


The Integrity of Gareth Moore's *Believing in God*

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Abstract

In this paper, I defend Gareth Moore from the charge that he espoused some kind of crypto-atheism in *Believing in God*. I do so by examining the case against Gareth outlined in Howard Robinson's New Blackfriars article "Gareth Moore's Radical Wittgensteinianism". I examine both the directly textual arguments Robinson presents, as well as his claim that Gareth adhered to a kind of "radical Wittgensteinianism" that involves, among other things, a commitment to materialism. More importantly, I emphasize the true integrity of *Believing in God*. By this I mean two things: like any worthwhile exercise in philosophy, the book has to be read as forming an integral whole. This requires both an appreciation of Gareth's philosophical and religious motives in writing it and a sense of how it hangs together as a "seamless garment". In addition, I mean the forthrightness of Gareth's efforts to be faithful to Christianity, not a Christianity of mere – or as he puts it "empty" – belief, but a Christianity that is to be lived out truthfully in thought, word, and deed.

Keywords

Believing in God, Gareth Moore, Howard Robinson, Wittgenstein, Atheism

I. Introduction

Gareth Moore's *Believing in God* is, to my mind, an exceptionally good book.¹ I consider it to be among the finest examinations of Christianity from a philosophical standpoint influenced by Wittgenstein. In it, Gareth carefully and painstakingly attends to what he calls "the peculiar grammar" of the word 'God'. He faithfully follows Wittgenstein's injunction to look and see how this word and others related to it are

¹ Gareth Moore *Believing in God: A Philosophical Essay* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1988).

actually used in the course of living a Christian life. What interests Gareth are the myriad ways in which the word 'God' shows up in the speech and life of orthodox Christian believers. The results of his patient and strenuous efforts are as surprising as they are thought-provoking. D. Z. Phillips was quite right to describe the book's central argument as "masterly".²

Sadly, *Believing in God* never received the attention it deserved. For the book appears to have disappeared almost without a trace. One reason for this is that, since its publication, the influence of Wittgenstein amongst analytic philosophers – already on the wane at the time – has diminished to almost nothing. In point of fact, the professional attitude towards Wittgenstein has hardened into hostility, and, in some cases, open contempt.

These are, as it were "external" reasons for the book's being neglected. But there are reasons for its disappearance from collective memory that are more of a more "internal" kind. They have to do with how people read the book, with what they took Gareth to be saying in it. And what many of his readers seem to have taken Gareth to be saying is that there really is no God, that God is, in some way, a kind of "metaphysical shadow" cast by our grammar. In this I believe them to have been grievously mistaken.

This fundamental misrepresentation of *Believing in God* is best exemplified by Howard Robinson's article "Gareth Moore's Radical Wittgensteinianism".³ In what follows, my aim is to clear Gareth from the charge that he embraced any kind of crypto-atheism in *Believing in God*. Anyone who takes Gareth to be denying the existence of God in the book has simply not read it carefully. But more importantly, I want to encourage people to see the book's true integrity. By this I mean two things: like any worthwhile exercise in philosophy, *Believing in God* has to be read as forming an integral whole. This requires both an appreciation of Gareth's philosophical and religious motives in writing it and a sense of how it hangs together as a "seamless garment". But, in speaking of the book's integrity, I also mean the forthrightness of Gareth's efforts in his book to be faithful to Christianity; not a Christianity of mere – or as he puts it "empty" – belief, but a Christianity that is to be lived out truthfully in thought, word, and deed.

Believing in God is one of those rare books in the philosophy of religion that repays careful study, one eminently deserving of attention precisely because of its intricate lines of thought. To be sure, there is much to be puzzled by, and much to disagree with, but one would be

² "The book presents one of the most masterly analyses of 'belief in God' in the philosophy of religion." ('Senses and Sensibilities' p. 346 *New Blackfriars* Vol. 84 No. 989/990 (July, 2003), pp. 346-353.

³ Howard Robinson's 'Gareth Moore's Radical Wittgensteinianism', *New Blackfriars* Vol. 84 No. 989/990 (July, 2003), pp. 353-360.

hard pressed to find a more able philosopher with which to disagree than Gareth Moore.

II. Robinson's charge: two kinds of reasons

Near the start of his article, Robinson, who had been a friend of Gareth's since their undergraduate days together at Corpus, informs us of a fundamental question he never quite had it in him to raise with Gareth while he was still alive:

... how could someone whose religious commitment and spirituality seemed so firm adopt a position that any normal orthodox person would regard as equivalent to atheism? (p. 355)

Robinson speaks of Gareth's "commitment ... to a full-blooded religious life" (pp. 354–355) and represents Gareth as "someone whose faith seems inwardly very robust" (p. 355). Nevertheless, it's hard not to see the charge of holding a view that's "equivalent to atheism" as an attack on Gareth's own integrity: how could anyone honestly live and die as a faithful Dominican and yet be an atheist at heart?

Before proceeding further, it's worth stopping for a moment over the wording of Robinson's charge. It's not entirely clear what he means by characterising Gareth's position as being "equivalent to atheism". I understand his claim to be that Gareth's views are tantamount to atheism, or are doctrinally on a par with atheism, without being explicitly or avowedly atheistic. Notice too that in framing his unasked question, and throughout the piece, Robinson presents himself as a spokesman for some kind of "normal orthodox" Christianity (at one point, he describes himself as a "rather conservative anglo-catholic" p. 354). As one such "normal orthodox" Christian, what so unnerved Robinson was that, at least as he saw it, Gareth's philosophical position was tantamount to atheism.

Rather surprisingly, Robinson's article considers only four passages from *Believing in God*. Given the seriousness of the charge (and the fact that Gareth himself goes to great lengths to deny that he is saying there is no God), we might be rather taken aback at how little textual support Robinson presents in defence of his judgment.

That said, as near as I can tell, Robinson adduces two kinds of grounds in support of his verdict that Gareth's views were tantamount to atheism. Grounds of the first sort are, as I shall put it, *directly* textual. In this part of his case against Gareth, Robinson exhibits one or two passages from the book and then argues, in effect, "How could you not be (something like) an atheist if you say things like this?"

The other sort of reasons supplied by Robinson provide, at best, only *indirect* evidence for Gareth's allegedly atheistic tendencies. For in this part of his argument, he cites a passage or two and then construes them

as saying something which he, Robinson, treats as sufficient evidence that Gareth adhered to the “radical Wittgensteinianism” of his title. By this Robinson means a distinctive philosophical position which he associates with philosophers like D. Z. Phillips and Peter Winch. It becomes clear that Robinson identifies three main ideas with this school of thought. One is a deep hostility towards metaphysics, something motivated by a “positivist account of what is factual.” (p. 354). Second, members of this school embrace a particular conception of religious language, according to which

... no religious statements can be accepted as descriptively true, on a par with descriptions of the physical world and the statements of science. Rather they have an entirely different function, being roughly expressions of value and attitude towards the world. (p. 354)

Finally, Robinson thinks of these radical followers of Wittgenstein as being, at bottom, materialists. He speaks, accordingly, of their reliance on “an essentially materialist framework” for approaching language (p. 356). And he describes them as holding that “facticity is restricted to the domain of the spatio-temporal, the physical, the empirically verifiable.” (p. 356)

To be sure, Robinson acknowledges that, in spite of the similarities between the logical positivists and the “radical Wittgensteinians”, when it comes to religious language, there are important differences between them. What they share is a common attitude about what deserves to be counted as factual: scientific statements and descriptions of the physical world are the only things in the running for being true. Where they divide, according to Robinson, is that the positivists hold that talk of God actually *purports* to be factual but necessarily fails to be such. This failure is enough to render such talk meaningless by the positivists’ verificationist standards for sensible discourse. It is at this juncture that Wittgenstein and his radical followers demur, insisting instead that religious talk is not intended to state facts at all, but that it can and should be understood to be purely expressive in character. Consequently, although they are neither intended to be nor capable of being true, according to the “radical Wittgensteinians”, sentences like “There is a God” convey deep and significant feelings and attitudes towards human life and the world in which it is lived.

Where Robinson’s first set of reasons is direct and narrowly textual, by the nature of the case, his second set is necessarily much less straightforward. Indeed, it seems right to think that when it comes to these latter considerations, Robinson treats them as sufficient to establish a finding of guilt by association. The syllogism is not hard to reconstruct: Every “radical Wittgensteinian” is an atheist. (After all, such “Wittgensteinians” are radical empiricists and out-and-out materialists!) Gareth Moore was a “radical Wittgensteinian”. QED.

My effort to vindicate the integrity of Gareth's position in *Believing in God* works in two stages. In the first, I look at the direct textual evidence that Robinson presents to show that Gareth's views were on a par with atheism. In the second stage, I examine what I called Robinson's "guilt by association" argument.

III. The direct textual argument

Here is the first excerpt from *Believing in God* on which Robinson focuses:

We speak of God in the absence of anything (any thing, person) that is called God. ... Rather, the word 'God' is used in unusual ways. In particular, establishing the presence of anything that we might call God is irrelevant to our speaking of God, since there is nothing that we might call God. ... the presence of God is not the presence of a thing (or person) called God, a thing undetectable because invisible, intangible, bodiless. There is not one more thing in the universe than atheists think. On the contrary, for Christians, no such extra thing could count as God. (*Believing in God*, pp. 19–20, cited in Robinson, p. 355)

I take this to be Robinson's primary piece of evidence against Gareth. Since the third sentence exhibited here plainly says that there is nothing that we might call God, and the text *as presented* says nothing to suggest anything different, Robinson appears to infer (and wants us to agree) that Gareth is really saying that there is no such thing as God.

Robinson then imagines someone trying to defend Gareth by suggesting that all that Gareth really meant here was that God is not any sort of ordinary object – the point being that God is not a member of the class of medium sized dry goods, as it were. But Robinson rejects that mollifying response by citing a second passage from the book. This time Gareth is speaking about poltergeists:

We talk about the presence of a poltergeist, if we do, not because we detect an invisible agent, but because we detect no agent at all. The presence of a poltergeist is not the presence of a thing, albeit an invisible one, called a poltergeist. "Poltergeist" is not related to poltergeist as name to object: it is not the name of a thing. So we do not infer a causal relationship between one object, a flying cup, and another one whose presence could be established independently. If nobody threw it, and there are no other discernible causes for its movement, like a sudden earth tremor or hurricane, then it was a poltergeist by definition. (*Believing in God*, pp. 89–90, cited in Robinson, p. 355)

Robinson comments:

Gareth does not think that it is a question of fact whether certain motions are caused by poltergeists. If objects move in certain ways without explanation, that is what it is for there to be a poltergeist. Just look at the way

the word is used. There is no possibility that these paradigm uses could embody a mistake. Similarly, what it is for God to exist is shown by the way people talk about Him. These paradigm uses could not be wrong. Though it might happen that we stop talking that way. Both 'poltergeist' and 'God' are essentially names for absences, not for real agencies. (pp. 355–356)

So Robinson concludes that although Gareth says that God is not the name of any thing or any person, Gareth actually meant that the word 'God' is, in point of fact, a name. And what the name 'God' refers to is an absence rather than to any kind of agent or cause.

Before contesting Robinson's interpretation of these passages, I need to say more about the first of the two dimensions of the integrity of *Believing in God* of which I spoke. I mean the way in which the text needs to be grasped as forming an integral whole. To see this, we need a proper understanding of the book's overarching dialectical context.

Far from being a mindless rehash of something called "radical Wittgensteinianism", *Believing in God* is an astonishingly clever and elaborate philosophical response to Antony Flew's paper "Theology and Falsification".⁴ In it, Flew famously elaborates on John Wisdom's parable of the two explorers who come across what appears to be a well-tended clearing in the jungle. One of them, the Believer, asserts that this must be the work of some kind of gardener. The other, the Sceptic, disagrees: on his view, there is no such thing as a gardener responsible for the clearing in the jungle. Flew intends the parable to shed philosophical light on the dispute between Christian believers and atheists. In doing so, we should note that there appear to be two vital philosophical assumptions that Flew takes to be shared by the Sceptic and the Believer. The first, we can think of as *metaphysical* in nature: what it would mean for there to be a God is that a certain invisible, bodiless, person would have to exist. The shared second assumption is *epistemological*: to come to believe in God is to make an inference from observed phenomena (the clearing in the jungle, or the overwhelming degree of "fit" between means and ends in nature) to the existence of a certain invisible, bodiless, person (the gardener, God). Belief in God, then, is revealed to be a kind of explanatory hypothesis, a species of inference to the best explanation of observations we are all in a position to make.

Gareth makes no secret of the fact that his book is intended to be a sustained set of arguments against Flew. Apart from Wittgenstein, Flew is the only other philosopher mentioned in the book. To the extent that there are "empiricist and materialist views" floating about in the book, they are there because they constitute the premises of Flew's

⁴ Antony Flew 'Theology and Falsification' in Flew and MacIntyre (eds.) *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London, SCM Press, 1955), pp. 96-99.

sceptical or atheist position. Gareth would simply have been talking past his main philosophical interlocutor had he appealed to different premises. That he accepted such premises for the sake of argument is, in itself, no reason at all to think that Gareth actually endorsed them.

But, understood in the right light, the book is much more than a philosophical response to atheism of the Flew variety. And this brings us to the second kind of integrity it has. For *Believing in God* contains several profound discussions of the proper shape and character of Christian life. In what are to my mind among the most impressive parts of the book, Gareth discusses with much subtlety and insight what it is to trust in God, to fear God, to love God, and to seek the kingdom of heaven.⁵ Given what he says in these chapters, Gareth's model is obviously not Wittgenstein at all, but rather his great Dominican forbear, Meister Eckhart.

It's worth noting that Robinson's hostility to what he calls "radical Wittgensteinianism" appears to have blinded him to the literary conceit at the heart of *Believing in God*. This has to do with the role played in the book by the character Gareth named 'Otto'. Robinson says of him that he

... has strongly empiricist and materialist views and is presumably named after Otto Neurath, a major figure in the Vienna Circle. Otto is taught to understand religious language – how the word 'God' is used – consistently with retaining his original, positivist, account of what is factual. (p. 354)

Obviously, Robinson takes Otto as intended to voice Gareth's own deepest philosophical commitments. This is because, as we have seen, Robinson sees Gareth himself as cleaving to "strongly empiricist and materialist views".

In fact, Gareth does several things with Otto. One is to use him as a device to follow another of Wittgenstein's crucial injunctions: when you are puzzled by the use of a word, ask yourself how you would teach someone else to use it, someone who was wholly unfamiliar with it. Otto, Gareth tells us, grew up on a logical positivist commune. This gives him a fluent command of English, and a sound grasp of logic and science. It also means that until he encounters "us" – orthodox believers such as Gareth took himself to be – Otto has never come across people who use the word 'God'. Gareth wants us to ask ourselves: How would we set about explaining to Otto what we do and say with this word?

But Otto is a literary device in a further sense: his appearance in the book is an expression of Gareth's delightfully wry sense of humour. This is finely brought out in many of the additional details. For instance, although at the time that Gareth was writing, logical positivism was no longer de rigueur amongst British and American philosophers,

⁵ See chapters four, five, and six.

the philosophical Establishment then – as now – embraced a kind of “reasonable empiricism”, of the Quine or Strawson variety, depending on where you trained. But what could be more “anti-Establishment” than a group of likeminded people living and raising children in a commune, set apart from the benighted hoi-polloi, with their superstitious ways?

The leader of the positivist commune turns out to be an occasionally threatening character named ‘Freddie’. A. J. Ayer had been one of Gareth’s teachers when he read the B. Phil and Gareth once told me that he had to inform Ayer of which papers he was going to be sitting for the B. Phil. If I remember correctly, they included the Wittgenstein paper as well as the one in philosophy of religion. Upon hearing this, Ayer raised a quizzical eye-brow and said to Gareth: “Got religion, have you? – Don’t worry, it’ll pass.” Towards the end of the book, Gareth muses that

... we could imagine Freddie walking along the street, suddenly being wonderstruck and saying “Now I understand what all these Christians are talking about when they say the world is made by God”. (p. 268)⁶

But the main thing I want to insist on is that Robinson has missed the dialectical significance of Gareth’s use of Otto. Otto is meant to stand somewhere between Flew’s Believer and Flew’s Sceptic. What Gareth wants to do is to present the most convincing philosophical response to Flew by helping us to see what might actually be involved in teaching someone with a perfectly good grasp of English what believers are actually up to when they speak to or about God.

With a better sense of the book’s overall argumentative framework in mind, we can now return to the text itself. If we go back to the passage from *Believing in God* which was Robinson’s central piece of evidence of Gareth’s putative atheism, we find something extraordinary. This is that Robinson has either wilfully or negligently omitted several crucial things that Gareth says in it. Whether deliberate or not, these omissions amount to a grievous injustice against Gareth. To show this, let me reproduce the full text with the excised portions restored and marked by (my own use of) italics:

We speak of God in the absence of anything (any thing, person) that is called God. *This is a plain fact that Otto observes. If this is not madness, neither is it because we have knowledge of the existence of some omnipresent being whom unfortunately we are unable to show to anybody (or to ourselves).* Rather, the word ‘God’ is used in unusual ways. In particular, establishing the presence of anything that we might call

⁶ It might be recalled that the real Freddie Ayer, who was indeed an empiricist and a materialist, after having undergone what is called a ‘near-death experience’ towards the end of his life, said that the whole thing had “weakened” his “inflexible attitude” towards the belief that there is no afterlife. Talk about being unable to escape the prison house of language.

God is irrelevant to our speaking of God, since there is nothing that we might call God. *Not that we want to say that God is absent: for most purposes we want to say that God is present everywhere, at all times. (We have a use for this expression and others like it; though sometimes, we may also want to say that God is absent; we may find a use for the sentence "God is absent", for instance in great misfortune or desolation.) But God would be absent, there really would be no God, if God were supposed to be a thing. But the presence of God is not the presence of a thing (or person) called God, a thing undetectable because invisible, intangible, bodiless. There is not one more thing in the universe than atheists think. On the contrary, for Christians, no such extra thing could count as God.* (pp. 19–20)

Before attending more carefully to what Gareth is arguing here, let's be very clear: it turns out that the heart of Robinson's case that Gareth was some kind of atheist depends on the willful or negligent suppression of crucially relevant evidence. Gareth says, in the plainest of plain English, that "*for most purposes we want to say that God is present everywhere, at all times*" (my italics).

Gareth's first point in this passage, and it's one he stresses repeatedly in the book, is that there is something striking about the use that believers make of the word 'God'. When they utter this word – say, in the course of saying their prayers – they do so in the manifest absence of any thing or any person that they (or anyone else) could demonstratively pick out with the word 'God'. In claiming this manifest absence to be a plain fact, what Gareth means is something very simple: nobody can deny that when, for example, the officiant at Evening Prayer says "O God, come to our aid" he or she does so without there being anyone present – any man, woman, or child – whose proper name is 'God'. What makes this odd is that, by and large, it only makes sense for us to address someone when they are in the room with us (or any rate, when we have reason to believe that they are within earshot). And this is because we address people we know using their names (we use the word—the name – 'Charlie' to refer to Charlie). To address people we don't know, we employ expressions like "Hey you there!" Whenever we are addressing someone, other people can always ask "Who are you talking to?" and we typically offer replies like "The chap over there, the one in the blue shirt." Of course, one can speak to Charlie when he is not in the house at all, but on holiday in Spain; we would then talk by phone or over the internet. But if one were to persist in speaking to Charlie when there was absolutely no one at all of that name in the house and when there was absolutely no one who could be identified as Charlie, one would be thought quite mad. (If one were not mad, then some special explanation of one's behaviour would be needed. Perhaps I was rehearsing my lines for *Charley's Aunt*).

Gareth's second point is that the absence of anyone called 'God' is as it were constitutive of the proper use of that word because that absence

is not a contingent fact (as Charlie's absence would be a contingent fact if I were in my room calling him, when he'd just stepped out for a stroll). That's why if someone phoned for Charlie while he was out, it would be quite proper to say "Unfortunately, he's not here right now. May I take a message?" Whereas it would never make sense to say "Unfortunately, God's not here right now." God is not a thing or a person whose presence can come and go, like Charlie's. And this helps to explain why it's not madness for Christians to address themselves to God when there is no one there named 'God' while it would be madness for me to speak to Charlie in the complete absence of anyone called 'Charlie'.

And now we come to the crucial part in the middle of this passage, the part that Robinson excised in his paper. In this section of the text, Gareth says quite explicitly that "we" – that is orthodox Christian believers, among whom he numbers himself – *do not want to say that God is absent*. What I take Gareth to be doing here is emphasizing a further logical or grammatical difference between the presence of God and the presence of medium sized dry goods. The tractor might be in the barn or being used to plough the fields or at the shop being repaired. But the tractor cannot *ever* be everywhere. It's part of the grammar of word like 'chairs', 'tables', 'tractors' and 'people' that the items we pick out with those words have to be somewhere or other. They cannot be everywhere at once. But, 'God' is different: of God alone is it true to say that he "is present everywhere, at all times." Nowhere in the book does Gareth claim that the sentence 'God is present' has no place in Christian belief and practice. His rather different point is that the importance of that use of 'present' should not lead us to overlook its logical or grammatical differences from its use in a sentence like "Was Charlie present in the house at the time of the alleged crime?" The answer to the latter could equally be "yes" or "no" depending on the facts, while the answer to the question "Is God really present?" could never, under any circumstances be "no".

Finally, we come to the philosophical upshot of what Gareth Moore is arguing in this passage. He is arguing against those atheists who want to say: "Look, it's obvious that there is no God, since you can never produce anyone or anything called 'God'." To which Gareth's reply is, in effect: "You are quite right that we can never produce anyone or anything called 'God'. There really would be no God, no such thing as God, if God were supposed to be a thing or a person – an object – named by the word 'God': someone or something that could be exhibited or produced at will. But I am suggesting that your presumption is false: we orthodox believers are not supposing God to be a thing or a person – or any kind of object – named by the word 'God'. But it does not follow that God does not exist: rather, what follows is that what it takes for God to exist is – as a matter of logic – different from what it takes for things and people to exist."

The right conclusion to draw is that, on Gareth's view, there is no way for God not to be present. (Though again, there is an important spiritual role for sentences like "God is absent from me right now" – consider the Psalmist's cry "Why have you hidden your face from me?"). And while it might be fitting to say that God is present, we need to be mindful in saying this that the sentence 'God is present' is used differently from a sentence like 'Charlie is present.' For instance, God and Charlie do not compete for space: it's not that in order for Charlie to sit at his desk, God has to vacate the desk. If we say 'God is present everywhere', what we mean is that there is nowhere that is outside of God, that there is, as a matter of logic, no such thing as a space outside of or external to God. But we need to be careful: when we say this we are not saying God is so big that there is nothing outside of God, because in the sentence 'God is big' (if we were to say it) we would not mean God is a vastly huge thing or region of space. Things and regions are in the universe, they could appear on a list of what there is. God is not any kind of thing or any kind of region of space.

We saw that among the central claims that Robinson takes away from *Believing in God* is that the word 'God' is, according to Gareth, a name – only it's a name that refers to an absence (in the way that the definite description 'the hole in my tooth' might be taken to refer to an absence of enamel in one of my molars). It's beyond reasonable doubt that this is a mistake: for Gareth, 'God' is not a funny kind of name or referring expression (odd because it names an absence), it's not a name at all.

As we have noticed, although he is keen to emphasize the logical or grammatical role that absence plays in orthodox talk of God, Gareth is no less keen to emphasize the significance that presence plays in it. Many additional examples can be cited, including this one:

I am not saying that when people talk about the presence of God they are really talking about an absence. But for God to be present is not what it is for, say, a chair to be present. The presence of a chair is established primarily by seeing it, bumping into it, etc.; that is, by detecting what we call a chair, and regardless of whatever else may or may not be present. The presence of God is not so established (p. 64)

The word 'God' cannot name an absence, since God is always and everywhere present. It's just that establishing that God is present is not something that can be done by looking about, or feeling things in the dark. And again

If God is always there, this is not as a brute presence, as a book might be present; he is always there *to be talked to*. (p. 189)

This shows that Gareth actually wants to give us a positive account of God's presence; he wants to remind us that God's presence is not anything inert or indifferent. As my final example of the positive

affirmations of God's existence that occur frequently in *Believing in God*, I'll provide this one:

I do not want to deny the reality of God, that God really exists. But it is not yet settled what the reality of God consists in. (p. 101)

Again, Gareth is emphatically conveying his commitment to the existence and reality of God. What is of concern to him is to provide a proper philosophical account of what it might mean to have such a commitment.

Let me end this part of my response to Robinson by challenging his reading of what Gareth was up to in the discussion of poltergeists. Robinson took him to be affirming that 'God' names an absence, just as 'poltergeist' does. But Gareth's real target here is the conjunction of claims that Flew took to be common cause between believers and atheists. One of these was that religious beliefs are reached by making inferences from observable phenomena. Here we are meant to have in mind an analogy with our ordinary ways of explaining things. If Alvin's fingerprints are found on the gun used to kill Otto, we might infer that Alvin shot Otto, and this despite our not having seen the murder take place. We make an inferential move from what is observed (the fingerprints) to something that is not observed (the identity of the murderer). The second claim that Flew took to be common cause is that what makes religious beliefs *religious* is that those who hold them postulate special supernatural entities to account for what they observe.

Gareth's hostility to this pair of assumptions seems to be motivated by several things. One is that it seems to get the character of Christian belief all wrong. Typically, when we engage in inferences to unobserved things, we do so in an open-minded, fallibilist kind of way. It's quite possible that the real killer erased her fingerprints from the gun and then asked innocent, gullible Alvin to hold it for her, thereby causing his fingerprints to be found on it. So although we inferred that Alvin was the killer, we can and should be willing to revise our belief when and because new evidence comes to light. Another way to put this would be to say that we happily entertain competing hypotheses when it comes to ordinary explanations. But this is not what believing in God is actually like.

That belief in God is not an hypothesis at all is shown by the fact that we don't start by postulating God as a way of accounting for observable things. In the course of offering ordinary explanations, all of the hypotheses are "on the same level", as it were. We accept and reject any such hypothesis – to the extent that we are reasonable – in proportion to the strength of its supporting evidence. But we don't say: "God probably made the world from nothing, although perhaps the Big Bang explains it all." One reason why the thought that God made the world and the thought that the Big Bang explains everything are not on the same level is this. You can, without contradiction, entertain both

beliefs, whereas you cannot without contradiction believe that each of Alvin and Alice alone killed Charlie. The Big Bang is supposed to have happened at the start of the universe. For a believer, God is not just *supposed* to exist – God has to exist, he cannot not exist. Furthermore, you can't shape your whole life around a belief you've come to by formulating an explanatory hypothesis in the way that Christians shape their entire lives around their belief in God.

Gareth's other main reason for rejecting this picture of belief in God has to do with what a successful philosophical response to Flew's challenge might look like. In sum, Flew says to Christian believers: "Show me the hard empirical evidence for God's existence and I'll believe." To which Gareth wants to reply: Nothing could count as empirical evidence for God's existence because God is not an empirical kind of thing. There is nothing in the universe – nothing seen or unseen – that could be counted as God.

Having disposed of Robinson's direct textual arguments, I turn now to the second part of his case against Gareth.

IV. The indirect "guilt by association" argument

One of the reasons I have called this part of Robinson's case against Gareth his "guilt by association" argument is that it kicks off not with a quotation from *Believing in God* but rather with two passages taken from D. Z. Phillips's *Death and Immortality*. Robinson interprets Phillips to be saying that it would be utter nonsense to speak of surviving death. And as we have seen, according to Robinson, if you are "radical Wittgensteinian" you must be a card-carrying materialist: ipso facto, you deny the very possibility of anyone's surviving death.

Whatever exactly Phillips believed about immortality, the real question is whether Gareth says anything in the book to indicate that he subscribed to such a materialist doctrine. It is of great relevance to heed his remarks about heaven:

One way to sum up the Christian ambition is to say that Christians want to get to heaven. And that will be wonderful. It is the ultimate success, the ultimate happiness. There are all kinds of pictures of what heaven might be like: being in the bosom of Abraham [and so on] ... But these are 'only' pictures: their point is not to give an accurate description of the reality, but to present it as attractive – to advertise heaven as *the* place to be.

Everybody knows that these are only pictures, that things start to go wrong if we take them as descriptions of what heaven is really like ... But there is a sense in which they are not *only* pictures: we cannot be shown the original, and neither can we be given an adequate picture, a picture that doesn't start to go wrong if we take it too seriously as a

description. There is nothing we would call a “literal description” or “adequate description” of heaven; there is no ‘what heaven is really like’. So the descriptions of heaven that we do have are not *inadequate*, either. That is to say, it is not that our descriptions fail where others might succeed. It is part of the *concept* of heaven that there are no adequate descriptions of it. Of heaven, there are only advertising posters, catchy slogans, designed to appeal. All we know about heaven, the place of God, is that it is a place in the sun. We will find it good to be in, *whatever* our tastes – if we can get there, if we aim for it, and live in such a way as to get there. (pp. 169–170)

It beggars belief that anyone could read these words and think that they were written by a materialist or that they in any way “undermine religious belief.” (Robinson, p. 355)

There is, of course, no gainsaying Gareth’s wholehearted commitment to Wittgenstein’s approach to philosophical questions. Let me turn now to two other areas where Robinson is troubled by “Gareth’s choice of philosophical medium” (p. 360).

The first is tied up with what Robinson calls “the non-realist construal of religious language.” (p. 357) Roughly this comes to the claim that religious utterances are not statements of fact, but are, instead, something akin to “expressions of value and attitude towards the world.” (p. 354) Is there any reason to think that Gareth subscribes to such a view?

Understood as a doctrine about the meaning religious utterances, the thing that worries Robinson might be called *expressivism*. There can be no doubt that Gareth was some sort of expressivist, but to gain proper clarity, it would be helpful to distinguish between two versions of that position. One might be labelled *strong* expressivism – the claim that religious sentences are *never* in the running for being true or false because they *always* and *only* express (non-cognitive) attitudes. The other position is *moderate* expressivism. On this view, while religious utterances are often used to express (non-cognitive) attitudes, at least some of the time, religious sentences are in the running for being true or false.

Gareth was undoubtedly a moderate expressivist. There are two crystal-clear pieces of evidence that he thought that the predicates ‘true’ and ‘false’ can properly be applied to religious beliefs and religious statements. One is found in *Believing in God*:

People are in fact taught how to use sentences with ‘God’ in them and do in fact use them, and they do perform all the various ritual actions associated with religion. The use of ‘true’ and ‘false’ in relation to sentences containing the word ‘God’ is also in fact taught. (p. 46)

The other appears in a paper he published a few years after the book.⁷ In it Gareth wrote:

... in fact people accept and reject religion and particular religious statements or beliefs in more than one way. It is not just a question of either you think it's true or you think it's false. If you reject what a religious person says, you may say you simply do not understand what he is saying; or you may think you understand perfectly well what he is saying and reject it as false ... During a process of conversion to or from religious belief a person might successively adopt more than one of these attitudes. (p. 1)

There is not even the vaguest hint that Gareth thought that religious utterances could not be in the running for truth or falsity.

Robinson's other Wittgenstein-related concern is that Gareth thinks that

Believing is simply a matter of certain practices being natural for one, not believing is a matter of not feeling at home in a practice. And any further issue of truth does not arise. In saying that religious truths are 'made' not 'discovered', Gareth seems to be denying the [existence of any kind of] noumenal reality. (p. 359)

Let's take the last claim first. If anything belongs to "noumenal reality" God most certainly does. In the course of discussing the claims that God is invisible and intangible and so forth, Gareth says very plainly that God is transcendent:

... these traditional epithets say (or one use of them is to say): There is no such thing as discovering God. Whatever you discover, it is not God. God is not this, not that. God is 'totally other' than what you might find, 'transcendent' (outside the realm of the discoverable). (pp. 17–18)

What are we to make of Robinson's other claim (that Gareth thought that religious belief is nothing more than finding consolation in certain practices)? It seems to me that Gareth is as clear as can be that beliefs are one thing and practices another. He says

One of the things I want to show in these remarks and in many of those that follow is that Christian belief in and language about God is logically linked to the way Christians live and see their lives. (p. 147)

Saying that the beliefs are logically linked to (= cannot be understood apart from) the practices actually presupposes that the beliefs are one thing and the practices another. To say that "X is simply a matter of being Y" is not just to say that X and Y are conceptually connected, it is to say that X and Y are, at bottom, the same. Gareth never says the truth of Christian beliefs is simply a matter of finding Christian

⁷ Gareth Moore 'A Scene with Cranes: Engagement and Truth in Religion' *Philosophical Investigations*, 17 (1994), pp. 1-13.

practices to be life affirming or whatever. Rather, he is insisting that the ways in which Christian believers act and speak show how they take the claims of Christianity to be true.

I conclude that if to be a “radical Wittgensteinian” is to be an empiricist or a materialist or some kind of reductionist about belief, Gareth was no such thing.

V. By way of an ending

This brings me almost to the end of my vindication of the integrity of Gareth's position in *Believing in God*. I want to close by emphasizing the fact that among his primary motivations for taking up the stance he does is a deeply religious one. More precisely, it is a deeply Christian motive, to wit, a profound aversion towards idolatry and a strenuous effort to eschew idolatry in the ways we think and talk about God. And here ‘idolatry’ means any kind of worship directed towards something other than God himself.

Gareth's insistence on the transcendence of God was driven by a desire to overcome our constant tendency to picture God as just another inhabitant of or agent within the universe. If God is that which lets (or makes) all things be, God cannot, “upon pain of idolatry” (p. 17), be anything that might be discovered or encountered in the world. That this was, for Gareth, far from being merely an idle “philosophical” point is shown by his saying things like this:

Though we are all, as Christians, of course to make God our aim in everything we do (God is to be the centre of our lives), yet we all, or most of us, are prey to the grammatical illusion that “God” is the name of somebody. Then we get ourselves a false, illusory, God. That is the God we have to reject, to ignore in all our works. ... [I]f we do not act so as to aim at this false God, if we aim at nothing with our works, then we will be aiming at the true God. (pp. 159–160)

This is what I meant by Gareth's forthright effort in *Believing in God* to be true to Christianity, not a Christianity of “empty” or idolatrous belief, but a Christianity whose central focus is the living and true God. Could anything count as more integral to being a Christian?

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