dry, overly technical approach to philosophy writing. Despite spanning more than thirty years, Rhees's essays disclose a fairly consistent philosophy of religion with a clear emphasis. Since he was Wittgenstein's student and long-time friend as well as a literary executor of Wittgenstein's writings, it is not surprising that Rhees's comments on the philosophy of religion reveal a distinctly Wittgensteinian approach, both in content and style. Moreover, Rhees's particular way of doing philosophy of religion seems, in retrospect, to have set the course that subsequent philosophy of religion of the Wittgensteinian type would take.

Two themes, or methods, inform nearly the whole book: a concentrated focus on the "grammar" of religious statements and a selective reliance on verificationism. Although the latter may sound provocative since Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion can rightly be seen as a polemic against logical positivism, I will argue that Rhees's reliance on verificationism is important for his project. In this essay, I want to consider Rhees's treatment of the sense of religious language, for it both exemplifies his approach to nearly all aspects of his philosophy of religion, and it discloses what I will argue is his chief failing: the distortion of Christian concepts on the basis of what he thinks *ought* to be deep about religion. In what follows I will (1) summarise his contrast between how we come to have ordinary beliefs about the world versus how religious believers come to faith and belief in God; and (2) show that his treatments of the Christian beliefs in God and an afterlife distort what nearly all Christians take these beliefs to amount to.<sup>2</sup> My goal will

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<sup>1</sup> Rush Rhees (1977) *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy* Phillips, D.Z. (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). In what follows all citations of Rhees's writings refer to essays included in the work mentioned above; therefore, for all subsequent citations I will list only an abbreviated title and page number(s) in the text.

<sup>2</sup> For the duration of this paper I will use exclusively Christian doctrines and beliefs as cases in point for my critique. I do this for two reasons: Christian doctrines are the examples that Rhees uses, and they are those that I feel qualified to comment on. Also, my critique of



be to dispute Rhees's claim that religious believers never refer to God, as well as the related claim that religious belief language is never assertive.<sup>3</sup> Along the way I will provide critiques of what may seem to be marginal issues; however, each critique should shed some light on what Rhees is thinking, and it is my hope that by the end of the essay enough light will have been exposed to these matters that my final argument will be convincing.<sup>4</sup>

## Rhees on the role of religious language

Rhees begins by arguing that the religious believer's concept of God does not come by way of natural theology. Even if, Rhees urges, we were to prove the existence of a necessary being and that everything else depended upon it, we would have no good reason to call that being God. Rhees supports his claim in typical Wittgensteinian fashion: think of how religious believers teach children what "God" means. They do not appeal to causes at all; rather, Rhees says, "When people teach children about God—it is more like teaching them the language", and this language has its characteristic expression in "praying, telling stories, singing hymns, and so on" ("Religion and philosophy", p.5). Religious teaching, he asserts, differs greatly from the sort of teaching we receive in other domains. It is not like the sort we might get from a chemist who helps us to understand more about, say, water. For, Rhees asks, what would "learning more about God" be? Or "adding to our knowledge of God"? ("Religion and philosophy", p.6). His point is that God is not the sort of thing that we can learn more about, because understanding God is not a matter of *discovery*.

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Rhees is aimed at convincing mainstream Anglo-American philosophers, not Wittgensteinian fideists.

<sup>3</sup> I will be successful if I can show that Rhees's arguments do not establish his claims. I will not, however, provide a counter-analysis that establishes conclusively that religious believers do, in fact, refer to God and make assertions. I point the interested reader to other works that attempt to demonstrate those very claims: William Alston's (1988) "Referring to God" provides an account of referring to God; Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his (1999) *Divine Discourse*, and Alvin Plantinga, in his *Warranted Christian Belief*, discuss assertions of religious beliefs.

<sup>4</sup> In the meantime I am quite aware that suspicions are likely to be aroused that questions are being begged both by Rhees and by me. I urge my reader to withhold such judgements until the entire argument has been digested.



No one comes to a deeper knowledge of God by making an investigation—say by experimenting in order to discover properties which are not ordinarily apparent. The chemist can tell me more about sugar because he has made investigations and made experiments. He can tell us the results of these experiments and describe how they were produced. If he said that he had found out something by revelation, that would not mean much and it would not impress anyone (“Religion and philosophy”, p.6).<sup>5</sup>

Rhees says that, although we could not discover anything new about God, we might “come to a deeper knowledge of God ...” (“Religion and philosophy”, p.6). He thinks that a person who says she has a deeper knowledge of God than she used to would be like a musician who takes a way of playing a piece of music as the correct one; there would be no explanation for this in terms of reasons. Let us think about this idea for a moment. The claim is that gaining a deeper knowledge of God just amounts to taking something about God to be correct. Rhees uses this notion to explain what a great variety of religious beliefs amount to: a religious person has a religious belief, not because of anything the person has discovered or learned, but because the person just sees the world in a religious way and is thus able to worship and pray. On this point Rhees seems to be following Wittgenstein’s account of how a certain way of seeing may strike you. Think of Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit example.<sup>6</sup> You see the duck, or the rabbit, or both at different times, or neither. There do not seem to be reasons why you see as you see. I think Rhees has something like this in mind when he says that the religious person simply sees something in religion, while the non-religious person just does not see anything in religion.

Before I reply, let us remember that Rhees’s focus here is on striking an absolute distinction between what we know on the basis of scientific experimentation and what we know in religion: in science we discover things by empirical investigation, but in religion we either see the world in a religious way or we do not. Either we see the duck or we don’t. I don’t think this explanation will do for two reasons. First, we might agree that having a religious belief is typically *more* like seeing in the sense of what you see in the duck-rabbit example than it is like believing a scientific hypothesis, but let us be clear that the duck-rabbit is an example of literal seeing, while religious faith is not a matter of literally seeing an image. Moreover, we might agree with Rhees that religious persons do not typically believe on the basis of scientific

<sup>5</sup> Although I do not have space here to elaborate, this view strikes me as incorrect, for it assumes that investigation, or discovery, is always a matter of scientific experiment. As I argue elsewhere (*On Rush*, pp.5-7), both one’s emotional understanding and one’s religious understanding involve discovery, but neither involves scientific experiment.

<sup>6</sup> See Wittgenstein (*PI*, IIxi, p.194).



inquiry, but this point does nothing to show that there is never any basis for their religious beliefs. Is it the case that *all* religious people come to religious belief just because they *see something* in religion? Are there never experiences, or reasons, or discoveries that lead a person to faith? Rhees would likely reply to my question by saying that such experiences, reasons, or discoveries are not the sorts of experiences, reasons, or discoveries of science. I, on the other hand, urge that people come to religious faith in bewilderingly various ways and based on a wide range of experiences. How can we know beforehand precisely what will bring a person to religious faith?

The real trouble comes, Rhees thinks, when people “want to say there is some reality corresponding to their religious beliefs ... if they think of the reality corresponding in physics” (“Religion and philosophy”, p.7). He says that the importance of religion is not a matter of believing in the existence of an object, for there would be no sense in worshipping an object:

The trouble is that if moral judgements are vindicated by some reality corresponding in the way in which reality corresponds to physics, then they are not important either. That would not give moral questions the kind of importance which in fact they have. And it is something the same with religion. Descartes asked whether there were any reality corresponding to his idea of God, as though he thought this were like asking whether there were any reality corresponding to his idea of a tree. But what is there religious about believing in the existence of an object, in that sense? Or in worshipping it? (If you believed the tree was a holy tree, there might be some reality in that—but that is not the reality of the tree as a physical object.) (“Religion and philosophy”, p.7)

Here Rhees is pointing out, among other things, that the mere belief that the being who is God exists is not the sort of belief that is properly called a religious belief. Belief in the mere existence of an object, he thinks, is not the sort of thing that religious people give their lives to.

Two important ideas here need to be discussed. First, Rhees obviously thinks that he is denying something clear when he says that God’s reality is not like the reality that corresponds in physics. However, few things in academia are less clear than the ontological status of the items in quantum physics. These items are too small to sense directly in any way. My point is that what reality amounts to in physics is not clear. The objects of physics are not just one sort of thing. The notions of ‘object’ and ‘existence’ in contemporary physics often are nothing like what we mean when we talk about a tree as an object or as something that exists. For one thing, we do not discover the subatomic items of contemporary physics by looking (or pointing) at them. Since we are not clear about what reality amounts to in physics, it is hard to see what



Rhees's distinction between *reality in physics* and *reality in religion* is supposed to show.

Second, Rhees is arguing that the reason a religious value *matters* could never be the fact that something exists. Things get their significance, not from their mere existence, but from having a certain value. So, for Rhees, God is significant to believers (i.e., God is worthy of worship), not because God exists, but because believers view God as endowed with value. Something is right about this claim, but Rhees has failed to see something important: the objects of physics may not be valueless. If a thing itself is imbued with value, then the very existence of that thing obliges in us a response appropriate to things of value.<sup>7</sup> So, if something is good, then the fact of its existence as a good thing obliges us to treat it as a good thing should be treated. Similarly, if something is divine, then the fact of its existence as a divine thing obliges us to worship it. According to Rhees, the reality of physical items is a matter of their existence, something that Rhees supposes that scientists can check. Forgetting for a moment my objection that scientists cannot just check to discover the existence of subatomic items, let us note that Rhees is assuming that the objects of physics are *not* imbued with value. But, a core religious belief is that the objects of creation are the work of God as creator, and if God is the creator of the universe, then the very existence of physical items in the world obliges us to treat them as things of value. Whatever we might think these considerations show about Rhees's strict contrast between reality in physics and reality in religion, we may at least conclude that it is problematic; that is, the distinction is not as efficacious in establishing Rhees's position as he makes it out to be.

For a moment, however, let us grant Rhees's view that the reality of items in religion is nothing at all like the reality of items in physics. What, then, does he have in mind that would explain in a positive way what reality amounts to in the case of religious belief? I want to take a stab at illustrating what Rhees has in mind here: God is like a fictional character in a novel.<sup>8</sup> Just as from *inside* J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* no one will say that Gandalf is a fictional character (or, unreal), so also from *within* the context of Christian practice no one will say that God is fictional (or unreal). So from within the story we think of Gandalf as real, and from within Christian practice we think of God as real. However, just as from *outside* the story we would be confused to think that "Gandalf" refers to a person, so also from *outside* Christian practice we would be confused to think that "God" refers to a person. Inside Christian practice it makes perfect sense to speak of the ultimate reality of God, but outside of that practice talk of the reality of God misses the

<sup>7</sup> I owe this line of analysis to the comments of Catherine Osborne in personal correspondence.

<sup>8</sup> This idea was suggested to me by Nicholas Wolterstorff in conversation.



point entirely. God is like a fictional character.<sup>9</sup> “Gandalf” and “God” each expresses a certain character, but neither picks out a person. In *The Lord of the Rings* one finds out who Gandalf is, but “Gandalf” does not pick something out. In the religious life one finds out who God is, but “God” does not pick something out. Thus, it is as confused to try to find God outside the practice of religion as it is to try to find Gandalf outside the novel.

## Religious belief language: reference and assertion

There are at least two other important lessons that Rhees wants us to learn about religious language: (I) The term “God” expresses a religious idea—it is not a name that refers to an object; nor, as we shall see presently, does it refer to a being; and (II) Religious belief language is not assertive. Let us get clearer on Rhees’s claims by considering what he would have to say about two examples of religious belief language from the Nicene Creed—one that involves the word “God”, and one that is about future events.

**NC1:**      *I believe in one God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.*

This appears to be a straightforward affirmation of belief that is intended to capture some of the same claims that the Bible expresses.<sup>10</sup> When the religious believer utters NC1, usually in the context of worship, the believer typically means a number of things by it. Certainly, as Rhees points out with vigour, the believer is making a confession that expresses more than the belief that God is responsible for causing, or creating, the universe. Nonetheless, I say that most believers at least mean to be acknowledging that they believe that God, the divine person of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the one who appeared to Moses in the burning bush (pick any definite description you like from the Bible), caused the universe to come into being. This belief involves at least two elements: (1) “God” is taken by the believer to refer to a being, say, “the

<sup>9</sup> No doubt Rhees would want to add to my simile that God is like a very unusual character, and Rhees would want to emphasise the differences as well as the similarities. For instance, we cannot actually live in the novel, but we can actually live within the practice of religion. Nonetheless, I think my comparison is basically on-track in expressing what Rhees has in mind.

<sup>10</sup> I mean that the Bible contains stories in which God, a personal being, is attributed special divine characteristics such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, and being creator of the universe. Here are some biblical references that suggest these attributes: Creator: Genesis 1.1, Nehemiah 9.6, Psalm 102.25, Acts 14.15, Hebrews 11.3; Omnipotence: Job 42.2, Psalm 115.3, Matthew 14.26, Luke 1.37; Omniscience: Job 26.6, 31.4, 34.21; Psalm 147.5, Hebrews 4.13, I John 3.20; Omnipresence: Deuteronomy 4.39, Psalm 139.8, Proverbs 15.3, Isaiah 66.1, Jeremiah 23.24, Acts 17.27.



being who saw that the creation was good”, or “the being who delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses”; (2) This very being, God, is the being who was responsible for the creation of the universe.

In Rhees’s descriptions of what religious believers are doing when they engage in religious belief language, however, he denies that believers *ever* mean to acknowledge (1) and (2). According to Rhees, thinking that NC1, or some other expression similar to NC1, *does* function as a belief in (1) and (2) results from one’s misunderstanding the sense of “believe” being employed there. To say something like NC1 is never, even as a component of the utterance, to affirm an ontological commitment to the existence of God; for Rhees thinks that to claim that this *is* what one is doing is to make such religious language out to function as it might in the language-games of, for instance, astronomy. Astronomers make hypotheses and then test and verify them for accuracy. But a straightforward belief in the existence of a being who is God would not be the sort of belief that is capable of testing and verification. Rhees supposes this to show that the word “believe” in “I believe in God” cannot function in the same way as it does in an astronomer’s statement “I believe in black holes”. Therefore, Rhees thinks, the believer must be engaged in a *different* sort of language-game from those used in ordinary belief:

There is a way in which language is used in religion—what we may call the grammar of religious language—which is different from other uses of language. This appears in connexion with certain expressions which are the same here and in language that is not religious, but which have a different grammar here. We use such expressions as ‘understanding’, ‘teaching’, ‘accepting’, ‘following’, ‘believing’, ‘asking’, ‘doubting’, ‘seeking’, ... we use such expressions in the language of religion, and we use them outside religion. But they do not mean the same here and there. (“Religion, life”, pp.192-3).

So how are religious expressions used differently from those same expressions used in ordinary ways? Rhees often says that religious belief language is much more like a value judgement than it is like an assertion.<sup>11</sup> For instance, he writes of “The belief in a Creator—in awe and wonder. But it is also love and praise of the Creator. (It is not that I praise him *because* he is creator. To say ‘Creator’ is already praise.)” (“Belief”, p.50). Rhees is saying that belief-utterances are themselves acts of religious devotion that presuppose a special religious way of valuing one’s experience in the world. In worship, religious believers engage in various language-games such as prayer, praise, storytelling, singing, etc., but they do not thereby refer to a being that is God:

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Rhees (“Religion, life”, p.189). See also Rhees (“Religion and language”, p.42ff.) where he compares the language of love to the language of religion.



Does this question (about the term “God”) have any bearing on religious devotion—i.e. on the religion there has been in the lives of Hebrews and Christians who practised it? If you think there is some important confusion in the *question*—e.g. that it *seems* to have sense, because it is externally like a question that might be asked about “sulphur” or “air” or (?) “light”, then how would you *sort out* the confusion of trying to ask this sort of question about the term “God”. (“Remarks”, pp.31-2)

This question of how we would “sort out” what “God” means becomes a crucial component of Rhees’s argument that “God” is not a referring term and that sentences that seem to assert something about God (e.g. “God exists”; and “God appeared to Moses in a burning bush”) are not really assertive at all. Though Rhees makes this point many times, he lays all his cards on the table when he writes:

“What is being said to exist?” We use “it exists” chiefly in connexion with physical objects, and anyway we use it where we can ask whether it exists or not. This goes with the sense of *finding out* whether it exists. Now the ‘it’, whatever it is, is something that we could identify in such an investigation—by, for example, the methods by which we commonly identify a particular object. We might also confuse it with something else, or mistake something else for it. But in any case, the question *whether* it was the same object would involve those sorts of criteria. But the question whether we mean the same by “God”, I have said, is not a question whether we are referring to the same object. The question whether we are still talking about God now ... cannot be settled by referring to an object. And I do not think it would mean anything to ask “whether any such object exists”. Nor does it change anything if you say “being” instead of “object”.

“God exists” is not a statement of fact. You might say also that it is not in the indicative mood. It is a confession—or expression—of faith (“Religion and language”, pp.48-49).

Here we learn not only that God is not an *object*, but God is not a *being* either. Hold on a minute. I thought that God was the being in the Bible who created the universe and all that was in it, and that affirming this was entirely appropriate for the religious believer. What is Rhees up to here? Remember my illustration of Rhees’s notion of God as being like a fictional character in a novel. If I were to say straightforwardly, “Gandalf exists”, this would show deep confusion on my part. According to Rhees’s quote above, I would be confused because there would be no way of *finding out* whether Gandalf exists. I might, in my confusion, attempt to find out whether Gandalf exists, but I would try in vain. It makes no sense to affirm Gandalf’s existence outside the novel (unless I do so metaphorically, but then I am not stating a straightforward belief).



Similarly, for Rhees, it makes no sense to affirm the existence of God outside religious worship, for God does not exist outside religious worship.

Now we come to a crucial part of Rhees's argument. He claims that God cannot exist outside of religious worship because *we cannot refer to God outside the context of religious worship*. We cannot so refer to God, he thinks, because we cannot do an empirical investigation to discover whether or not God exists. This is what he means where he says, "We use 'it exists' chiefly in connexion with physical objects, and anyway we use it where we can ask whether it exists" ("Religion and language", p.48). Rhees seems to have two reasons supporting his claim that "God" is not a referring expression.<sup>12</sup> One reason is that religious language-games, even those that include "God", constitute the language of praise, confession, worship, etc.; they are not assertoric.<sup>13</sup>

One problem with Rhees's argument that "God" is not a referring expression is that it assumes that we refer only when we make assertions, but surely this is not the case. When I ask, "Where is Old Main?", I refer to Old Main, but I do not assert anything. When I say, "Meet me at the Rush Rhees Library", I refer to the library, but I do not assert anything. As Nicholas Wolterstorff says, "It may well be that when the religious person has occasion to say 'God exists', she is doing something other than, or at least something more than, making an assertion. From that it doesn't follow that she is not referring to God" ("Philosophy", p.14). Not only does it not follow, but I urge that most believers take themselves to be referring to God when they utter NC1. Furthermore, if they were asked, "Do you believe God exists?", they would likely find this to be a perfectly intelligible question in which they took the questioner to be referring to God. And in answering "yes" to the question, they would take themselves to be referring to God (and to be asserting something).

As Wolterstorff points out, it is question-begging to assume that all attempts to speak about God assertorically (other than talk about the "grammar" of a religious language-game) are misuses, for religious persons sometime speak about God assertorically,<sup>14</sup> and they most

<sup>12</sup> The critique in this section owes much to Nicholas Wolterstorff's critique of Wittgensteinian fideism, which also fits my specific critique of Rhees at this point. See Wolterstorff ("Philosophy", pp.13-5).

<sup>13</sup> This is, of course, a Wittgensteinian point. Wittgensteinian fideists have used it to combat the religious sceptic. If the religious believer never asserts anything with her religious language, then she cannot be contradicted by the sceptic. See Wittgenstein (*Lectures*, pp.53-9).

<sup>14</sup> Religious assertions made by religious persons fill the contents of various Bible commentaries, Church confessions, catechisms, books, essays, pamphlets, especially in those documents that make up what is often called "Church Tradition". As Wolterstorff points out, if all such attempts to speak assertorically are misuses, then "thereby an enormous amount of what religious persons have said over the centuries is dismissed as improper" ("Philosophy", p.15).



certainly take themselves to be referring to God. Now, one might object that even though most religious believers would answer “yes” when asked if they use religious language assertorically, religious believers have not thereby established that they do, in fact, use such language assertorically. This is because what their beliefs are about will always be properly expressed by saying that their words do function assertorically. However, since religious believers will typically answer that they take some of their religious language to be assertoric and referential, even when they are aware of Rhees’s Wittgensteinian position about this issue,<sup>15</sup> then unless Rhees can provide a satisfactory argument that establishes that religious persons never can refer to God, it will be more reasonable to accept what these religious people say they are doing than it will be to accept Rhees’s assessment. I will return to this point later.

A second reason Rhees offers for why “God” is not referential is that we cannot investigate to find out whether or not God exists. Rhees thinks that if we say “that God exists”, this assertion falls within the language-games of science, in which case we ought to be able to verify the claim as we might verify that Pluto exists as a planet in our solar system. His argument is roughly this: Since we cannot verify whether or not God exists (God is not a physical object), the term “God” is not a referring expression. Since “God” is not a referring expression, sentences containing the term “God”, even if they have the external form of actual assertive sentences, are not assertive. But this argument shows Rhees’s view to be a version of logical positivism. Unless we can *point out* what “God” refers to or *investigate to find out* whether or not God exists, we can never refer to God! Lest my reader should think I have mistaken Rhees or taken him out of context, let me add one excerpt from his essay “Religion and Language”:

What is being said to exist? If you are talking about an object, then if I and others understand what you are talking about, we can raise the question whether it still exists (whether the palace of Minos still exists or whether it has been destroyed now), or how long it has existed, and so on; even whether it has ever existed. This—the intelligibility of such questions—goes together with a general idea of what we could call finding out whether it exists or not. Suppose I have found out that as a matter of fact the palace of Minos does exist. But I do not think it means anything to say that someone might find out whether in fact God exists (p.47).

There are two things to note here. First, if this is Rhees’s view, then he is guilty of inconsistency, since he often refers to items that do not meet his standard for what can be referential. He refers to rules, causes and

<sup>15</sup> For instance, consider the hundreds of professional philosophers who are members of the Society of Christian Philosophers, many of whom take themselves to speak assertorically about God, both in the context of worship and outside of it.



numbers, but these items are not physical objects that can be pointed out or investigated by scientific means to find out whether or not they exist. Second, this quote shows once again that Rhees does not repudiate the positivist claim that only those things that can be verified can be said properly to exist; indeed, it shows that he *embraces* a version of verificationism in order to drive his own argument that religious belief language cannot be referential. I say, therefore, that his thesis is problematic, for it relies too heavily upon verificationism, a position that has been thoroughly discredited. I conclude that, on the basis of Rhees's argument, it does not follow that religious belief language cannot be referential—he has not established his claim.

Now let us see how Rhees would deal with religious belief language from the Nicene Creed involving future events:

**NC2:**        *I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.*

Like **NC1**, this seems also to be an affirmation of belief following from a biblical perspective. By this, I mean that **NC2** seems to express a belief, perhaps gained in various ways but generally based upon biblical passages, that though humans die, death is not the end of them—they will live again.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps we can cast it along these lines: “Someday I will die; sometime after I die I will be resurrected like the stories I have read about Jesus in the Bible;<sup>17</sup> there will be some sort of heavenly world in which I will participate.”<sup>18</sup> Of course, the person who utters **NC2** will typically be doing *more* than simply acknowledging his belief that death will not be the end of him. As Rhees stresses, he may also be expressing his devotion to God for all of his life, including his hour of death. **NC2** may serve to orientate his life in a particularly religious way, and it may express a certain religious valuing of his life. However, none of these things prevents the worshipper from holding the belief that he will live again after his death. In fact, many religious believers not only believe that they will live again after their deaths, but they also take themselves to be acknowledging such a belief, as least as a component, when they utter **NC2**.

However, according to Rhees, religious believers whose faith is deep *never* mean to express with their religious language the belief that they will live again after death. For if they did, Rhees says that they would be mistaking a belief “in the world to come” for an empirical prediction or hypothesis. He says plainly about the religious belief in an

<sup>16</sup> Some biblical passages that encourage such a belief include these: John 11.25; I Thessalonians 4.16; Psalm 49.15; Daniel 12.2; John 5.28-29; Revelation 20.13.

<sup>17</sup> Here are a few examples: Acts 3.15; Acts 10.40; Romans 10.9; 2 Timothy 2.8.

<sup>18</sup> Here are some passages that suggest as much: I Thessalonians 4.17; 2 Corinthians 5.1; Luke 13.29; Revelation 21.4; Revelation 22.5; John 14.2.



afterlife: "It has nothing to do with a belief that something is going to happen, or that something will last forever" ("Death", p.235). Why does he think this? First, prediction is one of the language-games in the domain of science. Scientists make predictions based on theories and then test their predictions for accuracy. But, Rhees thinks, we could not test the prediction that people live again after they die, at least not in the sense of resurrection life. This is supposed to show that "believe" in NC2 does not function as "believe" does in science. Second, the belief that a person will live after death is not supposed by Rhees to be a religious idea *at all*.

Rhees begins his essay "Death and immortality" with a discussion of the "grammar"<sup>19</sup> of statements about "what will happen to me after I die".<sup>20</sup> The main trouble arises, he thinks, when we talk about a person as immortal. Evidence of immortality should involve looking for signs of biological life, but the Christian does not ordinarily take immortality to be biological life just as it is here and now (hence the talk of transformed, resurrected bodies). However, the argument goes, if you try to think of a person abstracted from our physical life, which involves generation, flourishing, and perishing, then you raise the question of whether you are thinking of anything at all. So, the work to be done, Rhees thinks, is to show how a belief in immortality is different from a belief in a theory or a matter of fact.

About the Christian belief in immortality, Rhees says that there is no sense in asking, "What is the truth about these matters?" because "the truth about these matters" has no meaning. He thinks it is wrongheaded to say, "We'll find out after we die", because this assumes

that it is something that could be found out if only you get in the right position; bringing it closer to scientific beliefs again ... It can't be just because we lack some data or some source of knowledge, and that we must wait patiently until these are supplied. The sort of thing that could be found out by experiment. ("Death", p.214)

So Rhees wants to guard against our thinking that religious beliefs could be in any way settled by scientific means. But my question is this: Which believers expect their religious beliefs ever to be settled by scientific experimentation? There are all sorts of ways I may come to feel confirmed about beliefs or decisions in my life, none of which are settled by scientific experiment. I want to say, "Of course, the Christian afterlife cannot be decided by experiment, for people don't usually die and then

<sup>19</sup> Rhees follows Wittgenstein's notion that describing the grammar of an expression is a matter of describing how it can be used within the language-game to which it belongs; that is, describing the use of the expression. See Norman Malcolm (*Wittgenstein*, p.75ff.).

<sup>20</sup> Here I summarise some of the ideas Rhees discusses in "Death and immortality", pp.206-15.



come back a few years later to confirm that there is an afterlife.” Even if someone did come back to report that she had lived a resurrection life after her earthly life, this testimony would not be counted as scientific evidence, but do you think *she* would be in any way unconvinced?

Rhees makes a more subtle claim meant to destroy the sense of *any* conception of immortality: “No experience you had after death could show you whether you are *immortal* or not: just that you had survived *that* one ...” (“Death”, p.214). Now we can see what Rhees is driving at: What is it that would *guarantee*, or *demonstrate*, or *prove* a person’s belief, or prediction, concerning an afterlife?<sup>21</sup> Rhees answers that nothing would, and therefore a person who says that some of her religious belief language is an acknowledgement of a belief about future happenings beyond the grave is either confused or she misunderstands what religious language is about.

I have two things to say about this line of thinking. First, I want to ask: even if we assumed the resurrection life to consist of some sort of continuation of conscious experience (though we need not think of it this way), why should believers think that at the point of death their faith in God should end? That is, why should not believers expect trust in God to continue without any absolute guarantee? I sometimes feel confirmed that I have made a right decision in the past. Could this kind of confirming be settled by scientific experiment? Of course not. In a similar way, believers may come to feel confirmed by an afterlife experience, perhaps in a way far surpassing any earthly sense of confirmation, that they are on the right road, so to speak, without any guarantee involved. What characterises the Christian belief in the resurrection life is a matter of *trust*—specifically, trust in God’s promises; it is not a matter of scientific experimentation. My point here is that one may believe in an affirmative way that one will participate in a resurrection life without one’s belief involving exactly the sort of belief involved in science.

Second, Rhees would likely respond to my argument here by throwing the burden back on me to describe exactly what sort of future life beyond the grave I have in mind. In the absence of a good bit of detail, he would be likely to surmise that I really do not know what I am talking about.<sup>22</sup> I think this kind of question is important, but unless we are willing to abandon quite a few of our beliefs that we normally think of as warranted, or entitled, or as in some way epistemologically legitimate, then we must not think that somewhat vague religious beliefs

<sup>21</sup> Rhees makes his view explicit where he says, “What is it that is guaranteed; that that really happened; that so and so is going to happen? That something is to be found in such and such a place? That is not the reality which corresponds to religious beliefs. What is guaranteeing a *religious* belief? A guarantee is something you ought to be able to check; it should be borne out or not borne out” (“Belief”, p.50).

<sup>22</sup> Rhees says, for example, “If you try to think of an individual as something abstracted from the process of generation and flourishing and perishing, then there is the question of whether you are thinking of anything at all” (“Death”, p.209).



are illegitimate *qua* beliefs either. Consider the following situation: Little Fred's mother tells Fred that his father (who died before little Fred was born) left behind a huge sum of money for little Fred to claim when he is grown. Now let us suppose that, because of the way Fred's father set up the fund, Fred cannot legally check to determine whether or not he actually has the money coming to him, nor can he check to find out how much money is coming to him or exactly how old he will be when he is to receive the money. If little Fred tells one of his classmates, "I'm going to be rich when I'm grown", would there be anything wrong with Fred's belief? I think not. After all, Fred has never known his mother to tell him a lie. She seems perfectly reliable. Does anyone expect Fred to withhold all the beliefs he might have based on what his mother tells him until he has verified them all? What is interesting about this case is how little Fred knows: he does not know how much money he has coming to him, how he will get the money, where and when he will receive it, whether his mother will be alive when he receives it, etc. There are many details surrounding Fred's belief about which Fred is ignorant, and yet there seems to be nothing at all wrong with Fred's believing that sometime in the future he will receive a huge sum of money. I do not intend to use this example as an analogy for a religious belief about an afterlife (though there are parallels); rather, I want the example to point out that we can have legitimate (as well as *true*) beliefs about future happenings, even when the details surrounding those beliefs are vague, or even non-existent.

### Religious language goes deep

Following Wittgenstein, Rhees thinks that in order to understand religious language it is necessary to understand the connections between related concepts within the language-games of a religious form of life. However, I will argue in this section that Rhees does not follow his own principle, that his reluctance to connect certain Christian concepts to the traditional Christian belief in resurrection life results in a Christianity devoid of many of its fundamental concepts and is, thus, dubiously Christian. I want to show that this characteristic distortion follows from Rhees's unwarranted reducing of Christian belief to what *he* takes to be religiously *deep*.

Rhees says he once asked Wittgenstein whether one could find a way to settle the issue between conflicting moralities, and Wittgenstein answered, "It is nothing I could do or dream of doing. I might say that one of these moralities was deeper than the other" (quoted in Rhees, "Election", p.249). This notion of depth seems to have greatly influenced Rhees's thinking about religious belief, for he uses the notion of depth in religion in a similar way to Wittgenstein's notion in morality. But Rhees leans harder on this idea of religious depth. When reading him one gets the strong sense that proper religious beliefs are always the deep ones,



whereas what he thinks of as shallow religious beliefs are more or less odd or confused *qua* religious beliefs. In fact, what he considers to be deep about religious belief seems to determine what he is willing to count as religious at all.<sup>23</sup> As I have shown earlier, for Rhees to allow Christian afterlife concepts to be thought of in any way as future happenings is, to his mind, to make them out to be scientific or pseudo-scientific claims, which he takes not to be religious at all. Expressing his doubt about immortality as implying future events, Rhees says that the ideas of liberation from sin and alienation from God are involved

when the belief in immortality is expressed as belief in another sort of existence. And also, that they are part of what is meant by speaking of the belief in immortality as *hope*. Is it a hope *for* something that is going to *happen*? ... The belief in immortality as *hope*. When this is expressed as a hope for something that is going to *happen*—and **this seems to be the commoner form**—it would be hard to say clearly what is expected, or in what sense it is expected to *happen*. (“Death”, pp.221-2, bold added).

I agree that it is hard for believers to say clearly what is expected to happen, but let us ask ourselves this question: Can we imagine Rhees allowing *any* description or explanation about such a future happening? It is not just that it would be hard to say clearly what is expected to happen—he utterly rules out this sort of talking because he thinks it brings religion too close to scientific inquiry. But note that he has admitted that Christian belief in immortality in the sense of future experiences beyond death is “the commoner form” of the belief. And I would argue that this has been the traditional Christian position.<sup>24</sup> But Rhees says that he can see nothing in this kind of thinking:

There is a side of Christianity which I do not understand at all. I mean what is said in the Scripture about the Second Coming of Jesus and about the transformation of the world which there will be then.—I do not understand the way in which this is important to those who say and accept it: how it is that this goes **deep** into the souls of those who say and believe it. **What is the cry from the soul** that we can somehow understand in this teaching?

<sup>23</sup> For instance, Rhees talks about members of The Bible College in Swansea who used language expressing what Rhees calls “a personal affection for Jesus”. About their expressions, which included “meeting Jesus”, Rhees says, “I could never understand any of this, but it never sounded like what I should normally call religion ... I could not find anything in what they said that would suggest or lead on to: ‘sanctus, sanctus, sanctus. Domine Deus ...’” (“Mescaline”, p.340).

<sup>24</sup> Over the centuries various ideas about the Christian conception of afterlife have been expressed. However, my concern is not about any particular belief; rather, I am concerned with the general Christian belief in a resurrection life beyond the grave.



I *can* see, though vaguely, something of how one comes to believe in a Last Judgement: as though this were part of the sense of the life I ought to lead, of what it is for me to fail as I do, and so on ...

In a way this forms *part* of what Christians say when they speak of the Second Coming, I suppose. So they might say it ought not to be difficult for me to go on to the rest. But I just do not see what this "going on further" is ("Difficulties", p.256, bold added).

Rhees talks about how these ideas seem to be related to the idea of a new heaven and a new earth but that he doesn't understand what problems these ideas answer. He is further puzzled by the biblical talk about future events. He can only think of this talk as being "figurative language", but he says, "I am sure that to call this language 'figurative' shows a deep misunderstanding; but I do not know how to avoid it" ("Difficulties", p.357). Further along he says this:

What I do *not* understand is how one comes to the idea of a *new* world, which is part of the notion of Christ's Second Coming. Nor do I understand the importance for a believer that the Second Coming has. I do not doubt, of course, that it *has* great importance. I am saying only that I am blind.<sup>25</sup> ("Difficulties", p.360)

Why is Rhees blind? We might begin to understand how to take his admission of blindness by considering his question I quoted above: "What is the cry from the soul that we can somehow understand in this teaching?" He seems to think that only those things with which he intimately struggles, or which answer some deep personal problem, can be thought of as religiously deep.<sup>26</sup> He cannot see the Christian ideas of a future resurrection life, a future judgement day, and a future new heaven and new earth as being genuine religious ideas. For instance, about the belief in a new heaven and new earth, Rhees says, "But I do not know into what problems in the lives of believers this fits. I do not know which difficulties and attitudes of believers lead them to say and repeat these things as they are given in Scripture" ("Difficulties", 356). Similarly, he says, "... I do not understand what the belief in the Second Coming and in the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth 'does for people'" ("Difficulties", 361). Whatever may prevent Rhees from understanding these concepts, it is clear that he thinks that Christian afterlife concepts that suggest future happenings are, at their best, very shallow as religious beliefs.

<sup>25</sup> Rhees concedes an even more radical blindness where he says, "Because I am blind to the conception of Church, and of dogma also, I remain outside—Catholic or Protestant" ("Christianity", p.372).

<sup>26</sup> About these very issues he says, "I suppose my trouble is that I think too much of my own life and body and my own standing before Judgement" ("Difficulties", p.357).



However, I see no reason to think that the religious belief in a future afterlife need be shallow. With one example I would like to show how Christian concepts about an afterlife point toward a resolution of a very deep moral and religious problem. The problem I want to focus on is injustice. The Bible stresses that God is just, but we are all aware of shocking cases of injustice. Now, the problem of injustice is not much of a problem for me; as a middle-class Westerner I have lived a life of luxury far surpassing the vast majority of those who have lived before me. Not only that, but I have all sorts of resources to rebound from unfortunate circumstances and suffered harms. But, as Marjorie Suchocki puts it:

What about those whose lives waste away in desperate poverty, starvation, and disease? What about maltreated children so psychologically damaged by atrocities that they never develop the capacity to love? Where is the redemption in this world from such evils? How is there justice for those victims who are permanently marred through the effects of evil, beyond the ministering aid of social agencies or caring individuals. For many victims, the evil of injustice is the final and overwhelming word ("Question", p.298).

Now, if the Christian doctrines of atonement, judgement, redemption, and resurrection life are basically correct, and if God is just, as religious believers say God is, then we have good reason to hope that such shocking cases of injustice have a remedy. So my question is this: Is there not something very deep religious about the Christian concepts of a future redemption, resurrection life, and a new heaven and new earth, which taken together, point to a resolution of the terrible problem of injustice? Even if you are not religious, can you not see that these concepts, which are bound up with the notion of redemption, might be seen as very deep religiously? But Rhees says

I have missed the importance of the resurrection, in some way ... The resurrection does not seem to me to add much. I know that this shows there is some big defect in my conception of his life, and even of his Passion ... I can see, for instance, that the resurrection gives a special force and importance to Jesus' promise of eternal life (and resurrection of the body) to those who believe in him ... And I suppose this is connected, in some important way, with the idea of him as redeemer. If I could see that, I might see the significance more clearly than I do ... As far as I can see, then, the resurrection has its importance as part of the general idea of Christ as redeemer. I suppose that is in many ways the most important idea in Christianity. But it is one of which I can grasp at most only a certain fringe ("Difficulties", pp.348-9).

Before, he pleaded blindness with respect to the depth of the Christian doctrines of resurrection life, a future judgement day, and a new heavens and earth; here Rhees pleads poor vision with respect to the very central



Christian doctrines of Christ's resurrection and redemption. Admitting that Christ's redemption is "the most important idea in Christianity", why has he failed to see the significance of these ideas for the believer? We cannot, of course, answer this question determinately; however, by connecting Rhees's admissions of blindness to our earlier discussion of his view of the function of religious language, we can develop an answer that is not only consistent for Rhees, but which is also fully in the spirit of his view that religious language is a special kind of expression or valuation.

As we have seen, Rhees denies that religious language ever commits believers to the existence of non-physical objects or beings. Also, religious language is thought to be neither referential nor is it ever to be construed as anything like a fact about the past or a belief about a future happening. For Rhees, in as much as religious expressions have sense, their sense depends entirely upon the role they play in the lives of religious people. I think that Rhees is correct to point out the special role that religious belief language plays in the lives of believers. Surely believers *do* value life in a special, religious way. Surely religious language *is* expressive of a distinctly religious picture of the world, and it sometimes functions itself as a particular valuing of the world. One of Rhees's great contributions to philosophy is his trailblazing work in bringing out the significance of religious language as expressive of a religious form of life.

It seems to me, however, that his all-encompassing emphasis upon the *role* of religious language in the life of the believer comes at too great a price, for it threatens to take away from many believers what they think of as an indispensable feature of their religious belief. I urge that it is just false that most Christians through the centuries have not believed in the existence of God; it is also false that most Christians have not believed that Jesus, though he died, lives. It is false that most Christians have not believed that they would take part in a future last judgement and a resurrection life. Moreover, it is false that Christian believers have not taken their religious language to refer to God and to future events such as a resurrection life. It seems strange to have to argue for this. Go to almost any Christian church and ask the parishioners there if they believe they refer to a being who is God with their religious language. Look at the historical documents of the Church, and there you will find, over and over, expressions that are meant to be referential and assertoric. Consider the multitudes of Christians who have fought and died for their beliefs, the missionaries who have risked their lives (and often lost them), not because they thought it was of the utmost importance to have a deep, religious attitude to life, but because they actually believed in the existence of God to whom they believed they owed their very lives and from whom they believed they had received a command to spread the word.



Rhees admits that there are religious people who believe this way, but he considers this sort of belief either to be very shallow religiously or not religious at all. His failure to see the depth of religious ideas such as the atonement, redemption, and resurrection life, is due in part, I submit, to his commitment to the view that the language expressing those doctrines cannot refer to a being who is God, on the ground that if such language *did* refer to a being who is God, then we could never make an investigation that would guarantee that what we were referring to *was* the being who is God.

Rhees's move in spelling out what is deep about Christianity is to follow Simone Weil in thinking of religious concepts as being under the umbrella of *eternity*. Rhees says, "The belief that I may see my father again beyond the grave is not particularly religious. Religious beliefs centre rather on the notion of eternity ..." ("Death", p.211).<sup>27</sup> If what is deep about religion is seen from the standpoint of the eternal (in Weil's sense), then questions about future happenings beyond the grave *do* begin to sound silly. But, as I have shown, we need not think there is anything silly, or shallow, about the several Christian doctrines relating to the resurrection life; on the contrary, these doctrines taken together provide a deep answer to a deep religious problem. What is most troubling to me is that, given this particular interpretation of religious concepts seen under the eternal, many concepts I take to be crucial to Christianity are seen to be so unimportant that they can be abandoned.<sup>28</sup> It is revealing how often Rhees refers to or quotes Weil, and it is also revealing what he says about her: "Simone Weil could see little religious significance in the resurrection of Christ, neither does she seem to have found any sense or value in the idea of the resurrection of the body of each believer" ("That man", p.261). Elsewhere he says that Weil "did not think the Resurrection important in the Gospels ... she seemed sorry that it was included in the account" ("Mescaline", p.342). At another point, Rhees says he was reminded "strongly of how far she was from what one would normally take to be the Christian position ... She was far away from the Christian position" ("Christianity", p.371).

## Assessment and counter-arguments

To begin to see how far *Rhees* is from understanding the Christian position, let us begin where he comments approvingly of Wittgenstein:

<sup>27</sup> What an odd thing to say. As Mario von der Ruhr mentioned to me in personal correspondence, what could be more natural than the desire to be joined to the objects of our love for eternity? If it makes sense to speak of eternal life in the presence of Christ, then it should also make sense to speak of eternal life in the presence of our neighbours.

<sup>28</sup> This is especially puzzling to me because, as I will say with more force later in the essay, Rhees says that he just wants to *describe* religious language—not critique it.



He would not have said that he believed in a Judgement after death. But he did say ... that he understood how such an idea or belief comes to be important in a man's reflexion on his life and his sense of responsibility: that some day one will have to answer for it, that one will appear before God "in a queer kind of body" (a glorified body) and be judged ("Election", p.244).

Note that the sort of belief about a judgement after death that is being recommended here has nothing at all to do with an actual judgement after death; rather, the belief makes sense to Wittgenstein, and to Rhees, only because it engenders reflection upon one's life. I agree that the belief in a judgement after death engenders reflection upon one's life, but I also think the belief often involves thinking that there will be a real judgement after death. The kind of belief expressed in the quote above amounts to a sort of picture that serves to help you to regulate your actions now; that is, for Wittgenstein and Rhees, a belief in "a Judgement after death" serves as a guide for moral and religious action. I agree that such a belief *does* serve this purpose, but the believer *also* sees the concept of judgement day as bound up with other Christian concepts such as redemption, resurrection, and the new heavens and earth, and the New Testament writers clearly refer to these as being accomplished beyond this earthly life. Moreover, believers typically see the question of whether there is a being who is God to pray to and to praise, or whether there will be an afterlife, etc., as crucially important with respect to whether they *ought* to continue to participate in religious practices. Wolterstorff points out that if the Wittgensteinian analysis of religious language seemed right to many religious believers, this would be a good reason to discard their religion:

For example, fundamental to Christianity is the belief that we humans need to be saved from what fundamentally ails us; and that we cannot save ourselves but must be saved by God. Suppose one adopted the view that "God" is not a referring expression and that sincere participation in a religious form of life, even a theistically religious form of life, is devoid of commitment to the existence of a being which is God. For many people, their believing that would be seen by them as a reason for concluding that language about our needing to be saved by God is deeply inappropriate (Wolterstorff, "Philosophy", p.18).

I believe that Wolterstorff has here characterised properly the connection for most participants in salvation religions between the practice of engaging in religious language-games and the belief, e.g., that "God" refers to a being who is God. It is, of course, impossible to say generally what happens in each case. Perhaps in many cases the belief and the practice go hand-in-hand. In other cases, it may be that the belief is in the practice. In others, the belief may ground the practice. Regardless of the



various possible ways that beliefs and practices are connected, the point I am trying to make is this: For many believers, their belief in God is such that if they were to come to think that God does not exist, then this would be a reason to stop engaging in religious practices. There are examples of this. For instance, consider parents whose child has developed cancer. The parents believe in God. They have learned through religious instruction that God is merciful and that God answers prayers. The parents pray regularly that God will heal their child, but the child dies. The parents come to believe that God does not exist, because they cannot believe that a merciful deity would allow their precious, innocent child to die, especially after they have agonised for months in prayer, petitioning God with many tears to save their child's life.<sup>29</sup> Now, perhaps there are religious answers for why God does not always answer prayers as we would like them to be answered, but even so, we have here an example of former religious believers who become atheists *because* they do not think that God exists.<sup>30</sup> Also, if I may judge by what many Christians have told me, some religious believers have occasional doubts about whether God exists. Perhaps they have heard a compelling argument concluding that God does not exist. Perhaps certain life experiences have caused them to doubt whether God is there after all. In many such cases, the crisis involved is not just an emotional or philosophical one—the crisis may be acutely religious. Whether or not they will continue as religious practitioners hangs on a satisfactory answer to the question. We can put this point positively by saying that, for many believers, participation in religious practices *presupposes* an ontological commitment to a being who is God.<sup>31</sup> I do not mean to suggest that I am right but Rhee is wrong; rather, my claim is that Rhee's explanation for the connection between religious belief and religious practice is too narrow—it leaves too many cases out.

It will be helpful to contrast Wolterstorff's characterisation of salvation (above) with Rhee's comment: "Is the conception of 'salvation' something like saving us from a terrible predicament? It may be hard for us to think of it otherwise—and yet that idea has hardly anything to do with religion" ("Religion", p.203). Hardly anything to do

<sup>29</sup> Sometimes in such cases the parents become angry with God rather than disbelieve in God. They may refrain from participating in religious practices for a while but later return to them.

<sup>30</sup> There may be more to their new-found atheism than I have mentioned here. I only mean to point out that the belief that God does not exist may play an important role in their becoming atheists.

<sup>31</sup> Throughout this essay I have referred to "the being who is God" in order to distinguish what I think religious believers typically believe when they use the word "God" from what Rhee suggests that believers mean by it. My phrase is meant to say the following: God is a being whose attributes include most of the great-making characteristics traditionally attributed to God. God is thus, among other things, personal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, creator, omnipresent, everlasting (or, eternal).



with religion! Most Christians would say that the human predicament due to sin is the very reason that God became incarnate—to save us from our terrible predicament. *This* is the sense that salvation has. It is connected both internally and externally to the Christian notions of sin, incarnation, atonement, and redemption. If we are not in a terrible predicament, then salvation, *as the religious person means it*, loses its sense.

Since this *is* the sense of salvation for most religious believers of the type Rhees discusses (i.e. Christians), what are we to make of his claims: “You can only describe religious worship and practices” (“Difficulties of belief”, p.146), and “the philosopher’s business [is] to try to help the believer to understand what it is that he is doing and saying; not to interpret it ...” (“Remarks”, p.30)? These are echoes of Wittgenstein’s claim that the task of philosophy is merely to describe the uses of words that express concepts, that “philosophy leaves everything as it is”.<sup>32</sup> Let us assume that Rhees is merely *describing* what religious believers are doing when they use religious language. If religious believers accept Rhees’s description of religious language, then as we have seen, for a great many of them, this would constitute a good reason for them to reject their religious form of life. But Rhees says that he is not in the business of critique—he is only in the business of description. It seems to me that if Rhees wants merely to describe what believers are doing in their practices, he *ought* to say that religious believers sometimes take themselves to be referring to God and sometimes to be making assertions in their various language-games.

Rhees’s writings on these matters were, of course, directed at the logical positivists who were arguing that moral, aesthetic and theological sentences were meaningless on the ground that the only kind of meaning worth its salt was *cognitive* meaning. In an attempt to demonstrate the meaningfulness of religious, moral, and aesthetic language, Rhees followed Wittgenstein in showing that there are important kinds of meaning other than cognitive meaning. However (and this is important), Rhees *accepted* the positivist idea that religious language is not cognitively meaningful. Indeed, he staked his claim on the view that religious language is not referential because it is not assertoric and also because we cannot do an investigation to find out whether God exists. I have argued that, on the basis of Rhees’s arguments, we have no good reason to accept his conclusion. My claim here gains even more force when we take into account Rhees’s self-acknowledged blindness to the sense of core Christian doctrines. If he does not understand the sense of some of the core doctrines of Christianity, how can he know that none of them is referential or assertoric?

As I see it, this is how things stand: Given Rhees’s failure to establish his conclusion, given his self-proclaimed blindness with respect

<sup>32</sup> See Wittgenstein (PI, §124, 49e).



to what he himself acknowledges are core Christian beliefs, and given his insistence that the philosopher of religion's business is to "try to help the believer to understand what it is that he is doing and saying; not to interpret it" ("Remarks", p.30), I urge that since many religious believers say that they take themselves sometimes to refer to God and to make assertions, *even when they understand well the philosophical positions involved*, it is not only more charitable but also more reasonable to accept what these religious people say they are doing than it is to accept what amounts to a revisionist account of religious belief language.

Finally, we should note that there is another way to understand this dispute. It may be that when Rhees and his fellow Wittgensteinian fideists use religious language, they do not, in fact, use it referentially or assertorically. There are various ways in which we may use a bit of language, and it is certainly open to Rheesians always to use religious language as Rhees says it is used. On the other hand, it may be that when *other* religious believers use such language, they *do* sometimes use it referentially and assertorically. I am such a person who claims sometimes to use religious language referentially and assertorically, and I know many other religious believers who make the same claim. If I were to become convinced that there is no being that is God to whom I refer when I use some of my religious language, then I would stop engaging in religious language games; and so I think it is for many religious believers. So, another way to treat this dispute is to understand each side as providing a legitimate description of how religious language is used. If this is the case, then an appropriate account, or description, of the uses of religious language would be *broader* than Rhees allows; thus, my position still comes out better than his, for I acknowledge many of Rhees's insights about the role of religious language in people's lives, but he suggests that his description of religious language as fundamentally non-referential and non-assertoric captures *all* the deep uses of religious language. Thus, his description of religious language use precludes my description. I can once again employ my familiar argument on the present supposition: Since Rhees sees his project as non-revisionist, if both his and my descriptions are legitimate, he ought to include in his description what many religious believers would claim they are sometimes doing with their religious language, namely, referring and asserting. To fail to do so would be to mis-describe a component of some religious belief language for some religious believers.<sup>33</sup>

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