

The Rule of Theology: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Theology and Truthfulness

Phil Enns, Toronto School of Theology, Toronto, ON

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges currently facing theology is that religious statements look like other kinds of statements. For example, the sentence ‘God spoke to me’ has the same structure as the sentence ‘Mary spoke to me.’ This similarity in form makes it all too easy to assume that the criteria we would employ to determine the meaning of these sentences should also be similar. If Mary spoke to me, it would have been possible for someone else to overhear what she said, and so also, it might be assumed, with God speaking. I know possible ways of verifying whether Mary spoke, but how does one go about verifying that God spoke? In fact, how does one go about verifying the truthfulness of any religious statement? I would like to address two related challenges to religious language. The first challenge concerns the nature of religious discourse and how it can be distinguished from other discourses. The second concerns the truthfulness of religious statements.

Theology as Consistency

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) rejects any suggestion that the Christian is in possession of facts that the non-Christian doesn’t have. It seems to make sense that our beliefs are based on facts and therefore people with different beliefs are drawing on different facts. Yet, we could imagine an individual who acknowledges the facts of Christianity without believing them. We could think of an historian who can lay out the historical facts concerning the life of Jesus while not believing that Jesus was the Messiah. There is, then, a difference between *acknowledging* facts and *appropriating* them. For Kierkegaard the individual is the difference, because facts do not come with predetermined commitments. Yet it is often assumed that if someone will admit to certain facts, then a particular belief or activity will follow. However, no particular actions necessarily follow from the facts about Jesus, or from any other facts, for that matter. Belief, then, is not a set of facts but rather a passion that transforms a fact into a fact for the believer.¹

Kierkegaard insists that Christianity leaves the world as it is while changing the individual.² But how is the Christian different? The goal of the Christian, according to the Danish philosopher, is to become a self whose criterion is God. In existing as a self with the consciousness of being directly before God, the Christian is distinguished by a theological understanding of that existence. This transformation results not from ‘revealed’ facts but from an understanding that one is always living in the presence of God. What differentiates the believer from the non-believer is a theological perspective on the world.

If, for Kierkegaard, appropriation is the key to becoming a theological self, then it seems to follow that this self is to be identified with something interior, hidden, known only to the individual. However, Kierkegaard argues that the believer is the one whose life lies in the consistency of the good. Consistency is the ability to properly order one’s capacities or powers with the aim of producing a harmonious movement. Inconsistency attacks that harmony, resulting in chaos, lack of motion, and ultimately lack of a self. The theological [dimension] is, therefore, neither a set of doctrines nor an inner experience but the ordering of beliefs and activities in one’s life so that this life is understood to be measured by the criterion of being before God.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) suggests that we should think of the orderliness of theology along the lines of a grammar. For example, when someone talks about the soul being spiritual and therefore non-corporeal, there might be some confusion if it is also said that the soul leaves the body. Wittgenstein replies that it will all depend on how one uses the words ‘spiritual’ and ‘soul’.³ We can’t determine if there is confusion concerning these words apart from noting how they are being used. It is, then, only in their regular use that we can determine what words mean, and this is where the metaphor of grammar is helpful. According to Wittgenstein, theology has a similar task, of representing the orderliness of religious words and beliefs. Unfortunately, his identification of theology with grammar has too often been misunderstood, stemming from the notion that a grammar provides rules. From this, some theologians have argued that the basic rules of theology remain the same, no matter what the context, and that these rules stand independently of their applications. Both of these claims are rejected by Wittgenstein.

At the heart of Wittgenstein’s argument concerning rules is the matter of identifying when a rule has been followed. An example given by Wittgenstein

is that of a student learning how to add.⁴ The student is told to write out a series of numbers, counting by 2's, up to 1000, which he does successfully. When the student is told to continue past 1000, the student writes 1004, 1008, 1012, at which point he is stopped and told he is continuing the series incorrectly. The student responds by saying that he took the order 'Count by 2's' to mean 'Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, and so on'. The problem facing the teacher lies in clarifying to the student how the rule ' $n+2$ ' is to be followed, since the issue is not the rule but following the rule. The teacher would therefore have to show that following the rule ' $n+2$ ' means that after 1000 comes 1002. However, a troubling problem is raised at this point: If the teacher has to show the student that following the rule ' $n+2$ ' means that after 1000 comes 1002, wouldn't the same thing have to be done for what follows 1866 or 100034 or, in fact, every number? The problem lies not only in how the rule is followed at a certain point but how it is followed at any point. "It would almost be more correct to say, not that an intuition was needed at every stage, but that a new decision was needed at every stage."⁵ If a new decision has to be made at every stage of following a rule, the very idea of rule-following seems to be undermined.

Does Wittgenstein hold that there is no such thing as rule-following? The answer is no. According to him, the problem lies in thinking that a rule is something that always needs interpreting. The obvious response to this claim is to wonder what it means to follow a rule if it is not an interpretation. That is, what is the relationship between the rule and an action understood to be a case of 'obeying the rule'? The common assumption regarding rules is that they exist independently of their applications. It is this distance between rule and application which requires interpretation. However, Wittgenstein undercuts this assumption, arguing that a rule is nothing but the consistency of applications.

The nature of being able to 'carry on' should be stressed here. Borrowing from Kierkegaard, knowing a rule is not a matter of knowing particular facts but rather maintaining a consistency within one's life. This means, then, that if one is asked to justify an instance of following a rule, ultimately it will come down to one's life.

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do."⁶

It is, then, the customs and habits that we engage in that ground the rules we have, making them both meaningful and effective.

Returning to our original example, the statement ‘God spoke to me’, both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein agree that its meaningfulness can be determined only by referring to a context. If it is meant to be a religious statement, it will then be understood against a theological background. Kierkegaard describes this background as the consistency of the theological self which understands itself as living before God. Wittgenstein sees this background as the set of religious habits and customs the individual engages in. In both cases, theological discourse makes it possible for religious statements to be meaningful. However, a troubling question arises at this point: Is truth nothing more than what people agree on?

Theology as Criterion

According to Wittgenstein, a belief finds its meaning within a set of habits and customs rooted in the world. An example he gives is that of measurement.⁷ He distinguishes between methods of measurement, for example Fahrenheit and Celsius, and results of measurement. There is, however, also the judgment of measuring temperature which requires, in part, a consistency in results. Methods of measurement would make no sense without this consistency. Similarly, any habit or custom that did not have it would be meaningless. A language, or language-game, requires an agreement in judgment concerning the world, and it is this broad agreement, encompassing beliefs and activities, that constitutes a form of life.⁸

For Wittgenstein, religious beliefs are not, strictly speaking, propositions.⁹ Does this mean that these beliefs represent human attitudes imposed on the world? Does the fact that someone holds a religious belief tell us something only about the attitude of that individual, and nothing about the world? Wittgenstein rejects this conclusion on the grounds provided above, namely that if a religious belief is to be meaningful, it has to be associated with customs and practices. These customs provide the world with its meaning and truth.

What is being identified here as the truthfulness of a belief is the consistency of results arising from the customs and practices that give the belief its meaningfulness. The presupposition of this claim is that it is impossible for there to be a form of life consistently at odds with the world.

Imagine a person whose memory could not retain *what* the word ‘pain’ meant — so that he constantly called different things by that name — but nevertheless used the word in a way fitting in with the usual symptoms and presuppositions of pain — in short he uses it as we all do. Here I should like to say: a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism.¹⁰

The word ‘pain’ is understood both to have a place in our language and to refer to something in the world. However, in the above example, the amnesiac is using the word both properly, in terms of its place in the language, and improperly, referring to different things. Here we would say that the example is impossible because it would be impossible both to use the word properly and to be wrong. It is impossible because the consistency of a custom presupposes a degree of fittedness with the facts of the world or, in other words, a degree of truthfulness.

Insofar as theology represents the set of practices associated with religious beliefs, it can be understood as providing the criteria or logic for evaluating the truthfulness of those beliefs. Previously we saw how theology as grammar provides the *meaningfulness* of religious beliefs, but we now see that it also provides the *truthfulness* of these beliefs. It is, therefore, possible to evaluate whether the claim ‘God spoke to me’ is truthful by referring to the theological grounds which make it logically possible. Furthermore, the claim can be evaluated by standards independent of both the individual and the observer.

Much of Kierkegaard’s writings is taken up with evaluating individuals and how they measure up to the religious [criterion]. *Stages On Life’s Way* (1845) and its story of a diarist in love is one example. Having become engaged, the diarist moves toward ideality, considering only the possibility of love. On the other hand, the girl is moving towards reality and being in love. Unhappy love arises in the diarist because he is unable to see her in actuality, instead considering her only in ideality. While he talks at great lengths about the girl and what is best for their relationship, “it is immediately apparent that he has only himself to deal with — and not with her as an actuality outside of himself. . . .”¹¹

The movement of the diarist towards ideality is spurred by religious considerations. His life and, in particular, his love, must always be considered in light of the religious. The problem, in his mind, is that he cannot comprehend how he can develop his religious understanding while attending to the

responsibilities and duties of a husband. Therefore, telling himself that he must attend to his religious commitments while giving the girl the possibility of making her life come out all right, he provokes the break-up of the relationship. This, Kierkegaard tells us, is demonic: “that with a presentiment of a possibility he is unwilling to relate himself to himself in his religious idea but understands her in esthetic categories and cheats the ethical a little, as if he were — if he is guilty — less guilty because she came out of it all right. . . .”¹²

The key to understanding the diarist is that he anticipates being religious but is unable to make it actual. According to Kierkegaard, “if [the diarist] had been acquainted with the world and with the opposite sex, he would have come out better, that is, if he would have cared about this knowledge.”¹³ Here we get a glimpse of happy religiosity: to care about knowledge of the world religiously. The religiousness of the diarist is unhappy because it cannot resolve itself in the world, remaining only in ideality and possibility. Put differently, the logic of Christianity requires that it be always grounded in the activities of the world, though always with a Christian understanding.

Where Kierkegaard goes further than Wittgenstein is in arguing that the truth of Christianity applies also to non-Christians. The focus of *Sickness Unto Death* (1849) is on how one becomes a self. The book is structured around a phenomenological examination of the various possible forms of becoming a self might take. According to Kierkegaard, people who lack any sense of having a self are in despair even though they don’t realize it. This is possible because of what he calls the ‘obstancy of truth’. People who are not aware of being a self are still suffering the consequences of not being a self, because the criterion of truth is not *consciousness* of the truth but *truth itself*. It is by virtue of this operation of truth that Kierkegaard can both describe and evaluate people in terms of having selfhood.

That the selves of individuals can be evaluated presupposes Kierkegaard’s definition of the self, namely that there is a particular and proper criterion for measuring the self. In order for the self to be a self, there must be something by which the self can be constituted and by which it defines itself. Those who suffer the greatest despair are those who either make themselves their own criterion or make defiance against God their criterion. The reason despair remains is that there is only one proper criterion for the self, only one ruler by which one can properly constitute a self, and that is God. If adopting the criterion of the world, or the eternal, or oneself leads to despair, adopting the

criterion of God leads to being a self. The individual who adopts God as the criterion for the self gains the intensification of reality possible only through God and thereby possesses the truthfulness required to be a self. By being 'before God', the individual finds the proper grounds for being a self.

In developing the two criteria of truth and God, Kierkegaard provides a rich description of truth that accounts for the two most basic requirements of any theory of truth. With the first criterion, we have an analytical tool that can be applied both logically and phenomenologically: the lives of all human beings can be measured by the truth regardless of their own consciousness. With the second criterion, we have the grounds for establishing identity. It is not enough that a thing be described with regards to what it is; reference must also be made to what it ought to be. Ultimately, for Kierkegaard, the theological life is the most truthful life because it is the only life that accounts for the whole of one's life.

Conclusion

Theology, therefore, functions as a criterion in two different ways. First, it provides the set of beliefs and practices within which any particular Christian activity finds its meaningfulness. In order to make sense of the claim 'God spoke to me', it would be necessary to identify the understanding of the individual who made the claim. Is the individual Christian? What kind of encounter was it? Second, theology functions as a criterion insofar as it is the logic of religious discourse. So, not only is it necessary to establish the theological background of the claim 'God spoke to me', it must also be determined whether this claim properly fits that background. For religious discourse to be meaningful it must also be truthful, and it is theology which lays out the necessary logical structure. Theology is, therefore, not doctrines or dogmas — though it must articulate these. Nor is theology an inner orientation, though it must certainly include this.

What I have tried to show is that theology is the setting, composed of beliefs, customs, and habits, for our religious discourse. Theology provides both the sense and the reference for our religious language, and therefore is the thing that makes religious language possible. Theology is, therefore, the rule against which we as religious people measure ourselves in order to determine how we stand in relation to the truth.

Notes

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David Swenson and Howard Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 103.

² “[The knight of faith] makes the movements of infinity, but he does this with such correctness and assurance that he constantly gets the finite out of it, and there is not a second when one has a notion of anything else.” Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. and trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. G. H. von Wright (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), §127.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §185.

⁵ *Ibid.*, §186.

⁶ *Ibid.*, §217.

⁷ *Ibid.*, §242.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1955), 6.522.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §271.

¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, ed., trans., and introduced by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Kierkegaard's Writings, vol. 11 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 425.

¹² *Ibid.*, 427.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 434.
