PHILLIPS, BARTH, AND THE CONCEPT OF GOD

I

According to D. Z. Phillips and certain others who pursue a Wittgensteinian approach to the philosophy of religion,\(^1\) we must reject the time-honored conception of the relation of philosophy to religion which sees the role of philosophy to be that of providing an extrinsic justification for religion (or, conversely, showing why it cannot be justified). It is thought that Wittgenstein’s reflections on religion have helped to show us that religious practices such as worshipping God and praying are language games and that a language game or form of life is “something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified.”\(^2\) “Our mistake,” Wittgenstein says, “is to look for an explanation where we ought to look at what happens as a ‘proto-phenomenon’. That is, where we ought to have said: this language-game is played.”\(^3\)

By applying this point about the logically primitive status of language games to religion, which he calls a family of language games, Phillips concludes that “there is no question of a general justification of religious belief, of giving religion a ‘sound foundation’.”\(^4\) This is not to say, however, that religious beliefs are not

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\(^4\) *The Concept of Prayer* (London, 1965), p. 27; cf. also *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (New York, 1971), pp. 123-124. (In the latter Phillips has conveniently collected several of his most important articles; I shall refer to it (rather than
or cannot be justified in terms of the criteria of rationality existing within religion (by which he seems to mean within a particular religion). Indeed, Phillips thinks that Peter Winch has provided what amounts to a prolegomenon to the philosophy of religion in arguing that such are the only relevant criteria by which to judge religious beliefs. He quotes Winch as having arrived at this point in saying that

criteria of logic are not a direct gift of God, but arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living or modes of social life. It follows that one cannot apply criteria of logic to modes of social life as such. For instance, science is one such mode and religion is another; and each has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself. So within science or religion actions can be logical or illogical...in religion it would be illogical to suppose that one could pit one's strength against God's.... But we cannot sensibly say that either the practice of science itself or that of religion is either illogical or logical; both are non-logical (F. P. E., p. 8).

If Phillips is right, this means that the adjudication of religious beliefs is the legitimate task of theology. But even here one must take care not to confuse theology properly understood with the spurious venture of "rational theology," which is an attempt to provide a philosophical foundation for religion. Properly understood, theology is the "grammar of religious discourse"; it deals with the matter of what can and cannot be said about God on the basis of criteria internal to religion (F. P. E., pp. 5-7). Thus, the language of the professional theologian differs from that of the ordinary believer only in its greater degree of complexity or maturity.

By the same token, the philosopher who wishes to address the

to the original articles) as "F. P. E.".) On the relation between religion and language games see ibid., pp. 64-66, 71. Phillips (and Malcolm) sometimes speaks as though (a) religion were a single form of life, an unfortunate move which seems to misrepresent Wittgenstein's concept. (E.g., see Patrick Sherry, "Is Religion a 'Form of Life'?," American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 9 (April, 1972), pp. 159-167.) Phillips also blurs the distinction between religion (in general) and a particular religion, though it is usually evident from the context that he has Christianity in mind (see his introduction to Religion and Understanding, D. Z. Phillips, ed. (Oxford, 1967), pp. 1-2). There are problems here, but for the present purposes I shall try to avoid them by assuming "the Christian religion" for most of the contexts in which he refers simply to "religion."