CHAPTER SIX

WITTGENSTEIN ON THE (SUPPOSED) EVIDENCE FOR GOD’S EXISTENCE

It is widely thought in the circle of believers and unbelievers alike that a religious belief is worth holding on to if it is true, and that a belief can be proven, or at least can be shown to have a good chance of being true, if supporting evidence can be mustered, or if it is demonstrated to be rationally tenable. Belief in the existence of God is one basic religious belief. Among the most cited (supposed) evidence for the existence of (the philosophical theist’s) God are the following: miracles, extraordinary religious experience, and the orderliness in the universe. It seems that the atheists agree with the theists that these are relevant evidence for God’s existence. The atheists at least implicitly concede that had miracles actually occurred, had there really been extraordinary religious experience, or if the universe were as orderly as the theists portray it to be, then the case of the theists would have been laid down successfully. However, Wittgenstein, with all his avowed respect for religious belief, is very skeptical about the evidentiary value of those (supposed) evidence for God’s existence. The supposed body of evidence that is supposed to justify religious belief is itself a product of the same sort of religious belief that it is supposed to justify. Section I shows that miracles can only be seen through, as it were, a religious lens, which means that a phenomenon is a miracle to someone who wears that lens and not to someone who wears another kind of lens. Section II shows that the status of extra-ordinary religious experience is exactly like that of miracles, that is, that an experience can be said to be “religious” only if seen through a religious lens, and from another lens is something else. Section III argues that the argument for the existence of God using the perceived orderliness of the universe, while often presented in scientific-like form of argumentation, goes only so far as to serve a psychological need, and does not pass the standard of a scientific proof. Finally, Section IV argues that religious evidence is created by the very faith that it is supposed to serve as evidence for.
I. On miracles as evidence of the divine

According to a familiar theistic worldview there are two realms of reality: the natural and the supernatural. At times the supernatural intervene in the state of affairs of the natural realm. Occurrences of miracles are the result of the said intervention. The fact that miracles occur is itself proof that supernatural entities exist, or that certain entities situated within the natural realm possess supernatural characteristics. It has therefore become very important for some advocates of theism to establish that miracles did in fact occur, for if these were established, then proof of the existence of the supernatural, or of supernatural entities, would be established. As much as some theists would like to establish the factuality of miracles, there are those who deny that miracles occur, or will in fact ever occur. But usually, the affirmers and deniers of miracles more or less agree what miracles are: they more or less agree on the definition of ‘miracle’ and they agree that the act of Jesus turning water into wine is an example of a miracle. Moreover, they more or less agree on the evidentiary significance of miracles: i.e. those who deny that miracles did in fact occur agree with those who affirm that miracles did occur that, for instance, the resurrection of Jesus, if in fact it did occur, constitutes a proof of his divinity, or a proof of the existence of some supernatural entity.

On the matter of whether or not Jesus in fact literally turned water into wine, or some such occurrences, Wittgenstein appears to be on the side of, if one may, the miracle deniers. He tells his student and close friend Drury:

For me too the Old Testament is a collection of Hebrew folk-lore—yes, I would use that expression. But the New Testament doesn’t have to be proved to be true by historians either. It would make no difference if there had never been an historical person as Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels; though I don’t think any competent authority doubts that there really was such a person. (Quoted in Drury 1996c, 101)

And on another occasion he writes:

A miracle is, as it were, a gesture which God makes. As a man sits quietly & then makes an impressive gesture, God lets the world run on smoothly & that accompanies the words of a Saint by a symbolic occurrence, a gesture of nature. It would be an instance if, when a saint has spoken, the trees around him bowed, as if in reverence.—Now do I believe that this happens? I don’t.