

# **FAITH AND PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY**

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D. Z. Phillips

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# Faith and Philosophical Enquiry

*D. Z. PHILLIPS*



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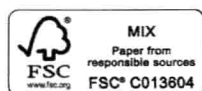
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TO MY  
MOTHER AND FATHER

## *Preface*

Apart from inserting cross-references for the purposes of the present collection, the papers in this volume, for the most part, appear as originally published. The only exception worth mentioning is the second paper in the collection, 'Faith, Scepticism, and Religious Understanding'. Five paragraphs of the original have been omitted, since they were a quotation from the first paper included in the collection. Also, some slight, but important, changes have been made in the paper. These changes have been made in order to bring out the distinction between religious and philosophical understanding, a distinction which was unclear in the original version of the paper.

A word might be helpful about the order I have given to the papers. What I have tried to do is to begin the collection with six papers which I hope present the positive arguments I want to put forward in this collection. I think this is true of the fourth paper, even though it is a reply to the criticisms of philosophers. I am grateful to Professor J. R. Jones for permission to include our discussion as paper VI. The arguments of papers I–VI are involved in the reasons for the criticisms of some contemporary philosophers of religion in papers VII–IX. The implications of these arguments for more specific topics are investigated in papers X–XII. The final paper is a modest attempt at saying something about the character of philosophical enquiry, and of

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how important it is to realize this character in the philosophy of religion. It is an enquiry which might well take as its motto: 'Think not of Socrates, think of the truth'.

The original contexts in which the papers of this collection appeared are as follows: 'Philosophy, Theology and The Reality of God' (*The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 13, 1963). 'Faith, Scepticism, and Religious Understanding' (*Religion and Understanding*, ed. D. Z. Phillips, Basil Blackwell, 1967). 'From World To God?' (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. LXI, 1967). 'Religious Belief and Philosophical Enquiry' (*Theology*, Vol. LXXI, No. 573, March 1968). 'Religious Beliefs and Language-Games' (*Ratio*, XII/I, 1970). 'Belief and Loss of Belief' (*Sophia*, 1970). 'Religion and Epistemology: some Contemporary Confusions' (*Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 1966). 'Philosophy and Religious Education' (*British Journal of Educational Studies*, February 1970). 'Wisdom's Gods' (*The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 19, 1969). 'Subjectivity and Religious Truth in Kierkegaard' (*Sophia*, 1968). 'God and Ought', 'On The Christian Concept of Love' (*Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. I. T. Ramsey, S.C.M. Press, 1966). 'Faith and Philosophy' (*Universities Quarterly*, March 1967).

I am grateful to all the editors and publishers concerned for permission to reprint the papers in this collection, and to Mr D. M. Evans for helping me with the proof reading.

D. Z. P.

Swansea



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# *I Philosophy, Theology and the Reality of God*

What kind of philosophical and theological account does the concept of divine reality call for? To answer this question one must determine the grammar of the concept to be investigated. All too often in the case of the reality of God this requirement has been overlooked or taken for granted. Because the question of divine reality can be construed as 'Is God real or not?' it has often been assumed that the dispute between the believer and the unbeliever is over *a matter of fact*. The philosophical investigation of the reality of God then becomes the philosophical investigation appropriate to an assertion of a matter of fact. That this is a misrepresentation of the religious concept is made obvious by a brief comparison of talk about facts with talk about God.

When do we say, 'It is a fact that . . .' or ask, 'Is it a fact that . . .?' Often, we do so where there is some uncertainty. For example, if the police hear that a wanted criminal has died in some remote part of the world, their reaction might be, 'Check the facts'. Again, we often say that something is a fact in order to rule out other possibilities. A student asks, 'Is the professor coming in today?' and receives the reply, 'No, as a matter of fact he never comes in on Monday.' A fact might not have been: it is conceivable that the wanted criminal had not

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died, just as it is conceivable that it had been the custom of the professor to come in on Mondays. On the other hand, the religious believer is not prepared to say that God might not exist. It is not that *as a matter of fact* God will always exist, but that it *makes no sense* to say that God might not exist.

We decide the truth or falsity of many matters of fact by taking account of the truth or falsity of other matters of fact. What is to count in deciding whether something is a fact or not is agreed upon in most cases. Refusal to admit that something is a fact in face of the maximum evidence might be cause for alarm, as in the case of someone who sees chairs in a room which in fact is empty. Is this akin to the dispute between the believer and the unbeliever; one sees God, but the other does not? The believer is not like someone who sees objects when they are not there, since his reaction to the absence of factual evidence is not at all like that of the man suffering from hallucinations. In the case of the chairs there is no dispute over *the kind of evidence* needed to settle the issue. When the positivist claims that there is no God because God cannot be located, the believer does not object on the grounds that the investigation has not been thorough enough, but on the grounds that the investigation fails to understand the grammar of what is being investigated – namely, the reality of God.

It makes as little sense to say, 'God's existence is not a fact' as it does to say, 'God's existence is a fact.' In saying that something either is or is not a fact, I am not describing the 'something' in question. To say that  $x$  is a fact is to say something about the grammar of  $x$ ; it is to indicate what it would and would not be sensible to say or do in connection with it. To say that the concept of

divine reality does not share this grammar is to reject the possibility of talking about God in the way in which one talks about matters of fact. I suggest that more can be gained if one compares the question, 'What kind of reality is divine reality?' not with the question, 'Is this physical object real or not?' but with the different question, 'What kind of reality is the reality of physical objects?'. To ask whether physical objects are real is not like asking whether this appearance is real or not where often one can find out. I can find out whether unicorns are real or not, but how can I find out whether the physical world is real or not? This latter question is not about the possibility of carrying out an investigation. It is a question of whether it is possible to speak of truth and falsity in the physical world; a question prior to that of determining the truth or falsity of any particular matter of fact. Similarly, the question of the reality of God is a question of the possibility of sense and nonsense, truth and falsity, in religion. When God's existence is construed as a matter of fact, it is taken for granted that the concept of God is at home within the conceptual framework of the reality of the physical world. It is as if we said, 'We know where the assertion of God's existence belongs, we understand what kind of assertion it is; all we need do is determine its truth or falsity.' But to ask a question about the reality of God is to ask a question about *a kind of reality*, not about the reality of *this* or *that*, in much the same way as asking a question about the reality of physical objects is not to ask about the reality of this or that physical object.

What then is the appropriate philosophical investigation of the reality of God? Suppose one asks, 'His reality as opposed to what?' The possibility of the unreality of

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God does not occur *within* any religion, but it might well arise in disputes *between* religions. A believer of one religion might say that the believers of other religions were not worshipping the same God. The question how he would decide the identity of God is connected in many ways with what it means to talk of divine reality.

In a dispute over whether two people are discussing the same person there are ways of removing the doubt, but the identity of a god is not like the identity of a human being. To say that one worships the same God as someone else is not to point to the same object or to be confronted with it. How did Paul, for example, know that the God he worshipped was also the God of Abraham? What enabled him to say this was not anything like an objective method of agreement as in the case of two astronomers who check whether they are talking of the same star? What enabled Paul to say that he worshipped the God of Abraham was the fact that although many changes had taken place in the concept of God, there was nevertheless a common religious tradition in which both he and Abraham stood. To say that a god is not the same as one's own God involves saying that those who believe in him are in a radically different religious tradition from one's own. The criteria of what can sensibly be said of God are to be found *within* the religious tradition. This conclusion has an important bearing on the question of what account of religion philosophy and theology can give. It follows from my argument that the criteria of meaningfulness cannot be found *outside* religion, since they are given by religious discourse itself. Theology can claim justifiably to show what is meaningful in religion only when it has an internal relation to religious discourse. Philosophy

can make the same claim only if it is prepared to examine religious concepts in the contexts from which they derive their meaning.

Some theologians have claimed that theology gives a justification of religion. E. L. Mascall, for instance, says: 'The primary task of rational theology is to ask what grounds can be found for asserting the existence of God.'<sup>1</sup>\*

Mascall implies that theology is external to religion and seeks a rational justification of religious truth. This view differs sharply from what I claim to be the internal role of theology in religion. This role can be explained as follows.

One cannot have religion without religious discourse. This is taught to children through stories by which they become acquainted with the attributes of God. As a result of this teaching the child forms an idea of God. We have far less idea than we sometimes suppose of what the nature of the child's idea is, but for our purposes its content is irrelevant. What is relevant to note is that the child does not listen to the stories, observe religious practices, reflect on all this, and then form an idea of God out of the experience. The idea of God is being formed in the actual story-telling and religious services. To ask which came first, the story-telling or the idea of God, is to ask a senseless question. Once one has an idea of God, what one has is a primitive theology. This is in many ways far removed from the theology of the professional theologian, but what makes it far removed is a difference in complexity or maturity, not a difference in kind or function. In each case theology

\* All references appear at ends of chapters.

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decides what it makes sense to say to God and about God. In short, theology is the grammar of religious discourse.

There is a limited analogy between the relation of theology to religious discourse and the relation of logic to language. One cannot have a language without a logic, although one can have a language without explicitly formulated logical principles. On the other hand, logical principles can have no meaning apart from the language in which they are found. This is not refuted by the fact that the meaning of a formal system can be explained in terms of the rules of that system. The question remains whether the possibility of any such system is dependent on the existence of language. The argument appears circular and contradictory if one thinks of either logic or language as being prior to the other. But as in the case of the child's stories and the concept of God, to ask which came first is to ask a senseless question. As soon as one has language one has logic which determines what can and what cannot be said in that language without being prior to it. As soon as one has religious discourse one has a theology which determines what it will be sensible to say and what it will be nonsensical to say within that religious discourse without being prior to it.

The limited nature of the analogy is evident when we want to talk of alternative theologies. To understand the need for a new theology, the need for a revised grammar of religious discourse, it is more helpful to consider an analogy with the development of scientific laws. In the course of scientific experimentation, in order to account for new phenomena, scientific laws have to be modified or changed. One would not say

that the old laws are wrong, or that the new ones are nearer the truth, but simply that they differ in their range of application. There is an analogy here with the way in which old ideas of God are supplanted and new ones take their place. This will not seem arbitrary if one remembers that the need for a new theology, for a different idea of God, does not occur *in vacuo*. The development of scientific laws can only be understood by reference to the tradition of scientific enquiry, and the changes in the idea of God can only be understood in terms of a developing religion. This is not to say that the role of the concept of God is akin to the role of a scientific model, for the analogy with developing scientific laws, like the analogy with logic and language, is a limited one. I use it simply to re-emphasize the internal relation of theology to religion.

Theology cannot impose criteria of meaningfulness on religion from without. Neither can philosophy. Mascall, on the other hand, maintains that like theology, philosophy has a special role to play, namely to seek rational grounds for asserting the existence of God. This view misrepresents the relation of philosophy to religion. The role of philosophy in this context is not to justify, but to understand. Mascall says of the Christian: 'He knows what he means by God because the Bible and the Church have told him. He can then institute a purely rational enquiry into the grounds for asserting that God exists.'<sup>2</sup>

Why not remain with an understanding of what the Bible and the Church teach? What extra is this rational enquiry supposed to achieve? This question might be answered by indicating the problems connected with



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the existence of a plurality of religions. If one accepts the internal relation of theology to religion and the religious tradition as the means of identifying God, what is one to say of the conflicting claims of different religions? In much the same spirit in which I have been talking about the relation of theology to religion, Peter Winch says:

. . . 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.<sup>3</sup>

But can this thesis hold in face of a plurality of religions? The problem is brought out if one considers the way in which the analogy between theology, logic and scientific laws which we have considered breaks down. In the development of scientific laws there is eventual agreement that such development is desirable. The same could be said, roughly speaking, of the development of the idea of God in the Old Testament. But this need not be true of modern developments in theology: opposing theologians will stick to their respective positions and declare the others to be wrong. This brings up the question of authority or reference to an