

Article

Persuading to See Differences: Religious Diversity and Deep Disagreement from a Wittgensteinian Perspective

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Abstract: This article contributes to philosophical discussions on religious diversity by applying a Wittgensteinian lens, specifically drawing on insights from *On Certainty*. It examines interreligious disagreement as a form of “deep disagreement” and posits that Wittgenstein contends that argumentation has limitations in resolving such conflicts. Instead, the article suggests that persuasion—a distinct process of making differences visible—facilitates a gradual reassessment of one’s world-picture. A key contribution of Wittgenstein’s thought to discussions on religious diversity lies in his emphasis on recognizing differences and understanding their transformative impact on our world-pictures. The article begins by differentiating between various types of disagreement, proposing that *On Certainty* addresses conflicts between world-pictures which can be characterized as deep disagreements. It then delves into Wittgenstein’s insights into the functioning of world-pictures and the crucial importance of grasping their dynamics for a better understanding of such disagreements. Building on this foundation, this article argues that persuasion, as a non-argumentative mode of engagement, is uniquely positioned to effectively make these differences visible in cases of deep disagreement. Finally, this article demonstrates how these ideas can help to address and resolve key misunderstandings within the philosophy of religious diversity.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; disagreements; world-picture; religion; diversity



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1. Introduction

A disagreement, in logical terms, can be characterized as a situation where A believes in P and B rejects P (where A and B are either individuals or groups of individuals). However, in general, the issue of disagreement is not understood only in logical terms (since such a logical perspective is obvious), but in terms of propositional attitude, that is, an attitude of rejection of a set of propositions by B in relation to A or vice versa.

Moreover, this simple definition of disagreement hides some important pitfalls. [Feldman and Warfield \(2013\)](#), for example, draw attention to the fact that it is necessary to differentiate between the kind of disagreement between epistemic peers and non-epistemic peers. Disagreement between epistemic peers occurs between people who share all the evidence and “are equal with respect to their abilities and dispositions to interpret this evidence” ([Feldman and Warfield 2013](#), p. 2). This disagreement is a typical internal disagreement within a discipline. In this type of disagreement, in general, both people involved in it are what we can call experts on the issue of disagreement. A typical example occurs when two scientists or two groups of scientists, using the same evidence, instruments, and methods available, reach different conclusions about an issue in common. That is, in this case, there is a shared background of beliefs between the two scientists that serves as a standard of correction to resolve the disagreement.

In terms of the philosophy of religion, this type of disagreement is generally treated as an internal disagreement within a religious system. These disagreements usually occur in terms of the interpretation of some important theological point or some passage of a particular sacred book. An example of this is given in interpretations of the nature of God from the Trinity, or about what is necessary for salvation according to Christian scripture, i.e., whether faith alone is sufficient or if actions are also required. For such authors as Dennis Potter (2013), internal religious disagreements are extremely important for the characterization of interreligious disagreements, since we could only speak of a genuine disagreement between groups of people from different belief systems if, before, the people of that system were really in agreement. This is a really interesting point and one that calls into question important issues in the philosophy of religious diversity,¹ but it is not the main subject of our work here. What I want to draw attention to is that this type of disagreement (internal or peer disagreement) can be characterized, using Wittgenstein's conceptual apparatus, as an internal disagreement within a world-picture. A world-picture, roughly defined, is the set of practices, behaviors, concepts, words, and, most importantly for our purposes, beliefs, learned in a pre-rational way that we do not constantly put to the test and that are the basis for formulating other beliefs. In other words, the world-picture² is the place where the "arguments have their life" (Wittgenstein 1972, p. 105).

Now, it is important to say that stating that an internal disagreement is a disagreement that occurs within a world-picture also has its problems, and it is important to draw attention to one of them. Namely, people from the same world-picture who disagree may not be entirely in an epistemic peer disagreement, since they may not be sharing the same evidence for the solution to the problem they both propose. Alternatively, they may not have the same skills or instruments available to solve the issue of disagreement. In these cases, although they share the same set of fundamental basic beliefs, they cannot be truly considered epistemic peers. But this problem does not refute the idea that peer or internal disagreement is an internal world-picture disagreement; it only shows that not every internal disagreement within a world-picture is a disagreement between peers. Having clarified this, it is necessary to deal with a second type of disagreement, which is the main object of this study.

Beyond peer disagreement, there is what has come to be called deep disagreement or external disagreement. Such disagreements are characterized as disagreements between people or groups of people who do not share a common background of beliefs and evidence, but who disagree about some issue internal to one belief system or another.³ "Deep disagreements are distinguished from other kinds of disagreements by being in some sense "fundamental"—as opposed to, say, insubstantial, merely verbal, or shallow—arising from 'clashes of worldview'" (Ranalli and Lagewaard 2022, p. 2). Such deep disagreement can be a specific disagreement about a particular belief or set of beliefs, or a broad disagreement, in which there is disagreement not only about a specific belief, but about a belief system as a whole. Here, it is worth noting that, as Plantinga (1999) rightly points out, the participant of system A who disagrees with the participant of belief system B needs, for there to be a genuine disagreement, to recognize that the subject of system B has good reasons to believe what they believe and that, therefore, they have similar cognitive abilities and vice versa. To simplify, for there to be a genuine disagreement, the epistemic subject needs to recognize cognitive abilities in the disagreeing party; otherwise, it is not really a disagreement, but a difference in cognitive abilities. In this sense, we can characterize a deep disagreement as one that occurs between participants of different world-pictures (different backgrounds of beliefs, practices, and ways of seeing the world) who recognize each other as epistemic subjects with similar cognitive abilities.⁴ This characterization is important so that we do

not fall into the temptation to simply, in the face of a disagreement, disqualify the opponent a priori as cognitively incapable of any disagreement.

In terms of the philosophy of religion, deep disagreement has garnered the most attention in the philosophy of religious diversity, as it involves disagreements between beliefs from different religious systems, such as disagreements between Christians and Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, and between atheists and theists (Rähme 2024; Pittard 2019; Andrejč 2016; Inwagen 2013). This article intends to contribute to philosophical discussion on religious diversity from a Wittgensteinian perspective, particularly drawing on *On Certainty*.⁵ It approaches interreligious disagreement as a form of deep disagreement and argues that many existing views on this topic are inadequately positioned in argumentation, often overlooking key questions about how our world-pictures are formed and sustained, and what truly occurs when they conflict and create so-called profound disagreements. Additionally, it contends that Wittgenstein sees argumentation as limited in cases of deep disagreement, suggesting that persuasion—a unique way of making differences visible—allows us to gradually reassess our world-picture. In this light, one of Wittgenstein's major contributions to discussions on religious diversity is his emphasis on recognizing differences and the impact of this recognition on our world-picture. We begin with Wittgenstein's insights into how world-pictures operate and the importance of understanding them to grasp such disagreements. Next, it argues that persuasion serves as a distinctive, non-argumentative means of making differences visible, which can be valuable in situations of deep disagreement. Finally, it demonstrates how these ideas help resolve misunderstandings in the philosophy of religious diversity.

2. Wittgenstein, World-Picture, and Disagreements

Fogelin (1985) believes that deep disagreement is the typical disagreement worked on by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* and claims that his position is that such disagreements are not resolved by argumentation.⁶ For him:

My thesis, or rather Wittgenstein's thesis is that deep disagreements cannot be resolved through the use of argument, for they undercut the conditions essential to arguing (Fogelin 1985, p. 5)

Fogelin's thesis that, for Wittgenstein, deep disagreements cannot be resolved by argumentation is based on a series of ideas present in *On Certainty*, especially the idea of world-pictures that form the basis for our argumentation and the factual existence of a plurality of world-pictures, as well as the idea of persuasion present in that work. Fogelin's central idea is that, given the variety of world-pictures, and since the world-picture is the natural foundation of our investigations and arguments (Wittgenstein 1972, p. 167), when we find ourselves facing a deep disagreement or a disagreement between world-pictures, we do not have common ground to which we can appeal to resolve the disagreement. Fogelin is right about the fact that, for Wittgenstein, there is a lack of common ground to which one can appeal in cases of deep disagreement and that such disagreements cannot be resolved through argumentation or, at least, through argumentation commonly used in disagreements internal to world-pictures.⁷ However, to understand this point, we need to better understand the idea of a world-picture present in *On Certainty*.

The first key point to highlight is that Wittgenstein uses the term *Weltbild* (world-picture) rather than *Weltanschauung* (worldview). A *Weltbild* is tacit and implicit, whereas a *Weltanschauung* is conscious and explicit. In other words, while a world-picture is pre-rational, a worldview is a rationalized, deliberate foundation or starting point. In this sense, Hamilton (2014), for instance, argues that a worldview is closer to an ideology or a scientific perspective on the world rather than a pre-rational image of it.⁸ Hamilton's distinction

is particularly insightful, as it helps clarify why Wittgenstein treats the world-picture as something almost instinctive, as we will explore further below.

Our world-picture is not the result of a conscious choice. It is not something we reason our way into. Instead, it forms the background against which we reason: “But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false” (Wittgenstein 1972, § 94). It is acquired gradually as we are initiated into linguistic activity and then we learn to act in accordance with it, not as a presupposition, but as something that is involved in our ways of thinking and acting (Wittgenstein 1972, §§ 144–49). It is intrinsically linked to our practice and not to explicit rules, because when we are inserted into linguistic practice we are not first taught the rules of that practice, but we are taught to act in it. We are not taught, for example, explicitly, that there is a physical object or that the world exists, but the existence of objects and of the world is implicit in the fact that, for example, we are constantly asked to pick up objects in the world (Wittgenstein 1972, § 7). Thus, the world-picture is a consequence of what we are taught, of our daily practice. In other words, when we are inserted into a linguistic practice, the world-picture is not presented to us as an alternative to other practices. It is not as if we were told, first of all: “Now you are going to be inserted into a practice X and it is the true practice, all the others are false”, before being taught to act in that practice.⁹

In fact, we first act, live, and believe in a practice; only later do doubts begin to arise. For Wittgenstein, the world-picture is there just like our life. Thus, even though it is what allows us to formulate hypotheses, our world-picture cannot be considered as the foundation or that which is unquestionable in our research of hypotheses, as a foundation that we arrive at after much reflection and that has become the unquestionable starting point of our later knowledge. On the contrary, in most cases, we do not even realize that we are acting within a world-picture and that our thoughts are guided and limited by it (Wittgenstein 1972, § 167).

D. Z. Phillips makes an interesting reflection on this point by stating that Wittgenstein, in *On Certainty*, is not interested in making a table of sentences from which we form our world-picture. For him:

In Wittgenstein, on the other hand, his discussion of what he calls a world-picture has nothing to do with endeavouring to draw up a list of approved propositions which can be known or believed to be true. He is not raising the question of what *can* be known. Rather, he is investigating what goes deep in our ways of thinking, what constitutes bedrock in them. He is not helping us to make a discovery of things which we did not know before, but he is concerned to investigate what is involved in the ways we think. (Phillips 1995, pp. 54–55)

Wittgenstein is interested in showing us how we think and how we form our thoughts, and for that it is necessary to see man as an animal, to see him before the capacity to reason, because language does not arise in us through reasoning (Wittgenstein 1972, § 475). In this sense, *On Certainty* is not a work that emphasizes other possibilities, other ways of seeing things, in the sense of “possible descriptions of reality” or “possible hypotheses about reality” that are naturally competing with each other. On the contrary, the other possible descriptions of reality are not hypotheses in relation to ours, just as our linguistic practices are not hypotheses in relation to other different alternatives related to how things really are; on the contrary, they are there just like our life. They emerged in our daily practices and became established in them in a natural, almost instinctive way.

Another feature of the world-picture is that it is changeable and flexible. Wittgenstein wrote:

The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e., it learns to act according to these beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. (Wittgenstein 1972, § 144)

As well as the fact that practices and human language are constantly changing, the beliefs that compose our world-picture also change. Our world-picture is like a riverbed, and the waters that pass through the river (everyday beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, new knowledge) can modify the bed. More importantly, even some sentences that form the riverbed (our world-pictures) can be modified and transformed into empirical judgments, i.e., become verifiable. In this sense, our world-picture emerges in our everyday language practice and is modified by it. But it is important to realize that some beliefs and sentences in our world-picture are not easily changeable. As Wittgenstein said, “And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited” (Wittgenstein 1972, § 99). Although our world-picture is changeable, there are certain hard rock beliefs that are not subject to change without our entire belief system being cast aside. In a sense, what Wittgenstein is stressing is that our world-picture is not fixed; it moves, just like the riverbed, but, even with the changes that occur in some of our basic beliefs, it is possible to distinguish between the river and the riverbed. The change is not abrupt. We do not abandon our system of reference, our world-picture, after every new discovery or every new falsification of a single belief, and this is certainly one of the reasons why when we are talking about disagreements between world-pictures, they are so difficult to resolve.

Moreover, if we take these ideas about world-pictures seriously, we will see that disagreements between two world-pictures are difficult to resolve because they are typical disagreements that do not share common criteria and belief networks that would allow for a quick agreement. In other words, these are disagreements between different ways of seeing the world, and, therefore, the typical argumentation that confronts different arguments within a pre-established standard of correctness does not work. However, to say that Wittgenstein understands that deep disagreements are not resolved by argumentation is not the same as saying that they are insoluble. That is, Wittgenstein does not seem to be a sceptic in terms of resolving deep disagreements but only draws attention to the fact that they may not be resolved through the path of argumentation.

In this sense, those who seek to resolve deep disagreements through mere argumentation common to internal disagreements are, so to speak, outside the rules that govern a discussion proper on deep disagreements. But what kind of discussion is this? In Wittgenstein, the question of deep disagreement, whether between religious systems or not, calls for an approach more oriented towards persuasion. This becomes clear when one pays attention to paragraphs 262 and 612 of *On Certainty*. In paragraph 262, Wittgenstein presents an excellent example of deep disagreement. He states:

I can imagine a man who had grown up in quite special circumstances and been taught that the earth came into being 50 years ago, and therefore believed this. We might instruct him: the earth has long. . .etc.—We should be trying to give him our picture of the world. This would happen through a kind of *persuasion*. (Wittgenstein 1972, § 262)

However, in paragraph 612 Wittgenstein states that:

I said I would ‘combat’ the other man,—but wouldn’t I give him *reasons*? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives). (Wittgenstein 1972, § 612)

In these paragraphs, Wittgenstein clarifies the limits of argumentation but also seems to provide elements to prevent us from falling into skepticism regarding the possibility of resolving deep disagreements.¹⁰ He draws attention to the fact that, in the face of disagreements between world-pictures, we must turn to persuasion. But what is persuasion? It seems to be, in the context of *On Certainty*, a way of encouraging someone to see a world-pictures, of making a person aware of a background where ideas make sense—or rather, showing them a world-picture capable of transforming previously unknown or nonsensical ideas into something that can be considered in future arguments.

Here, persuasion is a kind of education in seeing the world differently—a way of redirecting one's gaze toward a reality not previously perceived. This reality is not, a priori, a better or worse alternative, but simply a different way of picturing the world, with its own parameters and metrics for arguments. Persuasion, in this sense, can also be understood as a softening of the will, previously confined to a single way of picturing the world, to open up and recognize that there are other, distinct ways of picturing it. After all, as we noted earlier, Wittgenstein's concern in *On Certainty* was less about the correctness or incorrectness of beliefs and more about understanding how our beliefs function—how we form and sustain them.

In this sense, persuasion in deep disagreements plays the role of, first of all, showing the interlocutors that it is not worth attacking the beliefs of one or the other without first understanding how and why each belief was formed and maintained. By doing so, we will show that there is something common to both interlocutors, namely, both form and maintain their deepest beliefs in a pre-rational way and, therefore, their deepest certainties are the least available to rational argumentation because it was not reason what led me to believe in them, although it is in them that I deposit all my reasons.

At this point, someone might say that if, faced with a deep disagreement, what we should do is show an unknown world-picture and make it clear that our deep beliefs are pre-rational, this does not resolve the disagreement; it would only make us and them more tolerant. This reasoning is not entirely wrong. Without a doubt, this would be the first step in the possible resolution of deep disagreements: we would see more clearly that many of the beliefs that I hold as certain and untouchable are absurd to others because they have certain untouchable beliefs that seem absurd to me. We have here, in itself, an introduction to a new way of picturing the world, of seeing the role that world-pictures play in my life and in my beliefs. But someone could argue that this, in itself, did not convince or convert my interlocutor to my world-picture, nor me to his world-picture and, therefore, the disagreement remains.

This is really an interesting objection, and in it lies the important difference between persuading and converting.¹¹ Persuasion makes it clear that different beliefs are supported by the same epistemic basis by different interlocutors and clarifies differences in world-pictures, thus making epistemic subjects more tolerant because it makes them realize that their opponents are not necessarily evil or idiots, but people who, like me, are arguing from a world-picture that makes them form and maintain beliefs just as I form and maintain mine; conversion is a very special mode of persuasion that will lead the opponent, little by little, to agree with what I defend, that is, to convert to my world-picture. This becomes clear if we see what Wittgenstein says about conversion in paragraph 92 of *On Certainty*:

However, we can ask: May someone have telling grounds for believing that the earth has only existed for a short time, say since his own birth?—Suppose he had always been told that—would he have any good reason to doubt it? Men have believed that they could make rain; why should not a king be brought up in the belief that the world began with him? And if Moore and this king were to meet and discuss, could Moore really prove his belief to be the right one? I do not say

that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way.

Remember that one is sometimes convinced of the correctness of a view by its simplicity or symmetry, i.e., these are what induce one to go over to this point of view. One then simply says something like: “That’s how it must be” (Wittgenstein 1972, § 92).

Here it is important to draw attention to the fact that in conversion the epistemic subject looks at the world in a different way, that is, his world is no longer seen with the world-picture that he had previously. In persuasion, the subject is led to see the different, alternative ways of seeing the world; with conversion, the subject adopts the world-picture of his interlocutor and begins to see the world differently. But conversion is a process that the subject goes through, that is, conversion happens when subject A adopts the system of subject B. Here there is a primacy of the first person, that is, I convert myself after convincing myself that the new world-picture is correct, i.e., “That’s how it must be”. Conversion seems to be the end result of a long process of persuasion that first leads me to see world-pictures different from mine and that, little by little, can make me convinced of the justice of a new world-picture, leading me, in the end, to adopt this image.

In conversion, arguments are also of little interest, because what is at stake is not whether one world-picture is truer than another, since there is no criterion of correctness external to the world-pictures themselves that would allow me to know their truths. This also clarifies the appeal that Wittgenstein makes in paragraph 612 for us to look at how missionaries convert natives. If we imagine the work of the missionary, he does not convert the natives by arriving in their land and simply arguing with them, saying that their religious belief is wrong, or that their God is a false God. Perissinotto clarifies this idea very well by describing a hypothetical conversion process carried out by the missionary:

What the missionary will do or will have to do is to enter into the life of the natives, living among them, sharing their joys and sufferings, treating their sicknesses or relieving their pain, helping them in times of famine or other calamities, etc. At a certain point, it may happen, then, that the natives begin to pray with the missionary, that they ask him the name of that being to whom they are praying and whom they are thanking, that they want to hear and repeat the stories about him, that they carefully conserve his image, etc. [...] In any case, the lesson that, with Wittgenstein, we can draw seems to be the following: one does not convert natives when and because one has proved to them that their beliefs are false and deceitful; rather, it is once they have been converted, *and as part of their conversion*, that their previous beliefs can appear to them to be false and deceitful. (Perissinotto 2016, p. 167)

In this process, discussed by Perissinotto, we clearly see a need to first show a different world-picture so that later, little by little, people have the possibility of converting to a new world-picture. This idea becomes even clearer if we turn to what Wittgenstein says about religious instruction in *Culture and Value*:

Instruction in a religious faith, therefore, would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description, of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience. And this combination would have to result in the pupil himself, of his own accord, passionately taking hold of the system of reference. It would be as though someone were first to let me see the hopelessness of my situation and then show me the means of rescue until, of my own accord, or not led to it by my instructor at any rate, I ran to it and grasped it. (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 64)

Here we also see a process by which, first, it is necessary to show the reference system, describe it, and make the system visible so that, later, if it happens,¹² a conversion can

occur. This relates to Wittgenstein's perspective on religion and religious concepts. For him, religious concepts do not hold the same status as empirical or scientific concepts. They are pre-rational, meaning their existence or nonexistence is not determined by scientific or philosophical inquiry. In this sense, one does not convince someone of the validity of a religious idea by pointing to something like "God" or "Salvation", just as one does not prove the existence of the external world by showing their hand, as Moore suggested. Here, persuasion operates in a unique way—one that is neither demonstrative nor argumentative. As Schönbaumsfeld (2009) notes, the idea that religious questions cannot be objectively resolved is strongly influenced by Kierkegaard's impact on Wittgenstein. For Kierkegaard, too, religion is not a matter of demonstration, a point he makes explicitly when writing under the pseudonym Climacus:

To demonstrate the existence of someone who exists is the most shameless assault, since it is an attempt to make him ludicrous, but the trouble is that one does not even suspect this, that in dead seriousness one regards it as a godly undertaking. How could it occur to anyone to demonstrate that he exists unless one has allowed oneself to ignore him; and now one does it in an even more lunatic way by demonstrating his existence right in front of his nose. A king's existence or presence ordinarily has its own expression of subjection and submissiveness. What if one in his most majestic presence wanted to demonstrate that he exists? Does one demonstrate it, then? No, one makes a fool of him, because one demonstrates his presence by the expression of submissiveness, which may differ widely according to the customs of the country. And thus one also demonstrates the existence of God by worship—not by demonstrations. (Kierkegaard 1992, pp. 545–46.)

The apparent advancement from Kierkegaard to Wittgenstein is that Wittgenstein not only highlights the flaws in attempts at objective demonstrations in the realm of religion but also shows that such attempts fail in many areas of life when dealing with its central concepts. Schönbaumsfeld explores this idea in depth, stating:

Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard agree that religious belief is non-rational: it is neither reasonable nor unreasonable, as faith is not the result of philosophical deliberation or the consequence of weighing up empirical evidence. But in this respect the religious form of life is not, in the end, so very different from other language-games or forms of life, for as Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty*, 'You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there—like our life'. (PI § 559) Faith cannot be objectively justified (for if it could, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard would agree, it would *eo ipso* not be faith), but ultimately, what Wittgenstein is saying in *On Certainty* is that none of the concepts that lie at the heart of our forms of life can be so justified. In this respect use of the word 'object' can no more be justified than use of the word 'God', and yet the employment of these terms need not, for all that, be in the least arbitrary. As Wittgenstein keeps reiterating: *life forces these concepts on us*. (Schönbaumsfeld 2009, p. 143)

These insights into the nature of religious language further highlight how little influence arguments and demonstrations have in cases of disagreement, particularly when it comes to clashes between world-pictures. In the context of religious world-pictures, in particular, persuasion often depends on factors beyond rationality.

To summarize, in the face of deep disagreements or disagreements between world-pictures, Wittgenstein suggests that arguments have very little importance because there

would be no common standard of correctness between the different world-pictures. But this lack of arguments does not necessarily lead to skepticism in the face of disagreements, but instead to new possibilities. When faced with them, it seems that we have to resort to persuasion, which is nothing more than a way of making the interlocutor see the correctness of our world-pictures and our commitments to them, a correctness that, to a certain extent, we share by having similar commitments to our belief systems. This first step can cause, in a second moment, the conversion, which is a process of adopting a new system of beliefs and practices. However, it is important to emphasize that conversion is not the only possibility in the face of deep disagreements; I would like to emphasize precisely the possibilities that persuasion brings. That is, it makes us see the correctness of the different belief systems by showing us that epistemic subjects have, in the face of them, attitudes very similar to mine, having acquired and maintained their beliefs within the system in a very similar way to mine. But the reader who has come this far may be wondering: what does all this have to do with religious diversity?

3. Persuading to See Differences Instead of Exclusivity: A Wittgensteinian Contribution to the Philosophy of Religious Diversity

As previously mentioned, deep disagreement is a subject that has primarily captured the attention of philosophers of religious diversity, as it involves a disagreement between the beliefs of different religious systems, such as disagreements between Christians and Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, and atheists and theists. Generally, four positions dominate the philosophical debate on diversity, namely naturalism, which argues that the fact of religious diversity and the lack of agreement between them on basic elements of reality is evidence that we should abandon all of them and not trust their explanations of the world; exclusivism, which argues that there is only one true religion and/or that leads to salvation; inclusivism, which elaborates on the idea that even if there is only one true religion, there may be elements of truth and salvation in other religions; and pluralism, which argues that it is possible to think that the various existing religions are legitimate in logical and epistemic terms. We do not intend to discuss all these positions here; rather, we aim to demonstrate the fruitfulness of a Wittgensteinian approach to disagreement in the field of religious diversity.¹³

As we have seen here, Wittgenstein's ideas about world-pictures, persuasion, and conversion provide valuable tools for understanding deep disagreements. We argue that such disagreements are rooted in different world-pictures and that traditional argumentation is often ineffective in resolving them due to a lack of shared standards. However, this does not mean that we should be skeptical about the possibility of resolving such disagreements; persuasion and conversion remain viable options. When we view different religions as distinct world-pictures,¹⁴ we can see how Wittgenstein's philosophy offers unique insights into the nature of deep interreligious disagreements.

Firstly, Wittgenstein's ideas about disagreements between world-pictures can aid in understanding interreligious disagreements precisely because they reveal that different religions constitute world-pictures for believers. In other words, they see the world through the lens of the religion they believe in. In this sense, disagreements between religions are not always amenable to argumentative resolution, as the criteria for evaluating arguments may differ from one religion to another. However, the fact that different religions constitute world-pictures for believers does not render them entirely incommensurable¹⁵ or make disagreements between them completely inaccessible or irresolvable. As discussed previously, in the face of deep disagreements, persuasion remains a possibility. Before delving into persuasion, it is worthwhile to explore further the concept of religions as world-pictures.

Pritchard (2021) and Spica (2018a) highlight an important characteristic of world-pictures from a Wittgensteinian perspective: they are not entirely fixed and immutable. As they emphasize, our hinge commitments evolve over time within our world-pictures. While such changes may occur more slowly and with greater difficulty than those affecting our everyday beliefs, they do happen. They can be prompted by various factors, including new human discoveries, refinements in practices and methods, and the emergence of new practices.¹⁶ This idea that our world-pictures, including religious ones, can be modified is significant because it opens up the possibility that different world-pictures, when they encounter one another, can influence and modify each other. While these modifications may not occur through direct argumentation, as we have seen, due to the lack of shared standards of correctness, they can happen indirectly, for example, through persuasion. In this sense, approaches that claim that world-pictures different from their own are wrong by using arguments that are internal to their own world-picture are committing a misunderstanding on the nature of the disagreement at play in religious disputes.

This is the case, for example, with Plantinga's Christian exclusivist position, according to which Christianity is the only true religion. In defending this position, Plantinga argues not only that Christianity is the only true religion but also that the fact of religious diversity can actually increase one's confidence in Christian belief. The problem with his argument is that the increased confidence in Christian belief, in the face of disagreement with other beliefs, is based on criteria that only function within the framework of Christian belief itself. In other words, Plantinga fails to take seriously the fact that other beliefs have commitments that are just as deep as those of Christians.¹⁷ To a certain extent, Plantinga has failed to be genuinely persuaded that world-pictures different from his own have commitments similar to his own.

Here, in my view, lies a second important contribution that Wittgenstein's treatment of what we call deep disagreements can bring. This contribution comes with the idea of persuasion. As shown above, persuasion is a way of making possibilities visible, that is, of showing that there are commitments to beliefs and practices different from my own that have as much epistemic force as my own. World-pictures different from mine are not a priori contrary to mine or wrong; they are pre-rational ways of understanding the world and life, just like my pre-rational way of understanding the world and life. The practices and beliefs of a world-picture different from mine have created in the epistemic subject the strength and confidence they have in the beliefs that constitute their world-pictures, just as the beliefs and practices of my world-picture have created in me the epistemic force that my beliefs and practices possess. This, in our view, can lead over time to our opening ourselves up to the possibility of relativizing some of our commitments to our world-picture and opening ourselves up to adopting ideas and beliefs from other world-pictures. This is possible because, as pointed out above, our world-pictures are not entirely fixed; they change over time and in the face of new practices and human needs. In this sense, Wittgenstein's idea of world-pictures helps us understand that defending the existence of world-pictures that guide our practices and beliefs is not the same as saying that these world-pictures are absolute and immutable. It is intrinsic to our world-pictures that they have a certain fluidity (Wittgenstein 1972, §§ 96–99). In terms of the philosophy of religious diversity, this helps us understand that different religions need not be understood as completely closed and fixed systems, and this can open up space for the resolution of disagreements. They are not entirely closed because, despite having important and fundamental differences between them, it is possible that they share certain elements that can serve as a basis for future attempts to resolve disagreements. They are not fixed because, as systems of human beliefs and practices, they are fluid, although not with a constant and rapidly visible fluidity. This fluidity allows for small changes to occur over time and to

be the basis for other significant changes that can lead to the resolution of disagreements, because as some beliefs of their system change, it may happen that some of the hinge commitments also change,¹⁸ and this may lead to the resolution of deep disagreements.

A third contribution, in my view, is the distinction between persuasion and conversion. This constitutes an important element in the defense of a pluralist position on religious diversity. The approach I have proposed regarding this difference leads us to see that conversion is not the only possibility in the face of deep disagreements. In other words, when faced with them, the only alternative is not to make the opponent adopt my world-picture. They can simply be persuaded to see the validity of a different world-picture. This, in my view, is a crucial point in the defense of a pluralist perspective on religious diversity. To be a pluralist is not to convert someone to the belief that there is one correct and definitive religious world-picture, but rather that there are numerous religious world-pictures that are valid and that have developed more or less independently, and which are not intentionally opposed to each other. In other words, the pluralist perspective is limited to the position of persuading, of showing differences and the validity of such differences. Understood in this way, the pluralist perspective on religious diversity cannot be accused of being, ultimately, an exclusivism as defended by exclusivist authors, such as Gavin D'Costa (1996), because it is a way of showing differences, not a theory that defends the truth of one point of view. What is at stake in this way of seeing the pluralist perspective on religious diversity is that it is not a theory about the truth of one or another world-picture, but a way of showing how different religious ways of seeing the world work. Just as Wittgenstein was interested in showing how our way of thinking works, rather than showing what the correct way of thinking is, the pluralist perspective is interested in showing how different religions think and see the world. This, in my view, is an important methodological gain for the debate on religious diversity and the philosophical perspectives on such debate.

4. Conclusions

My point in this article was to show a contribution of Wittgenstein's philosophy, present particularly in *On Certainty*, to the discussion of deep disagreements in the philosophy of religious diversity. I developed this contribution showing that the Wittgensteinian understanding of disagreement between different world-pictures is exemplary of deep disagreement. I have shown some important features of the world-picture and how they have implications in the context of deep disagreement. After this, I argued that there is an important difference between conversion and persuasion in the context of *On Certainty*. To persuade is to make differences visible. To convert is to make someone adopt a different world-picture. In both cases, however, the argument does not have much strength because we are dealing with beliefs and practices from different world-pictures and, therefore, different backgrounds.

The way in which Wittgenstein understands world-pictures and the disagreements between them, I argued, can shed light on some aspects of the philosophy of religious diversity. I highlighted, in particular, three contributions that *On Certainty* can make to such philosophy: (1) the argument does not have much strength when it comes to disagreements between them, since it is not about truth or falsehood, opening up space for us not to see different religions as a priori a mistake or false, but as different world-pictures that are as reasonable as mine; (2) given that religions are world-pictures, the encounter between them can open up space for them to, through persuasion, respect each other as different and reasonable belief systems and, more than that, such an idea can open doors for future internal changes within different religious systems; (3) conversion is not the only possibility when different world-pictures meet—it is possible for different religions to be persuaded to see the rightness of each other and this seems to be the central feature of a pluralist position.

I hope that such ideas can further show the important contribution that Wittgenstein's philosophy can make to questions of the philosophy of religious diversity.

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Notes

¹ Here, I use the term *philosophy of religious diversity* to refer to studies within the philosophy of religion that explore questions about religious diversity from various perspectives. Notable works in this field include [Hick \(1985, 1989\)](#), [Harrison \(2006, 2008\)](#), [Burley \(2020\)](#) and [Plantinga \(1999\)](#), among many others.

² This concept will be made clearer later.

³ Such disagreements can be understood as disagreements between hinge propositions or disagreements over fundamental epistemic principles ([Ranalli 2021](#); [Johnson 2020](#)). From a Wittgensteinian perspective, we will treat deep disagreements as disagreements between world-pictures. This approach is based on the idea that interreligious disagreements arise because religions shape how believers see and interpret the world. As a result, even disagreements over specific propositions or beliefs are ultimately influenced by the broader religious world-picture ([Spica 2018a](#)).

⁴ [Pritchard \(2021, 2023\)](#) prefers to call these disagreements, in Wittgensteinian terms, hinge disagreements, alluding to the idea of hinge propositions in *On Certainty*. For reasons that, I hope, will become clearer later, I prefer to call such disagreements world-picture disagreements.

⁵ Wittgenstein himself did not write about religious diversity. Therefore, my approach is not an exegetical reconstruction of his ideas but rather a Wittgensteinian perspective. My goal is to show how some of Wittgenstein's insights on disagreement can help us better understand religious disagreements—a point I hope will become clear by the end of this text.

⁶ Many other scholars of Wittgenstein's work have argued, from different perspectives, that the theses present in *On Certainty* are characteristically theses that involve deep disagreement. [Pritchard \(2021, 2023\)](#), [Coliva \(2010\)](#), [Kusch \(2016\)](#), and [Godden and Brenner \(2010\)](#) stand out among these scholars.

⁷ Later, we will clarify such limits of argumentation and the alternatives to it in cases of deep disagreements.

⁸ [Hamilton \(2014\)](#) highlights that Wittgenstein's distinction between *Weltbild* and *Weltanschauung* may have been influenced by Spengler, who saw *Weltanschauung* as a way of perceiving the world characteristic of our time. While we do not have space here to delve into Spengler's influence in detail, this connection is widely discussed in the literature—see, for instance, [DeAngelis \(2007\)](#), [Graham \(2014\)](#), and [Burley \(2018\)](#). One particularly interesting angle to explore is how Spengler's influence may have shaped Wittgenstein's pessimism regarding the possibility of genuine religion in our time, given that our era is marked by an excessive rationalization of life. [Burley \(2018\)](#) offers a thorough discussion of this issue. In this same vein, [DeAngelis \(1994, p. 55\)](#) asserts that: "Religious expression is problematic not because of universal, necessary limits on expressibility, but only in times, like modern times, of cultural decline. Again, religious expression is not perfectly absolutely impossible; but in a civilized age, the cultural surroundings needed for religious expression—the "externals" against which religious expression has its meaning when it does have meaning—have disappeared". This idea paves the way for numerous discussions about the true status of religious language in modern culture. Additionally, another intriguing debate concerns the relationship between *Weltbild* and *Weltanschauung*—in other words, how this initial, pre-rational image connects with our rationalized concepts of the world ([Spica 2018b](#)). However, that is not my focus here.

⁹ For a deeper understanding of this idea, see ([Spica 2018a](#)).

¹⁰ In this sense, and as will be made clearer later, our interpretation differs, for example, from the interpretation of [Fogelin \(1985\)](#), for whom deep disagreements cannot be resolved.

¹¹ Most scholars of Wittgenstein see persuasion and conversion as synonymous, but there seems to be an important difference between them. Wittgenstein uses persuasion in contexts where it is necessary to clarify or show interlocutors that they are seeing the world from different images. Conversion, on the other hand, is the process by which the epistemic subject sets aside his world-picture and adopts the world-picture of his interlocutor.

¹² It is necessary to strongly clarify that for Wittgenstein the persuasion that makes different world-pictures visible does not necessarily lead to a conversion. It is possible to be convinced of the correctness of a world-picture without necessarily converting

to it. A good example of this idea can be found in Wittgenstein's own life and his relationship with Sraffa. Both deeply disagreed on important issues. Both seemed to see the world very differently, but, apparently, for a long time, at least Wittgenstein understood the correctness of Sraffa's world-picture, despite never having converted to it. An excellent development of this example is made by Salles (2024).

- 13 There are other important works that show the fruitfulness of Wittgenstein's work for the field of the philosophy of religious diversity. See, for example: Burley (2020) and Andrejč (2016).
- 14 Spica (2018a) shows how is possible understand religions as different world-pictures.
- 15 For a Wittgensteinian critique of the idea of incommensurability between different religions, see Spica (2018a). For a critique of the idea that deep disagreements cannot be resolved from a Wittgensteinian perspective, see Pritchard (2021).
- 16 Wittgenstein himself provides examples of hinge propositions that have changed over time. One example of a hinge proposition is the belief that no human has ever been to the moon, which is no longer considered a hinge proposition today.
- 17 One might argue that Plantinga does acknowledge the commitments of other beliefs, as he himself states that "She may agree that she and those who dissent are equally convinced of the truth of their belief, and even that they are internally on a par, that the internally available markers are similar, or relevantly similar" (Plantinga 1999, p. 182). However, despite making this claim, Plantinga ultimately argues in defence of Christian exclusivism that the Christian sees that adherents of other beliefs are in error, that they have failed to perceive something that the Christian has perceived, etc. This shows how he fails to take seriously the fact that the Christian and the believer of other faiths have similar ways of forming beliefs, of forming their world-picture. He immediately jumps to an assessment of the truth or falsity of the adversarial belief system.
- 18 This idea is very well developed by Pritchard (2021). For him, deep disagreements are not resolved directly and argumentatively, by pitting arguments against each other, but can be resolved indirectly: "We thus have a way of dealing with deep disagreements involving hinge commitments in a rational fashion, albeit in an indirect, and side-on fashion. The crux of the matter is that while it would be fruitless in the face of deep disagreement of this kind to try to change someone's hinge commitments head-on, there will always be a rational way of engaging with the other party by looking to common ground (common beliefs, common hinges), and using that common ground to try to change their wider set of beliefs. If this is achieved, then over time one can change the other person's hinge commitments. More precisely, as their wider set of beliefs changes, so too will the specific hinge commitments which manifest their über hinge commitment (which never changes)" (Pritchard 2021, p. 1123).

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