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## Does Religious Skepticism Rest on a Mistake?

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## I

*There are those who will say that the skeptic's . . . questions indicate that he has got religion all wrong and that we can, if we have a feel for what religion is all about, only be radically skeptical of such skepticism.*

Paul Holmer and D. Z. Phillips, working out of a tradition deeply influenced by both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, try to make such a case.<sup>1</sup> . . . I want to examine this anti-skeptical argument that there is no such skeptical case to meet since it is a mistake to look for some rational foundation for religious belief or for some general standards of significance or rationality. Philosophy, such philosophers contend, cannot supply such standards as foundations for there are none; but Judaism and Christianity are none the worse off for all of that, for they neither need nor require such general criteria. No philosophical, logical, or scientific sanction is required or indeed possible for religion; no sustainable case can be made for looking externally to the practices of religion themselves for criteria of intelligibility, rationality, and truth in religion; outside of the discourse itself there is nothing in virtue of which we could come to see how, after all, there is a religiously viable concept of God or how fundamental religious beliefs could be seen to be true or, for that matter, false. There are, it is argued, within religion itself, good reasons for believing that there are religious truth-claims and that these truth-claims are indeed true. But they are not the type the skeptic expects and regards as relevant to the establishment of the intelligibility or truth of the claims of religion. The skeptic has a conception of what would satisfy claims of intelligibility and truth for a putative truth-claim, but doubts, for religious utterances of a nonanthropomorphic sort, that either of these conditions can be satisfied. But, Holmer and Phillips maintain, the skeptic's quest is a mistaken one, for there is and can be no question of confirming "religious hypotheses" or giving evidence for religious beliefs or displaying the facts which

show them to be true or the possible facts which, if they indeed turned out to be the facts, would show them to be false. Not all beliefs need be so related to evidence and not all legitimate uses of language need be used to make confirmable or infirmable statements. Religious utterances, it is maintained, are not even of the type that should pass tests for intelligibility applicable to genuine empirical statements of fact. They do not play or even purport to play that role in religious life and to so construe them is to misunderstand their very logic.

In short, the claim is that it is not the case that the body of truths embedded in our religious forms of life are truths which require evidence or support by the facts. The "grammar of belief" should be differently understood. We need to understand that religious beliefs are not bits of speculative metaphysics or parts of isolated language-games (esoteric forms of discourse) separated from the stream of life. Religious beliefs indeed play an important role in the lives of many people; they are closely meshed with the whole of our life and are not isolated from the facts. But they are not and cannot be assessed by the facts; rather, as Phillips puts it, they assess the facts, "bring a characteristic emphasis to bear on the facts."<sup>2</sup> They are the framework, the onlook, within which the believer meets and understands "the fortune, misfortune, and the evil that he finds in his own life and in the life about him."<sup>3</sup> To think that they are assessable by reference to the facts is utterly to confuse how religious discourse works. They regulate our lives and they have a regulative function in certain domains over what it makes sense to say, over what constitutes an explanation, and over what is taken to be reasonable and unreasonable.

The thing to see, Phillips maintains, is how religious beliefs are a distinctive kind of belief. They are not conjectures, opinions, something we hold tentatively, and they are less closely linked with predictions than with conceptions of how we shall strive to live and how we view the value and significance of life. Religious beliefs are differently related to knowledge claims than are empirical beliefs. They are not beliefs which can be so generalized and systematized that we can ask for a verification of or an external check on "religion as such."<sup>4</sup>

There remains, however, on this account, a real difference between believers and skeptics . . . The essential difference, Phillips claims, is the "difference between someone who does look on his life in a certain way and regulates it accordingly and someone who has no time for such a response or who sees nothing in it."<sup>5</sup> It is a critical mistake on the skeptic's part to "think that nothing can be believed unless there is evidence or grounds for that belief."<sup>6</sup> "Belief" when we are talking about religion and when we are talking about empirical matters of fact has very different employments. . . . Phillips maintains that in coming to have a religious belief—say a firm faith in God's providence—what is most essentially involved is the viewing and regulating of one's life in a certain way and not the coming to have an opinion which is based on the weighing of evidence.<sup>7</sup> The difference between a believer and a skeptic is not that the believer knows something that the skeptic doesn't, but the difference is in commitment and orientation. The core confusion for skeptics and for many believers as well is to assume, indeed to hold as a very fundamental presupposition, "that the relation between religious beliefs and the non-religious facts is that between what is justified and its justification, or that between a conclusion and its grounds."<sup>8</sup> It is a pervasive mistake in thinking about religion to take it as

just evident that if religious beliefs are to be sustained they must have such a foundation.

Holmer stresses, even more than Phillips, both that there is no underlying philosophical, scientific, or indeed just plainly factual support for religious beliefs and that no underlying conceptual scheme or foundation for belief is needed. There are plenty of concepts actually functioning in the religious life and they are sufficient.<sup>9</sup> It is a mistake to think either that philosophy can supply a convincing answer to the skeptic or that it can support the skeptic's negations and doubts. Philosophy can give us no new knowledge of God nor can it even reconfirm any old knowledge to bolster up the leaky vessel of faith. In this way neither philosophical theology nor philosophical atheology is possible. Philosophy cannot give us something crucial for our religious lives which Christianity or Judaism cannot; it can neither provide the ground for nor the critique of everyday religious language and practice. It is a pervasive confusion among philosophers and theologians to think that some philosophical scheme can "become both the way of treating the meaning of the term 'God' and thus of grounding it in its proper referent, and also the way of treating the question whether anything exists to which such a concept can refer."<sup>10</sup> The assumption is that there is a real point to the question: Is there or is there not a God? But this is an illusion. There is no "ultimate court of understanding" or transfield criteria of rationality or intelligibility in virtue of which this "question" could be answered. Religion is a form of life and within this form of life there are established criteria for truth, intelligibility, and rationality, but there are no transfield criteria of truth, rationality, and intelligibility, in virtue of which one could justifiably claim that religious beliefs are either true or false, reasonable or unreasonable, or even intelligible or unintelligible. The skeptic can have no place to stand. His very core assumptions concerning religion rest on mistakes.

## II

We must put aside, Holmer and Phillips would have us understand, such philosophical preconceptions and recognize that to understand religion we must see it in its own context. In such a context we see orthodox Christians and Jews confessing their sins to God and praying to God. But, in trying to attain such a participant's understanding, it is surely natural to ask: To whom or to what are they praying or confessing when they pray or confess? Here the believer is very likely to be "up-tight," utterly at a loss to know what to say. Almost anyone who has grown up in a Jewish or Christian culture can readily play such religious language-games; that is, such a person knows how to pray and confess to God, yet even with this skill, this mastery of the language, and the religious employment of the key "pictures" used in this form of discourse, he can remain utterly skeptical about the coherence of such concepts and at sea about the alleged reality for which the key religious terms stand. Such a person may have a very good understanding of how to engage in religious practices and he will, if he has such an understanding, also have a good grasp of religious language-games (forms of discourse). But the crucial point to see is that he can very well have such an understanding while remaining utterly agnostic about

whether these practices make sense or whether such talk is intelligible. It may be true, as Phillips avers, that within Jewish and Christian forms of life, love of God is the primary form of religious belief, but the nagging question still remains: What are we talking about here? Where our God is not the God of religious idolatry, *what* is it that we are trying to love or are supposed to love when we love God?

With even a rudimentary understanding of the underlying structure of this discourse, it should be evident to us that God is not something which could be located and that believing in God is very different from believing that the world is round. Our "belief in" here is indeed not the mere holding of an opinion. And it *may* even be true that for some sorts of X the only way of discovering what belief in X is like is by believing in X. But before we treat God as that sort of X, we should bear in mind that there have been countless people who have believed in God, who have thrown themselves wholeheartedly into these forms of life, and who have gradually, as they have explored the logic of their faith, come to find such beliefs not simply mysterious but incoherent. Perhaps they have made philosophical blunders in coming to think such concepts incoherent, but it is surely not correct to say of these people, as Phillips does, that they once understood and then later failed to understand. They plainly have a religious understanding and sometimes, at least, it is the case that this very religious understanding drives them into perplexity about and sometimes into a rejection of religion. Sometimes, as Phillips and Holmer show, loss of belief does not have such conceptual roots and indeed is far less intellectually defensible or (for some other cases) arguable. But there are also men with the need to believe or at least with the wish to believe who find they can no longer believe because they have become convinced that the key religious concepts of their faith are unintelligible or incoherent. And coming as it does out of religious and philosophical reflection from within this very form of life, it surely is question-begging to assert that this skepticism must simply be the result of conceptual blunders.

When we believe, we must believe something. That is what Wittgenstein would call a grammatical remark. But what is it that we believe in when we love, confess to, or pray to God? Is believing in God like believing in justice, i.e., is it *simply* to subscribe to a set of moral principles and to hope these principles will prevail? This, though it would relieve us of some philosophical difficulties, would hardly appear to be a characterization of Christian or Jewish religious forms of life. Surely to believe is to do that, but it is not *simply* to do that any more than to be an M.D. is simply to be able to give first aid.

Phillips believes that one comes very close to superstition or idolatry when one treats a religious form of life as a form of life which takes belief in God to be belief in an ultimate order of fact. "True religion," Phillips argues, does not essentially consist in trusting that a certain state of affairs is going to be the case or perhaps even in believing that a certain state of affairs is the case. Belief in God, as Phillips sees it, is *entirely independent* of the way things go. But then it becomes, to put it conservatively, doubly difficult to say what belief in God comes to. Phillips, and Holmer as well, stress how religious belief involves trust and regulating one's life in a certain way. But religious belief involves trust *in God* and that involves believing that (thinking that) there is a God. It makes no sense to say "I trust in God but I don't think there is a God." So we have another component in belief in God that

cannot be understood in terms of trusting or anything like trusting. Moreover, the other factor does not have to do just with the regulating of one's life, for there are people who have ceased to believe or are unable to believe, who still continue to regulate their lives in very Jewish or Christian ways.

Phillips maintains, as has Norman Malcolm as well, that to give an account of belief in God one must take "the distinction between existence and eternity seriously." He tries to give an account of what it is to "come to see meaning in the eternal."<sup>11</sup> To understand how this links up with belief in God, it is necessary to recognize and take to heart the fact that in developed forms of the Hebrew-Christian tradition "the conception of God is not a conception of a being among beings."<sup>12</sup> Coming to see that there is a God is not like coming to see that some additional being exists. It is not, as Kierkegaard paradoxically put it, like coming to see that something exists, but it is a coming to an acknowledgment of eternity. But again, what we are talking about here remains intolerably obscure. What is it to acknowledge eternity? What is it to come to understand that God does not exist but is eternal?

Let us see if we can get a purchase on this. I, of course, agree with Holmer and Phillips that the philosopher may indeed fail to understand what it means to believe in an eternal God.<sup>13</sup> We cannot, they point out, be confident that we, even as participants, have an adequate religious understanding even of first-order discourse. But this has an unwelcome consequence for Holmer and Phillips, for it also means that we cannot be sure that our first-order religious discourse is intact as it is and that we are only confused about the proper *analysis* of the discourse in question. I understand what it is to believe or to know that there are physical objects (e.g., sticks and stones), though I am quite unclear about the proper analysis of 'physical object', but by contrast, I am actually unclear (a) about what I am to believe in order to believe in an eternal God and (b) about the correct *analysis* of 'eternal God'. I am in doubt about the proper analysis of 'physical object' but in no doubt whatsoever about whether there are sticks and stones; however, in the religious case I am in doubt both about the proper analysis of 'God' and about whether there actually is or even could be such a reality.

Presumably, in Christian-Jewish discourses 'eternal God' is a pleonasm, but pleonasm or not, how are we to understand such a phrase? In fact—to push the matter a little further—if we are honest with ourselves can we really rightly claim we understand it? In trying to understand and then give an account of what it is to believe in such a kind of reality, to believe in a kind of order of eternity which transforms and gives a new meaning to one's life, one should start, Phillips argues, with trying to understand what it means to speak of 'eternal love' and what role such a concept has in the stream of life. The aim of this exercise is to show how "there is a God in this context is synonymous with seeing the possibility of eternal love. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

A Jew or Christian is distinguished from a skeptic, according to Phillips, in believing that besides temporal love there is a "love that will not let one go whatever happens."<sup>15</sup> If one's aspirations and desires are thwarted, if one's friendships go dry, and if one's love dies, one's life, if one has such a belief, is not robbed of its meaning, for *whatever* happens to one, one's life has significance. . . . In loving in this way,

one engages in self-renunciation, one loves one's neighbor no matter what he does and thus one cannot be deceived. . . .

It is true that one could not believe in God without loving or at least having some affective attitude toward God. Knowledge of God—if indeed there is such—cannot be a purely theoretical knowledge. Kierkegaard is perfectly correct in maintaining that "if anyone thinks he is a Christian and yet is indifferent towards being a Christian he is not one at all."<sup>16</sup> But to equate belief, understanding, and loving here is to confuse a necessary condition for religious belief with a sufficient one, and it is to convert atheists like myself who have such supposed exclusively Christian or religious attitudes toward love into believers by stipulative redefinition. I do indeed believe in eternal love, characterized as Phillips characterizes it—though I do not like to talk in this way—but I do not believe in God. A man who really cares about humanity will indeed have such agapeistic attitudes toward his fellow men: he will love them come what may. It is a commitment which for him is categorical. And if this is what is meant by 'eternal love', he believes in eternal love. But a man with such attitudes need not believe in God or even understand the word 'God'.

To reply in the manner of Phillips that such a man is really a believer for to love in this manner is to believe in God is not to characterize the Christian religion from within, as Phillips would have us do, but to select from within this form of life *some* of the criteria for what constitutes religious belief and by *persuasive* definition to *make them the* criteria of 'true religion'. But this is not to keep to the pure Wittgensteinian task of conceptual analysis that Phillips takes to be the sole legitimate philosophical task. Rather it is an oblique way of doing what he thinks ought *not* to be done in *philosophy*, i.e., to advocate and to engage in apologetics.<sup>17</sup> And such an advocacy is all the more insidious for not being straightforward, for it appears to be a conceptual analysis of a form of language, when in reality it is the identifying of religious belief with a particular subset of religious beliefs by the simple expedient of selecting and labeling as the sole legitimate claimant for genuine religious discourse, expressive of religious beliefs, the portion of that discourse which is not "a scandal to the intellect." That is to say he simply ignores those bits of religious discourse which at least *prima facie* appear to contain incoherent or at least very problematical claims. (He does exactly the same thing with the concept of immortality in his *Death and Immortality*.) Here we have what in effect, if not in intention, is a form of apologetic advocacy of a radically reconstructed Christianity masquerading as a neutral conceptual analysis of Christian discourse. Through an arbitrary *persuasive* definition of "true religion," our religious options get circumscribed. The difference between a believer and a nonbeliever on such an account becomes simply a difference in attitude and picture preference; what appear at least to be substantial, nonattitudinal clashes between Christianity and atheism are whisked away by linguistic legerdemain. . . .

We are left, Holmer's and Phillips's arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, in the following situation. Given the type of form of life and mode of discourse that Judaism and Christianity have become, 'God', though purportedly functioning as a referring expression, is not taken to denote anything locatable. But if "belief in God" is to be an intelligible notion, we must believe in something when we sin-

cerely say we believe in God. But no criteria of identification have been given for identifying the referent, the alleged reality, that 'God' supposedly denotes. God is plainly not some locatable reality "out there." Phillips makes this evident enough. But then *what* are we talking about when we speak of God?

If God is construed as 'creator of the universe', 'pure spirit', 'pure act', or 'necessary being', we are still at a loss to identify what it is we are talking about. Thus, if a man asserts that there is indeed a necessary being, there is no way of deciding or even gaining an educated hunch whether his assertion is true or false or even probably true or false and this is, in effect, to confess that we do not understand what he is trying to claim. That is, we are trying to take it as an assertion, but we do not understand what it could conceivably assert. The trouble in the utterance "There is a necessary being" is with 'necessary being'. We are given to understand that a necessary being is an 'independent being', 'eternal being', i.e., "a being which could not begin to exist or cease to exist," "a being without sufficient conditions," "an unlimited being," and the like. But we still have no effective understanding here, for such terms are expressive of a network of notions, all of which suffer from the same conceptual difficulty: we do not know if any of them are in any way *exemplifiable*. We do not know and seem to have no way of finding out, for example, if there is an eternal being, though we do know that *if* there is an eternal being, it makes no sense to ask when it started to exist or if it could cease to exist. Assuming for a moment that 'necessary being' or 'necessary existence' is in *some way* intelligible, we need to ask in a timeless, tenseless way, whether there is or could be such a being. Part of what is involved here is this: we know that if God is a necessary being or existence, that if He does not exist now, His existence is eternally precluded; furthermore, it at least seems to be the case that if this necessary being does exist now, He always existed and must always continue to exist. But we still have no idea of what would or logically could constitute an answer to our putative question, i.e., whether there is or could be a necessary being. Since this is so, the concept (notion) in question is an *ersatz*-concept. Its sign-vehicle 'necessary being' purports to stand for something but actually does not. Similar arguments can be made for 'pure spirit', 'the creator of the universe', 'pure act', and the like.

Holmer and Phillips could respond that I have not really taken to heart or come to grips with their claims about the contextual (form-of-life-dependent) nature of criteria of truth, intelligibility, and rationality. In my account, they could say, something is going on that is typical of philosophers, namely a confused "craving for generality, a desire to give an all embracing unitary account of reality."<sup>18</sup> But, they could add, the search for such a unit is a delusion. The distinction between 'the real and the unreal' does not come to the same thing in every context. Moreover, we have no criteria for or an independent test of whether language corresponds to reality. It is not reality which gives language its sense. It is not reality which shows which words, if any, in our discourse are empty, idling words. Rather, what is real and what is unreal shows itself in the very workings of our language, in the actual and varied uses of language in live contexts. There is no general way of talking about how language corresponds to reality and there is no general way in which we can usefully talk about criteria of rationality either. Rather, the criteria of rationality and coherence are *internal* to each mode of discourse.

I have discussed this issue elsewhere and I must be brief here.<sup>19</sup> First, Phillips admits that there "will be no strict lines of demarcation between different modes of discourse at many points." But, given this overlap, what really is the argument for believing that the criteria for truth, rationality, intelligibility, and evidence are contained within the particular mode of discourse in question? The very mode of discourse is not on Phillips's own account self-contained. Why, then, should we think that each mode of discourse has within itself its distinctive and self-contained criteria for truth or rationality? The concept of consistency is a part of the concept of rationality, and consistency is not utterly form-of-life-dependent. Moreover, to be rational is—though this is not all that it is—to be objective. That is, where we are talking about rational action, it is to be willing, where it is possible, to examine the evidence or reasons for a belief and to hear argument before acting or judging. Now, what in a given situation will count "as evidence" or "as relevant reasons" is indeed partly a function of a particular form of life but not entirely so. If someone tells me that God created the heavens and the earth, there is in English an ordinary sense of 'created' which is not utterly form-of-life-dependent and without which we would not understand that religious claim, and given this common use of 'created', I know what counts as evidence for something's being created and thus I know what, if anything, would count as evidence for that alleged claim. Because of features in common to all uses of 'created', evidence for something's being created is not utterly idiosyncratic to each mode of discourse. Moreover, we should not forget that forms of life change, drop out of existence, come into existence, and overlap. We once believed in ghosts and engaged in explicit magical practices. They once were our forms of life. But our very pervasive concepts of truth, evidence, and knowledge and our expanding knowledge of the world led us to criticize and finally to abandon such forms of life. Phillips's argument commits him to the a priori claim that it is impossible to assess rationally whole forms of life. A blunder, he would have us believe, can only be a blunder within a particular system. But to say we could have no rational grounds for criticizing belief in ghosts or our own Western magical practices constitutes a *reductio* of his argument.

It is not unnatural to respond that, in arguing as I have, I neglected to consider an important page that both Phillips and Holmer take from Wittgenstein about the distinctive features of religious belief. I have spoken about the need for evidence or reasons for or against as something that must go with an assertion which could in turn be believed or disbelieved. But Phillips directly and indeed Holmer by implication have asserted that religious claims are not claims for which there can be evidence or grounds. The logic of the discourse is such that the very idea is deemed to be irrelevant.

While this may be true of some religious utterances, it has not been shown to be true of all of them. There appears to be no conceptual ban on asking (to take a key example) for the evidence for "God created the heavens and the earth." When someone wants to know how, if at all, it is known to be true or believed with justification to be true, he has not said something deviant or logically or conceptually odd as he would have if he had asked how we know "Stop yelling" is true.

Phillips, however, remarks that we cannot grasp the nature of religious beliefs "by forcing them into the alternatives: empirical positions or human attitudes."<sup>20</sup>

When I avow, "I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth" or "God is in Christ" or "God is truth," I indeed typically would be expressing an attitude, and, with respect to the first utterance quoted, perhaps in some sense I am necessarily doing that. However, this is not all that I mean to be doing; and this holds for any of the above utterances. . . .

In believing in any of these religious claims one believes firmly: they are unshakeable for believers, they do not think of them as conjectures or hypotheses for which the evidence is not particularly good. Rather, to be a religious believer, one must subscribe to them with one's whole heart and whole mind and, moreover, they are the framework or picture in accordance with which believers view crucial areas of their lives. That is to say, their view of birth, death, joy, misery, despair, hope, fortune, and misfortune is deeply affected by this framework. Religious beliefs are firm in that they categorically regulate the believer's life in those domains on which they touch.

Religious beliefs either are or necessarily involve pictures or frameworks doing the work characterized above. But what is meant by 'framework' or 'picture' here? Plainly these terms are not being used literally, but beyond that bare acknowledgment it is difficult to know what is intended. Phillips claims that we know that when we assert religious beliefs we are not asserting empirical propositions or purely moral or purely normative claims (e.g., purely moral or normative in the way that "You ought to think more of the feelings of others" is moral or "Rigorous training makes good athletes" is normative). As Phillips puts it himself, religious beliefs are neither "empirical propositions . . . [nor] human attitudes, values conferred, as it were, by individuals on the world about them."<sup>21</sup> Rather the religious pictures "have a life of their own, a possibility of sustaining those who adhere to them."<sup>22</sup> Believers believe that these pictures are not pictures they can pick and choose and about whose adequacy they can make a judgment. Rather these pictures come to measure them. They simply find themselves adhering to them and subscribing to them in a quite categorical way. For them they have a value which is absolute. They are, after all, their picture of the divine for which they have and can have no substitute, since they have and can have no independent access to or notion of divinity.

This is a very odd use of 'picture' in which we are to adhere to a picture and yet can have no independent access to what is pictured. Moreover, if 'picture' here connotes anything similar to what 'image' connotes, there must be some notion of representation in virtue of which there must be something which the picture is a picture of. But we seem barred from any understanding of this 'something that is pictured' in religious contexts because there can be no independent access to what is pictured. And if (like an abstract painting) the picture is in no way a representation, it is difficult to understand how it can be a model and a guide.

In general, the notions of picture and framework remain so obscurely characterized by Phillips that we can make little of them or put little weight on such notions. Moreover, if these beliefs, which are also pictures or frameworks, are not, when we express them, empirical propositions or simply moral or normative ones, then, what we should say is that no alternative characterization has been given of what they mean or how they function. Their logical status is utterly problematical.

Consider:

1. To love God is to know the truth.
2. God is the truth.
3. God is in Christ.
4. I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth.

None of these, according to Phillips, are empirical propositions and they are not analytic either. Well, then they are some other kind of proposition. Well and good. But what kind and how are we to understand them? They are said to be key religious truths, but no hint—once we exclude all evidential considerations—is given as to how we could have the slightest reason for believing them to be true or false. But if this is so, then it is difficult to understand what could be meant in saying they are truths (claims or statements) which could actually be true or false. Phillips comes perilously close to saying that truth here comes to truthfulness, that is, sincerity of avowal and commitment. But then religious claims are being modeled too nearly even for Phillips's taste on moral ones. Religion, so construed, is too close for comfort to morality touched with emotion and the distinctive putative truth-claims of religion have been lost. But if Phillips backs off here, how are we to understand (1) through (4)? Presumably they have some statement-making role (constative force). But if that is so, then they have truth-values and if they have truth-values, it should be possible at least in principle to find out what their truth-values are. Phillips and Holmer have made us keenly aware of the commissive force of religious utterances: how, in sincerely avowing "Christ is the truth and the way," I am committing myself to a norm in accordance with which I evaluate my own life and the quality of life around me. But religious utterances certainly appear at least to have a constative, statement-making force as well. But about this Phillips and Holmer are unhelpful. It seems to me that we should say of them what W. D. Hudson has said of Wittgenstein: ". . . what he seems at times to have come near to suggesting is that, because religious beliefs have commissive force, that somehow entitles us to by-pass the troublesome problem of their constative force."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, as Mitchell has recognized, that we commit ourselves quite categorically to being regulated by certain claims—in this case religious doctrines—says something about "the pragmatics of belief" but does not imply that there cannot be evidence for or against a religious belief.<sup>24</sup> It only means (by definition) that for the *believer* his belief is in an important way unshakeable. If his belief is nevertheless shaken such that he no longer accepts the belief because he does not believe that it is true, he ceases (again by definition) to be a believer. But this does not mean that he cannot acknowledge that there is evidence for or against religious beliefs, it is only that he, *as a believer*, is committed to treating that evidence in a certain way, namely to regarding it as not sufficiently strong to warrant abandoning his faith. But he need not contend that in some way it is logically impossible that his religious beliefs could be false. But it is impossible for him to be a believer and actually believe that his religious beliefs are false. (Again we see that even truisms can be true.)

Once we abandon anthropomorphism, it is unclear what constative force or what truth-value (if any) religious utterances have. Phillips and Holmer leave us

without a clue here; indeed they are of no help beyond suggesting that we cannot establish truth here in the way we can over a question of empirical fact. But we are left entirely in the dark about how else we might go about understanding what truth-value putative religions truth-claims have and this leaves their meaning or at least their constative force problematical.

These utterances which express beliefs which are said to be pictures may very well only have what has been characterized as having a 'pictorial meaning' or a 'pictorial sense'.<sup>25</sup> "There is a time machine in the basement of the Chrysler Building" is a good example. Here we have some understanding of the utterance, for we have some relevant images or pictures—we could even have a governing picture of a "time machine"—but the utterance still could not be used to make a true or false statement. People characteristically care about (1) through (4) in the way they do not about the above utterance, but, as to their "claims" they appear to be parallel. At the very least we have much to remain skeptical about and it does not at all seem to be the case that it has been established that [religious] skepticism rests on a mistake. . . .

### Notes

1. See Paul L. Holmer, "Wittgenstein and Theology," in *New Essays on Religious Language*, ed. Dallas M. High (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); "Atheism and Theism," *Lutheran World*, 12 (1963) (reprinted in revised form in this anthology as "Theology, Atheism, and Theism," pp. 104–15) and "Metaphysics and Theology: The Foundations of Theology," *The Lutheran Quarterly* (1967). See D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965); *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970) (reprinted as "Faith, Skepticism, and Religious Understanding" in this volume); *Death and Immortality* (London: Macmillan, 1970); the essays by Phillips in *Religion and Understanding*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Oxford, Engl.: Basil Blackwell, 1967); "Religion and Epistemology: Some Contemporary Confusions," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 44 (1966): 316–30; and "Religious Belief and Philosophical Enquiry," *Theology* 71, 573 (March 1968).

2. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 166.

3. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 113.

4. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 157.

5. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 157.

6. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 87.

7. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 89.

8. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 101.

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# III

## REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY