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Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Religion: Looking for A Common Ground

One of the most important tasks of theology in the post-secular age is the search for a common ground with science. Willing to initiate a fruitful and unbiased dialogue between 'scientific reason' and 'theological reason', objective descriptions of both reasons and the differences between them are needed. Unfortunately, most of the existing descriptions are either inclined towards one of the standpoints or have been designed as weapons in ideological battles, which renders them unusable, as adopting them would result in splitting the dialogue into two monologues.

However Wittgensteinian fideism, also called the Swansea School or the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion – a branch of twentieth century philosophy of religion – seems to give us a common ground for the dialogue. Its philosophers, working under the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein's later thought, claim to give a 'pure description' of religious 'grammar'[1] and promise to elicit the differences between

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[1] By 'grammar' I mean here (and further in this paper) what Wittgenstein meant by this concept in his *Philosophical Investigations,* thus the word 'grammar' should not be understood in terms of syntactical features of an expression, but rather as its practical functions in the context of people's lives.

religion[2] and science by means of clarification of linguistic and non-linguistic practices involving each of them.

The standard Wittgensteinian approach entails the rather controversial claim that every genuinely religious use of language (religious 'language-game') – and consequently every theological conception – has nothing to do with invention or description of facts. According to the Swansea School, Christianity (as well as other religious traditions) has practically no epistemic content. This view may be described as a very critical kind of theology (with some similarities to Bultmann's demythologizing theology) rather than a philosophy, especially when defining the latter as a 'pure description' of grammar. To sum up, the Swansea School cannot provide the ground for the dialogue between theology and science, however it gives us a fine example of a theology devoid of any empirical or metaphysical claim. The fact that the existence of such a theology is possible is interesting in itself and should not be omitted in the search for a neutral description of religion and its relation to science. Therefore the first goal of this essay is to outline the doctrine of the Swansea School.

The idea of a purely descriptive philosophy, its only drawback being the problem of it's correct execution, may seem appealing, however according to me 'pure description' is yet another philosophical utopia.

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[2] I need to make two remarks here. Firstly; every time I use the term 'religion' in this paper I mean Christianity, unless it is stated otherwise. The Wittgensteinian fideists focused almost exclusively on Christianity (save P.G. Winch and his analysis of Azande beliefs) and I follow them in this regard, mostly because of the long and complicated relationship between Christianity and science, but also because it is still the default religion in European culture.

Secondly; I realise that the relation between religion and theology may seem to be disregarded in my paper. Indeed, the differences between both are not the main topic of this article. To avoid confusion I explain: by 'theology' I mean the reflective, discursive element of religious faith, which can be expressed in a theory, for it is driven by the desire to understand faith, which is inherent in faith itself (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Theoretically theology may (but also may not) claim the right to describe reality, hence overlapping with science or philosophy. I skip the topic of the relationship between religion and theology as I do not want to determine whether every religious belief with an epistemic content is a part of theology.

Since our linguistic depictions are always conditioned by our beliefs and aims, there can be no neutral or 'pure' description of any grammar. Furthermore, every attempt of this kind is always driven by some interest, and this is also the case with the Swansea School of philosophy of religion. Therefore the second goal of this essay is to discover what influenced their approach.

In the final part of my paper I am going to prove that an unbiased description of the relationship between theology and science is achievable using the philosophical 'tools' created by Wittgenstein. I shall present such a description, which will be broadly inspired by the author of *Philosophical Investigations* and the doctrine of the Swansea School. I will, however, refrain from criticizing linguistic (and other) practices and reactions that are considered religious by their practitioners.

AGAINST OBJECTIFYING GOD

The relationship between religion and science can be divided into three basic groups of interactions. When no common interest is shared and no interaction is needed, we may note a complete separation of religion and science. When both parties occupy and try to rule the same epistemological (and political) areas, conflict arises. The case of Galileo and Christian attacks on Darwin's theory are the most popular examples of bygone imperialistic aspirations of (western) theology, while the actions of Sigmund Freud and Richard Dawkins may be given as examples of the same trend from the opposite camp.

The third kind of interactions between science and religion is probably the most interesting, but also most complicated and difficult to understand. Co-operation requires at least a partial agreement, and this means some common ground is needed. How to find such a neutral position between theological and scientific reason? What kind of relationship would it create between religion and science? What can we achieve by it? Is such a common ground even possible?

I will try to address these questions at the end of my paper. First, I shall present a certain current in twentieth century Anglo-Saxon

philosophy of religion, which gave us some quite unusual answers. This will prepare the ground for my own view on the relations between religion and science. I would like to present so-called Wittgensteinian fideism[3] – a method of philosophizing about religion formed by Rush Rhees, Peter G. Winch, Roy F. Holland, Howard O. Mounce and Dewi Z. Phillips at the University of Wales in Swansea (and accordingly called the Swansea School), supported by Norman Malcolm from Cornell University (USA).

The Wittgensteinian fideists are usually considered to be separationists in the context of the relation between science and religion and there are good grounds for such an opinion. According to them, both realms are – from the epistemological perspective – absolutely non-overlapping, since religion does not have any epistemic content and theology is just its grammar[4]. However they firmly reject accusations of separatism and the 'language compartmentalization' charge, because epistemology is not their primary concern and they (especially D.Z. Phillips) give many examples of reciprocal relations between religion and science in human life.

The claim that religious faith has no epistemic content rises controversy. It seems to echo Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing theology but in a much more severe form: contrary to Bultmann, who believed that removing the mythical content is necessary because of the increasing pressure of science on contemporary religious thinking, the Swansea School maintains that the mythical and (apparent) epistemic content of religious faith *is* the effect of the supremacy of science in our lives. Basically, according to Bultmann, Christianity seems to be mythological *ab origine*, while the Wittgensteinian fideists maintain that Christian belief was originally free from mythological thinking but then became 'contaminated' with it. Hence, the main difference between the two doctrines lies in the understanding of their own

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[3] This is a term created by a critic. See: K. Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', "Philosophy" Vol. 42, No. 161, July 1967, p. 191-209.

[4] Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell 1974, §373. See also Footnote No. 24.

roles: while Bultmann projects a new meaning of religious symbols, the Wittgensteinians aim to restore the original meaning of these symbols and clear them from confusing interpretations. So while the former thinks of himself as a theologian proposing a new Christian hermeneutics, the latter ones consider themselves philosophers simply dealing with misunderstandings in the field of religious language by the method of 'pure description' of its *proper* use.

What do Rhees and his followers claim to reveal using 'pure description'? Firstly, they come to a conclusion that God is not an object. This does not simply mean that He is different from all the objects in the world – such a view is broadly accepted by a majority of theologians and philosophers. What the Wittgensteinian fideists mean by 'God is not an object', is that the language of objects cannot be meaningfully applied to Him. Therefore, they conclude, speaking of God in a substantive manner is pointless. Rhees writes as follows:

> If one emphasizes (...) the fact that 'God' is a substantive, and especially if one goes on (...) to say that it is a proper name, then the natural thing will be to assume that the meaning the same by 'God' is something like meaning the same by 'the sun' or meaning the same by 'Churchill'. You might even want to use the phrase 'stands for' the same. But nothing of that sort will do here. Questions about 'meaning the same' in connexion with the names of physical objects are connected with the kind of criteria to which we may appeal in saying that this is the same object – 'that is the same planet as I saw in the south west last night', 'that is the same car that was standing here this morning'. Supposing someone said 'The word "God" stands for a different object now'. What could that mean?[5]

Nothing, of course. Consequently, God cannot be an object (a thing, a being) and therefore He cannot be a subject for the attribution of any predicate in the ordinary way. The great theologians of the past, like

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[5] R. Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, ed. D.Z. Phillips, M. von der Ruhr, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 45–6. Cf. D.Z. Phillips (ed.), *Whose God? Which Tradition?*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2008, p. 2–3.

St. Thomas of Aquinas, came to the same conclusion[6], but, from the Wittgensteinian point of view, their recognition was blurred by their confusing use of conceptual schemes. Aquinas himself did not refrain from thinking of God in the terms of a causal relation identified with the act of creation, he also tried to prove His existence[7]. The Wittgensteinians' approach is much stricter: not only do they reject explanations of creation in terms of causality[8] but also refuse to recognize God's existence as an fact.

R.F. Holland's 'Religious Discourse and Theological Discourse' (1956)[9], which explores the difference between the language of faith and the language of theological dispute about the existence of God, points out that the belief *that* God exists is not a natural aspect of religious faith. Holland notices that some may treat faith as a set of beliefs *about* God, but, according to him, this is not what religious faith really is. He writes:

> *Is* it in fact usual for seriously religious persons to do anything that can be properly described as talking about God? They believe in God certainly; and they are usually ready to affirm this belief. They worship God, thank God, praise God, ask God's forgiveness. Perhaps they could be said to talk to God: but that is not the same thing as talking *about* God.[10]

Who talks *about* God? Professional theologians, scientists paying some attention to philosophy, and 'Third Programme humanists' – as Holland calls the intellectuals associated with BBC Radio Three and its then intellectual atmosphere. The theological discourse of the latter

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[6] Cf. e.g. M. von der Ruhr, *Lucky Pagans and Unfortunate Believers: Wittgensteinian Construals of Religious Faith*, in: J. Guja, J. Gomułka (eds.), *Anglosaska filozofia religii wobec wyzwań współczesności*, Kraków: Libron, p. 59.

[7] Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Benziger Bros. edition, transl. by the British Dominicans, 1947, Q. 2, Art. 2-3, p. 13-16.

[8] Cf. R. Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, p. 35.

[9] R.F. Holland, 'Religious Discourse and Theological Discourse', "Australasian Journal of Philosophy" Vol. 34, No. 3, December 1953, p. 147–163. This was the first publication presenting the Swansea School doctrine.

[10] R.F. Holland, 'Religious Discourse and Theological Discourse', p. 147.

is similar to the study of objects, however God cannot be referred to as an object, even though certain religious expressions may suggest so. Believers often utter propositions which may seem to assert something about God, but Holland relates them to the believers themselves and their relationship to the divine.

> But if someone were then to request a description of that to which this relationship is a relationship, I should say that this request signified a misunderstanding.[11]

God cannot be referred to, because He is not an object. The grammar of the word 'God' is not that of a proper name. If it were, as Rush Rhees and his followers claim, it could work like the word 'Churchill', but this cannot be, as the use of regular proper names is dependant on the criteria of sameness of their bearers. There is no such criteria for the word 'God'[12]. One may therefore reason that the debated word is a defective proper name, but the Wittgensteinian fideists incline to reject this way of dealing with this problem.

> I know what it means to say that 'the Queen' stands for a different person now, and I know what it means to say that St. Mary's Church is not the St. Mary's Church that was here in So-and-So's day. I know the sort of things that might be said if I were to question either of these statements. But *nothing* of that sort could be said in connexion with any question about the meaning of 'God'. Now this is not a trivial or inessential matter. It hangs together in very important ways with what I call the grammar of the word 'God'. And it is one reason why I do not think it is helpful just to say that the word is a substantive.[13]

The opinion that God is not a normal being is both obvious and widely recognized by a huge majority of theologians. This is exactly

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[11] R.F. Holland, 'Religious Discourse and Theological Discourse', p. 149.
[12] Cf. R. Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, p. 45.
[13] R. Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, p. 46.

why expressions like the *Supreme* Being, or the *Eternal* Being have been formed. The Swansea School however goes much further. They propose, that since the word 'God' in the language of faith does not refer to anything definable, nothing named 'God' may exist, and therefore nothing described by the words "God exists" is true[14]. However there is a disagreement among the Wittgensteinians regarding the concept of the *Necessary* Being. Norman Malcolm makes use of it in his well-known paper 'Anselm's Ontological Proofs' where he argues that the category of necessity changes the way the expression 'God exists' is used. He points to the role of the expression as a grammatical rule of the language of faith[15]. However some of his colleges are reluctant to that notion[16].

AGAINST THE DOGMA OF GOD'S OMNIPOTENCE

If God is not a being, then how can one think of him as the omnipotent Creator of the world? The reply of the Swansea School is simple: one should not think of Him that way. Rush Rhees in his short but very concise paper: *Natural Theology* (written in 1963, published in 1969) heavily criticises the concept of Divine omnipotence. He suggests that the idea of 'limitless power' is at odds with true and deep religious thinking. Rhees, using a lot of sarcasm and irony, depicts a situation in which a man to chooses to worship God because it pays off:

> Is the reason for not worshipping the devil instead of God that God is stronger than the devil? God will get you in the end, the devil will not be able to save you from his fury, and then you will be *for* it. 'Think of your future, boy, and don't throw away your chances.' What a creeping and vile sort of thing religion must be.[17]

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[14] Cf. R. Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, p. 49.
[15] Cf. N. Malcolm, 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', "The Philosophical Review", vol. LXIX, No. 1, January 1960, p. 41–62.
[16] Cf. R. Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, p. 18.
[17] R. Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, p. 36.

According to Rhees, correct religious reasoning must not be based on such calculations, but on the concepts of love, grace, compassion and mercy. And so the idea of Creation should be understood within these conceptual frames, as the idea of God's self-limitation:

> The whole of creation, everything in creation, is a diminution of God's power. Those who have objected to the idea of God's omnipotence on grounds of this sort, were sound enough. And those others who see an analogy, or more than analogy, between creation and the Passion, would not dispute them.[18]

This line of argumentation leads Rhees to a startling conclusion: the concept of omnipotence is evil devilish in its core: the putative omnipotent one – even if it existed – should not be worshipped, but rather consciously rejected despite all possible consequences.

If my first and chief reason for worshipping God had to be a belief that a super-Frankenstein would blast me to hell if I did not, then I hope I should have the decency to tell this being, who is named Almighty God, to go ahead and blast.[19]

This narrative (which some may find shocking and blasphemous) was prominent in the doctrine of the Swansea School for the next fifty years after the publication of Rheeses article and reappeared in the last significant work of D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of God and The Problem of Evil* (2004). The book mentions the essay 'A Masterpiece of Existential Blasphemy' by Herman Tennessen, a lesser known Norwegian philosopher. The mentioned paper gives a disturbing exegesis of the Biblical story of Job and proposes a very pessimist conclusion to the story: although God (YHWH of the Old Testament) exists, He is rather a mentally deranged tyrant, a jealous Lord of the Hosts who follows his caprice playings with people's lives and not the being that believers

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[18] R. Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, p. 35.
[19] R. Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, p. 36.

tend to assign spiritual greatness to[20]. Phillips quotes the mentioned article's conclusion in order to present the consequences of adopting the premise of an omnipotent lord of the world. However, many philosophers of religion, while accepting the same premise, disagree with the conclusion, developing in response the project of theodicy – an attempt to defend the omnipotent and omniscient God from accusations concerning the existence of evil in the world. D.Z. Phillips denies the possibility of accomplishing such a task. He argues that if God really rules the earth, He is, as Tennessen says, a god of blind caprice[21]. According to Phillips, the main error of the theodicists, is adopting a way of thinking about God, in which He is a kind of a super-powerful person who created the world and so may do anything he pleases with it. If so, He must be taken as a moral agent whose deeds may be evaluated according to some objective criteria. This development pushes the philosophers onto the thin ice of speculations about the 'greater good' and 'moral fruits' of such things as the holocaust, or the idea of evil being the opportunity for noble responses, freedom and the soul-shaping process[22]. In Phillips' view all these ideas are ill-formed, they lead to the vulgarization of the concept of God's grace, and sound like foolish jokes in the face of real examples of evil:

> Theodicists claim that their systems make God's ways understandable to us. But the understanding we achieve by examining what they say is to see how destructive it is of moral responses to suffering. It seems, then, that God can be found, not only to be guilty (the lesser verdict),

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[20] Cf. H. Tennessen, 'A Masterpiece of Existential Blasphemy: the Book of Job', "The Human World", No. 13, November 1973, p. 1–10.

[21] Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, London: SCM Press 2004, p. 134.

[22] See for example: R. Swinburne, *The Problem of Evil*, in S. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1977; R. Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998; J. Hick, *An Irenaean Theodicy*, in T. Davis, *Encountering Evil*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2001; A. Plantinga, *God, Evil, and the Metaphysics of Freedom*, in M. McCord & R.M. Adams (eds), *The Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990.

but also to be unintelligible (the deeper verdict), if we try to understand him both as a moral agent like ourselves *and* in the terms theodicies offer us.[23]

AGAINST THE CONCEPT OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

The important part of every religion is usually some kind of promise of salvation. Christianity links this concept with the idea of an immortal soul. The mainstream philosophical and theological elucidations of these terms, were shaped by the tradition of Platonic philosophy, according to which the soul is somehow independent of body and can exist without it after its death. Hence, life after death is viewed as the ultimate subject of Christian hope, a promise given by God in Jesus Christ – resurrection being a sign of this promise.

The Wittgensteinian fideists – and D.Z. Phillips in particular – strongly oppose to elucidations of this sort. First, they reject the concept of soul as a kind of thing. This is, they say, another ill-formed philosophical conception and has nothing in common with religious faith. Soul, from the religious point of view, is neither a substance nor an attribute. Detailed and free from philosophical misconceptions, the linguistic analysis shows that the term in question has a completely different meaning:

> If we ask ourselves when we would consider whether a man has a soul or not, we see that this has nothing to do with any kind of empirical question. It is not like asking whether he has a larynx or not. ... Questions about the state of a man's soul are questions about the kind of life he is living. If the soul were some quite distinct entity within a man, it would follow that whatever a man did would not affect it. But this is not how we speak of the soul. The relation between the soul and how a man lives is not a contingent one. ... Once this is recognised, once one ceases to think of the soul as a thing, as some kind of incorporeal substance,

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[23] D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, p. 123-4.

one can be brought to see that in certain contexts talk about the soul *is* a way of talking about human beings.[24]

Since the Wittgensteinians leave no place for metaphysical and immaterial reality of Cartesian *ego cogito* or similar concepts, they discard the idea of eternal substance within us that has the capabilities to survive the death of our bodies. Death of the body is supposed to be the final end of us, and we should simply come to terms with it. As Rhees noted:

> A rather stupid theology student once asked me, 'What do you think is going to happen to you when you die?' In one sense certainly nothing will 'happen to me' after I have died – whatever may happen to my body. ... I shall not be in any sort of state. I shall not be at all.[25]

Phillips, quoting this paragraph, comments that these words do not preclude the notion of eternal life nor the Christian notion of the Last Judgement[26]. One may ask, how is this possible. The answer can be found, according to the Wittgensteinians, in the religious grammar of the word 'soul'. Examination of genuinely religious uses of this concept (excluding philosophical and theological theories and Platonizing homilies) shows that it should be understood in terms of the kind of life a 'soul owner' is living, i.e. whether his life is spiritually deep or shallow[27].

What the Wittgensteinians mean when they talk about spirituality or the spiritual dimension of human life should be made clear. Again, their understanding has nothing to do with any metaphysical theory of some immaterial substance. According to them spirituality manifests itself in everyday life threw our relations with other people. It is usually plainly visible when a person is egoistic and self-centered, or

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[24] D.Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, London: Macmillan & St. Martin Press 1970, p. 44-5.

[25] R. Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, p. 206.

[26] Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, p. 94.

[27] Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 45.

when one holds back one's desires and is able to sacrifice comfort, time, health and sometimes even life for others. The members of Swansea School, after Simone Weil, call the latter 'dying to the self' and claim that in Christianity it is linked to the idea of life as an undeserved gift of grace[28].

Hence the Wittgensteinians claim that the true subject of Christian faith is not a continued existence after one's death, but a hope for eternal life. 'Eternal' in this context does not mean *more* life, but *this* life – the life we are living here and now – seen *sub specie aeternitatis* (as Wittgenstein put it in the *Tractatus*) and in connection with the concepts of sacrifice and grace[29]. The true eternal life is the participation in the life of God, but what can the this mean since God is not a being? Phillips tries to clarify it with the following:

> I am suggesting then, that eternal life for the believer is participation in the life of God and that this life has to do with dying to the self, seeing that all things are a gift from God, that nothing is ours by right or necessity. (...) In learning by contemplation, attention, renunciation, what forgiving, thanking, loving, etc. mean in these contexts, the believer is participating in the reality of God; *this is what we mean by God's reality.*
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> This reality is independent of any given believer, but its independence is not the independence of a separate biography. It is independent of the believer in that the believer measures his life against it.[30]

He then continues to say that the reality of God is eternal in the sense that it does not change and cannot be influenced by anything, especially by someones wishes or deeds. The ultimate meaning of the reality of God can be then formulated with the notions of 'eternal measure', 'love', 'grace' and 'forgiveness'. Such concepts as 'being',

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[28] Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, p. 183. It should be emphasized that the Wittgensteinian fideists do not assign 'dying to the self' solely to Christianity or the religious life. They hold the attitude in question without any religious interpretation.

[29] Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 49-50.

[30] D.Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 54-5.

'power', 'cause' and 'fact' give us no additional knowledge of the reality of God (since the 'knowledge of God' is very far from, say, the concept of 'scientific knowledge' or 'knowledge about facts[31]'), mainly because genuine religious attitude towards God is not epistemic *at all*[32].

OBJECTIONS TO THE WITTGENSTEINIANS DOCTRINE

We may consider the Swansea School a group of thinkers presenting an interesting and remarkable *theological* doctrine – indeed, it has been slightly suggested in this article so far, since I have tended to use the term 'doctrine' when referring to their theories. However this is definitely not how they want to be seen. They think of themselves as intellectual heirs of the author of *Philosophical Investigations*, who in turn believes that philosophy should leave everything as it was[33]. For the fideists believe that Ludwig Wittgenstein in his later philosophy only describes the actual uses of language, not interfering with them in any particular philosophical theory. They do, however, follow him in the field of philosophy of religion[34]. They are not metaphysical realists or epistemological foundationalists, for they claim – after Wittgenstein – that neither realism nor foundationalism can be a meaningful position. They deny any factual interpretation of religious beliefs, for, according to them *and* Wittgenstein, true religious faith has nothing in common with facts[35]. They also reject the idea of life after death and

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[31] Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *Faith, Scepticism and Religious Understanding*, in: D.Z. Phillips (ed), *Religion and Understanding*, Oxford: Blackwell 1967, p. 68.

[32] Cf. for instance D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgensteinianism: Logic, Reality and God*, in W.J. Wainwright, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, p. 462-3. Phillips also writes about the related concept of understanding God. He claims that 'understanding' in the context of God means 'obedience' (Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 12).

[33] Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §24.

[34] Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, London: Macmillan 1993, p. x, 254.

[35] In order to prove this, the following passage from Wittgenstein is usually quoted: „Queer as it sounds: The historical accounts in the Gospel might, historically

God's interventions in the world, as is the case with Wittgenstein, who also wrote the following:

> Religious faith and superstition are quite different. One of them results from *fear* and is a sort of false science. The other is a trusting.[36]

It may be said that this is the central point of Wittgensteinian fideism: they broadly utilize the difference between 'true religion' and 'superstition' in order to criticize the content of what they call 'popular religion'. Of course, the exponents of the Swansea School do not deny that some people do believe in God as a person helping them in their everyday troubles, who they sometimes pray to in order to persuade Him to do something. A person whose existence they accept as a fact. The same people also hope that they will survive their deaths as disembodied souls. It would be pointless to deny such sociological facts and the Wittgensteinians acknowledge them. Therefore, they admit, that their task is not only the battle with metaphysical claims of philosophers and theologians, but also the criticism of some 'misleading' practices and opinions of ordinary religious believers. However, they claim, that the grounds for any justified philosophical criticism of religious beliefs must be found *within* religion itself[37].

There are good reasons for which such a criticism cannot be done in accordance with the methodological rule of 'pure description' of linguistic practices. First, there is a problem with the rule itself: when describing any practice we should determine what is essential and inessential in the whole body of the given practice. Therefore, choices

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speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this: *not*, however, because it concerns 'universal truths of reason'! Rather, because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief. This message (the Gospels) is seized on by men believingly (i.e. lovingly). *That* is the certainty characterizing this particular acceptance-as-true, not something *else*." (L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, transl. by P.G. Winch, ed. by G.H. von Wright, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984, p. 32e.)

[36] L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 72e.

[37] Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, p. 8.

about what to focus on must be made, but this means that the omitted aspects (e.g. gestures, particular expressions, particular relations between words or sentences, etc.) are left in the shadow. And so a single practice may be described an infinite number of times, each description different from the other. How can we possibly have the criteria of a correct and an incorrect description?

One may answer: the criteria may be found in the tradition the practice belongs to. But does this mean that we should ask the people who are involved in the practice to assess our descriptions? Possessing mastery of a technique does not guarantee the mastery of description of the said technique. This is illustrated by Gilbert Ryle's example: simple people who have lived in a village for many years may be unable to create a map of their village and hence may be unable to assess a map made by somebody else. This is also exactly the point that D.Z. Phillips makes, writing:

> Some philosophers have suggested a short way with the question [of what is correct description of religious practices]: Simply ask what religious believers mean by their beliefs, and that settle the matter. Unfortunately, that suggestion gets us nowhere, since the fact that someone prays does not save one from giving a confused account of prayer[38].

Unfortunately on rejection of the metaphysical 'universal truths of reason' there is no other source of the criteria we seek[39]. And so we must somehow rely on the internal criteria of a tradition. But when it comes to traditions like Christianity – very old and complicated – it appears that again we must make choices, since the tradition itself is a bulk of different views with different sets of criteria, sometimes even contradictory to each other. Finally, our 'pure description' appears to be determined by our own view on the tradition we are writing about.

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[38] D.Z. Phillips, *Religion and Friendly Fire. Examining Assumptions in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2004, p. ix. See also: D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, p. 247.

[39] See Footnote No. 33

It is possible, however, to adopt a view intentionally designed for inter-traditional communication and comparative tasks. The possibility of such an approach enables more objective studies in such areas as sociology, anthropology or cultural science. I shall develop this concept further in the paper.

My second objection to the claim that the Swansea School's philosophy of religion is 'purely descriptive' can be justified by their own solution to the problem of the criteria for the correct description of religious practices. (It is notable, that these criteria form the ground for their critique of current religious practices.) Wittgensteinians like to recall the following example from the Bible: the scapegoat ritual described in the Book of Leviticus 16:20-22. Phillips, having quoted a critical commentary on the ritual included in *The Interpreter's Bible*[40] (published by United Methodist Church), writes:

> Notice that here one has the possibility of criticism within a tradition. The ritual concerning the scapegoat is called crude and inadequate. Wittgenstein might say that the crudity and inadequacy are partly connected, at least, with the confusion in the role attributed to an animal in the ritual. By thinking that the scapegoat *can* take away sins, the legitimate longing of a people to be freed from their sins is obscured and distorted.[41]

Of course, we can find many similar examples of religious rituals and traditions which were once practised and later criticized within the Judeo-Christian tradition (e.g. food restrictions). But this only means that religious traditions may evolve. What Phillips misses here is that the possibility of such an evolution within religious traditions requires special institutions *entitled* to give their approval or disapproval for the rites, beliefs and deeds of a community. In the times of the Old Testament those institutions were the prophets, contemporarily they are bishops, patriarchs, councils, and theologians. Therefore,

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[40] Cf. G.A. Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. II, New York: Abingdon Press 1953, pp. 82-4.
[41] D.Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, London: Macmillan 1986, p. 32.

to give criteria for a good description of religious practices, that is, to recognize what is correct and what is wrong about them is a theological task. And this is why I tend to call Wittgensteinian fideism a theological doctrine.

However, a disclaimer is needed here: a philosophical critique of some theological descriptions rooted in certain outdated metaphysical theories is possible. Therefore, part of the Swansea School doctrine is not a kind of theological theory, as it criticizes metaphysical grounds of certain theological conceptions. From the perspective of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language the fideists do the philosophers' task, but when they go on utilizing the dichotomy of 'true religion' and 'superstition', when they develop a critique of 'religion of fear', they leave the realm of philosophy and venture deep into the theological context.

Why do they cross the mentioned border? One obvious reason is that they followed Wittgenstein. It may be said that Wittgenstein himself was the first Wittgensteinian fideist since he wrote strictly theological remarks in his notes, published as *Culture and Value*[42]. But Wittgenstein is not the sole theological authority of the Swansea School. They were also influenced by another philosopher with theological inclinations: Simone Weil. As I already mentioned, they owe to her the idea of 'dying for the self' which plays a key role in their concept of spirituality. It may be noticed that the Wittgensteinians (especially Rhees and Phillips) developed their whole positive understanding of the reality of God under heavy influence by the intellectual heritage of the French thinker.

Simone Weil is the person who links the Swansea School to the rich theological tradition of apophatic Neoplatonism with a hint of existentialism. The unique combination of these elements together with Wittgenstein's philosophy of language is responsible for the fideists'

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[42] *Culture and Value* includes several remarks devoted to the problems of religion and Christianity in particular. Some of them propose interpretations of the New Testament, so they may be well described as theological (cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, pp. 29-33).

remarkable style of philosophizing, which is so different from their Anglo-Saxon milieu.

But there is probably one more reason for their longstanding insistence on the differentiation between 'true religion' which grows on trust and 'superstition' caused by fear. It is clearly visible in Phillips' many polemics with the idea of theodicy: the experience of great evil in the twentieth century and the mystery of God's silence. If God is able to intervene in our world, then why did He refrain from preventing the mass killings? The theodicists have answers for these questions, and they may be convincing for some people, but others often feel uneasy reading them.

Brian Davies in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* suggests that this controversy cannot be settled, since the disagreement doesn't concern empirical data, nothing which can be verified, but regards the individual sensitivity (Davies eventually agrees with the theodicists)[43]. Phillips replies to this observation in *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* by claiming that the situation is not symmetrical, since the whole theodicy is grammatically incoherent[44]. However, having written this claim he devoted the next several pages of his book to a series of quite convincing examples concerning our ethical imagination and sensitivity. (Our personal ethical sensitivity is what puts us off when reading Swinburne, Hick, or Plantinga.) Nonetheless, one may agree with Davies: the Wittgensteinians go too far when claiming that theodicy, and all the conceptions assuming that God is able to do something in the world, as well as with us after our death, are inconsistent and violate the grammar of religious language. Besides, even if they do violate grammar as the Swansea School present it, so what? The theodicists probably see it differently and we do not have any objective criteria in order to determine whose description is the correct one.

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[43] Cf. B. Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993, p. 38.

[44] Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, p. 44-45.

The described situation resembles the subject matter of one of the best known papers written by P.G. Winch: *Understanding a Primitive Society*[45]. Winch investigates the beliefs of the Azande tribe and the impression they make on us, 'rational' Europeans. Their beliefs are based on the concept of witchcraft and magic. The ability to do magic is considered hereditary by the tribe and can be proven by *a post mortem* examination of the suspect's body. Let us assume that the Azande have examined a few bodies. The output of some of the tests confirm witchcraft, others don't. Now, making another assumption that all the people in the tribe are in some way related (which is quite probable), we come to two contradictory conclusions: every Zande[46] is a witch and no Zande is. This is what *logically* stems from what we have assumed. But the Azande accept neither of these two conclusions, although they assume all the premises. Therefore it seems to us that their beliefs are illogical and inconsistent. However Winch opposes this view:

> Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which Azande try to gain a quasi-scientific understanding of the world. ... The forms in which rationality expresses itself in the culture of a human society cannot be elucidated *simply* in terms of the logical coherence of the rules according to which activities are carried out in the society. For, as we have seen, there comes a point where we are not even in a position to determine what is and what is not coherent in such a context of rules, without raising questions about the point which following those rules has in the society.[47]

According to Winch, the Azande do not come to inconsistency, for they do not practise the form of activity – that is, theorizing – which would force them to draw our contradictory conclusions. The author

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[45] See P.G. Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', "American Philosophical Quaterly", Vol. 1, No. 4, October 1964.

[46] A Zande is a member of the Azande tribe.

[47] P.G. Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', p. 315.

of *Understanding a Primitive Society* was probably inspired by one remark made by Ludwig Wittgenstein during his meetings with the Vienna Circle in 1930:

> ... suppose among the rules there were two that contradicted each other, but I had such a bad memory that I never noticed this and always forgot one of these two rules or obeyed alternately the one and then the other. Even then I would say, -everything is all right. After all, the rules are instructions for playing the game, and as long as I can play, they must be all right. It is only when I *notice* that they contradict each other that they cease to be all right, ant that manifests itself only in this: that I cannot apply them any more.[48]

What is most astonishing in this remark is that it regards the problems of contradiction in the foundations of mathematics – the core of our rationalistic civilization. The obvious moral of these citations is that philosophers (or Wittgensteinian philosophers at least) should be very careful when accusing something or someone of inconsistency. They should rather ask themselves: does inconsistency make one incapable of carrying on one's practices? In case of a negative answer they should refrain from accusations. This is also the case with the question: does the belief in a powerful God, who can and does intervene in the factual world, combined with the observations of injustice and suffering make people abandon their faith in Him? The answer depends on the people themselves. A believer who believes that God saved her from a car accident is not only perfectly imaginable – finding such a person wouldn't be difficult. When asked why God didn't save millions from gas chambers during the II World War, she could answer, for instance, that the Devil was also active. We may attack again by asking: do you mean that the Devil is more powerful than God? But she may answer that Devil happened to be stronger in this

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[48] L. Wittgenstein, *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: conversations recorded by Friedrich Waismann*, transl. J. Schulte & B. McGuinness, Oxford: Blackwell 1979, p. 125.

world, or that it is a great mystery, or that she simply does not need to know such things. These answers do not mean that the status of Divine intervention she believes in cannot be factual at all[49].

LOOKING FOR A COMMON GROUND

We can now come back to the problem of descriptions. Our starting point was the question of a possible common ground between religion and science. It seems that on the way we encountered another question, namely: is the existence of a common ground for different religious views possible? In any case the Swansea School does not give us this ground, since it simply proposes its particular view and tries to combats others. Wittgensteinian fideism is largely a critique of elements of religious traditions. We have noticed that this is linked to the problem of criteria for a correct description of a practice. It has been suggested that the only way to answer this problem is to consult the practitioners. They may be unable to give descriptions themselves – as Ryle's villagers were unable to draw a plan of their village – but they should be asked their opinion on a given description. Their answers are the only valid criteria of correctness we can achieve. Any appeal to logical inconsistency does not work, since the very category of consistency and its meaning are rooted in the practices themselves, as Wittgenstein pointed out in the passage quoted above.

We can now sketch a kind of a systematic outline of various religious attitudes[50]. This is a description which takes into account the relation between religion and science. My aim is to give this description in the spirit of what has just been noted about the possibility of correct descriptions, without any claim to faultlessness and completeness. It will be slightly inspired by the philosophy of the Swansea School. The

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[49] Certainly, it is more than just factual, but it is *also* understood in a factual way.

[50] The idea of this outline has been presented – however in a less elaborate form – at the conference "Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century" on June 28th 2011 in Cracow in my speech titled *Dialogue Between Theism and Atheism: A Variety of Rationalities.*

outline is quite simple (maybe too simplified) as it assumes only three dimensions of a possible religious attitude: factual, metaphysical and spiritual. The last of them requires a broader explanation. It is the dimension identified by Wittgensteinian fideists and Simone Weil with a true religious attitude as such, because they rejected both metaphysical and factual contents as extra-religious intrusions. One may say that such labelling redefines the concept of spirituality in the fashion of Rush Rhees *et consortes*, especially by separating it from the context of an interpersonal relationship with God. However, it should be noted that the concept of a spiritual relation with God as a person is a possible religious attitude involving at least two of the dimensions distinguished above: the spiritual and the metaphysical, since the concept of personal God is directly metaphysical, or at least it requires some other metaphysical concepts like being, substance and so on. (If it is not the case, then the concept of God as a person can be fully explained in terms of non-metaphysical spirituality, entirely acceptable by the Wittgensteinians.)

As it has been mentioned before, metaphysical dimension is the plane on which religion (or theology) and philosophy overlap. This does not mean, however, that religion must have a metaphysical component, there are religious attitudes which manifestly avoid metaphysics (like Jehovah's Witnesses for instance). Nonetheless it is very frequent. There are two great metaphysical traditions in Christian theology, the Aristotelian one, utilizing the concepts of substance, essence and first cause, and the Platonic one, which makes use of the concepts of participation and gradation of being and good. The metaphysical dimension can be understood as a field between the spiritual and the factual: it is non-empirical, but still involves such notions as 'objective reality', 'thing', 'complexity', 'simplicity' and 'existence'. It is a rather theological and theoretical domain.

The factual dimension is a space of particular interest for us. That is because here religion may come into direct contact with science. It seems that recently this contact is far from being friendly. Of the three possible forms of contact I mentioned in the introduction, co-operation seems to melt in recent times, therefore leaving separation

and conflict as the only alternatives. Separation requires that at least one party withdraws from the disputed area. Since science is reluctant to give up the field of facts and religion has two other dimensions to move to, separation practically means that religion reduces its factual dimension, trying to avoid the collision with science. This is, for instance, exactly what mainstream Roman Catholic theology did in the last century. It retreated, leaving just a few outposts in places where contemporary scientific method is unable to reach. Some other Christian traditions, especially many evangelical churches in the USA, choose the conflict with science and keep firmly to their factual beliefs regarding the Creation and the history of the Earth as described in the Bible.

The most important of the few factual outposts in Catholic tradition is obviously the belief that Jesus' rising from the dead is a historical fact. It is very hard to imagine a scientific method which would give strong grounds for rejecting (or endorsing) this belief in its empirical dimension. It seems that as long as historians are incapable of travelling in time, the resurrection is not a front of conflict.

Other, less important outposts regard the miracles. It can be noticed that most of them are relatively safe from the attacks of science: they are singular, distant in time, or concern a complicated matter where science gives no unequivocal results (i.e. healings). In case of artefacts which are open to future scientific disconfirmation, the authorities of the Catholic Church take a safe position. The Shroud of Turin is a good example of this: the Church neither formally endorses nor rejects the it (although it approves of the devotion to the Shroud) and claims that whether the relic is authentic or not has no bearing whatsoever on the validity of their teachings about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It seems that a total eclipse of the factual dimension of religious faith is possible (the doctrine of the Swansea School being a good example). Samples of this were illustrated by the cases presented above. Total frontal conflict is possible as well, but let us leave this issue for now – it is pretty straightforward and therefore not really interesting. The real question is, what about cooperation? Is it still possible today?

Before we try to answer this question we have to ask another one: what would the cooperation between religion and science mean in our times? Let us start with the following definition: cooperation occurs when science proves – directly or indirectly – the probability of a certain religious belief. When does this happen? Firstly, when medicine confirms that a miraculous healing cannot be explained in terms of our current medical knowledge. This usually happens during the process of beatification in the Roman Catholic Church. Secondly, when a scientific examination confirms or discovers facts which leave room for an explanation involving miracles. This may happen when researchers comes to the final conclusion that, e.g. the Shroud of Turin has been produced in the 1st century and contains no pigment. Thirdly, when religious interpretations of certain scientific theories are possible. A religious interpreter of the Big Bang Theory may claim that it is in a sense a parallel to the religious teaching about the Creation as the act of God.

Notice that it is not possible for science to prove the miracle or the Creation as such, since the quality of being miraculous cannot be operationalized. The word 'cannot' used here *is* grammatical in Wittgenstein's sense, since this impossibility relies on the grammatical opposition between natural and supernatural. We may wish to abandon this opposition but this would force us to reject the present meaning of scientific method and rationality. It is not to say that no rationality other than the scientific one may exist but it is hard to imagine any rationality which would replace it in our civilization.

However, the cooperative attitude has one major problem: the roles of approved claims in science and religion are incompatible. The former is always open to constant revision, the latter is considered to be the ultimate truth. (This is, again, a grammatical difference.) Hence somebody, who wishes to utilize the Big-Bang theory for religious purposes, must be aware that the theory may lose its approval in science and be replaced by some other theory, in turn forcing the revision of religious dogmas. In fact, a similar situation has already occurred in history, when the geocentric model of the universe had been replaced by the Copernican theory.

All this shows that the cooperative attitude is quite risky. It may be applied with success to a limited extent, alongside other general approaches: separation and conflict.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a sketch of the doctrine of the Swansea School, its critique and the possibility of another solution for the problem of a common ground between religion and science. It was an attempt to explain why one can find Wittgensteinian fideism attractive even when rejecting some of its claims. This article also contains a general outline of religion which may encompass all existing Christian traditions and theological standpoints. This outline focuses on the factual dimension of religious faith, namely the area where religion and science overlap, and tries to distinguish and describe three possible religious attitudes to the problem of the religion-science relationship. It has been suggested that the cooperative attitude is not an option nowadays (save examples of scientific examination during the process of beatification) and so there are two possibilities left: conflict (where religion tries to discredit science or vice versa) and separation (e.g. when religion tries to avoid beliefs which can be proved false in science). The latter generally means that religion withdraws from the factual plain, leaving behind only a couple of outposts like the belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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