HYOSEOK KIM

D. Z. Phillips on Religious Language, Religious Truth, and God

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116

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Beyond Misunderstandings and Criticisms

Mohr Siebeck

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To Ingolf U. Dalferth
who taught me the power of distinction

Preface

This book is a revised version of my Ph.D. dissertation, "Toward a More Illuminating View of Religious Language, Religious Truth, and God: Examination of and Critical Reflection on D. Z. Phillips' Philosophy of Religion," submitted to Claremont Graduate University in the summer of 2020. This book would have not been completed without my Claremont teachers and the members of my dissertation committee.

First and foremost, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my doctoral advisor and dissertation chair, Professor Ingolf U. Dalferth, for his inspiration, guidance, and support. I will always admire his analytic mind and extensive knowledge of philosophy and theology. Among the many lessons that I have taken from him, the importance of making distinctions for philosophy and the integration of phenomenological, hermeneutical, and analytic approaches have had the greatest influence on my way of doing philosophy. It has been my great honor and pleasure to have the guidance of such an exemplary and kind scholar. It is to him that I dedicate this book.

In addition, I thank Dr. Randy Ramal whose warm encouragement and assistance were such a big help to an international student like me. He introduced me to Wittgenstein's philosophy. At the time I could not have imagined that I would write a dissertation on Wittgenstein's thought. I am also thankful to Professor Hartmut von Sass. He joined my dissertation committee at the last moment and generously approved my dissertation despite the difference between his interpretation of Phillips and mine.

There is one more member of my dissertation committee to whom I will always be grateful: Professor Anselm K. Min (1940–2020). He had been a member of my original dissertation committee but had to withdraw because of failing health. He was a true scholar with endless academic passion and a role model for Claremont's Korean students. I wish that he had lived to read my completed dissertation.

I am indebted more than I can acknowledge to Mohr Siebeck and its directors and staff – Elena Müller, Tobias Stäbler, Jana Trispel, Josephine Krönke, and all the staff members who are involved in the publication of this book but whose name I do not know – for their assistance, effort, and patience in publishing this book.

I could never have finished my Ph.D. in the United States without the sacrifices of my family in Korea. I have every reason to express my deep appreciation to my entire family and in-laws for their selflessness, love, and spiritual,

emotional, and financial support. I especially and sincerely thank my son, Ian, and my wife, Joung Hee, who walked through the valley of Ph.D. with me.

Hyoseok Kim

Table of Contents

Introduction

Dewi Zephaniah Phillips (1934–2006), known as D. Z. Phillips, was one of the most influential, ingenious, and perhaps provocative and controversial thinkers in the Anglo-American philosophy of religion. In particular, he is widely regarded as a leading proponent of a Wittgensteinian approach to the philosophy of religion. The present book will explore and critically discuss Phillips' philosophy of religion, focusing mainly on his view of religious language.

The problem of religious language, and the debate on the distinctiveness, cognitivity, or meaningfulness of religious language in particular,[1] has been one of the most fundamental and controversial issues in philosophy of religion and Christian theology.[2] Though there had been several debate precursors, it was with and after the positivist (verification and falsification) challenge of the 1930s to the 1950s that the debate became sharply focused within philosophy of religion and theology. According to the logical positivists' infamous "verification principle" that A. J. Ayer popularized, "a statement has literal meaning if and only if it expresses a proposition that is either analytically true (and thereby factually uninformative) or empirically verifiable."[3] For positivists,

[1] The main question of this debate would be "Does religious language have an objective or propositional truth value?" or "Is religious language ever capable of being objectively true or false?" Roughly speaking, one group of scholars (the realists or cognitivists) claim that religious claims are factual; that religious language can be used to make assertions or to frame sentences with a truth-value. The other group, usually called the non-cognitivists or non-realists, claims that religious language fulfills a quite different function or status, e.g., that religious statements are expressions of emotion; or that they represent a commitment to a policy of action or a lifestyle; or that they are ways of evoking disclosures by the use of symbols, and so on. See William P. Alston, "Religious Language," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William Wainwright (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 222, Mark Wynn, "Religious Language," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden (London: Routledge, 1995), 418–19, John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 82, and Ronald E. Santoni, introduction to *Religious Language and the Problem of Religious Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 11–41.

[2] John Hick says, "The debate between realist and non-realist understanding of religious language exposes the most fundamental of all issues in the philosophy of religion today." John Hick, "Religious Realism and Non-Realism: Defining the Issue," in *Is God Real?*, ed. Joseph Runzo (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 3.

[3] Michael Scott, *Religious Language* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 40–41.

then, all metaphysical assertions – religious utterances included – cannot be either true or false, and are thus cognitively meaningless. Antony Flew also issued the "falsification challenge" in 1950, the essence of which is as follows: statements about God like "God loves us as a father loves his children" are "compatible with any and every possible state of affairs in the world."[4] This means that nothing could possibly counter those statements. Thus, they are "unfalsifiable pseudo-statements."[5]

Many philosophers of religion and philosophical theologians attempted to respond to the verification and falsification challenge. One way to save religious language from the challenge was to argue that though religious language is not fact-stating, it is meaningful because it expresses feelings, attitudes, commitments, and the like. In his influential 1955 lecture, R. B. Braithwaite argued that religious utterances are "primarily declarations of adherence to a policy of action, declarations of commitment to a way of life."[6] For example, a Christian's assertion that God is love (*agape*) should be construed not as an assertion about the ontological nature of reality but as an expression of the speaker's intention to follow an agapeistic way of life.[7] Also, doctrines of Christianity, for Braithwaite, are not to be "taken as literally true as descriptive (true/false) locutions, but rather as 'stories'" which serve as a stimulus to moral actions.[8] J. H. Randall likewise claimed that religious language, which he called religious symbols, is both "*nonrepresentative* and *noncognitive*," in as much as religious symbols symbolize "what they themselves *do*, their peculiar functions."[9] R. M. Hare, too, admitted that religious statements cannot be factual assertions. For Hare, nevertheless, religious statements did function quite meaningfully as "*bliks*," a term he invented.[10] He did not define the term but in his stories it refers to "a fundamental attitude, stance, or presupposition that a person takes to the facts and/or the world."[11] Paul van Buren argued that

[4] Patrick Sherry, *Religion, Truth, and Language-Games* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1977), 10.

[5] Santoni, introduction to *Religious Language and the Problem of Religious Knowledge*, 33.

[6] R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 15.

[7] Ibid., 18; Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 121; Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 93.

[8] M. J. Charlesworth, *Philosophy and Religion: From Plato to Postmodernism* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2002), 139; Wynn, "Religious Language," 420.

[9] J. H. Randall, Jr., *The Role of Knowledge in Western Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1958), 114, quoted in Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 89–90.

[10] Antony Flew et al., "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. idem and Alasdair C. MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 99–103.

[11] Terrence W. Tilley, *Talking of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis of Religious Language* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 27.

religious language is to be interpreted "as statements which express, describe or commend a particular way of seeing the world, other men, and oneself, and the way of life appropriate to such a perspective."[12] Donald Evans claimed that religious talk of God is an "onlook," which expresses the speaker's attitude to God, leaving "the problem of the reference of religious talk of God unsolved."[13]

The positivist challenge was discredited mainly because of the weakness of its own principle and the later Wittgenstein's new view of "meaning." Yet, as Michael Scott writes, "worries about the meaningfulness of religious statements continued to exert a remarkable influence on work in the philosophy of religion."[14] Moreover, the clarification of the nature of religious language is even more crucial for people living in a religiously diverse society in today's era of advanced technology and science, in particular for avoiding or overcoming the conflicts between various religious traditions, and between religion and science. For example, if a Christian believes that the statement "Jesus Christ is the Son of God" is literally true in the same way as the proposition "George W. Bush is a son of George H. W. Bush" or the proposition "1+1=2" is true, then the believer would consider other religious traditions as inferior or simply false, and conflicts could arise. Also, for those who understand the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 as scientific or empirical accounts, religion and science would be seen as being in competition or at odds, as if they were on the same plane.

With that in mind, attempting to overcome the dichotomy between the view of religious language as fact-asserting (cognitive, realist) and as attitude-expressive (non-cognitive, non-realist), Phillips provides us with an interesting and insightful view of religious language, which this book attempts to present constructively and discuss critically. As I show later, for Phillips religious language is distinctive. It has a special grammar, one that is different in kind from that of empirical or scientific language. In order to understand the grammar and meaning of religious language, we have to examine the context of its use. By paying attention to absolute (regulative), pictorial, grammatical, expressive (confessional) aspects of religious language, Phillips shows us the distinctiveness of religious language which should not be confused with empirical/scientific language, without losing the sight of the connection between religion and other aspects of human life.

The exploration of Phillips' view of religious language will necessarily entail the examination of his position on other closely related topics, such as philosophical method, religious truth, and God, for the following reasons. First,

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[12] Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel: Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 156, quoted in Tilley, *Talking of God*, 30.

[13] Tilley, *Talking of God*, 58, 61.

[14] Scott, *Religious Language*, 45–46.

Phillips' philosophical method, or way of doing philosophy, needs to be introduced and examined both since the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, of which Phillips is a leading proponent, is not a matter of accepting Wittgenstein's theory or system (if he even has one), but of following his attitude or way of doing philosophy, and since Phillips' view of religious language, religious truth, and God is none other than the result of his attempt at practicing his conception of philosophy in regard to religious issues. Also, as will be seen below, Phillips' criticism of the problematic dichotomies (realism/nonrealism, fact/attitude) is also closely connected to his view of philosophy's task as description and contemplation.

Second, the problem of religious language is inseparably tied to that of religious truth, since one's judgment of truth/falsity of a given religious statement or utterance would depend on that person's understanding of the nature of religious language. If one regards religious language as fact-asserting, that person would think that religious truth must be propositional.[15] In fact, when many analytic philosophers of religion discuss a religious statement, they consider it as if it were an empirical proposition. They thus simply ask whether the statement is true or false, without considering its distinctive nature, genre, context, discourse, and practice from which the statement came, or the personal and existential involvement of the speaker. But, for instance, if that sentence came from a novel, to simply ask whether it is true or false would be a misplaced question.

Likewise, one's view of religious language would affect that person's understanding or concept of God, and vice versa. One who believes in an anthropomorphic god would literally accept anthropomorphic expressions of God in the Bible without any difficulty, whereas one who objects to such a conception would attempt to interpret those expressions in different ways. For Paul Tillich, for instance, God is being-itself, and as such is beyond the subject-object structure in the world within which human language only works adequately. Thus, religious language, or more precisely every concrete statement about God, is not a direct and proper statement but points beyond itself to something else, namely, God as being-itself; in this sense, Tillich argues, religious language is symbolic. In a similar vein, many philosophers and theologians point out that religious language is to be construed primarily as analogical, symbolic, poetic, metaphorical, and so on.

The main purpose of this book is therefore to offer a constructive presentation and critical discussion of Phillips' view not only of religious language but also of philosophy, religious truth, and God. I will first attempt to grasp and present Phillips' position as correctly and thoroughly as possible, since all too

[15] The view that "truth is a property of propositions such that a proposition is true if and only if the state of affairs to which it refers is as the proposition asserts it to be; otherwise it is false." Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 114–15.

frequently it has been grossly misunderstood and has attracted often unwarranted criticism from various sides. In doing so, I will endeavor to resolve some misunderstandings and refute undue criticisms of his position. In critically evaluating his position, I will also make some suggestions concerning directions in which Phillips' view might and ought to be further developed.

To that end, Chapter 1 sets the stage by introducing Phillips' philosophical method or way of doing philosophy, which he calls descriptive and contemplative. Focusing on the central notions in his philosophy, such as description, contemplation, grammar, neutrality, and possibility, I sketch out his descriptive and contemplative conception of philosophy. I also address scholarly debates on the alleged shift from description to contemplation in Phillips' way of doing philosophy. One question the discussion of Phillips' view of philosophy poses is whether descriptive or contemplative philosophy could legitimately involve reforming; this is the first one among several questions which the final chapter examines in greater detail.

Chapter 2 explores Phillips' view of religious language. It begins by examining his attempt to maintain the balance between the distinctiveness of religious language and its relation to other, non-religious aspects of human life. It asks: In what sense does Phillips understand religious language to be distinctive? To that end, it begins by discussing one of his central contentions: that the meaning of language is determined in the context of its use. The chapter then moves on to specific characters of religious language: absolute (regulative), pictorial (religious pictures), grammatical, and expressive (confessional). Since Phillips holds that religious language is expressive, he has been often charged of an attitude-expressivist. This charge and his response to it are examined, too. Two problems with his view of religious language are introduced here for further critical discussions in the final chapter: the inexpressibility of God and the limits of human language, and the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical.

Chapter 3 examines Phillips' view of religious truth. First, it discusses his context-dependent notion of truth according to which not only the meaning but also the criteria of truth are to be found within the context in question. It then turns to his account of the personal (confessional, spiritual) character of religious truth, according to which religious truth is personal in the sense that it is a matter of personal decision and that it regulates a believer's whole life. Next, the chapter addresses the charge of relativism and his response to it, focusing on the role of a religious community and of the connections between religious beliefs and other aspects of human life; they function as criteria preventing his view from falling into individualistic relativism according to which anything goes. The charge of arbitrariness and Phillips' reply – namely his account not of the arbitrariness but of the radical contingency of our epistemic framework – are examined, too. The discussion of this chapter leads to the question of

whether and in what way we can decide the truth of our framework or worldview itself – which the final chapter addresses further.

Chapter 4 explores Phillips' discussion of the reality of God. It distinguishes between his negative analysis, which attempts to show what the reality of God does not amount to, and his positive analysis, which attempts to show what it amounts to. For the negative analysis, the examination focuses on his persistent emphasis on the difference between the reality of God and the reality of physical objects, and his rejection of metaphysical conceptions of God. As for the positive analysis, the chapter investigates his elucidation of the existence of God as necessary existence, his equation of God's reality with God's divinity, and his notion of God as Spirit. It then considers Phillips' rejection of the charge of being a Feuerbachian reductionist, and his attempt to go beyond the dichotomy between realism and nonrealism. The examination of Phillips' accounts of the reality of God leads us into the further discussion of whether Phillips is faithfully describing Christian understanding of the reality of God and whether he is prescribing his preferred notion of God.

Chapter 5, in which all the critical questions raised in the previous chapters are taken up again, consists of two parts. The first part addresses common criticisms of Phillips' notion of the neutrality of contemplative philosophy. The first such criticism is that despite his claim to neutrality, he is in effect a revisionist or a reformer who prescribes rather than describes. The response to that critique shows that Wittgensteinian description, which Phillips employs, does have prescriptive force and thus the charge of revision or prescription could be less serious than is often thought. In terms of Phillips' allegedly "one-sided diet," namely, his Kierkegaardian-Weilian reading of Christianity, the chapter suggests that that reading needs not be taken as *the* grammar of religious beliefs; rather, Phillips offers it as an alternative account in his positive task of showing what religious belief does or may mean. Nevertheless, Phillips' overreliance on that form of spirituality sometimes makes his accounts of religious beliefs less persuasive.

The second such criticism examines whether the kind of neutrality that Phillips pursues is as attainable or essential to contemplative philosophy as he thinks it to be. It suggests that while his critics tend to take his notion of neutrality as a view from nowhere, it is better understood as "trying to go nowhere." In other words, "the vantage point" of contemplative philosophy is better construed not as an Archimedean point but as a third perspective from which a philosopher is looking for a way of describing the pros and cons of both the affirmation and the rejection of a position.

The second part of the fifth chapter discusses in what direction Phillips' position can and needs to be further developed. First, in terms of religious language, I will argue that Phillips' philosophy needs to involve more philosophical reflections on the structural inadequacies of human language, how language works in our talk of God, and, in this regard, the metaphorical character

of religious language. Second, in terms of religious truth, I will explore two ways of deciding on the truth or rationality of a whole conceptual framework or a worldview as such, despite the radical contingency of our framework: first, we can criticize or reject a framework by means of our context-internal criteria; second, the truth of a given worldview can be verified in an experiential or practical way. Finally, in terms of the reality of God, I will point out that Phillips' account of the reality of God does not take account of the trinitarian conception of God, which is central to Christianity. Philosophers of religion following Phillips' way are thus invited to pay more careful attention to and elucidate the grammar of trinitarian language used not only in Christian theology but also in Christian practices.

In terms of existing literature on Phillips, it would hardly be possible to provide a full list of them, since almost every book on religious language or Anglo-American philosophy of religion deals with his thought or, at least, mentions his name. However, it is regrettable and unfortunate that many of them misunderstand his position, construing it as attitude-expressivist, non-cognitivist, non-realist, or even atheist. Nevertheless, in regard to the topic of the present book, I found some literature that is worth mentioning and to which I am indebted for my understanding of Phillips. Peter Bloemendaal's *Grammars of Faith: A Critical Evaluation of D. Z. Phillips's Philosophy of Religion*[16] and Mikel Burley's *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life: Wittgenstein and D. Z. Phillips*[17] provide not only good introductions to but also comprehensive analyses of Phillips' thought. In particular, as far as I know, to date the former is the only book that focuses on Phillips alone. Asle Eikrem's *Being in Religion: A Journey in Ontology from Pragmatics through Hermeneutics to Metaphysics*[18] also needs to be mentioned, in that Eikrem not only provides a brilliant analysis of Phillips but also attempts a creative dialogue between Wittgensteinian and phenomenological/hermeneutical traditions. Critically relating Phillips and Paul Ricoeur to each other, he systematically attempts to integrate their views on religious language into a coherent and comprehensive conceptual framework in the light of Lorenz Puntel's metaphysics. Of course, though I learnt a lot from these three books, I do not agree with all that they say. How I agree and disagree with them will become clear below, as our discussions proceed.

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[16] Peter F. Bloemendaal, *Grammars of Faith: A Critical Evaluation of D. Z. Phillips's Philosophy of Religion* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006).

[17] Mikel Burley, *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life: Wittgenstein and D. Z. Phillips* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

[18] Asle Eikrem, *Being in Religion: A Journey in Ontology from Pragmatics through Hermeneutics to Metaphysics* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

There are two collections of essays worth mentioning. First, *D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses*,[19] edited by Andy Sanders, consists of critical essays by six philosophers and theologians on Phillips' work and six extensive responses by Phillips himself. This is a valuable resource for studies on Phillips, in that we can more clearly grasp his position from his direct response to each critique. Also, we find his most recent and developed thought in this collection, which was published one year after Phillips' sudden death. Second, *The Contemplative Spirit: D. Z. Phillips on Religion and the Limits of Philosophy*,[20] edited by Ingolf Dalferth and Hartmut von Sass, is also an important resource for Phillips studies. Through a dialogue between Claremont scholars who were former students of Phillips and thus understand his thought well and European scholars mostly from phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions, this book provides more comprehensive analyses of his thought. Of course, there are other books and essays that provide insightful analyses of the thought of Phillips and/or Wittgenstein but are not mentioned here. Readers will find them below, as our discussion proceeds. Building on those precedent studies – both already mentioned and still to come – I present in this book my examination and critical discussion of Phillips' view of philosophy, religious language, religious truth, and God. Though they are valuable and insightful resources, as far as I know there has as yet been no in-depth study focused on the four areas in Phillips' thought. I hope that the present study can contribute to future studies by providing a more comprehensive understanding of his position, which can solve prevalent misunderstandings, and by making useful suggestions for directions in which Phillips' accounts of religious language, religious truth, and God can be further developed.

A word on the use of terms in what follows: "Religious language" and "religious truth" are themselves controversial terms and could be misleading. Of course, since the meaning of any term depends on the context of its use, perhaps it would not be appropriate to *define* the meaning of the terms in advance. So I will say only approximately in what senses those terms will be used. First, by "religious language" I mean primarily the religious use of language, or the use of language in the area of religion. In particular, I am interested more in our God-talk than in any language used in religion. I agree with Hans Penner that "religion is not an autonomous domain" and that "there is no such thing as religious language, as a sui generis language."[21] I also agree with William

[19] Andy F. Sanders, ed., *D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007).

[20] Ingolf U. Dalferth and Hartmut von Sass, eds., *The Contemplative Spirit: D. Z. Phillips on Religion and the Limits of Philosophy* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

[21] Hans H. Penner, "Why Does Semantics Matter?," in *Language, Truth, and Religious Belief: Studies in Twentieth-Century Theory and Method in Religion*, ed. Nancy Frankenberry and idem (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), 497, 504.

Alston that a language, such as English, German, or Korean, "contains resources for anything that its users have occasion for talking about."[22] Nevertheless, I think that certain use of language in religion is distinctive when it is used to refer to a religious entity, such as God, or a religious property, such as holiness, or a religious fact, such as "God loves humankind" (of course, such words as "entity," "property," and "fact" themselves need grammatical elucidation, as Phillips argues).[23] I do not justify the distinctiveness of religious language here, since the examination of whether and in what sense religious language is distinctive is an important part of this study. "Religious truth" is another controversial term, since some thinkers insist that religion does not have its own special sense of truth. In terms of the problem of "religious truth," I have two different kinds in mind. First, it refers to the problem of the truth or falsity of a religious sentence (religious statement or religious utterance). It relates to the question, "How can a religious statement be said to be true?" Second, it refers to the problem of truth or falsity of a given religious worldview as such. In what sense I am using the term will become clear in a given context. Finally, though I use the term "religious," my focus will be on Christianity, and this for two simple reasons: Christianity is the only religion with which I am familiar, and Phillips also regards himself as writing from within the Christian tradition.

[22] Alston, "Religious Language," 220.

[23] I borrowed these examples from Scott, *Religious Language*, viii and Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 82.

Index of Names

Subject Index