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Sprachspiele des Glaubens: Eine Studie zur kontemplativen Religionsphilosophie von Dewi Z. Phillips mit ständiger Rücksicht auf Ludwig Wittgenstein [Language Games of Faith: A Study of Dewi Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion with Continual Reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein]

By Hartmut Von Sass

Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010. 454 pp., pb. € 79.00; ISBN: 978-3-16-150460-0.

The book starts with an anecdote: 'Richard Swinburne had just held a lecture entitled "On the concept of heaven", which was followed up by a lengthy discussion about his usual theistic-metaphysical fantasies. He had overcome the numerous, mostly critical reactions quite well, when his fellow citizen Peter Winch remarked: "Richard, going to heaven is not like going to Scotland." "Why not?", Swinburne asked after a moment of obvious perplexity; Winch replied: "Well, for one thing, Richard, you have to be dead to go there"' (p. 1, all translations are mine). Von Sass takes this story as an opportunity to reflect upon jokes in general and announces that they will play an important role throughout the book – which is a tribute to and at the same time a critical assessment of the philosophical work of D.Z. Phillips, who used jokes frequently. The book is not only thoroughly written and philosophically solid, but also entertaining.

Jokes, as the one in the preceding scene, often rely on shortcuts to ordinary life or to a plain understanding of a situation. The idea of directly relating things to ordinary life and common understanding whenever possible can be noticed throughout Von Sass' book – jokes are but one means to do so. In line with this he argues (p. 186) that Swinburne's theism is not (only) a grammatical confusion – as some of his opponents hold –, but is, more basically, irrelevant in matters of everyday (religious) life/the common realms of (religious) life [lebensweltlich uninteressant]. In this context one finds a nice example of the interplay between entertainment and profound philosophical study, which is typical: Von Sass, in the course of his book, invokes the protagonists of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. 'Demea, who is traditionally considered the weakest figure in Hume's dialogue fixture [Dialoginventar], does not only most aptly comment on the topic, but also gives an adequate answer to this 'argumentative fiasco': the



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premature exit' (p. 186). Demea leaves the company when the arguments have run away too far from (his) actual religious practice.

In German the word 'Witz' (joke) can also mean 'the essential point', and in this sense the 'Witz' of the book lies in what is already announced in the title: God as a language game. Von Sass denies that the following two are exhaustive alternatives: either religious language has references which make religious claims true or false (realism), or religious utterances are merely emotivist, expressivistic, prescriptive... (non-cognitivism, reductionism). Understanding language as partly consisting of images makes it possible to break up this dichotomy: 'God is *neither* a Something, *nor* a Nothing; *neither* are religious images representational, *nor* are they mere "genre pictures". God is a religious image, which exists only in the variety of its variations and which by definition functions as regulation of life in just that totality' (p. 213). 'The religious image offers everything it has, it reveals everything it has to say about God; God is – with Luther: "est" instead of 'significat' – in the image; it is his image without being an image imaging him; the image is sacramental: *ex opere operato* – it effects what it shows' (p. 211).

Although a God understood in this way is no person (which Von Sass emphasises throughout the book, see e.g. p.174ff), as he does not speak a language, it is nevertheless meaningful to pray to this God (and praying to him is more than just talking to oneself, see p. 389): 'God is not a spirit existing beyond all participation, rather the spiritual reality, in which the praying believer moves, is the spirit of God – is God himself, who can be found nowhere else than in the partaking of the addressed one [*des von ihm je Angeredeten*]' (p. 391).

In the following I will give an overview. Besides Phillips' considerations the book mainly discusses those of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Rush Rhees, and, rather indirectly, Simone Weil – as Rhees is frequently referring to her. Von Sass: '*Rhees' and Phillips' philosophy of religion can be seen as a reaction to the failing of the ontological founding, to which Swinburne and all the other friends of Cleanthes want us to commit us*' (p. 163).

- Part One: Von Sass argues that the philosophical abstinence, which Phillips demands, cannot be consistently kept up. He argues in favour of what he calls 'constructive imagination' (p.87ff) instead of pure description (earlier work of Phillips, following Wittgenstein) or contemplation (late work of Phillips) only.

- Part two contains a broad discussion of (religious) language games and fideistic intentions.

- Part three is dedicated to the grammar of the word 'God', and especially to what God is not: he is not existing as a matter of fact (p. 171), not a personal existence (p. 174), not the reference of the word 'God' (p. 176), not a 'pure consciousness' (p. 179).

- Part four brings the discussion close to the debates about metaphysical realism in general and hereby relates it to the philosophical tradition. Von Sass refers to Descartes, Kant, Putnam, Davidson, and Rorty, among others.

- Part five first examines the relation between 'seeing aspects' (Wittgenstein) and religious belief and then studies some particular language games of religious beliefs: creation, bad and evil, sacrifice, prayer, (next to) last things.

I close my presentation of Von Sass' book by letting himself summarize: 'The main thesis of my study claims that the work of Dewi Z. Phillips provides us with means, demanding clarification, which enable us to overcome the traditional bivalence between the "Either" of cognitivistic-metaphysical fantasies on the one hand and the "Or" of subjective-moralistic reductions on the other' (p. 410).

As I am now expected to give critical comments on the book I have to confess that I do not find much fault with it. I will just mention two directions in which I would wish to get (in future) further information from the author:

(1) Von Sass admits that a crucial point for his (and Phillips') view of God is whether it can do justice to the practice of prayer. And in this context he quotes Wittgenstein: "You cannot hear God talking to someone else, but only, if you are the one who is addressed." This is a grammatical remark. (Z 717)' and goes on: 'God only occurs in such a way that one becomes a You when listening to him; God does not talk about us, but only with us' (p. 385). I would be interested in getting to know more about how such a You-relation can be brought in accordance with God being not a person, because I think we are inclined to say that everything which is a You (or treats us a You) is a person. (Some comparisons would suggest themselves, with Paul Tillich, for example, who also refutes theism, but considers God as a You, who is a person, with Martin Buber, for whom a person is the I of a I-You-relationship, but also with authors who have explicit conceptions of a 'person', like Peter Strawson or Thomas Nagel.) Hence, I would be interested to read some further grammatical remarks of Von Sass concerning the use of the word 'God' as something non-personal and the use of the word 'you'.

(2) Theism itself has become a sort of religious practice. The way Swinburne and other proponents of a natural theology or of theism talk about God has become a part of religious life – at least of those believers who are involved on a theoretical level. Many of Swinburne's attitudes are much closer to the convictions of the 'average Christian' than those of Von Sass. Therefore it is not unrestrictedly true that Swinburne's philosophy is uninteresting from the point of view of 'ordinary religious life'. Von Sass does not ignore this point: he states that Phillips' ability to contemplate does not go so far that he (Phillips) manages to see Swinburne in this light, that means as someone who is following a practice which has to be accepted and should not be judged. Von Sass proposes to accommodate such circumstances by distinguishing 'grammatical impossibilities' from 'impossibilities of life' (p. 87) and then discusses the consequences of the fact that Swinburne's philosophy contains 'grammatical impossibilities' – but he pays much less attention to the fact that it is obviously a 'possibility of life'. Von Sass' book is dedicated to the refutation of all theisms à la Swinburne, and this is of course a legitimate concern – but the quite different concern of making the best out of (this) theism, even if or especially if one is sceptic against it in just the way Von Sass is, remains a work worthwhile to be done, I believe.