

*Thomas D. Carroll: Wittgenstein within the Philosophy of Religion. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2016, x + 209 pages, £59.99 (Paperback), ISBN 978-1-349-48827-8*

This book, first published in 2014, is divided into seven chapters: 1 – Problems of Interpretive Authority in Wittgenstein’s Corpus; 2 – Wittgenstein, Biography, and Religious Identity; 3 – A History of Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Religion; 4 – The Traditions of Fideism; 5 – On ‘Fideism’ as an Interpretive Category; 6 – Religions, Epistemic Isolation, and Social Trust; and 7 – Wittgenstein’s Ethic of Perspicuity and the Philosophy of Religion. This review will follow the structure of the chapters in order to be faithful to the author’s line of reasoning.

In the first chapter, Carroll presents his reading of Wittgenstein: the perspicuity reading. This interpretation is close to the ethical-therapeutic reading, privileging the works that Wittgenstein prepared for publication as its main sources. This reading is characterized by attributing to Wittgenstein an ethical mission of clarity and of clarity in this pursuit itself. His work is one of a constant search for clear descriptions of language. This mission for a transparent philosophy is what Carroll calls perspicuity, and he sees this as an essential transversal feature of his work. The perspicuity reading also calls for a contextualist approach to the texts, proposing a hermeneutical understanding of the problems posed.

Carroll proposes that we should read Wittgenstein’s references to “the mystical” as a reference to things that have a higher ethical value, somewhat sacred. This reverence to a higher order is part of the perspicuity Carroll sees in Wittgenstein’s work – a deference to the world, to the sacred, in such a way that one’s mission can only be of a pursuit for clarity. This philosophical goal of perspicuity is, in Carroll’s reading, Wittgenstein’s answer to the sense of wonder at the world. It is a sacred clarity, the one Wittgenstein is pursuing, and he did not take fondly the fact that other philosophers did not share with him this mystical perspective over perspicuity.

For Carroll, the commonplace of intertwining the term “fideism” with Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is neither inevitable nor unavoidable. First, because it is academically inadequate. Second, because it is a product of a specific interpretation of Wittgenstein developed by Kai Nielsen, where he describes eight points of Wittgensteinian fideism. Carroll starts by pointing out that all this classification presupposes a conception of religion as being a form of life or a language-game that is immune to external criticism, a point he will develop further in the book. For now, all Carroll wants is to overcome the discussion of whether Wittgenstein was or was not a fideist since, as he sees it, this discussion has not led anywhere fruitful and has blocked Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion for too long. But this also shows that the epistemic status of religious be-