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Clarifying the Meaning of Religious Beliefs: An Examination of D. Z. Phillips's Critique of Modern Philosophy of Religion

This paper examines the problem religious beliefs through an examination of Dewi Z. Phillips's critique of modern philosophy of religion. Phillips argues that modern philosophy of religion is methodologically and conceptually confused in its understanding of religious belief. The predominant framework of investigation seeks to substantiate or explain religious beliefs either through the "hermeneutic of suspicion" or the "hermeneutic of recollection". The former hermeneutic aims to critically engage religious belief through rationalism; whereas, the latter hermeneutic attempts a more empathic account of religious beliefs as expressions of particular understandings of reality. According to Phillips, neither approach addresses philosophy of religion's proper task - to clarify the meaning of religious concepts within the context of the form of life of the believer - as confuse the relationship between belief and faith within religious discourse. These hermeneutical approaches view beliefs as foundational propositions that either substantiate the faith of the believer or are justified through the faith of the believer. Phillips proposes a new Wittgensteinian approach termed the "Hermeneutic of Contemplation". He argues that beliefs are concepts whose meaning is determined by the grammar of religious discourse and faith is the framework within which religious grammar is constructed. In order to clarify the meaning of religious beliefs a philosopher of religion must adopt a neutral standpoint from which they can observe how beliefs operate in the life of a believer and the grammar of their faith. I contend that Phillips rescues philosophy of religion from confusion by restoring the concept of faith to its proper place within religious discourse. His hermeneutic of contemplation demands that the philosopher avoid both fideistic and sceptical positions in order to embark on a path parallel to that which the believer travels, which begins with a break from rationalizing analytical frameworks and ends in wonder at the possibilities of discourse.