

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.