"Ethics and Aesthetics Are One"

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Let us suppose that for a long time now, in the modern West, religion has been the name of a certain wound. I am specifically referring to Latin Christianity as a wound, due to its historic excesses, its ever-deepening irrelevance, and our inveterate sense of its externality.[1] This inherited—perhaps even debilitating—wound has in time become universal: Europe's history, and wound, have become the rest of the world's. Europe's pains have become the pain of others the world over, as that continent, under its banner of modernity, has become a compass for orienting "universal" modes of life. If Europe laughs, so does the world, and if Europe aches, an obsequious world aches as well. Indeed, to the extent that pain engenders a European confusion, such a confusion becomes the world's.

Malcolm X summed up the condition of mental slavery, whereby the dominated assimilates the dominant's pain, with the question, "What's the matter boss, we sick?"[2] Malcolm X's question invites a recovery of discernment. Most immediately, there is the recovery from a master's inflicted pain. But ultimately, questioning this question entails clarifying attendant confusions about a pain's owner and by extension its very existence. In his essay, Talal Asad seeks such discernment, such healing from pain and confusion, as he "thinks" about religion. He summons Wittgenstein, who broadly seeks to "heal" from confusions, including through efforts to step "outside" thinking.[3]

I am here using *heal* and *pain* in a very specific sense: to heal through thawing out our thinking about religion and recovering it from the painful deep freeze to which it has been subjected. Here *healing* means to let the blood of life run its course again where a hypothermia of conceptual habits has blocked its flow; it is a healing in which the first sensation is another kind of pain.

The kind of cure which Wittgenstein and Asad entreat us to embrace involves avoiding the temptation to define.[4] Indeed, defining can undermine our investiga-

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tive aim, for defining can confine. Rather, our task is to investigate religion's oneness with life. Summoning the courage to simply embark on describing, or dare I say, "observing," is what I hear Asad and Wittgenstein imploring us to do. Let "religion" remain an open question and an active quest.[5] I even wonder if this restraint from defining (that is, from ostensibly defining) is what gives Asad's essay its shape and power. Instead of a more standard, linear treatment, Asad's "main argument" takes the form of a two-tiered rotunda.[6]

The first tier assembles diverse "equipment" from Wittgenstein, as well as a series of associated themes, largely sheltered under the umbrella of "persuasion." Asad then moves us to the second tier where he "applies" Wittgenstein's "equipment" to examine ways in which the Muslim tradition has availed various resources—"native remedies"—for resolving possibly painful contradictions apparent in the revelatory language of the Qur'an.

I was able to count sixteen themes in the rotunda's first tier under the umbrella theme of persuasion: critique, tradition, belief in divine attributes, conversion, Enlightenment, uncertainty and control, science ideology, rule-following, money and labor exchange, modernity, state and corporate power, the soul, philosophy-science tension, modern civilization, and planetary future. Other readers may locate more or fewer, but I suspect that this plethora and its indeterminacy might be the very argument (demonstration) of this essay. Its shape embodies (or should I say, "ensouls") Wittgenstein's exhortations to resist the seduction of conceptualizing by insisting on the oneness of investigating and living.[7]

Wittgenstein's sense of "grave mistakes" he made in the *Tractatus* notwithstanding, he prefaces it with a statement that I believe guides us into his subsequent rectifying work, which Asad follows when it comes to "thinking" about religion: "It shows how little has been done when these problems have been solved."[8] Solving a problem by formulating a concept, eradicating infinity, or dissolving aporias is not an accomplishment for Wittgenstein. Keeping problems alive is.[9] And notable among them stands the problem of drawing lines between "sense" and "nonsense." The ongoing life of this problem furnishes healing for "thinking."

I suspect that Wittgenstein's foundational refusal to, in a certain sense, "philosophize," which resonates with a traditional Muslim mistrust (as in Ibn Taymiyya's mistrust of philosophy and theology insofar as they are theoretical discourses), is here extended to Asad's refusal to ostensibly define, conceptualize, or theorize religion, leading him to broach a striking abundance of topics in "thinking" about it. Wittgenstein's curative technique in guarding against "bewitchment" by philosophy becomes Asad's in assigning no universal essence to religion.[10] The point is to recognize infinity, not simply multiplicity, as Asad reminds us: "Of course words signify but they do infinitely more" (406).

Recognizing this infinity stands at the center of Asad's discussion of the oppositional ways in which different scholars went about resolving apparent contradictions within the Muslim tradition. Asad refuses a scalar reading that posits greater rationalists ("philosophers" or "theologians") and lesser rationalists ("traditionalists") in the debate over approaching rather than receiving the words of the Qurʾan. This is because receiving the Qurʾan is living it. And living it faithfully is a practical task, not merely a conceptual one, as Asad came to recognize through his own mother's mode of religiosity: a practical ability she lived in.[11] Living the Qurʾan makes contradictions apparent rather than real. For example, God's being beyond human grasp and simultaneously having hands are not discrepant theoretical statements to be hermeneutically resolved by exegetes, but different (not necessarily contradictory) invitations for divinely oriented forms of life.

Clearly, there is more at stake here than thinking about Islam, or religion for that matter. Asad's "thinking" is an occasion to think about the relation between religion and life, and by extension, about the relation between "thinking" and "living," specifically their oneness (although Asad would likely say they are "intertwined"). I take from his "thinking" about religion that "dissolves language into everyday behavior," and words into forms of life, that concepts are also dissolving into practice, rules into applications, interpretation into action, description into criticism, and believing into being in the world.

In undoing these dualities, following Goethe if not Plotinus,[12] Wittgenstein in a sense implores us to suture religion with life, to suture our thinking with our living, and to cease from insulating our thinking and living from standing before and as part of the infinite and its riddles.[13] And for someone like Wittgenstein who wanted to exit the Cartesian method, the infinite exceeds our grasp, leading us to mystery, which will inevitably demand courage for reaching understanding through "silence." Wittgenstein seems to have consistently lived by the ethical rule, "the simple demand": "We should at all times and in all places say no more than we really know."[14]

Considering Wittgenstein's exhortations for silence and dissolving the duality of living and thinking, I find it ironic that Asad describes what he is doing as "thinking" about religion. He does it through a man (Wittgenstein), who long looked across the rivers of "thinking," seeking to step beyond "thinking." To recognize how Wittgenstein locates the primal home of "thinking" in "doing," recall him quoting Faust: "In the beginning was the deed."[15] In what ways therefore, does Asad, through Wittgensteinian eyes, not merely "think" but also do: describe, clarify, and indeed attest to "religion" as made up of ordinary deeds inexhaustible by any single and terminable "language-game?"

The inexhaustibility of "religion" as a way of life, its groundlessness, perhaps even the miracle that it exists, and that the world exists in the first place, means

that it takes falling prey to a bewitchment to generate definitions of it. If we start to define it (or anything) in order to understand it, then we might even be right to suspect a certain death has visited it. We could suspect this kind of death visited Pascal, who needed to establish theoretical arguments for God's existence. Perhaps Pascal's very effort was in a way indicative of God's "exit" from the fabric of practical life, an exit culminating in Nietzsche's announcement of God's demise in modern Western forms of life. Perhaps this kind of death has left us with the "profound consequences" to which Asad refers. In agreement with Asad, I take the way we have come to live (and not live) religion as one such consequence.

The intertwining of life and language are such that a vibrant tradition's ends and beginnings cannot be permanently fixed; rather the distinction between its "inside" and "outside" "has to do with what is taken for granted only in and for a particular time" (415). If—and to the extent that—this claim holds true, we are poised to formulate the following question: What conditions have been enabling us to take for granted the notions that faith starts where reason and doubt end, that aesthetics is one thing and the religious another, that worship belongs to one world and scholarship to another, and that politics is not a way to found a pious life?

Inquiring into the relation of each thing to everything else and refusing to settle for illusory securities of grounding—fabricated by the quicksand of metaphysics[16] that Wittgenstein sought to leave behind—takes courage. Instead of succumbing to the modern craving for generality and generalizing about "religion," let us assume that we cannot know the essence of religion, as Asad has been exhorting anthropologists to recognize since his *Genealogies of Religion* (1993). Asad and Wittgenstein's apprehension about a world moving toward an "increasingly controlled future" ought to be a warning that seeking to control (define, theorize, conceptualize) what religion or indeed anything is—rather than keeping ourselves open to the "miracle that it exists," that is, nurturing a curiosity about infinite and perhaps inexpressible life forms—relegates us to remaining, after centuries of relying on the Cartesian method, barely able to conceive of a way of knowing that is not about controlling.

A veritable cacophony of academic and non-academic theorizing of "religion" in our contemporary world bespeaks this craving for control. For any salutary hush that Asad's thinking may bring to this din, beckoning us to "silence"—so dear to Wittgenstein in facing mystery and infinity in the quick of the ordinary (not beyond it)—we can be particularly grateful, and would do well to recall before opening our mouths about "religion" next time.

I want to conclude with a provocative suggestion with the aim of disabusing Islam from "religion" as caged by post-Reformation definitions: In what ways might it be sensible to suggest that Wittgenstein was Muslim? With this question, I wish to enter the "healing" that Wittgenstein's philosophy sought, when he investigated the line between "sense" and "nonsense" in efforts to seek knowledge with-

out control, and to live outside of fears that force us to painfully, even fatally, define and domesticate infinity and its puzzles. That Wittgenstein could not help but see "every problem from a religious point of view" is what leads me to make this suggestion, as does his focus on practice and rejecting idols, his embrace of Hebraic thought,[17] and, crucially, his vision of a future "religion" without a priesthood.[18]

Two places in Asad's essay especially lead me to entertain the notion that Wittgenstein was Muslim by disposition or aesthetically, or "grammatically," as Wittgenstein himself might say. First, Asad aligns Wittgenstein and Ibn Taymiyya for their common view about the oneness of mind and behavior and refusal to accord "belief" the status of an "inner state" that subsequently induces practice. Second, he concludes that Wittgenstein senses modernity's greatest failure as "the continuous desire to move the world toward an increasingly controlled future" (430). Wittgenstein's lifelong quest to refrain from controlling feels to me rhythmically close to "letting go," to adopting "surrendering" (*islam*), as a disposition for knowing and living.

Recognizing Wittgenstein as rhythmically Muslim does not mark a solution to a problem; it opens an invitation to one. It invites a question: How might we recognize Islam, or any religious tradition for that matter, as essentially undefinable by "the religious"? To keep this question alive is one way to keep the clarity to which Asad aspires in "healing" from our modern confusions about religion and in "healing," as Wittgenstein had wanted, from our confused drawing of lines between life's "sense" and "nonsense."

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Notes

The title is drawn from Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §6.421.

1. This sense of Christianity as an "externality" to Europe, as a colonizing power arriving from elsewhere, I find manifest in Nietzsche's writings, especially in "Anti-Christ" and "Human all too Human" (*Portable Nietzche*), where he refuses to acknowledge "the Galilean religion" as having its "native soil" (589) in Europe and blasts Christianity for doing "everything to orientalize the Occident" (63).
2. Malcolm X, "Race Problem."
3. Wittgenstein holds, "My whole tendency . . . and [anyone's] who tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language" (Klug, "Wittgenstein and the Divine," 7). My referring to healing relates to late Wittgenstein's approach to philosophical labor as therapeutic. Hadot says about *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*), "Philosophy is an illness of language . . . the true philosophy will therefore consist of curing itself of philosophy. . . . [*PI*] wishes to act little by little on our spirit, like a medical treatment" (citing two essays in *Critique* in 1959, in Hadot, *Philosophy*, 17–18).

4. One place to witness Wittgenstein's aversion to "ostensible definitions" is among his remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*: "Whoever is gripped by the [idea of the] majesty of death can express this through just such a life" ("Remarks," 36).
5. Wittgenstein holds, "If you want to stay within the religious sphere, you must struggle" (*Culture and Value*, 98e).
6. Interestingly and tellingly, in interpreting Ibn Taymiyya, Asad provides a meaning for the word *din* at the end of his essay, noting that it is "a complex word for which 'religion' will [only] sometimes do," suggesting that readers turn to Lane's lexicon for a "fuller account" (425). If it is true that the form of *PI* is inseparable from Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, I am proposing that the form of Asad's essay is inseparable from his "argument" about religion.
7. Wittgenstein holds, "In reality one gives only a few examples & explanations . . . no more than this is necessary" (*Culture and Value*, 94e).
8. Wittgenstein, preface, 24.
9. Klug, "Wittgenstein and the Divine," 3.
10. When I speak of "bewitchment," I have in mind Wittgenstein's student Wasfi Hijab, who holds, "I came to recognize that Wittgenstein never intended to suppress concepts or replace them by their respective language games. . . . The replacement was merely a tactical move in his technique to in order to exorcise the demon that bewitched him into the quicksand of metaphysics [in the *Tractatus*]" ("Wittgenstein's Secret," 22).
11. Furani, *Redeeming Anthropology*, 108–9.
12. And Plotinus in turn followed his teacher, Ammonious of Alexandria in a "pilgrimage to the source" (Hadot, *Plotinus*, 78).
13. In the face of ethics, Wittgenstein held the following "picture" of words: "Our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water [even] if I were to pour a gallon of water over it" (in Klug, "Wittgenstein and the Divine," 7). And words so "pictured" as a "vessel" seems also implicit in al-Niffari's adage, "The more a vision expands the more an expression stifles (*Kullamā tasa'at ar-ru'yah ḍāqat al-ʿibārah*)."
14. Wittgenstein's widely cited sentence from the *Tractatus* comes to mind: "Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must remain silent" (§7). And so does another from that book: "There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical" (§6.522), quoted in Kerr, *Theology*, 37.
15. "Im Anfang war die Tat" (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 51e; §402).
16. See note 10.
17. Wittgenstein once reported to his friend and student Maurice O'Connor Drury: "Your religious thoughts have always seemed to me more Greek than biblical. Whereas my thoughts are one hundred percent Hebraic" (quoted in Klug, "Wittgenstein and the Divine"). Brian Klug bases his comments on Wittgenstein's "religious point of view" on this quote, saying, "To see the world as a miracle is to see it in the light of the opening verse of Genesis. To read Wittgenstein from this point of view is to understand his work as bearing witness. Drawing the limits of language, his work, from early to late, testifies to the Hebraic vision that does not and does make sense: created bespeaking creator" (Klug, "Wittgenstein and the Divine," 12).
18. Wittgenstein declares, "All philosophy can do is to destroy idols. And that means not making new ones" (*Big Typescript*, 305e). Elsewhere he remarks that "the religion of the future" will perhaps be "without any priests or ministers" (in Plant, "Wretchedness," 466).

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