Wittgenstein: A Religious Thinker?

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In the context of contemporary philosophy and religious thought, Wittgenstein is particularly attentive to the problematic of religious beliefs, especially Christian ones, and, more important, he seems a valid interlocutor for those engaged in the effort to determine the status of ethics and religion so as to safeguard them from possible neglect or outright rejection. After all, Wittgenstein has outlined new paths for philosophy, as well as for religion itself, which deserve to be attentively explored and evaluated.

Indeed, if contemporary theology, which is undergoing a profound identity crisis, wishes to address the issues that have emerged in the postmodern era, it cannot avoid taking into consideration with Wittgenstein’s philosophy, whose alleged hostility to religion is only apparent. Theology is encountering unprecedented difficulties in its effort to continue speaking of God to contemporary men, and may gain much from the appropriation of Wittgenstein’s method, aimed at clarifying religious statements and sifting out the sedimentations of the past from all traditional religious experiences based on precarious and no longer tenable foundations. Through the theory of "language games," which for Wittgenstein are characteristic of all languages, it is possible to re-enter the arena of the critique of theological reason, an operation which is currently of the outmost necessity. There is indeed no alternative, if we wish to preserve the capability of theology of meaningfully speaking of God to a humanity that has experienced the tragedies and convulsions of the 20th century and finds itself incapable of seriously addressing the question of His presence.

If we take into account Wittgenstein's life, considered in its totality, and his philosophy as it developed throughout his career,
it is possible to affirm that religion, and especially Christian religion, was not in any way dismissed or underestimated by him, but rather recovered in its essence, as the expression of the "unsayable" as experienced by each believer, beyond scientific proof or any possible representation. Religion does not belong to the world of facts, the world that may be experienced empirically, but this does not mean that one should reject it or not take it into consideration. The greatest danger that threatens religious thought in general is that of postulating a religion that treats reason as a decisive aspect of its foundation and credibility. For Wittgenstein, religious faith cannot be based on any scientific proof or argument whatsoever; it is, more than anything else, a passion, and testimony is the only proof that the believer can rely on. This is the true significance of the "folly of the cross" which Paul refers to as the foundation of Christian faith, and which Wittgenstein takes up again from the perspective of its being a "scandal" for wise men but "salvation" for those who believe in God.¹

1. Wittgenstein and religion

It would be reductive to view Wittgenstein solely as the philosopher of language who brought to its difficult conclusion the experience of logical neopositivism and opened a new era for analytic philosophy, and not to consider other equally important aspects of his philosophy, pertaining to the domain of ethics and religion. This reductive view is in fact common in critical literature on Wittgenstein, and while understandable it does not do justice to the complexity of his philosophy and of his very

¹ This religious interpretation of Wittgenstein is extensively discussed in my essay La fede come passione. Wittgenstein e la religione, S. Paolo, Cinesello Balsamo 1997. See especially pp. 180-186, where I refer specifically to Wittgenstein’s works from this perspective. Allow me to refer the reader to this publication also for pertinent bibliographical information and for a discussion of historical events that were especially significant for Wittgenstein, where I outline more fully the religious context of Wittgenstein’s life. See also P. MANGANARO, Wittgenstein e il Dio inesprimibile, Città Nuova, Roma 1999.
existence. Considered together, Wittgenstein's biography and philosophy produce a different and less stereotyped image of the philosopher, which furthers our understanding of his ethical and religious views and directs us in a different hermeneutic direction, closer to the question of religion. This question is not rejected by Wittgenstein but rather addressed in non-traditional terms. It is reformulated and given credibility while remaining within the domain of the issues raised by the analytic movement in its various articulations.

If we follow this interpretative approach, acknowledging Wittgenstein's religious background and his desire to provide sounder foundations to ethics and religion, it becomes evident that Wittgenstein arrived at a more open conception of religious experience, reconsidering in positive terms the role of ethics and religion, and specifically of Christian religion, both in general and personal terms. For both Wittgenstein the philosopher and Wittgenstein the man this outcome cannot be considered an episode in an occasional, limited or fragmentary line of thought found here and there in his work. Rather it must be viewed as the final arriving point of a long journey towards the region “full of colours,” the expression Wittgenstein used to describe religious experience. The path followed by Wittgenstein was no doubt an uncertain one, marked by reservations and detours, but always open to that which provides the ultimate meaning to the existence of man.

Wittgenstein's influence on religious thought and on theology itself is not inferior to his influence on contemporary philosophy tout court. Neither philosophy nor theology can do without Wittgenstein, and his impact has been decisive especially after the 1950s. Neopositivism and analytic philosophy found in Wittgenstein, as acknowledged by many scholars, one of their foremost exponents, notwithstanding his difference from other representative figures of the analytic movement. At the same time, Wittgenstein can be seen as the thinker who opened new avenues of investigation to twentieth-century religious thought, in response to the radical “semantic atheism” advanced by neopositivism. According to this latter current, it was impossible
even to speak of God, since the word “God,” as stated by Carnap, was nothing but three casually arranged letters. Furthermore, all religious statements found in theologies were simply nonsensical. These were the conclusions agreed upon by the foremost representatives of neopositivism, who, in the early 20s, had begun to gather in Vienna around Schlick, giving rise to the so-called “Vienna circle” (Wiener Kreis). Against these conclusions, so damaging to religious thought, Wittgenstein’s philosophy constitutes, above all, “an intellectual sophisticated defense of religion”, contrary to what some members of the “Vienna Circle” thought. In Wittgenstein, religious thinkers have found new arguments and new courage for an apology of religious and especially of Christian faith.

Wittgenstein’s philosophy is located in the above context as the overcoming of the Vienna philosophy in its most radical version and, at the same time, as the search for a sounder basis for ethics and religion. From this perspective, the approach to ethics and religion of the Vienna philosophy was no longer tenable, since it was rooted in the nineteenth-century positivist climate. The religion that Wittgenstein advances is a “mystical” religion, which invokes an absolute faith and excludes any scientific proof, the exact opposite of the religion envisioned by the Vienna philosophers. As Wittgenstein was to write in 1946, this new religion is profoundly different: it is located at a much deeper level and resists all turbulence: “Religion is, as it were, the calm bottom of the sea as its deepest point, which remains calm however high the waves on the surface may be.”

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2 D. GILLIES, La filosofia della scienza nel XX secolo, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1995, p. 211
Religious faith, as Wittgenstein often said quoting Kierkegaard, is a passion for oneself, the world and God, which is always without reason, yet always necessary. It is just there, it is nothing other than “a way of living or of judging life.” Indeed, already in the late 20s, in his Conference on Ethics, Wittgenstein had spoken of ethics, and, therefore, of religion as a “tendency of the human spirit ” for which he had great respect and which he would never wish to ridicule. As such, religion referred back, in terms of its status, to the Kantian conception of religion, reinterpreted, however, in the light of the radical quality of religious faith postulated by Kierkegaard, a thinker very close to Wittgenstein in many ways.

In any case, Wittgenstein’s personal position towards religion and its manifestations was certainly complex and not always so linear, since it was the result of two contradictory tendencies, two extremes between which he oscillated, seeking in vain to reconcile them. He yearned for some sort of religious faith that would allow him to leave behind doubts and uncertainties, yet, he was constantly thrown back on them by the incompleteness of the human condition, which seemed to lack meaningful and stable answers. Notwithstanding these difficulties, Wittgenstein continued to hope for some sort of religious belief, Christian if possible, as a final solution to the doubts of his existence. In later years, Wittgenstein, reflecting on his condition of failed believer, confessed: “I am not a religious man: but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view”. In the thirties, almost as if to justify his uncertainties, he had written: “I feel just an awkward rider on his horse: if the horse is well disposed everything goes, but as the

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5 Wittgenstein sharply distinguishes between “knowing” and “believing.” “Knowing,” unlike “believing,” is based on reason and needs empirical proof and verification. Thus “I Know” is supposed to express a relation, not between me ad the sense of a proposition (like “I believe”) but between me and a fact.” See L. WITTGENSTEIN, On Certainty, Blackwell, 1969, § 90.

horse become nervous, he becomes insecure, he realises his insecurity and that he depends entirely on his horse.”

Similar comments recur in his more personal writings and become increasingly frequent as time goes by. In the last years of his life, the religious themes discussed in the past resurface along with the problems and issues typical of Christian faith, suggesting almost explicitly a desire to find in them convincing responses to his search for religious faith. But his search never reached any final destination. Yet, precisely because of that, the search is bound to continue.

As already mentioned, the religion, or religious form, that Wittgenstein seeks as the final outcome of his research and of which he becomes the spokesman, is a mystical religion, demanding absolute faith. It does not believe in the necessity to search for empirical or historical proof, beyond that of testimony, and indeed discourages such an endeavor. If any proof, other than that, ever existed, it would not be significant, since it would be beyond the domain of faith as defined by Wittgenstein. At the basis of this view, is a radical interpretation of Christian faith, deriving from a tradition that runs throughout the entire Christian culture, from Pascal to Kierkegaard, including Tolstoy and Dostoevskij: “..” Wittgenstein repeatedly states: “Wisdom is passionless. But faith by contrast in what Kierkegaard calls a passion ”.

Following Wittgenstein, religious faith transcends the level of reason or of its potential reasonability and positions itself at a

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7 “Ich mich ganz so fühle, wie ein schlechter Reiter auf dem Pferd: ist das Pferd gut aufgelegt, so geht es gut, kaum aber wird das Pferd unruhig, so wird er unsicher, so merkt er seine Unsicherheit & daß er ganz vom Pferd abhängend ist.” L. WITTGENSTEIN, Denkbewegungen: Tagebücher 1930-1932/1936-1937, Innsbruck, Haymon Verlag, 1997, p. 102. (There is no english translation of this book).

8 Cfr. R. PITITTO, La fede come passione. Wittgenstein e la religione, cit., p. 69 and after.

deeper and sounder level. And any true believer will not fail to appreciate the importance of this alternative view of religion. The description of religious statements, considered in their specific use, in which religious thought itself is called upon to participate, allows one to identify the “language games” on which religion is based and thus to recognize the many religious “signs” in the world, which, while not ascribable to empirical facts, are true traces of God, of which human life is imbued, traces that are open to transcendence. This is true especially of all that lies beyond the empirical world. Following Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein affirmed that faith is a passion, an attitude towards oneself, the world and God. It is not motivated, yet people shall never be able to do without it. It is not that there is no proof backing up religious faith, since it is possible that such proof might exist. The question is, rather, that religious faith belongs to a domain that is completely different from the world of facts, so that, even if such proof existed, it would have no value for believers. True faith requires one to transcend boundaries, to move into another world, beyond the horizons of human existence. This was, ultimately, the faith that Wittgenstein was seeking, a faith based on the heart more than on reason.

The are many elements, in his writings as well as in his biography, that suggest that Wittgenstein was ultimately a religious thinker, open to transcendence. These elements, once put together and read as a whole, construct the image of a man and of philosopher, who, while wading through countless reservations, embarked himself on a route that led him to seek, and perhaps to find, God. The silence on what is “mystical,” the invocation with which the Tractatus ends, is only one and certainly not the most important of the clues that suggest the importance of a religious interpretation of Wittgenstein’s work. There are other, more pertinent ones, such as the acknowledgment of the existence of a world of values beyond the world of facts, the desire for personal salvation, his great attention and respect towards the various Christian denominations and religion in general, the demand for an existence that would be a testimony to religious belief. All
these elements outline in practice a “space” within Wittgenstein’s philosophy that is open to transcendence.

In his *Notebooks 1914-1916* Wittgenstein wrote that believing in God means understanding that human life has meaning, that there is something absolutely other, beyond the world of factuality. Through the belief in God one may finally grasp the question of the meaning of life. On all the rest, all that pertains to the area in which humans may access a personal God, Wittgenstein remains vague and uncertain. From this perspective, the discourse on religion remains open; Wittgenstein maintains an interlocutory position, as if waiting for a decisive encounter and a “word of salvation,” a word that he continues to pursue, without ever finding it.

### 2. The foundation of faith

An affirmation of any religious faith, says Wittgenstein, can never be founded on a rational basis of empirical or historical origin and if one were to found it on such a basis it would cease being a religious faith. The search for reasonability in Christian faith, which has been so important in the history of reformed theology, does not lead in fact to a faith based on reason, but rather limits it to a more human dimension, measuring it on the basis of empirical facts, the object of sensitive experience. A “demonstrated” faith would no longer be a faith proper, from the perspective of believers. In other words, there are no proofs that can serve to “prove” the validity of a faith or base it on reason. The credentials of a faith must be sought elsewhere.

The paradigm of Wittgenstein’s argument, remains, in any case, the Christian faith, in which he had been raised and which he never gave up totally, except for a short time in his early youth, before he turned twenty. There is more than one reference to this in Wittgenstein’s work, especially where the philosopher, in the light of the astonishment caused by to becoming aware of the

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mere existence of the world observes that it is not a question of searching for causes.\textsuperscript{11} “\textit{How} the world is, is completely indifferent for what is higher. God does not reveal himself \textit{in} the world.” and later, “Not \textit{how} the world is, is the mystical, but \textit{that} it is.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, though a religious belief, say in the resurrection of Christ or the Last Judgment, may affect the life of a person, it can never be justified from a rational perspective.\textsuperscript{13} There is no empirical proof that justifies the belief in the Last Judgment, for example, and it would be a mistake to seek it; yet, those who believe in it must live according to this belief, that is, they must accept all the practical implications of this belief, along with the theoretical ones. Their life, through the practical choices they make, must become a living proof of their religious faith, almost a contagious form of testimony. The foundation of religious belief must thus be found in testimony, in the capacity of individuals to accompany words of faith with deeds of faith.

What Wittgenstein teaches us on religion is, therefore, that, in order to understand the meaning of a religious belief, one must seek it in the actions of believers, in what they say and do. This is the ultimate criterion of any religious faith. Basing their lives on religious faith is an inescapable exigency for believers and for all those who wish to understand its true meaning. “Of everything that could be true or false in the New Testament, Wittgenstein

\textsuperscript{11} Wittgenstein writes: « If someone who believes in God looks around and asks: “Where does everything I see come from?”, “Where does all this come from?”, he is not craving for a (causal) explanation” L. WITTGENSTEIN, \textit{Culture and Value}, (edit.) G.H. von Wright, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1980, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{12} L. WITTGENSTEIN, \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus}, 6.432 and 6.44.

\textsuperscript{13} Only a life, conceived as a practical testimony, can justify a religious belief and provide it with meaning. Wittgenstein, in a passage quoted by Rush Rhees, once said to his friend Drury: « But remember that Christianity is not a matter of saying a lot of prayers; in fact we are told not to do that. If you and I are to live a religious life, it mustn’t be that we talk a lot about religion, but that our manner of life is different. It is my belief that only if you try to be helpful to other people will you in the end find your way to God» M. O’ C. DRURY, \textit{Conversations with Wittgenstein}, in R. RHEES (ed.), \textit{Ludwig Wittgenstein. Personal Recollection}, cit., p. 129.
says, one can not be doubted: that to live rightly I should live in a completely different way from what I like. That life is much more serious that what appears in surface. Life is tremendously serious.”

Wittgenstein rejects, in short, any effort to rationalize religious faith. Sacred texts, religious truths, mysteries, doctrines, dogmas, rites, all these are examined through a critical conscience that does not look for a scientific or causal foundation for religious belief but rather takes on the character of passion, seeing religion as something that goes beyond empirical facts. The avowed goal of this hermeneutic work is to show how religious belief is such insofar as it can not be put in the domain of worldly facts. The search and formulation of empirical proofs of the existence of God or of his presence in the world are destined to remain empty exercise insofar as they are inconclusive. Even if these proofs existed and we were to find them, we would not have demonstrated anything, since nothing can be demonstrated through them. Of Wittgenstein, Malcolm wrote: “Once, when I quoted a Kierkegaard’s remark: ‘How could it be that Christ does not exist, if I know that he saved me?’, Wittgenstein answered: ‘Look! There is nothing to prove.’”

This explains Wittgenstein’s virulent polemic against father O’Hara, a Jesuit, who, in his opinion, turned the question of religious belief into a scientific one, seeking to rationalize the truth of Christian faith, which cannot be rationalized in any way: “Whoever reads the Letters will find: not only it is not reasonable, but it is madness. […] What I find ridicule in O’Hara is his will to

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make it appear reasonable.”  

Wittgenstein repeatedly stated that “Christianity properly says: let every intelligence fall.”  

The solution that Wittgenstein is tentatively reaching for consists in adhering to a faith of the heart rather than a faith of the reason: “With the word ‘believe’ in religion,” he writes, “many damages have been made. All the tangled thoughts on ‘paradox,’ on the eternal meaning of an historical fact, and so on. If you instead of ‘faith in Christ’ says: ‘Love for Christ’ the paradox disappears, that is the irritation of the intellect. But what has religion to do with such a tickle of the intellect?”  

Rather, believers must let themselves be guided by another “light” and live a different life: “This life must, so to says, keep you hanging on this hearth; that is when you go on the hearth you lean no more on the hearth, but you hang in the sky; you are kept from above, not supported from below. – But this life is love, the human love for him who is perfect. And this is faith.” In the light of the above, one understands why Wittgenstein wrote that: “You can not call Christ saviour, without calling him God. Because a man

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16 L. WITTGENSTEIN, Lezioni e conversazioni sull'etica, l'estetica, la psicologia e la credenza religiosa, Adelphi, Milano 1962, p. 151.
cannot save you.”

For Wittgenstein, in the context of a religious belief and of the expectations of believers, salvation has a decisive role, though he well knew that only a God could enact such a salvation.

3. Faith as passion

All of Wittgenstein’s religious thought can, therefore, be read as a continuous search for God and perhaps as a rediscovery of a form of faith in God of which he became the interpreter and spokesman, a faith that constitutes individuals in their interiority and to which they entrust themselves blindly, knowing that they will live in certainty and the absence of fear. Wittgenstein knows that “Wisdom is grey. Life on the other hand and religion are full of colours.”

The statement almost suggests a pre-eminence of faith over reason, through the opposition of gray and colors: two different states of mind, determined respectively by science and faith. But the faith that Wittgenstein discovers is a faith without a Church, though his attitude towards Christian denominations, especially the Catholic Church, remained one of constant attention and often resurfaces as nostalgia or hope for the future.

Yet, Wittgenstein could not avoid the painful consideration that his faith remained weak, much below his expectations, while “a being that has a link with God is strong.”

Wittgenstein knew that to remain religious one must fight and that “you can fight, hope and even believe without believing scientifically.”

A religion based on science is useless and another kind of foundation must be sought. God, this too Wittgenstein knew, cannot be reached through science but only through love. Indeed,

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21 L. WITTGENSTEIN, Culture and Value, cit., p. 62.


23 L. WITTGENSTEIN, Culture and Value, cit., p. 60.
love, from this perspective, represents the synthesis of the entire
Christian doctrine.24 The Christian faith that Wittgenstein borders
on is not a reasonable faith, but a religion of the heart, the religion
that springs from the most intimate recesses of individuals and
expresses itself as an absolute desire for salvation, when all other
paths have led nowhere.

This difficult speculation—already begun in the 1914-16
period, at the time of his Notebooks—continued throughout his
existence, and brought him in the end to avow a faith conceived
as passion as the answer to the question of the meaning of life.
What was before in the background of Wittgenstein’s existence,
such as the “desire” for an “orientation” on life and God, becomes
later the “saving word” (das erlösende Wort), that Wittgenstein
does not wish to renounce, because reaching salvation is his
deepest aspiration. He knows that “faith is a grace.” And this is
the view or religion and of religious beliefs that Wittgenstein
wished to achieve by exploring its uses and its most significant
words, especially in his more personal writings. Through this
research, Wittgenstein hoped to find the meanings that could
safeguard the significance of religion for the human kind
precisely within the context of the discourse outlined by the
Vienna neo-empiricism, which had been already compromised by
criticism.

This is the origin of his insistence in stating that the
existence of God does not pertain to the world of facts and cannot
be scientifically demonstrated but only lived. And life is precisely
the test of religion: “The way you use the word ‘God’ does not
show whom you mean— but, rather, what you mean.”25 Therefore
the only true proof is the testimony of the believer. It follows
necessarily that any discourse, including religious discourse “gets
its meaning from the rest of our proceedings”.26 One must

25 L. WITTGENSTEIN, Culture and Value, cit., p. 50.
26 L. WITTGENSTEIN, On Certainty, cit., § 229.
therefore always think of the practice\textsuperscript{27} as the ultimate criterion through which statements, whether religious or not, can be verified, since it is practice that provides given words with their meaning. In line with his \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, the use of language becomes the ultimate criterion of meaning.

After all, faith, as already noted, can never be based, for Wittgenstein, on purely rational bases. While a specific religious belief, such as the belief in the Resurrection of Christ or in the Last Judgment, may be related to a particular world-view and thus concretely determine the choices of a believer, it cannot, according to Wittgenstein be rationally justified, nor would that be desirable. Wittgenstein’s rejection of empirical or historical proof entails a much more demanding stance for believers, a form of rigor and ascesis that may serve to explain some apparently extravagant behavior on his part. Wittgenstein gave away all his inheritance to poets and family members, often isolated himself in remote corners of Norway, volunteered in World War I, becoming a prisoner of war after the Austrian defeat, worked as elementary school teacher in little unknown Austrian towns after his release, enlisted again in World War II, this time as an auxiliary in the British army, and lived his entire life in poverty.

Throughout his existence, among contradictions and changes, he remained convinced and often reaffirmed his belief that faith is ultimately “absurd”: “Christianity properly says: let every intelligence fall.”\textsuperscript{28} The solution that Wittgenstein glimpsed was one of a faith based on the heart and not on reason. “With the word ‘believe’ in religion,” he writes, “many damages have been made. All the tangled thoughts on ‘paradox,’ on the eternal meaning of an historical fact, and so on. If you instead of ‘faith in Christ’ says: ‘Love for Christ’ the paradox disappears, that is the irritation of the intellect. But what has religion to do with such a

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ib}, §601.

Rather, the believer must let himself be guided by another “light” and live a different life: “This life must, so to says, keep you hanging on this hearth; that is when you go on the hearth you lean no more on the hearth, but you hang in the sky; you are kept from above, not supported from below. – But this life is love, the human love for him who is perfect. And this is faith.” Wittgenstein’s uncertainties coexisted with his constant desire for salvation which no man, but only God, can provide. Wittgenstein saw this salvation in the approaching encounter with Christ the Savior, knowing that Christ, precisely because he is the Savior, is necessarily God. He said himself: “You can not call Christ saviour, without calling him God. Because a man cannot save you.” Indeed, his entire philosophy must be seen as the search for a “saving word” (das erlösende Wort). While waiting for salvation, Wittgenstein could proceed to clear the way of all obstacles to its action. Thus, on the one hand, is his fight against all bad usages of language, which he carries on in all fields of knowledge, including ethics and religion; on the other, we have his personal search for a word that may free him of the web of false evidence that people remain caught in when they restrict their horizon of meaning to the world of facts. This operation of “putting in order” thoughts and words is the only possible


religious “space,” the space within which Wittgenstein carries on his philosophical speculation beyond language itself. From this perspective, the “language game” itself becomes the instrument that can serve to acknowledge the “mystical” as a testimony of a world that cannot be grasped in any other way, yet nevertheless is absolutely necessary, since it constitutes the homeland of human kind.

Herein lies the meaning of the religious belief to which Wittgenstein hoped to arrive at the end of his search. But, in talking to his friend Drury in the early 1930s, Wittgenstein admitted that they should learn to live “without the consolation of belonging to a church.” In other words, the results obtained in the religious field could not be deemed satisfactory, yet this did not justify ascribing religious belief to a more human space, that is, looking at God with a purely human gaze. This would have meant assimilating religious belief to all other human knowledge, without any relation to transcendence.

Wittgenstein is thus, ultimately, a religious thinker, open to Christian belief. His lesson, which is after all the same lesson of St. Augustine and Pascal, of Kierkegaard, Tolstoj and Dostoevskji, directs us towards the rediscovery of a religion of the heart, which no longer aspires to a foundation in reason.

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