

Article

Religious Belief as Hinge Proposition

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Abstract

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein introduces the metaphor of “hinge propositions” to refer to those propositions that must remain certain if a language is to be used meaningfully within a community, such as “the earth has existed long before my birth” or “here is one hand”. This paper argues that religious belief can be understood as a distinctive form of hinge proposition for two reasons. First, if two individuals disagree on hinge propositions, they can be seen as belonging to different forms of life or language. It is impossible for them to understand each other. This is also true with disputes over religious beliefs. Second, for Wittgenstein, religious belief is not a theoretical assertion but a way of living, and therefore disputes over religious beliefs are deeper than any other dispute in ordinary life.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; hinge proposition; religious belief; language-games

1. Introduction

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein employs the metaphor of “hinge propositions” to refer to those propositions that must remain certain for a language to be used meaningfully by language users. Such propositions form the foundational framework of a belief system. This paper aims to show that, for Wittgenstein, religious belief can also be understood as a distinctive form of hinge proposition, which forms the unshakeable part of a believer’s religious life.

According to Wittgenstein, hinge propositions provide necessary presuppositions for cognitive activities, but are themselves immune to doubt.¹ They lie outside the realm of cognitive activities and form the preconditions that make cognitive activities possible. Wittgenstein argues that the sort of “common-sense” propositions discussed by Moore are, in fact, such hinge propositions, which function as the framework for people’s belief systems. Since hinge propositions are not knowledge, one cannot meaningfully say of them: “I know”. These propositions are certainties that cannot be meaningfully doubted.

Although Wittgenstein does not give a precise definition of “certainty”, its characteristics can be delineated through an examination of key discussions within *On Certainty*.² It is evident that certainty, for Wittgenstein, signifies neither absolute scientific correctness nor subjective psychological conviction. Rather, it constitutes the very foundation of all language-games—something that requires no justification and is itself beyond proof. It is not knowledge, but rather the background against which knowledge emerges. It does not rely on empirical evidence, but reveals itself in ungrounded ways of acting. In several remarks, Wittgenstein characterizes this certainty as a “form of life”.³

Unlike scientific beliefs, religious beliefs do not rely on evidence. Wittgenstein consistently refuses to equate religious beliefs with truth-apt empirical propositions or hypotheses. Instead, he always regards them as practices or existential stances deeply rooted in forms



Academic Editor: Sebastian Sunday Grève

Received: 29 September 2025

Revised: 27 October 2025

Accepted: 31 October 2025

Published: 7 November 2025

Citation: Lou, Wei, and Shuo Liu. 2025. Religious Belief as Hinge Proposition. *Religions* 16: 1427. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16111427>

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of life (see [Glock 1996](#), pp. 320–23). For him, religious beliefs form the unshakeable hinge of believers' belief systems, guiding all aspects of life in such a way that to alter them would be to alter one's entire world-picture or form of life.

Consequently, it becomes clear that religious belief may also be understood as a form of hinge proposition. This insight facilitates a deeper understanding of how Wittgenstein viewed religious beliefs. Section 2 provides a brief introduction to *On Certainty* and outlines three characteristics of hinge propositions. Section 3 examines two established interpretive approaches to Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion (cognitivism and non-cognitivism) and offers a critique of the cognitivist reading. Drawing on texts from *Culture and Value* and *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, this section also explains how religious beliefs can be qualified as unshakeable certainties. Section 4 advances two central claims: first, adherence to a religious belief entails participation in a particular form of life; second, disputes over religious beliefs are conflicts between distinct world-pictures or civilizations.

2. Hinge Propositions in on Certainty

At the end of his life, Wittgenstein frequently reflected on the topic of certainty, examining Moore's views. These reflections are crystallized in *On Certainty*. In this work, Wittgenstein acknowledges Moore's efforts to combat skepticism but disagrees with his attempt to prove the truth of "common-sense" propositions.

In his essays "A Defence of Common Sense" and "Proof of an External World" ([Moore 1959](#), pp. 32–59, 127–50), Moore asserts his knowledge of certain propositions—such as "here is one hand" and "the earth has existed long before my birth"—which he terms "common-sense" propositions. Moore maintains that these propositions are true because our knowledge of them is supported by possible empirical evidence, and that they can therefore serve as proof of the existence of an external world. From Wittgenstein's perspective, however, Moore's mistake lies in treating these propositions as knowledge. Wittgenstein argues that they do not belong to the category of knowledge but to the category of certainty. They are hinge propositions:

That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (OC,⁴ §341)

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC, §343)

[I.e.] Dispute about other things; *this* is immovable—it is a hinge on which your dispute can turn. (OC, §655)

The certainty of hinge propositions does not derive from the way in which they serve as justifications for other propositions. This means that hinge propositions are not "first knowledge" in the traditional epistemological sense; on the contrary, they are propositions that must remain fixed in a logical sense. This enables other propositions to be meaningfully evaluated as either true or false. As Wittgenstein puts it, a hinge proposition is "held fast by what lies around it" (OC, §144). Hinge propositions were of profound philosophical significance to him, and he used them to combat philosophical skepticism in a way that is fundamentally different from Moore's approach.

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein's conception of hinge propositions can be summarized in three theses:

1. Hinge propositions describe the world-picture that is certain for speakers of a language.
2. Hinge propositions are not knowledge, but certainties.

3. Hinge propositions lie at the foundation of language-games and are immune to doubt.

First, the world-picture described by the hinge proposition constitutes a shared framework that we must accept in order to understand others' utterances and participate in communal life (OC, §298). This framework is acquired not primarily through ratiocination, but through a process of training and persuasion (OC, §§233, 262; see also §§106, 612, 669).

For Wittgenstein, the world-picture is neither true nor false, but "the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false" (OC, §§94, 205). Disagreements about truth are possible only within this framework, which functions as "the matter-of-course foundation" for all inquiry and assertion (OC, §§162, 167). He likens it to "channels" through which non-hardened, fluid empirical propositions may flow (OC, §96), and to the "river-bed" of thought (OC, §97).

It may be argued that this concept closely corresponds to what Wittgenstein refers to as the "limit of the world" in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (cf. von Wright 1982, p. 176). The certainty of the world-picture does not arise from personal conviction or empirical evidence, but from its embeddedness in stable, deeply rooted forms of life. To accept a world-picture is to adopt a particular orientation toward the world and oneself—one that furnishes the very criteria for distinguishing truth from falsity.

Hinge propositions are faithful descriptions of this world-picture.⁵ They are not explanations, let alone hypotheses. Their certainty derives from the certainty of forms of life: "I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life" (OC, §358; cf. §559). From Wittgenstein's perspective, Moore mistakenly claimed to know such "common-sense" truths and insisted that they could be supported evidentially. He failed to recognize that hinge propositions already stand at the "end-points" in chains of grounds. They possess certainty rather than truth-value, and certainty is logically prior to truth-value.

Second, from Wittgenstein's perspective, "knowledge" and "certainty" belong to different categories (OC, §§308, 511). Knowledge is confined to the cognitive domain, and hinge propositions lie outside this domain.

According to Wittgenstein, to treat hinge propositions as knowledge requiring justification will lead to an inevitable impasse.⁶ That is, any evidence one might offer in support of a hinge proposition is no more certain than the hinge proposition itself. For instance, attempting to justify "I have two hands" by looking at them is futile, since the visual evidence is no more certain than the proposition (OC, §§125, 250). Similarly, appealing to a notion such as "agreement with reality" is merely "going round in a circle" (OC, §191; see also §215).

The absence of justification, however, does not render hinge propositions uncertain, since their certainty was never a product of evidential support in the first place. For Wittgenstein, they are "groundless beliefs" that constitute the foundation of our system of belief (OC, §253). Why does one not doubt "I have two hands"? Because this certainty is presupposed in the language-game, and the entire language-game depends on this certainty (OC, §446).⁷ To doubt "I have two hands" is to play an entirely different language-game—that is, to embrace an entirely different form of life.

Finally, doubts, for Wittgenstein, only become meaningful within a language-game that already rests on certain hinge propositions. These foundational certainties lie beyond the scope of doubt—they are what make doubting possible (OC, §24; see also §§115, 317, 375, 446, 558). For instance, just as we can evaluate a chess move only by accepting the rules of the game, the rules of chess are immune to doubt unless we are playing a different game. Wittgenstein suggests that to claim to "know" such hinge propositions is to enumerate some empirical propositions that we affirm without special testing, which "have a peculiar

logical role in the system of our empirical propositions" (OC, §136; see also §§112, 308, 342, 401, 494, 628).

Doubt about hinge propositions is logically impossible (OC, §454), because they are the "logical receptacle" (von Wright 1982, p. 173) within which all our inquiries proceed.⁸ Wittgenstein asks playfully: "Do I know or do I only believe that I am called L. W.?" (OC, §491). If I doubt this, there is no judgment of which I could be certain (OC, §§69, 370, 490; also §514). Thus, when Wittgenstein says "I have two hands", anyone who doubts this must be considered either insane (OC, §§217, 281) or belonging to a different form of life (OC, §§7, 108; cf. §§92, 106, 264). Meaningful doubt depends on something which is immune to doubt. A doubt without an end is not even a doubt (OC, §§519, 625). Doubt ultimately disappears at some point where "I find no ground for doubting" (OC, §123; also §375). Similarly, all explanation, testing, and justification come to an end (OC, §§34, 164, 192; cf. §563), and this end is "not an ungrounded presupposition" but an "ungrounded way of acting" (OC, §110). To the question of why, for example, the proposition "Here is one hand" cannot be doubted, Wittgenstein would reply: "There is no why. I simply do not doubt it. This is how I act" (OC, §148; cf. §212). Indeed, a close reading of *On Certainty* reveals that Wittgenstein's exploration of hinge propositions can be useful in understanding religious belief.

3. Religious Belief in Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein makes frequent observations about religion. These observations are scattered throughout his middle and later works, such as *Culture and Value* and *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Religious issues also appear in *Philosophical Investigations* and *Recollections of Wittgenstein*. Scholars have tried to systematize these scattered observations into a distinctive Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, the core of which is his attitude toward religious belief.

A key debate in interpreting Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion concerns whether he viewed religious belief non-cognitively. Non-cognitivists (e.g., Glock 1996; Schroeder 2007) claim that religious statements either lack cognitive content or, at most, express a form of "belief-in" rather than a propositional "belief-that".⁹ Cognitivists (e.g., Pichler and Sunday Grève 2025), however, argue that religious statements do carry cognitive content and can be qualified as genuine "belief-that".¹⁰ The crucial distinction between these readings lies in whether statements of religious belief possess truth conditions.

Some scholars contend that Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion displays varying theoretical tendencies across different stages, characterizing his mature position as "a dual approach combining cognitivism and moderate non-cognitivism".¹¹ According to Pichler and Sunday Grève, Wittgenstein initially endorsed a strong non-cognitivist stance, particularly during the composition of works such as the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, *A Lecture on Ethics*, and Part I of *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*.¹² However, after 1931, he shifted toward a moderate non-cognitivism,¹³ as reflected in *Culture and Value* and *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. In his later period, it is alleged, he embraced cognitivism, which represents his mature thought.¹⁴

This interpretation faces significant challenges. First, given the chronology of Wittgenstein's manuscript sources, it is difficult to neatly separate these theoretical tendencies into distinct stages. For instance, remarks in *Culture and Value* may originate from the same period as those in *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* and *Philosophical Investigations*, and the manuscripts for these works were in fact composed in close proximity. Second, due to the lengthy composition period of *Philosophical Investigations*, it is difficult to pinpoint which stage represents Wittgenstein's mature views. For instance, according to von Wright, Wittgenstein may have been revising the final typescript of Part I of *Philosophical Investigations* as late as 1949 or 1950 (von Wright 1982, p. 130).

This paper argues that Wittgenstein's religious views do not rest on cognitivism. Even in his final period, his philosophy of religion remains fundamentally non-cognitivist. For Wittgenstein, religion is not a theory, and religious doctrines possess no theoretical content. Religion is not a body of knowledge that consists of religious belief statements.

If religion were a theory, it would have to put forward a core proposition along with auxiliary claims, supported by reasoning and evidence, and advance verifiable hypotheses capable of yielding knowledge. Wittgenstein, however, maintains that religious statements do not make any knowledge claims; they are not attempts to establish the truth of certain religious statements (cf. [Mulhall 2001](#), p. 101; [Schönbaumsfeld 2014](#), p. 94). Instead, he insists that religion is not a form of theorizing but a way of characterizing what takes place in human life:

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened & will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For "recognition of sin" is an actual occurrence & so is despair & so is redemption through faith. (CV, p. 32)

Election by grace: It is only permissible to write like this out of the most frightful suffering—& then it means something quite different. But for this reason it is not permissible for anyone to cite it as truth, unless he himself says it in torment.—It simply isn't a theory.—Or as one might also say: if this is truth, it is not the truth it appears at first glance to express. It's less a theory than a sigh, or a cry. (CV, pp. 34–35)

Religion is not a theoretical system—that is, it is not a body of knowledge composed of statements of religious belief—nor is it founded upon actual historical events. Nevertheless, a religion like Christianity includes religious narratives (such as the stories in the Gospels), which appear to offer what might be construed, in a cognitive sense, as historical evidence. Does religious belief, then, depend on such evidence? Wittgenstein answers in the negative. In his view, religion presents us with a (historical) narrative and commands: "Now believe! But not believe this report with the belief that is appropriate to a historical report,—but rather: believe, through thick & thin & you can do this only as the outcome of a life" (CV, p. 37). Wittgenstein rejects the treatment of religious narratives as historical facts in an inferential manner. That is, he denies that they function as historical proofs. For Wittgenstein, the function of religion is not to convey knowledge, but to orient individuals toward a religious form of life.

On one hand, "Historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief" (CV, p. 38). Believers do not acquire religious belief through historical evidence but rather through life experiences. Wittgenstein offers an example: suppose someone claims to believe in the Last Judgment. If one's belief is based upon evidence, then this belief would not be a religious belief at all. It is neither testable nor can we find any means of testing it (LA, pp. 56, 60–61, 70). However, a man with genuine religious belief would fight against being dragged into the fire at the Last Judgment not on the basis of induction, but out of sheer terror! (LA, p. 56; cf. CV, pp. 34–35, 52). The difference between someone who merely professes religious belief and someone whose belief emerges from profound suffering is reflected in their distinct forms of life. For Wittgenstein, whether one holds religious belief depends not on knowledge of historical facts, but on the experiences one has undergone and the way of life one embraces. Religious belief expresses itself in a believer "not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for in all his life" (LA, p. 54). For a genuine believer, religious belief becomes an unshakable certainty—one for which they take risks, which is not the case with ordinary beliefs.

On the other hand, even if religious narratives were historically disproven, “yet belief would lose nothing through this” (CV, p. 37)—since religious belief does not rely on historical verification, it would not be undermined by the falsification of them.¹⁵ Religion does not consist of propositional knowledge and therefore lacks truth conditions. As a result, cognitivist interpretations are fundamentally misplaced. For Wittgenstein, religious belief “is not a scientific belief” (CV, p. 72). It is not comparable to historical inquiry, where one may speak of proof, reasoning, and truth value. Rather, a religious belief “is neither true nor false, for he conceives it as expressing a particular stance of a person toward the world, to other humans or human life in general” (Kober 2005, p. 234).

Wittgenstein illustrates this with a thought experiment: imagine an island society whose practices include utterances that we may recognize as religious statements. From a scientific standpoint, one might argue that these statements are poorly evidenced or based on faulty reasoning. Yet from within the religious form of life, the participants are not reasoning—at least, not in a scientific sense—and even the best scientific evidence remains irrelevant (LA, pp. 56, 58–59). In scientific contexts, belief statements can and must be tested. In religious contexts, however, such statements are connected to something altogether different.

In short, genuine believers do not ground their faith in evidence, nor do they treat religious narratives as historical proof. The relationship between believers and these narratives is “neither a relation to historical truth (probability) nor yet that to a doctrine consisting of ‘truths of reason’” (CV, p. 38). Instead, such narratives gain meaning only when believers earnestly adopt a religious form of life. In this way, Wittgenstein rejects both the treatment of religious narratives as historical evidence and the characterization of religious belief as scientific belief with truth-value.

How, then, do believers integrate narratives into religious life? Unlike scientific evidence, these religious messages are “seized on by a human being believably (i.e., lovingly): That is the certainty of this ‘taking-for-true’, nothing else” (CV, p. 38). In a nutshell, religious belief is not a scientific truth, but a certainty:

Asking him is not enough. He will probably say he has proof. But he has what you might call an unshakeable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for in all his life. (LA, pp. 53–54)

But if I am to be REALLY redeemed,—I need *certainty*—not wisdom, dreams, speculation—and this certainty is faith. And faith is faith in what my *heart*, my *soul*, needs, not my speculative intellect. For my soul, with its passions, as it were with its flesh & blood, must be redeemed, not my abstract mind. (CV, p. 38)

This “unshakeable belief” (LA, p. 54; also CV, p. 84) constitutes the core of their belief system. What Wittgenstein primarily aims to illustrate is not the “truth” of religious belief but its “certainty” for believers. This certainty manifests, for example, in piety and love toward God, longing for redemption, or firm belief in the Last Judgment; it is ultimately expressed through a religious life.

For Wittgenstein, genuine religion does not supply people with a comprehensive doctrine but merely teaches: “Do this!—Think like that.” It neither needs nor attempts to provide reasons, since “for every reason it gives, there is a cogent counter-reason” (CV, p. 34). If religious doctrines belong to the domain of knowledge, then both theological descriptions of God and historical narratives in the Gospels can easily be falsified. Genuine religion shows people their hopeless situation and describes the means of rescue—until believers themselves, acting of their own accord, “at any rate not led by the instructor” (CV, p. 73), grasp it. From a scientific standpoint, one can doubt the truth of these historical

narratives, but these doubts cease when one is “submerged in religion” (CV, p. 54). Being submerged in religion, believers do not obtain a (causal) explanation but “a stance towards all explanations” (CV, p. 97). In a genuine religious life, believers need certainty, not wisdom—“Wisdom is grey” (CV, p. 71).

Religious belief runs deeper than truth-value. A believer takes religious belief as a stance toward the world—a stance beyond right or wrong. Religious belief constitutes the unshakeable part of believers’ religious lives. For Wittgenstein, religious belief is like a hinge of the belief system, around which other beliefs turn, and changing it would alter the entire world-picture and form of life.

4. Religious Belief as Hinge Proposition

As research on Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion has developed, a growing number of scholars have come to appreciate the significance of *On Certainty*.¹⁶ Although Wittgenstein explicitly uses the term “religious belief” only once (OC, §459), religious themes are explored recurrently throughout the work:

Very intelligent and well-educated people believe in the story of creation in the Bible, while others hold it as proven false, and the grounds of the latter are well known to the former. (OC, §336)

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.) (OC, §612)

Once we grasp the central concerns of *On Certainty*, it comes as no surprise that Wittgenstein addresses religious belief in this work. For him, religious belief exemplifies a type of hinge proposition. It articulates a worldview that is held as certain by believers and forms an unshakeable foundation within their belief system. It underpins one’s religious life, which places it beyond the reach of meaningful doubt.

First, being religious requires one to transform one’s life or reorient its direction (CV, p. 61). Religion, in other words, prescribes a particular way of living and provides a framework. For instance, “one has to forego all pleasures because of such a forecast”¹⁷ (LA, p. 56), “thank God for the good you receive but don’t complain about the evil, as you would of course do if a human being were to do you good and evil by turns” (CV, p. 34). The difference between those who live within such a framework and those who do not is not merely doctrinal—it is profound:

It appears to me as though a religious belief could only be (something like) passionately committing oneself to a system of coordinates. Hence although it’s belief, it is really a way of living, or a way of judging life. Passionately taking up *this* interpretation. And so instructing in a religious belief would have to be portraying, describing that system of reference & at the same time appealing to the conscience. And these together would have to result finally in the one under instruction himself, of his own accord, passionately taking up that system of reference. (CV, p. 73)

Here believing obviously plays much more this role: suppose we said that a certain picture might play the role of constantly admonishing me, or I always think of it. Here, an enormous difference would be between those people for whom the picture is constantly in the foreground, and the others who just didn’t use it at all. (LA, p. 56)

Those who adhere to such a picture regard it as absolutely certain—not because their truth is firmly established, but because they constitute the ground for what can be said

and thought within religious life (see [Martin 1984](#), p. 602). For example, those who believe in the Last Judgment are guided by it across their whole lives and may act in an entirely different way (LA, pp. 53–54; cf. CV, pp. 38–39). A person who believes in retribution, for instance, interprets everything that happens to him as reward or punishment: if he is ill, he may say to himself, “what have I done to deserve this?” and when he is ashamed of himself, he may say, “this will be punished” (LA, pp. 54–55).

In contrast, someone who holds an attitude different from that of a religious believer thinks in an entirely different way and lives a different life. Wittgenstein would say: “I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have different pictures” (LA, p. 55). For a person who does not have religious belief, Gospel narratives are sheer “ugly non-sense” (CV, p. 37). Religious discourse becomes meaningful to people only when they live a completely different life, that is, a religious life.

Secondly, believers do not embrace a religion by reasoning (or by appealing to grounds), but by living a life. While wisdom is passionless, faith is a passion. Religious belief could “only be (something like) passionately committing oneself to a system of coordinates” (CV, p. 73; also p. 61), and the person who believes passionately takes up, of his own accord, that system of reference.¹⁸ A doctrine cannot move someone to embrace a religion. Only when one has experienced what life reveals—such as various forms of frightful suffering¹⁹—and urgently needs certainty, does religion become a refuge from extreme suffering. Wittgenstein observes: “Someone to whom it is given in such distress to open his heart instead of contracting it, absorbs the remedy into his heart” (CV, p. 52; also pp. 38–39, 61, 97). What matters here is not the words people speak or what they think while speaking,²⁰ but “the difference that they make at different points in their life” (CV, p. 97). Their religious belief manifests in their life, for “practice gives the words their sense” (CV, p. 96).

Thirdly, disputes over religious belief are confrontations between civilizations. Like hinge propositions, religious belief is not epistemic knowledge but certainty. If we accept Wittgenstein’s conception of a language-game as “the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven” (PI, §7), then there is no reason not to regard a religious game as such a language-game.²¹ Within a specific language-game, the rules constituting it cannot be meaningfully doubted. As Wittgenstein illustrates with the example of the standard meter in Paris: “There is one thing of which one can state neither that it is 1 m long, nor that it is not 1 m long, and that is the standard meter in Paris” (PI, §50). Before the standard meter in Paris was established, there was no criterion for judging “whether something is 1 m long”, for it is what determines the standard of measurement—a precondition that makes “measurement with a meter-rule” possible.²²

Similarly, religious belief lies at the foundation of religious games. It determines how believers perceive the world and themselves through a distinctly religious lens and shapes their ways of distinguishing between good and evil. This is a certainty deeply rooted in the form of life. Thus, different stances on religious belief place people in different language-games:

If we have a belief, in certain cases we appeal again and again to certain grounds, and at the same time we risk pretty little—if it came to risking our lives on the ground of this belief.

There are instances where you have a faith—where you say “I believe”—and on the other hand this belief does not rest on the fact on which our ordinary everyday beliefs normally do rest. (LA, p. 54)

In a religious discourse we use such expressions as: “I believe that so and so will happen,” and use them differently to the way in which we use them in science.

Although, there is a great temptation to think we do. Because we do talk of evidence, and do talk of evidence by experience. (LA, p. 57)

Wittgenstein argues that religious belief is distinct from scientific belief. For him, a dispute over religious belief is not about “hypothesis”, “high probability”, or “knowing” (LA, p. 57). Thus, unlike disputes over truth, disputes over religious belief are in essence confrontations between different civilizations.

Scientific belief appeals to reasoning and justification. However, an error arises when one thinks scientific belief is comparable to religious belief; after all, people claim religious narratives are easily proven false (CV, p. 37), that evidence for “God’s existence” is unsatisfactory or insufficient (LA, p. 60; see also OC, §336), or that believers “reason wrongly” (LA, p. 59). Yet Wittgenstein reminds us: “Whether a thing is a blunder or not—it is a blunder in a particular system. Just as something is a blunder in a particular game and not in another” (LA, p. 59; also OC, §105). It is only within a specific language-game that concepts such as truth, falsity, correctness, and error gain meaningful application. Notions like “reasoning”, “evidence”, and “justification” function within the scientific framework. Religious belief, however, is not established through such means—it operates within an entirely different language-game.

Religious belief arises from intense life experiences (see above). After enduring great suffering, believers need the certainty of salvation, prompting them to live a religious life. Within such a life, what believers possess is an unshakeable belief. Wittgenstein offers an example: the “honest religious thinker”²³ is like a tightrope walker standing on “the slenderest imaginable” support, as if on “nothing but air”—yet “it really is possible to walk on it” (CV, p. 84). What Wittgenstein intends to convey is that scientific thinkers often criticize religious belief statements for being based on “poor evidence” or “insufficient evidence”, but this so-called “evidence” is not evidence at all. Religious believers do not need evidence. They do not rely on reasoning or seek a means of testing (LA, pp. 56–59, 60–61). “There is no why. . . this is how I act” (OC, §148). When people embrace a religious life, everything is different: “It is ‘no wonder’ if you can then do what now you cannot do” (CV, p. 39). For genuine believers, religious belief has already stood at the center of their belief system, around which other beliefs cluster and upon which they depend. Such a belief cannot be meaningfully evaluated in a scientific way.

In essence, disputes over religious belief are disputes over forms of life, yet they are often mistakenly treated as ordinary—specifically scientific—disputes. This confusion is particularly evident in attempts to provide scientific explanations or justifications for religious belief. Wittgenstein observes that some believers, influenced by scientism, attempt to ground their faith in evidence or positivist reasoning. In doing so, they inappropriately adopt a scientific world-picture and its associated framework of justification—tools fundamentally unsuited to the religious language-game.

Thus, for Wittgenstein, the error committed by someone like Father O’Hara²⁴ lies not in providing insufficient evidence, but in misapplying the standards of the scientific game to a completely different kind of language-game—that of religion (see LA, pp. 58–59). When attempts are made to render religious statements “reasonable” in a scientific sense, the result is not a successful defense of religion, but rather what Wittgenstein calls “a sort of false science” (CV, p. 82).

As a special kind of hinge proposition, religious belief arises from profound life experiences, forming the unshakeable core of believers’ belief systems. To abandon it would thus mean abandoning their entire world-picture. Hence, those who believe in religious belief and those who disdain it think differently, practice differently, and connect different things to the same statements. Fundamentally, they embody two distinct ways of life.

5. Conclusions

This paper has considered the metaphor of “hinge propositions” from *On Certainty*, arguing that Wittgenstein’s conception of religious belief can also be regarded as a kind of hinge proposition. For believers, religious belief describes a world-picture characterized by certainty, embodying their unique stance toward the world and themselves within religious life. To possess a religious belief, therefore, is to choose a religious form of life. In Wittgenstein’s view, religious belief is an “unshakeable belief” deeply rooted in forms of life. Because religious belief is irrelevant to knowledge, religious belief statements lack truth conditions, and so Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion cannot reasonably be classified as cognitivism.

For Wittgenstein, religious belief is not a theoretical assertion but a way of life. Accordingly, if a genuine believer holds a religious belief, and another person argues against it, their dispute is not an ordinary disagreement but a conflict between two entirely distinct forms of life. Wittgenstein drew a sharp distinction between “scientific belief” and “religious belief”, and between two different ways of life: the former depends on reasoning and justification, with truth as its aim; the latter arises from profound life experiences, appealing to a sort of certainty.

Thus, the qualifications for scientific truth cannot be applied to religious belief, as they cease to function as valid standards within a different language-game. Similarly, disagreements among believers over specific religious doctrines also represent confrontations between distinct forms of life. There is no meaningful distinction between “primary” and “secondary” in religious belief, for if a belief does not permeate and shape the entirety of a person’s existence, it cannot genuinely be regarded as religious. In summary, religious belief functions as the “hinge” within a believer’s entire system of thought—a fixed point around which other beliefs revolve and from which they derive their stability, forming the indubitable core of that system.

This conception of religious belief is deeply embedded in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, where it aligns coherently with key concepts such as “language-game”, “form of life”, and “certainty”. Throughout both *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*, he emphasizes that language-games are intrinsically tied to forms of life. A word acquires meaning only through its use within a particular language-game, just as doubt is meaningful only within a specific framework of action and understanding. For Wittgenstein, what underlies language-games is not explanation or hypothesis, but rather ungrounded ways of acting. Within this perspective, it comes as no surprise that, in *On Certainty*, he quotes the phrase “In the beginning was the deed”.²⁵ Accepting this allows us to see that when two individuals disagree on religious belief, they can be seen as belonging to different forms of life. Furthermore, disputes over religious beliefs are not disputes in the ordinary sense, but rather confrontations between different forms of life—or even different civilizations.

Author Contributions: Writing—original draft preparation, S.L.; writing—review and editing, W.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ This interpretation builds upon and engages with significant accounts of hinge propositions, including foundational accounts by Wright (1985) and Williams (1991), contemporary developments within hinge epistemology (Coliva 2015, 2025; Pritchard 2016, 2017b, 2024; Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock 2016; Siegel 2019; Gómez Alonso 2021), and crucially, the explanation of hinge propositions in Wittgenstein given by Schönbaumsfeld (2016).
- ² For insightful analyses of Wittgenstein's concept of certainty, see Glock (1996, pp. 76–81) and Baker and Hacker (2009, pp. 294–97). Authoritative reference works on *On Certainty* include the following: von Wright (1982, pp. 163–82) provides a brief introduction to the themes of the book; Rhees (2003) discusses certain aspects of the work in a seminar, which was later compiled into a book by D. Z. Phillips; Moyal-Sharrock (2004) organizes Wittgenstein's remarks around themes such as certainty and hinges; Moyal-Sharrock and Brenner (2007) present numerous essays on *On Certainty*, with discussions divided into four sections: the Framework Reading, the Transcendental Reading, the Epistemic Reading, and the Therapeutic Reading.
- ³ Wittgenstein's concept of "form of life" (*Lebensform*) is deployed centrally in *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein (2009)). For key interpretations of this concept, see Hallett (1977, pp. 88–89); Glock (1996, pp. 124–29); Baker and Hacker (2009, pp. 218–23); McGinn (2013, pp. 54–56).
- ⁴ In what follows, Wittgenstein's works are cited using standard abbreviations. For example: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 1922), (TLP); *The Blue and Brown Books* (Wittgenstein 1960) (BB); "A Lecture on Ethics" (Wittgenstein 1965) (LE); *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Wittgenstein 1966) (LA); *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969) (OC); *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Wittgenstein 1984) (RW); *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* (Wittgenstein 1993) (GB); *Culture and Value* (Wittgenstein 1998) (CV). I use full titles at their first occurrence, and abbreviations thereafter, including in citations.
- ⁵ Wittgenstein sometimes refers to propositions describing the world-picture as "a kind of mythology" (OC, §95; see also §97) and sometimes as "logical propositions" (OC, §§43, 51, 319, 401); in other works, he also calls them "grammatical propositions" (PI, §§251, 295, 458; see also §§401, 558, 572). In essence, they all belong to the category of "hinge propositions".
- ⁶ Wittgenstein identifies a crucial distinction between the concepts of "knowledge" and "belief": whereas establishing knowledge requires justification, possessing a belief does not (OC, §175; cf. §§18, 91, 243, 373, 484, 550). One does not arrive at certain beliefs via evidence, but they are "fixed within all questions and answers" (OC, §103). These beliefs are fixed not because they are based on grounds—"The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing" (OC, §166)—but because people act in accordance with them (OC, §§173, 284).
- ⁷ In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein states: "It is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game" (OC, §204). In *Philosophical Investigations*, he describes the language-game as "the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven" (PI, §7); he then provides a series of examples to demonstrate the diversity of language-games. For Wittgenstein, this concept emphasizes the fact that "the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (PI, §23). For discussions of Wittgenstein's concept of "language-game", see Baker and Hacker (2005, pp. 45–64).
- ⁸ When discussing the question of whether material objects exist, von Wright notes: "Its existence is, so to speak, the 'logical receptacle' within which all investigations concerning the mind-dependent existence of various objects are conducted" (von Wright 1982, p. 173). For hinge propositions, to doubt them is to mistakenly treat the receptacle as if it were an object within itself; they thus constitute the necessary foundation that makes doubt possible.
- ⁹ Within non-cognitivism, one can distinguish between strong non-cognitivism and moderate non-cognitivism. Pichler and Sunday Grève introduce this distinction: strong non-cognitivism holds that statements of religious belief have no substantial truth conditions, i.e., such statements can, without substantive loss, be analyzed as or translated into non-cognitive language (see, for example, Ayer 1936, pp. 104–26; Braithwaite 1955); moderate non-cognitivism, by contrast, maintains that statements of religious belief belong to a special type of belief that may also contain cognitive elements (Price 1965, pp. 17–19).
- ¹⁰ Duncan Pritchard proposes an externalist defense of the cognitive justification of religious belief. According to externalism, if a belief bears an appropriate "truth-tracking" relationship to facts, that is, if religious belief is subject to empirical verification, then it retains cognitive justification (Pritchard 2000). Internalist and externalist theories will not be elaborated here. For related discussions, see Bonjour (1980), Goldman (1980), and Alston (1986).
- ¹¹ Pichler and Sunday Grève contend that Wittgenstein addresses non-cognitivist aspects throughout his work, yet exhibits cognitivist features in his mature period. Ellis further characterizes Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion as a "grammatical duality" (Ellis 2025). Regarding the so-called "grammar of religion", some scholars argue that the later Wittgenstein sought to describe the complete grammar of religion, while others oppose this view. For useful discussions on this topic, see Citron (2011), Carroll (2014), and Söderström (2025).
- ¹² According to von Wright's catalog of Wittgenstein's papers, these works were composed around 1918, 1929, and 1936, with manuscript and typescript sources including MSS 104, 139a/b, 143, and TSS 20–24, 207. See von Wright (1982, pp. 43–49).
- ¹³ Some scholars argue that Wittgenstein later reconsidered strong non-cognitivism and adopted a moderate non-cognitivist stance (see, e.g., Jäger 2003, pp. 238–39; Schroeder 2007, p. 443; Schönbaumsfeld 2007, 2023).

- 14 Pichler and Sunday Grève regard the 1940s as the period of Wittgenstein's mature philosophy, with *Philosophical Investigations* as its hallmark. This division is approximate. According to von Wright's catalog, Wittgenstein produced the dictated text of *The Blue Book* in the 1933–1934 academic year and (perhaps) began writing remarks for *Philosophical Investigations* as early as 1936, a project that continued until around 1949. Sources for these works primarily include MSS 11–17, 142, 144, 152; TSS 220–222, 226–227, 234, 239, 242; C 309 and 310.
- 15 In some places, Wittgenstein also notes that a genuine religious believer may present historical information and even mistakenly regard it as evidence: "But I think that believers who offered such proofs wanted to analyse and make a case for their 'belief' with their intellect, although they themselves would never have arrived at belief by way of such proofs" (CV, p. 97). For Wittgenstein, however, belief grounded in evidence is only "the last result—in which a number of ways of thinking and acting crystallize and come together" (LA, p. 56).
- 16 See, for example, [Martin \(1984\)](#), who was the first to examine the relation between *On Certainty* and religious belief; [Pritchard \(2000, 2016, 2024\)](#), [Vasiliou \(2001\)](#), [Jäger \(2003\)](#) and [Boncompagni \(2022\)](#) for systematic discussions of hinge epistemology and its implications for religious belief; [Moyal-Sharrock \(2004\)](#) and [Kober \(2005\)](#) for detailed exegesis of Wittgenstein's remarks on knowledge and religion; [Schönbaumsfeld \(2014, 2016, 2023\)](#), whose contributions connect hinge theory with broader questions of doubt, faith, and meaning; [Carroll \(2014\)](#) on Wittgenstein's place within philosophy of religion; [Löffler \(2018\)](#) on religious belief as worldview belief; [Pritchard \(2015, 2017a, 2018\)](#) and [Bennett-Hunter \(2019\)](#) on quasi-fideism and interreligious dialogue; [Gómez Alonso \(2021\)](#) and [Coliva \(2025\)](#) on the hinge-epistemological critique of quasi-fideism; and [Weiberg \(2025\)](#) on interpreting Wittgenstein's remarks in terms of hinge, form of life, or worldview.
- 17 Namely, the Last Judgment. See LA, p.56.
- 18 On religious themes, Wittgenstein highly valued and was deeply influenced by the works of Søren Kierkegaard, noting in a letter: "Kierkegaard is far too deep for me" ([Malcolm 2001](#), p. 62). For discussions of Kierkegaard's influence on Wittgenstein, see [Drury \(1967, p. 70\)](#), who recalls that Wittgenstein once said to him that Kierkegaard was by far the greatest philosopher of the nineteenth century; [Hallett \(1977, pp. 426, 768–69\)](#), who argues that although references to Kierkegaard in Wittgenstein's writings are rare, Wittgenstein nevertheless held Kierkegaard's work in high esteem; [von Wright \(2001, p. 19\)](#), who notes that certain writers working in the borderlands between philosophy, religion, and poetry made a deeper impression on Wittgenstein than professional philosophers, among whom Kierkegaard was foremost; [Malcolm \(2001, p. 59\)](#), who recalls that he once quoted to Wittgenstein a remark by Kierkegaard, to which Wittgenstein expressed strong agreement; and [Schönbaumsfeld \(2007, pp. 10–36\)](#), who offers a systematic philosophical comparison between the two thinkers.
- 19 Martin describes such sufferings as "disgust with our own wickedness, disillusionment by the emptiness of all merely earthly attainments, physical suffering, anxiety arising from the threat of death—these and other ubiquitous experiences constitute part of the texture of life and give gravity to one's days" ([Martin 1984](#), p. 610).
- 20 According to Wittgenstein: "Asking him is not enough. He will probably say he has proof" (LA, p. 53) One might "pretend" to hold religious belief, but the difference between pretense and genuine belief manifests in two distinct lives. Wittgenstein discusses "the idea of death" (LA, pp. 68–69): ordinarily, "having an idea" involves mastery of a word's technique; but if I say I have an idea of "death", I lack a technique for using this word. For his "idea of death" to be meaningful, it must become part of our language-game.
- 21 In fact, in PI, §23, Wittgenstein lists a series of language-games, including the game of "praying".
- 22 For Wittgenstein, if two people have different attitudes toward this, they are essentially engaged in different language-games and thus in different forms of life. He illustrates this in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*: "We can say in chess that the exact shape of the chess-men plays no role. Suppose that the main pleasure was to see people ride; then, playing it in writing wouldn't be playing the same game" (LA, 72). Wittgenstein's point is that the physical form of the chess pieces is irrelevant to the rules of chess. However, if an agent—for instance, a child—derives primary pleasure simply from seeing figures ride, such as stacking a king or pawn atop the knight (the horse-shaped piece), or by making one piece chase another across the board, then, whether or not the agent is familiar with the rules of chess, the resulting activity can no longer be regarded as the same game as chess played on paper. Thus, to say that they "violate chess rules" is meaningless. For discussions of Wittgenstein's reference to "the standard meter in Paris" in PI, see [Baker and Hacker \(1980, pp. 107–10\)](#) and [Lugg \(2000, pp. 93–95\)](#).
- 23 For discussions of the "honest religious thinker", see [Schroeder \(2007\)](#), who employs the image of the tightrope walker as a metaphor for the precarious yet authentic stance of religious commitment, and [Pichler and Sunday Grève \(2025\)](#), who analyze this notion within the framework of Wittgenstein's later philosophy of religion, arguing for a nuanced form of cognitivism.
- 24 C. W. O'Hara, SJ (1886–1967), whom Wittgenstein mentions in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, was "a professor of physics and mathematics at Heythrop College, London, who participated in a BBC debate about science and religion in the 1930s" ([Schönbaumsfeld 2023, p. 25](#)). O'Hara maintained that there is no essential conflict between science and religion, arguing that the two share common standards of truth. In his view, the truths of Christianity—for example, that God exists, that He created the world, and that God ultimately came into this world as man—are reached by the very same intelligence

that operates in science and with the same certainty. O'Hara suggested that statements of religious belief possess, in some sense, scientific evidence for their truth (British Broadcasting Corporation 1931, pp. 107–16, esp. p. 112). For Wittgenstein, however, Father O'Hara is “one of those people who make it a question of science” (LA, p.57), and his mistake lies in “making it appear to be reasonable” (LA, p.58). Such an approach, Wittgenstein argues, produces a kind of “false science”—that is, “superstition” (CV, p. 82). As Wittgenstein remarks, “I would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable. I would say, if this is religious belief, then it's all superstition” (LA, p. 59). For further discussion of O'Hara, see Martin (1984) and Schönbaumsfeld (2007, 2014, 2023).

²⁵ This sentence appears in Remark 402 of *On Certainty*, as quoted from Goethe's *Faust*, Part I (cf. Goethe 2014, pp. 3, 45).

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