

Wittgensteinian Fideism?

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Since the 1970s, at least in German speaking theology, the name of Dewi Zephaniah Phillips is closely related to the notion of Wittgensteinian fideism.¹ Although Phillips himself continued during his whole life to fight against this accusation, the claim stays persistently. Is the claim to fideism just a silly prejudice of envious ignorants, as Phillips seems to think, or does Phillips' philosophy of religion really lead to fideism? Which are the elements of Phillips' philosophy which lead to the reproach of fideism? And are the roots of these elements really Wittgensteinian?

In the following remarks I try to answer these questions by examining Phillips' attitude to the possibility of a philosophical foundation of religious belief. In addition, I take a look at the Wittgensteinian roots of Phillips' ideas and try to show how a Wittgensteinian foundation of religious belief is possible. First, I try to deal with the reasons for the reproach of fideism against Phillips.

1. The Autonomy of Language Games and of Grammar

Although the prejudice remains strong, Phillips never said that religion is an autonomous, self-governing language game which follows its own rules and which cannot be criticized from the outside. Phillips is completely aware of the fact that there is a multitude and variety of very different language games in each religion and that these language games are closely connected with other ›non-religious‹ language games and with non-religious elements of our world pictures.² Thus, Phillips does not want to immunize religion against external critique.

¹ Cf. the overview on the debate given by T. CARROLL in this volume.

² Cf. S. EIBACH-DANZEGLOCKE, *Theologie als Grammatik? Die Wittgensteinrezeptionen D.Z. Phillips' und George A. Lindbecks und ihre Impulse für theologisches Arbeiten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2002), 68.

Nonetheless, he shares Wittgenstein's diagnosis of the autonomy of language games and of grammar.³ But as Y. Huang rightly states: »It is one thing to say, with Wittgenstein, that different languages have different logics, and quite another to say, with a fideist, that they are private and can be understood by their respective users only.«⁴ This fideistic thesis is not maintained by Wittgenstein, and it is not maintained by Phillips either. The only thing he insists on is the Wittgensteinian observation of the different grammars of language games which often complicates interreligious dialogues or the debates of theists and atheists.

If you want to understand the claims to truth of religious believers you have to consider the grammar of religious language games. Only when you understand the regulative components of religious speech, can you also understand its cognitive meaning. You have to take a look at the language game praxis in order to understand the cognitive meaning of religious beliefs. This Wittgensteinian observation does not mean that it is only possible to understand religious belief by being a religious believer and playing religious language games. Certainly, an atheist is able to look at the peculiar character of religious language games and thus understand the meaning of religious utterances – Wittgenstein and Phillips never denied this obvious fact, although Nielsen in his famous criticism makes us believe the opposite.⁵ The pretention that the Wittgensteinian insight in the autonomy of (religious) language games leads to fideism certainly is a fundamental misunderstanding of both Wittgenstein and Phillips.⁶

But, nonetheless, there is one philosophical root of fideism in this Wittgensteinian analysis: religious believers normally claim that their beliefs are true. Truth claims have to be founded or substantiated. For Wittgenstein it is even a sort of definition for truth claims that you can give reasons for

³ Cf. K. VON STOSCH, *Glaubensverantwortung in doppelter Kontingenz. Untersuchungen zur Verortung fundamentaler Theologie nach Wittgenstein* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2001), 100–107.

⁴ Cf. Y. HUANG, »Foundation of religious beliefs after foundationalism: Wittgenstein between Nielsen and Phillips«, *Religious Studies* 31 (1995), 252.

⁵ Cf. K. NIELSEN, »Wittgensteinian fideism«, *Philosophy* 42 (1967), 201; G. GUTTING, *Religious belief and religious skepticism* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), 15–24; as critique of Nielsen cf. HUANG, »Foundation of religious beliefs after foundationalism«, 256.

⁶ Cf. V. BRÜMMER, »Wittgenstein and the anselmian project«, *Bijdragen* 60 (1999), 449–450; HUANG, »Foundation of religious beliefs after foundationalism«, 251; F. KERR, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, 2nd ed. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997), 31; NIELSEN, »Wittgensteinian fideism«, 199; S. PIHLSTRÖM, »Hilary Putnam as a religious Thinker«, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 11 (1999), 49, 52; H. PUTNAM, »On negative theology«, *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997), 419; P. SHERRY, »Truth and the religious language-game«, *Philosophy* 47 (1972), 20.

them.⁷ The reasons for truth always must be valid independently from the truth claim. Otherwise the believer commits a *petitio principii*. Thus, it is not sufficient to give internal reasons for religious beliefs which are only valid within religious language games. It is not enough to argue within the frames of the religious elements of my world picture, but to give reasons for these elements of my world picture or at least to argue independently from them. Otherwise the choice of my religion remains arbitrarily.⁸

The striking point in Wittgensteinian analysis now is whether it is possible to give reasons for religious beliefs which do not depend on other religious beliefs. The question is whether it is possible to give external⁹ reasons for the validity of religious belief or in other words: is a foundation of religious belief possible? If not, truth claims of religious believers remain unfounded and religious belief seems to be fideistic.

2. Foundation of Religious Belief by Philosophy?

Phillips' answer to this question is clear. He denies any philosophical possibility for a foundation of religious belief. He even says that the »philosophical request for a general justification«¹⁰ of religious belief is completely meaningless. And indeed, within a Wittgensteinian approach such a request for a foundation independently of any concrete language game does not make sense. But what about a philosophical foundation of concrete religious beliefs in certain contexts? An approach to such a foundation would not be meaningless. Phillips gives two main reasons why even in those cases a philosophical foundation of religious belief is impossible.

The first reason is rooted in the purely descriptive role of philosophy, while the second relies on the insight in the grammatical character of religious beliefs. In stressing the descriptive task of philosophy Phillips surely follows the intuitions of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein often underlines that philosophy can only describe the use of language and does not have the

⁷ Cf. L. WITTFENSTEIN, *Über Gewißheit*, Werkausgabe Band 8. Neu durchges. von J. SCHULTE, 5th ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1992), 113–257, § 205: »Wenn das Wahre das Begründete ist, dann ist der Grund nicht *wahr*, noch falsch.«

⁸ Cf. I.U. DALFERTH, *Religiöse Rede von Gott* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1981), 527–528: »Wenn es Gründe nur innerhalb eines Systems gibt, wie kann dann ein System gegenüber einem anderen aufgrund anderer als bloßer Beliebigkeitsüberlegungen vorgezogen werden?«

⁹ By »external« in this context I mean external to religious presuppositions, not external to our language–game–practice.

¹⁰ D.Z. PHILLIPS, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 124.

right to change anything.¹¹ Loyal to this Wittgensteinian insight Phillips rejects any kind of theory of religion (or of magic) in philosophy,¹² and he maintains that »the philosopher is not showing something to be true or false, but explaining *what it means* to talk of truth and falsity in such contexts«. ¹³ Thus, the philosopher »is not to be found in propaganda either for or against religion. The philosopher wishes to understand the grammar of worship.«¹⁴ For Phillips, it is confused if philosophy tries to give a justification or foundation of religious belief, but it has to understand the meaning of religious belief.¹⁵ »Philosophy's task is, according to him, to bring clarity where there is confusion, not to get things done in any kind of way.«¹⁶

On the other hand, Phillips is aware of the fact that philosophy of religion has influence on religious beliefs.¹⁷ Even a purely grammatical consideration can and will have »persuasive effects« and can even offer a reconciliation of a man with religious beliefs in certain contexts.¹⁸ And a purely grammatical and descriptive consideration can have an explicative function for religious belief.¹⁹

Although Phillips is aware of such consequences he does not intend them. As a philosopher he just wants to be the »guardian of the grammar«, and »not the guardian of the faith«.²⁰ Phillips is without any apologetic purpose

¹¹ Cf. VON STOSCH, *Glaubensverantwortung*, 74–81.

¹² Cf. PHILLIPS, »Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism, and magic: a philosophical tragedy?«, *Religious Studies* 39 (2003), 185.

¹³ PHILLIPS, *The Concept of Prayer* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 22.

¹⁴ Ibid. 23–24; cf. 149; PHILLIPS, *Religion without Explanation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), 41.

¹⁵ Cf. PHILLIPS, *Concept of Prayer*, 10: »The whole conception [...] of religion standing in need of justification is confused. [...] It is not the task of the philosopher to decide whether there is a God or not, but to ask what it means to affirm or deny the existence of God.« Cf. D.J. ARCHER, »Küing, Wittgenstein and God«, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 50 (1983), 246.

¹⁶ T. KURTÉN, »Internal Realism: A joint feature by Dewi Z. Phillips and Paul Tillich?«, in *D.Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion. Questions and Responses*, ed. A.F. SANDERS (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2007), 96.

¹⁷ PHILLIPS, *Concept of Prayer*, 158.

¹⁸ Cf. J.H. WHITTAKER, »Can a purely grammatical inquiry be religiously persuasive?«, in *Philosophy and the grammar of religious belief*, ed. T. TESSIN and M. VON DER RUHR (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 357–366; W. VAN HERCK, »De Taak van de Godsdienstfilosofie«, *Bijdragen* 59 (1998), 449–452.

¹⁹ Cf. EIBACH-DANZEGLOCKE, *Theologie als Grammatik?*, 43: »Dieses Beschreiben kann allerdings durchaus auch ein erläuterndes sein. Erläutert wird jedoch nicht durch begründende Erklärungen, sondern durch das wohl durchdachte Nebeneinanderstellen von Gedanken, durch das sich Zusammenhänge zeigen können.«

²⁰ PHILLIPS, *Faith After Foundationalism. Plantinga-Rorty-Lindbeck-Berger – Critiques and Alternatives* (London: Routledge, 1988), xvi–xvii.

in philosophy.²¹ His purpose is a completely contemplative one,²² and he tries to educate philosophers to change their purposes. He criticizes that »those who appeal to inductive procedures to criticise the groundlessness of religious belief do so without realising that, in the context in which they do so, their inductive procedures are equally groundless«. ²³ But is this groundlessness really the same one?

This question leads to the second and more important reason for Phillips' critique of foundational philosophy of religion. Phillips seems to have the opinion that religious propositions (mostly?) are grammatical propositions, and he even compares them to »hinge propositions«. Hinge propositions are discussed by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*. They belong to our world picture and they constitute our approach to reality. They are the quasi-transcendental ground of all of our beliefs, and it is impossible to argue for them because they are the »Lebenselement der Argumente«, as Wittgenstein states.²⁴ If religious beliefs were hinge propositions, the trial to give a foundation of them would be ridiculous nonsense. And exactly this seems to be the position of Phillips: »We have suggested that where religious belief is concerned, to speak of proof and explanation is to betray a misunderstanding of what is being investigated.«²⁵ And as to the relationship between religious beliefs and hinge propositions, he states: »Here, too, one finds a similarity between propositions such as ›I have two hands‹, ›This is a tree‹, ›Here is a torn page‹ and religious beliefs, since if one tries to contradict them one finds that one is not uttering a contradiction within a mode of discourse but cutting oneself off from a mode of discourse.«²⁶ It is not possible to contradict religious beliefs within the grammar which is constituted by these beliefs, and, for example, you will just stop talking about God, if you deny his necessary existence. Nonetheless, Phillips admits a very important difference between hinge propositions and religious beliefs. You are only cut off from a certain grammar, but you are not cut off from reason if you contradict them.²⁷

Thus, Phillips does not want to say that it is more reasonable to have religious beliefs than to be an atheist. It is totally acceptable to reject religious belief. But, for Phillips, if you reject the belief in God you will not

²¹ Cf. PHILLIPS, »Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism, and magic«, 196. That's why he never accepted to be called a fideist.

²² Cf. PHILLIPS, *Philosophy's Cool Place* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 46.

²³ PHILLIPS, *Faith After Foundationalism*, 126.

²⁴ WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*, § 105; cf. VON STOSCH, *Glaubensverantwortung*, 97–100.

²⁵ PHILLIPS, *Religion without Explanation*, 43.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 167.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

only reject a belief, but a whole world picture, even a way of life. »To reject God's claim is not to reject one of many competing claims in a way of life; it is to reject a way of life as such.«²⁸ That's why the question whether God exists is not only a theoretical question and why it is not possible to answer it by philosophical arguments.²⁹ Only if religious beliefs are torn from their scriptural contexts is it possible to treat them as theoretical claims or statements of fact.³⁰

But if religious beliefs are no statements of fact and if they do not make theoretical claims, how can it be understood that the believers claim the truth of what they believe? Is the conception of Phillips really describing the reality or does he give an anti-realist interpretation of religious belief which is not acceptable for most theists?

3. Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism?

Confronted with this question Phillips always insisted that he does not want to maintain an anti-realist position. He wants to offer an alternative beyond such distinctions. As does Wittgenstein, he maintains that distinctions like the one between realism and anti-realism or between cognitive and non-cognitive »are artificial and illuminate nothing«.³¹ »Phillips has argued for a position which says ›yes‹ to realism in religion, but ›no‹ to the way realism is understood by most philosophers who argue for realism in relationship to religious beliefs.«³² There are some similarities between Phillips' point of view and internal realism.³³ But Phillips rejects this position as well because he does not want to defend any ›ism‹ at all, and for him the distinction between external and internal realism once again is a distinction which does not clarify anything.³⁴

His position is just that the dispute between the believer and the atheist »is not a dispute over a matter of fact«.³⁵ The reason for this position is that the belief in God is not a belief in a matter of fact like the fact that I am now sitting at my computer and writing this article or like the fact that

²⁸ PHILLIPS, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, 231.

²⁹ Cf. PHILLIPS, *Religion without Explanation*, 181: »Does God exist? The worst misunderstanding is to think that this question is a theoretical one. Not far behind is the belief that philosophers should be able to answer it.«

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.* 184.

³¹ PHILLIPS, »Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism, and magic«, 192.

³² KURTÉN, »A joint feature«, 95.

³³ See *ibid.* 105.

³⁴ Cf. PHILLIPS, »Philosophy and theology – too close for comfort. A reply to Tage Kurtén«, in *D.Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion*, ed. SANDERS, 112.

³⁵ PHILLIPS, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, 17.

Angela Merkel is the chancellor of Germany. For Phillips, it is obvious that believing in God does not only change my knowledge of a matter of fact. »Coming to see that there is a God involves seeing a new meaning in one's life, and being given a new understanding.«³⁶ And this new understanding is not a purely theoretical understanding. Phillips even states that there »is no theoretical understanding of the reality of God« at all.³⁷ That is why Phillips has the opinion that the dispute of a believer and a non-believer is not »like two people who disagree about the existence of unicorns«.³⁸

But is this observation really true? Surely, the disputes between believers and non-believers often are not disputes on matters of fact. Wittgenstein shows in his *Lectures on religious belief* how a believer in the last judgement and a non-believer can talk about completely different things while using the same notions. Wittgenstein wants to show that a believer plays other language games than a non-believer and that he has a different world picture. Moreover, he wants to stress that for many believers the belief in the last judgement is deeply rooted in their way of life. If an atheist does not consider the grammatical function of the belief in the last judgement, she will not understand the believer. Then, they will not succeed in finding common language games to express their differences and their dispute will be doomed to failure.

By this description Wittgenstein does not want to say that believers and non-believers generally do not understand each other and that they cannot have a dispute on truth claims or on cognitive statements on the real. He just shows an often surprising problem. Believers and non-believers often do not speak of the same things though using the same notions. This is often the case, not always, and it is not necessarily the case. Phillips seems to disagree here.³⁹ Perhaps he is not always aware of the fact that it contradicts his own Wittgensteinian approach to claim that a theoretical understanding of the reality of God is impossible. Such statements establish a theory on religious belief and contradict the descriptive account he himself defends.⁴⁰ They lead to the impression that Phillips does not

³⁶ Ibid. 18.

³⁷ Ibid. 26.

³⁸ Ibid. 85.

³⁹ Cf. PHILLIPS, *Religion without Explanation*, 166.

⁴⁰ That's why John Hick pretends that Phillips' apparent description in reality is »a proposal for a radical new interpretation of religious utterances« (J. HICK, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990], 98). Perhaps this proposal may correspond to the attitude of a minority of religious believers and it has a certain value for them (cf. C. INSOLE, »A Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion – or a philosophy of Wittgensteinian religion?«, *Heythrop Journal* 39 [1998], 155). But even if it can be important and helpful to stress the expressive moments of religious beliefs, »[t]here is

respect the external reality of God and claims a metaphysical atheism or anti-realism.⁴¹ Although Phillips rejects this accusation, his fight against all sorts of realism – even internal realism – makes it sometimes difficult to see how he avoids the alternative between realism and anti-realism. When he maintains that the claim to eternity is just a mode of judging life and not a claim about the truth of an external reality,⁴² he seems to misunderstand the grammar of this religious belief because especially the belief in eternity has a cognitive and realistic meaning for most religious believers.

However, this problematic tendency of his thinking should not lead us to call Phillips an anti-realist⁴³ and it is not founded in Wittgenstein's philosophy, but on a one-sided or at least misleading interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Lectures on religious belief*. Although I wonder whether Wittgenstein can be used for the defense of a realist philosophy of religion in the doctrinal sense,⁴⁴ he certainly is not an anti-realist. For him it was obvious that many religious beliefs have a referential character and that religious believers want to refer to external realities. He just stresses that this insight is trivial and does not help to understand anything.⁴⁵ For Wittgenstein, you always have to be aware of the expressive and regulative components of religious belief without forgetting its cognitive elements. Thus, he is not advocating a cognitive or a non-cognitive approach to religious belief, but

no escaping the cognitive component of many religious beliefs and utterances« (ibid. 152).

⁴¹ Cf. E.V. THOMAS, »Wittgensteinian methodology and religious belief«, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (1999), 266; A. KEIGHTLEY, *Wittgenstein, grammar and God* (London: Epworth Press, 1976), 136: »Phillips is an ›atheist‹ in the sense that his analyses deny a concept of ›God‹ which includes the idea that ›God‹ refers to something which is ›there‹ whether people believe in Him or not.«

⁴² Cf. PHILLIPS, *Death and Immortality* (London/Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1970), 49: »Eternity is not an extension of this present life, but a mode of judging it. Eternity is not *more* life, but this life seen under certain moral and religious modes of thought.«

⁴³ Cf. to this topic the illuminating contributions of P. HORN and M. RODGERS in this volume.

⁴⁴ Cf. J.W. CARLSON, »Wittgenstein and philosophy of religion. An application of emergence themes in History of philosophy in the making«, in *History of philosophy in the making*, ed. L.J. THRO (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 269; M. SCOTT and A. MOORE, »Can theological realism be refuted?«, *Religious Studies* 33 (1997).

⁴⁵ Cf. WITTGENSTEIN, *Wittgenstein's Nachlass. The Bergen electronic edition*. In cooperation with Oxford University Press on CD-Rom, ed. Wittgenstein-Archiv der Universität Bergen (Oxford 2000), Item 116, 345: »Wenn Einer sagt, er glaubt an Gott, so ist das eine ganz undeutliche Mitteilung. ›Aber‹ ›glauben‹ heißt doch einfach: ›für wahr halten!‹ – Ja, es heißt für wahr halten, und mit dieser Definition ist *auch* nichts erklärt, was uns interessiert.«

he shows that you always have to be aware of both of these elements of belief if you want to understand something.⁴⁶

4. Foundation of Religious Belief?

But if it is true that Wittgenstein wants to show a perspective beyond realism and anti-realism (3.) and if it is true that he does not want philosophy to do any form of apologetics for religious belief (2.), is it possible in a Wittgensteinian approach to give any sort of foundation of religious belief? The answer from Phillips seems quite clear. He denies many times the possibility of any justification or foundation of religious belief and any need for it. »That is the thematic idea of Phillips' work on religion: the belief in God is not *logically* subject of being defended as a rational hypothesis. To believe is *eo ipso* to effect a transformation in the way that one lives. And if one tries to justify this belief as an objective hypothesis, the result will be a conclusion that has lost its power to change us.«⁴⁷ Thus, Phillips does not only reject philosophical foundations of religious beliefs, but any kind of foundation which treats belief as an objective hypothesis. Theology like philosophy is understood as grammar in Phillips' Wittgensteinian approach. So he only »looks for the differences that attend the sense of what we say and think about God, as opposed to what we say and think about other things«⁴⁸ and he does not raise the question of God's existence. »The question of God's existence, in other words, is internal to the grammar of faith; and it is settled by choosing to abide personally in the guidance that conceptual truths about God bring into one's life. [...] The actual existence of God, like the actual existence of numbers, is found in the *actual* practice of the activity that goes with believing in God or in believing in numbers.«⁴⁹ Indeed, in Phillips there is no possibility to give a justification for religious beliefs which leaves the context of religious language games and the religious ways of life. Only in the language-game-practice can you get access to religious belief and be convinced by it.

Is it possible to give a sort of foundation of religious belief which takes into account this special view of religious beliefs? Is it possible for Phillips that not philosophy, but theology tries to give a foundation of religious

⁴⁶ Cf. J. CHURCHILL, »Wittgenstein on the phenomena of belief«, *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984), 139; B.R. CLACK, »Wittgenstein and expressive theories of religion«, *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 40 (1996), 48–50, esp. 58.

⁴⁷ J.H. WHITTAKER, »D.Z. Phillips and reasonable belief«, in *Ethics of belief: Essays in tribute to D.Z. Phillips*, ed. E.T. LONG and P. HORN (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 120.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 121.

⁴⁹ WHITTAKER, »D.Z. Phillips and reasonable belief«, 125–126.

belief? Phillips emphasizes that the philosopher is not the guardian of faith, but the guardian of grammar. »The theologian, however, is the guardian of Faith«,⁵⁰ Phillips states. How can theology fulfil this task? Is it enough just to describe the use of language or can theology give reasons for religious belief? Phillips is very cautious in this context perhaps because he wants to be a philosopher and he is not so sure in theological matters. But I think there is at least one interesting point he shows without deciding whether theology can be more than grammar.

The task of theologians could be to translate between religious and naturalistic language games and to show that there are intuitions in non-religious contexts which cannot be appreciated without religious belief. For example you cannot appreciate the promise of eternal love which is given by unconditional love without switching into religious language games. Phillips wants to illustrate »how seeing that there is a God in this context is synonymous with seeing the possibility of eternal love«. ⁵¹ So if you see at an existential level the possibility of eternal love, a theologian can explain that this trust can be translated as the trust in a being which rescues from death and gives eternity to love. Phillips does not elaborate on this possibility. But I am not sure whether he would exclude it.

Another possibility of a Wittgensteinian foundation of religious belief could be the distinction between primitive language games and basic propositions which constitute these language games on the one hand, and second order-language games and second-order-propositions on the other hand. This strategy is followed by the philosophers and theologians who call themselves Reformed epistemologists and Phillips comprehensively dealt with this possibility.

5. Phillips, Reformed Epistemology and the Danger of Relativism

The most important idea of Alvin Plantinga and other Reformed philosophers Phillips deals with is the idea that there are certain basic propositions and certain elements of our world picture which cannot be rejected within our epistemic conditions. Plantinga tries to show that some religious beliefs are such basic propositions and maintains that it makes no sense to doubt them. For example it can become self-evident for a religious believer that God has spoken to him. Then, it simply makes no sense to give a foundation of this experience because the experience is more fundamental than each foundation of it. He tries to show different basic propositions

⁵⁰ PHILLIPS, *Faith After Foundationalism*, xvi–xvii.

⁵¹ PHILLIPS, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, 21.

which constitute the ground of religious belief and which can be used to reconstruct its foundation.

Phillips criticizes two points of Plantinga's approach. First of all, he rejects its tendency of psychologism. In Phillips' eyes, Plantinga puts too much »emphasis on the individual's psychology instead of on the practice«. ⁵² Instead of accepting the actual practice of religious believers as ground of all reasoning about religious belief, Plantinga tries to select some basic propositions which are most fundamental for religious believers. Phillips thinks that this selection leads to a psychological misunderstanding of religious belief because the personal feeling of having unchallengeable opinions becomes more important than the actual practice of religious believers.

If this was the only point of criticism, one could think that some sort of foundation of religious belief could be possible for Phillips. You just have to change the Reformed attention from psychologically rooted basic propositions to the language game practice of religious believers. But Phillips has a second point of criticism which shows that he wants to reject each form of foundation of religious belief. He reproaches Plantinga with the observation that for Reformed epistemologists »basic propositions in noetic structures are thought of as the *foundations* of those structures«. ⁵³ That's why Phillips concludes: »Plantinga is still in the grip of the foundationalism he set out to criticise.« ⁵⁴ Unlike the Reformed philosophers Phillips does not want to find propositions which can be used as starting points for theological reflections. Phillips wants to invite us to give up any search for basic propositions or starting points of argumentation, because such hinge propositions logically cannot be isolated from their surrounding. They are held fast by all that surrounds them. ⁵⁵

For Phillips, it makes no sense to give evidence of the hypothesis that certain religious beliefs are at the bottom of our language-game-practice and, furthermore he thinks, that it is impossible to doubt them without rejecting parts of our own world picture which we do not want to lose. Even the elementary propositions of mathematics can be doubted and alternative ways of calculating on other planets cannot be ruled out. This does not mean that we should doubt them or the naturalness of the way we calculate. ⁵⁶ In Phillips' opinion, we simply cannot ask whether such practices or whether a certain world picture is the right one. ⁵⁷ At least we

⁵² PHILLIPS, *Faith After Foundationalism*, 27. For Phillips, this leads to »relativism and psychologism« (ibid.).

⁵³ Ibid. 38.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 29.

⁵⁵ Cf. ibid. 40.

⁵⁶ Cf. ibid. 32.

⁵⁷ Cf. ibid. 55: »For Wittgenstein, it would make no sense to speak of establishing a

cannot find reasonable criteria to answer this question because we need the world picture in order to find these criteria.

But as we are aware of a plurality of world pictures in religious matters, it becomes difficult to see how Phillips avoids relativism when maintaining that we cannot give reasons for our world picture. How would Phillips judge a religion of cannibals or the justification of war and violence by a religious world picture? Do we have to accept such ways of life as the given which stands with the same right beside our own convictions?

Phillips denies this relativism, but he does not give arguments for this denial which are independent of his own religious belief. For example, he asks himself how to evaluate the belief of someone who thinks that God wants him to kill his only son. Why is it impossible that this murder is the will of God? Why could God not want me to kill my child? The reasons Phillips gives to answer these questions are purely grammatical ones. He just states »that we should not know what it would *mean* for God to ask anyone to sacrifice his child«. ⁵⁸ Or another example: »If a person so placed said that God had told him to chase the English out of Wales, he would be wrong; this could not be the will of God.« ⁵⁹ But the reason here again is a grammatical one. Our grammar does not allow that it is the will of God to chase or even to kill all English. But there are people who think that their God wants them to kill innocents. Their grammar obviously is different from ours. And we need criteria to evaluate such differences. We have to choose the criteria in such contexts which are better or more reasonable. Otherwise the belief in certain values and insights in the being of God becomes arbitrary.

Phillips insists that the »absolute beliefs are the criteria, not the object of assessment«. ⁶⁰ He thinks that there cannot be a list of criteria which religious beliefs should fulfil. He is completely aware that there are difficult situations of antagonism and conflict. But he is certain that philosophy alone will not help in these situations. ⁶¹ This remark is rather astonishing. I do not know any philosopher or theologian who thinks that philosophy or theology alone could solve all problems in the confrontation of religions.

world-picture or of asking whether our world-picture is the right one. For Plantinga, however, these questions concerning our pictures of the world, our noetic structures, are fundamental.«

⁵⁸ PHILLIPS, *Concept of Prayer*, 153.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 156.

⁶⁰ PHILLIPS, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, 90; cf. EIBACH-DANZEGLOCKE, *Theologie als Grammatik?*, 72: »[S]o etwas wie einen Kriterienkatalog für religiöses Sprechen kann es für Phillips nicht geben.«

⁶¹ Cf. PHILLIPS, *Concept of Prayer*, 160: »They would say that I was blind to the truth, and I should say the same of them. Of one thing I am certain: in this context, philosophy alone will not bring the blind to see.«

The question is not whether it alone can help, but whether it can contribute to a solution. And to me this contribution seems to be impossible if you do not accept the possibility of external criteria of religious belief.

In the following I want to propose some ideas how to establish philosophical criteria of religious belief. For this enterprise I use the method and some insights of the later Wittgenstein, and I even think that I suggest a rather Wittgensteinian approach, although Phillips probably would not accept it. But without such an establishment of external criteria of truth or reasonableness in religious beliefs there is no way of escaping the accusations of relativism and fideism.

6. Form and Structure of Religious Utterances

My approach is inspired by an idea of Kant. When Kant in the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* searches for a principle of all morality, he takes the form of moral judgements as criterion for their possible contents. I will try to pursue a similar way of searching foundations of formal criteria for the contents of religious beliefs. In a Wittgensteinian, descriptive account I try to show some characteristics of religious utterances. By these insights in the form of the utterances of religious belief I propose some criteria to judge them which should be accepted by all people who are aware of the structure of religious beliefs. Naturally, I cannot force anybody to accept these criteria and from a Wittgensteinian perspective it is obvious that you cannot give an unshakeable foundation of them. But the reasons I propose are not dependent on the contents of certain religious beliefs. That's why I call them in a certain sense external. So the proposed criteria should be acceptable for believers of all kind of religions and for non-believers as well. At least they should be acceptable for those who accept my description of the grammar of religious belief.

The first observation I want to elaborate on is the following: If you examine the form or structure of religious beliefs, you will realize immediately that they have cognitive-propositional and regulative-expressive elements which cannot be reduced to each other.

On the one hand, religious beliefs are an expression of a certain attitude towards the world. These beliefs change my attitude towards and my perception of the whole reality. They have a regulative meaning for the way I deal with people, and how I act in my everyday life. They represent last orientations which cannot be understood without correlation to practice. If, for instance, a Christian recites the whole Credo, but at the same time kills all – in his opinion unpleasant – people with the slogan ›Christ is the lord!‹ most of us would not accept to call him a Christian. At least he would have a completely different idea of the meaning of the lordship of Christ than

most of us. Nonetheless, on the propositional level he could agree with most of our religious beliefs. Thus, it is not enough to concentrate on the cognitive-propositional dimension of religious belief.

On the other hand, religious beliefs have unrelinquishable encyclopaedical contents, which cannot be ignored when paying attention to the pragmatism of religious beliefs. Although religious beliefs give orientation and rule lives, they still refer to an extramental reality and often have a cognitive-propositional character.

This acceptance of both components of religious beliefs is – at least nearly – not debated any more in the current discussion of philosophy of religion. However, the question whether one of the components is considered as (epistemically) basic is controversially discussed. For the basicity of the encyclopaedical level one could name that the life ruling character of religious beliefs only works if its cognitive-propositional truth is believed. Only if a religious believer really believes that God exists, this belief will change her life. Thus, the orientative power of religious belief seems to be dependent on its cognitive-propositional content.

Correct as this observation is in general, it is inaccurate to deduce the epistemic basicity of the cognitive-propositional level from it. For – as the example with the battle call ›Christ is the lord!‹ already indicates – the impact of the cognitive-propositional content also depends on the pragmatic role of its articulation. As Phillips rightly highlights again and again, the semantic potentials of religious beliefs cannot be developed without looking at the precise language game and situation in which they have been articulated.⁶² At the same time one can observe that religious beliefs are so deeply rooted in our system of belief that they cannot be disproved easily by good reasons. Sometimes they even seem to play a constitutive role for what we are ready to accept as good reasons. Hence, there is a lot to be said for the deliberation – also maintained by Phillips – to compare them to hinge propositions.

If religious beliefs could be classified in this way, they would be like other hinge propositions epistemically basic. My belief in God would be warranted, if it was embedded in my view of life and my behaviour in such a way that it completely regulated them. The result of such a strategy would be that I would not know any more how to doubt God's existence. Such a consideration could be easily changed into a lamentation concerning the disbelief nowadays and be a draft for a touching sermon of conversion. Besides all the charm, which those suggestions have, the underlying conception however leads – especially concerning religious beliefs – straightly into an aporia. I want to go into detail about this in the following.

⁶² Cf. VON STOSCH, *Glaubensverantwortung*, 16–29.

The feature of unshakability of religious belief does not imply that we would not be capable of reasonable doubts. But such an incapability should be realized if we want to equate religious beliefs with hinge propositions.

At this point there has occasionally been objected that a world-picture-internal doubt on elementary religious beliefs is not possible.⁶³ From this point of view doubts are an indication of the absence of assurance of faith and therefore an indication of the fact that religious beliefs have lost their regulative, world-picture-constitutive status. Concerning this thought it is certainly proper that doubts can be a sign of religious beliefs having lost their regulative status. However, there are acts of faith, which include these doubts without invalidating the regulative status of the religious components of one's world picture. As an example one could mention the act of praying, which certainly has a constitutive status for a whole set of religious beliefs.

It seems to me that in our context it is an important characteristic of Jewish and Christian prayers that you can doubt essential religious beliefs and even despair without them losing their regulative status. »Also the prayer has been affected by doubt. It cannot and may not deny its place of living; the faith founded by praying cannot abolish the doubts in God. The prayer is the place of truth, the hour of truth – and precisely therefore not a place of unquestionable and questionless assurance.«⁶⁴ Thus, prayer is not the removal of doubts concerning fundamental religious beliefs. In contrast, it rather helps to articulate those doubts without invalidating the world-picture-constitutive meaning of religious beliefs. It would be a great misunderstanding of religious beliefs to consider them undoubtable in their regulative status. On the contrary, it seems – as the example of the doubtfully-searching praying man shows – to be their characteristic to have regulative status without abolishing the internal possibility of doubting.

The peculiarity of religious beliefs seems to consist of being able to have all characteristics of world-picture-constitutive, regulative beliefs without taking part in their internal undeniability. Indeed it is possible to doubt all sort of regulative sentences regarding their semantic meaning. But in those – internally not doubtable – regulative sentences, such a doubt results in either a pure *paper doubt*, or the doubt leads to a change of status heading towards encyclopaedical belief. For instance, the proposition ›That is a hand‹ gains temporarily an encyclopaedical status when pointing at one's own hand after a traffic accident. Usually such a regulative sentence is only doubtable in scepticism. Such a doubt can indeed be used methodically,

⁶³ Cf. BRÜMMER, »Wittgenstein and the anselmian project«, 446; VAN HERCK, »De Taak van de Godsdienstfilosofie«, 223.

⁶⁴ J. WERBICK, *Gebetsglaube und Gotteszweifel* (Münster: LIT, 2001), 32; my own translation.

but loses its power when used in real life, because it deprives itself of its own grammatical foundation. On the contrary, even without turning to a general scepticism and without being in extreme situations you can always internally doubt religious beliefs.

This internal questionability is, for example, shown in the act of praying. It shows that religious beliefs – because of their universal demand to state something about the last reality – do not endure anything which is not arrangeable with this demand. A religious proposition can only be valid, if it is arrangeable with everything we know about reality. Hence, problems emerge from two points of view. On the one hand, the religious view of life is questioned, when it is confronted with alternative ways of the overall interpretation of reality. This factual plurality of religious and non-religious views of life means that no view of life can be accepted unquestioned in its regulative importance.⁶⁵

On the other hand, religious beliefs are not only doubttable because of their factual plurality. Furthermore, they are doubttable, because their universal need of compatibility with our experiences makes it possible to question them again and again. As they want to be compatible with all experiences and all ideas of the world, doubt can never be forced to come to an end, because there can always be new ways of perception of reality. Or said in a more technical way: Religious beliefs represent last orientations in relation to the last reality. They want to refer to something unconditioned in a conditioned life and world. This correlation cannot be unambiguous because the unconditioned cannot be unambiguously expressed in the conditioned world. That's why in religious matters there is a never ending possibility and need of interpretation. And that's why doubt never can be excluded.⁶⁶

Thus, the strategy to explain religious beliefs as undoubtable parts of our world pictures not only fails because of the factual plurality of religious beliefs, but also because of their grammatical structure. From this it does not follow that religious beliefs do not have or should not have a constitutive role in our world pictures. It only reminds us of the contingency of this role. And the insight found in the contingency of the regulative status of

⁶⁵ However, there are other subjects without reasonable alternative approaches, for example the idea that the world did not exist before my birth. Perhaps in a certain discussion we will have no more arguments against this idea and – after three years in the dungeons of a king, who thinks that the world started with him – we will be so brittle that we would admit anything to him. But we cannot help calling such a king mad, while we take alternative religious or naturalistic interpretations of the (last) reality seriously.

⁶⁶ Cf. VON STOSCH, *Glaubensverantwortung*, 268–274; IDEM, »Was sind religiöse Überzeugungen?«, in *Was sind religiöse Überzeugungen*, ed. H. JOAS (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 124–139.

religious belief and in the contingency of religious language games leads us to the task of rational justification of religious belief.

I will not elaborate on this point because I have done so already several times⁶⁷ But the following insight already seems to me clear by these short reflections: At least regarding Christian religious beliefs, regulative and encyclopaedical elements depend and rely on each other. An irredeemable momentum of contingency inheres in them on the encyclopaedical as well as on the regulative level. Therefore, the articulation of religious belief needs rational responsibility. It is needless to say that from a Wittgensteinian perspective this effort for rational responsibility of religious belief has to refer to precise language games and situations.

7. Wittgensteinian Criteria of Religious Beliefs

The previous deliberations have already brought out two important criteria of religious beliefs: Firstly, the observation that religious beliefs cannot be reduced to their regulative–expressive or their cognitive–propositional dimension, and neither can one of these dimensions be seen as only epistemically basic. Secondly, the momentum of contingency in both dimensions of religious belief.

These two insights can be taken to establish some formal criteria of religious belief. At least they can help us against four cardinal misunderstandings of religious belief which I will call relativism, fundamentalism, fideism and rationalism.

Let's start with the explication why relativism is a misunderstanding of religious belief. *Relativism* makes the mistake to confound contingency with arbitrariness. But the task of reasoning is not made impossible through the insight into the contingency of religious belief. On the contrary, this insight enables reasoning and free choice in religion. Thus, it would be a relativistic misinterpretation to conclude from the necessarily given contingency of the regulative status of religious belief to its arbitrariness.

My description of the misunderstandings of *fundamentalism* also refers to the contingency of religious belief. Fundamentalism does not confound contingency with arbitrariness, but it tries to eliminate it. I propose to differentiate between an individual and a collective form of fundamentalism. The first one eliminates contingency by ignoring it. The second one eliminates it by violence. Both forms of fundamentalism are unreasonable because contingency is a grammatically rooted characteristic of religious belief which cannot be eliminated and should not be ignored. Thus, religious believers should be able to appreciate the contingency of religious belief.

⁶⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 106–110; IDEM, *Glaubensverantwortung*, 222–277.

In addition to this, the contingency of the regulative status of religious beliefs leads to the insight of the historical formation or shaping of religious beliefs. Only undeniably given elements of our world picture can be assumed without questioning the conditions of their evolution and formation. Therefore, religious believers should not only be aware of the contingency, but also aware of the shaping of their belief.

With regard to the firstly mentioned characteristics of religious belief, the following positions can be excluded: *Fideism* because it overemphasizes the regulative components of religious belief, and *rationalism* because it overemphasizes the cognitive-propositional character of religious belief. In this sense as rationalists can be identified philosophers like Swinburne and Mackie, Dawkins and Craig. Whether Phillips should be called a fideist is much less clear. But his philosophy could be taken as a root for theological fideism.

Besides the defense against relativism, fundamentalism, fideism and rationalism, there are some more traditional criteria for religious belief which should be accepted to prevent the meaning of belief from arbitrariness. First of all, internal consistency cannot be given up without losing the possibility to understand the cognitive meaning. But it is not sufficient to avoid only internal contradictions. Moreover, you should avoid external contradictions, i.e. religious believers should try to be coherent with beliefs that are generally accepted. As the claim of all religions deals with the whole reality, it would be a problem for the rationality of belief if it contradicted the general insights about reality. Surely, consistency and coherence is not enough. Wittgenstein reminds us of the importance of symmetry and plausibility of world pictures.⁶⁸ Their importance cannot be justified, but just be hinted at.

It is important to note for all mentioned criteria that they do not only concern the cognitive-propositional content of religious beliefs, but also their regulative dimension. To be able to appreciate this reference to practice implied by this appeal to the regulative dimension of religious beliefs, religious believers have to show why and how far their religious belief can be correlated with their (language game) practice. If this correlation within their world picture were doubtful, even on the regulative level, it would be a *petitio principii* to reveal these correlations only within their own world picture. Therefore, it is essential to demonstrate the correlation between the religious belief to the critics of religion and believers of another religion in their world pictures, seen as regulative.

Even if it were possible to demonstrate such correlations convincingly, there still would be the question, if the underlying adapted behaviours were adequate. Imagine, for instance, an atheist who realizes that behav-

⁶⁸ Cf. WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*, § 92.

ious which practice love and solidarity over and above death can be correlated with the Christian belief in resurrection. Imagine she accepted that this correlation was very convincing that the promises of love will only be fulfilled if God existed. Nonetheless, she could reject these promises and she could deny the solidarity with dead people because she does not make the experience of sense in this practice.

In my opinion the previous deliberations have already given some significant criteria for religious beliefs without mentioning ethical aspects. However, I do not want to exclude these aspects. An ethically meaningful criterion can be developed on the basis of the earlier mentioned insight into the fallibility and reversibility of ascriptions to meaning regarding to religious beliefs. Moreover, it follows from the fact that you only understand the regulative meaning of religious beliefs by turning your attention respectfully to the practice of the other. Thus, it is necessary to look carefully at the ideas of other people and it is irrational to form any sort of irreversible judgement on them – as long as this judgement is not necessary to prevent them from forming irreversible judgements on other people.

Although this criterion sounds rather technical, it shows why a crusade or act of terrorism is not a rationally possible way of interpreting religious beliefs. Naturally, this is not enough. But the criteria I have mentioned so far can already help to give a first orientation for the complicated discussion on the possibility of justification and evaluation of religious beliefs. Moreover, they do not only allow a sort of evaluation, but they offer an explanation for misleading religious beliefs. If you remember that religion is often understood as a practice which helps to cope with contingency, you can see why it is so threatening for many believers to accept the contingency of their beliefs. Does a contingent belief help against contingency? How can I stand the insight of the formation and contingency of a belief which claims something necessary and eternal?

Although these questions can lead to the rejection of the insight in the contingency of religious belief, people, who want to ignore it, do not realize the point of religious beliefs. Perhaps you can even say that convictions that do not accept their own contingency cannot be named as religious convictions any more because they idolize their own beliefs instead of trusting in God. Religious belief cannot eliminate its contingency, but it invites to a new perspective on contingency.

All the criteria I have mentioned will not be sufficient to show which religion is the most adequate. In a Wittgensteinian account such a result is not astonishing because of Wittgenstein's preference for a micrological method. Wittgenstein's attention to the particular does not allow a decision about the rationality of religions as a whole. If you adopt Wittgenstein's point of view *sub specie humanitatis* this renunciation of judgements from the point of nowhere is no disadvantage. It closes the way to a theology of

religions dealing with the relationship of the truth claims of religion. But it opens us for ways of comparative reasoning in between different religious beliefs.⁶⁹ And by this, it opens up the room for free choice and development which, at least for Christian belief, is the fundamental condition for a beneficial relationship to the real.

⁶⁹ As I already proposed several times I suggest bringing to an end the futile debate on options in the theology of religions and proceeding to Comparative Theology (cf. VON STOSCH, »Comparative theology as an alternative to the theology of religions«, in *Naming and thinking God in Europe today. Theology in global dialogue*, ed. N. HINTERSTEINER (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2007), 507–512. Thus, what general theories are not able to say, can sometimes be shown by the attention to the particular.