REJECTION OF CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONALISM: PHILLIPS' WITTGENSTEINIAN RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE ANALYSIS

Dini Epistemolojik Temelciliğin Reddi: Phillips'in Wittgensteincı Din Dili Analizi

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Abstract
In contemporary philosophy of religion, Phillips uses Wittgenstein's theory of language-games to examine the truth claims, metaphysical meanings and practical implications of religious assertions. According to this theory, religious language cannot be evaluated by the criteria of meaningfulness applied in other language-games, due to its distinctive grammatical structure. Hence, religious language is not meaningless, contrary to the view of verificationism and falsificationism. Ayer's verificationist criterion asserts that a proposition is meaningless if the conditions under which it can be empirically verified are unclear. From this perspective, moral, aesthetic, and religious propositions are considered meaningless. This criterion, based on scientific language, was later replaced by Flew's falsificationist criterion, which argues that a proposition is meaningless if it cannot be shown false under any empirical condition. Flew claimed that religious propositions fail to meet this standard because no empirical condition can falsify them. Phillips, unlike these claims, argues in his functionalist analysis that religious language has meaning because of the functional roles it plays within communities and cultures. Reformed epistemologists, on the other hand, contend that religious language is properly basic and requires no external justification. According to Phillips, reformed epistemologists', like Alvin Plantinga, problem lies in treating religious propositions as universal and foundational while overlooking the role of experience. Therefore, both the religious evidentialist attempt to ground religious claims in transcendent factors and the reformed epistemologists' effort to justify them on universal foundations should be rejected. For Phillips, the meaning of religious language derives not from transcendent factors but from the functional roles it plays in the lives of believers, in practices such as prayer, faith, and worship.
Keywords: Philosophy of Religion, Functional Analysis, Religious Language, Logical Positivism, Natural Theology, Reformist Epistemology.

Öz
Çağdaş din felsefesinde Phillips, dini ifadelerin doğruluk iddialarını, metafiziksel anlamlarını ve dini iddiaların uygulamadaki tezahürlerini incelemek amacıyla, Wittgenstein'ın dil oyunları teorisini kullanmıştır. Bu teoriye göre din dili, özgün gramatik yapısı nedeniyle diğer dil oyunlarının anlamlılık ölçütüne göre değerlendirilemez. Din dilinin bu anlamlılık ölçütüne göre, din dili doğrulamacılık ve yanlışlamacılık ilkelerinin iddia ettiği gibi anlamsız değildir. Oysa Ayer'in doğrulanabilirlik ölçütü, eğer bir önermenin olgusal olarak doğrulanabileceği şartları açık değilse, o önermenin anlamsız olduğunu savunur. Bu bağlamda ahlak dili, estetik dili ve din dilinin önermeleri anlamsızdır. Ayer'in bilim dilini temele alarak geliştirdiği bu ölçüt, zamanla yerini Flew'un yanlışlanabilirlik ölçütüne bırakır. Flew'un bu ölçütüne göre, eğer bir önermeyi yanlışlayabilecek olgusal şartlar açık değilse, o önerme anlamsızdır. Flew'a göre, hiçbir dini önermenin aksini gösterebilecek olgusal koşullar mevcut olmadığından dini önermeler yanlışlanabilirlik ölçütüne uygun değildir. Oysaki Phillips'in işlevselci din dili analizine göre, din dili, geniş topluluklar ve kültürler üzerinde işlevsel rollere sahiptir. Din dilinin bu işlevsel rolü, onun anlamlı olduğunun kanıtıdır. Reformcu epistemologlar ise din dilinin bizatihi kendisinin temel olduğunu, bu nedenle herhangi bir dışsal önerme tarafından kanıtlanmaya ihtiyacı olmadığını savunur. Ancak Phillips'e göre, Alvin Plantinga gibi reformcu epistemologların iddialarındaki temel sorun, dini önermeleri temel ve evrensel önermeler olarak ele almaları ve pratikleri göz ardı etmeleridir. Bu bağlamda, hem delilci epistemologların dini önermeleri din diline aşkın unsurlarla

temellendirme çabaları hem de reformcu epistemologların dini önermeleri evrensel temellere dayandırma girişimleri reddedilmelidir. Çünkü din dilindeki önermeler temelini, aşkın unsurlardan değil, o önermelerin söz konusu dine müntesip bireylerin dua, inanç ve ibadet pratikleri gibi yaşamında oynadığı işlevsel rollerden alır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Din Felsefesi, İşlevsel Analiz, Din Dili, Mantıksal Pozitivizm, Doğal Teoloji, Reformcu Epistemoloji.

Introduction

The epistemological analysis of religious language focuses on the epistemic function of religious propositions, the rationality of belief in God and the relationship between faith and reason. Different approaches to these issues allow for various perspectives on the rationality of belief in God. In this study, the Wittgensteinian analysis of religious language that based on the theory of language games defended in Wittgenstein's second period and developed by Dewi Z. Phillips, will be discussed. According to this theory, the truth of a proposition within a language game is not determined by its correspondence to some transcendent criteria or external facts and objects, but rather by the function it performs within its linguistic universe. Therefore, any religious propositions do not necessarily correspond to objects and facts imposed by the criterion of a scientific or historical language game. Since the religious language, like other language games, is an autonomous game that cannot be tested by the truth criteria of another language game and provides its accuracy from its use within itself.

Phillips' Wittgensteinian analysis of religious language argues that contemporary epistemological approaches to religion are under the pressure of by foundationalism. Accordingly, those who seek a foundation for religious belief can be divided into evidentialist epistemologists and Reformed epistemologists. Evidentialist epistemologists include natural theologians who assert that there is evidence supporting religious beliefs, and Logical Positivists or falsificationists who reject the epistemological validity of religious beliefs on the grounds that such evidence is absent. reformed epistemology, on the other hand, claims that religious beliefs do not require evidence, as they are properly basic propositions. Another contemporary religious epistemological approach is fideism and Phillips'

Wittgensteinian functional analysis, both of which reject the search for evidence or foundational support for religious claims. Thus, contemporary epistemological approaches to religious claims can be categorized under three main headings:

a) Verificationist and falsificationist challenge to religious claims: The rejection of religious beliefs through reason.

b) Reformed Epistemology: The acceptance of religious beliefs without rational justification.

c) Fideism and Wittgensteinian functional analysis of religious language: The reason-independent structure of faith and the way of life it makes possible.

1. On the Necessity of External Justification for Religious Beliefs: Logical Positivism and Natural Theology

A. J. Ayer constructed the main principles of the verificationism method. According to this, the content of propositions in philosophy must be empirically testable and verifiable. Thus, in accordance with the principles of Positivism, the claims expressed in a proposition must be emergence in the external world, and an observer must be able to test these claims.[1] From this perspective, Ayer supposes metaphysical, religious, aesthetic, and moral statements as pseudo-propositions. Meaningful statements, by definition, must be subject to empirical verification, and therefore must have a factual content.[2] If the criterion of verifiability cannot confirm a proposition, that statement must be pseudo-proposition. Because to say that the proposition is true or false is to say that it is literally meaningful. In this respect, propositions about God cannot be verified because they involve metaphysical components that do not express an empirical hypothesis.[3] Consequently, belief in God is meaningless since it fails to meet the criterion demanded by the verification principle. According to Ayer, the assertion "God exists" is as nonsensical as the assertion "God

[1] Alfred J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 14.

[2] Alexander Miller, "Emotivism and the Verification Principle", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 98/1 (1998), 106-107.

[3] Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 119-120.

does not exist", because there is no empirical evidence either for or against propositions with metaphysical content.

In The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, contrary to the claims of the Logical Positivists, Thomas Kuhn argues that scientific processes do not adhere to strict rationality and that science itself contains metaphysical content Accordingly, scientific hypotheses are shaped by metaphysical and cultural backgrounds, and thus the scientific findings of scientists are quasi-metaphysical commitments.[4] The metaphysical presuppositions held by scientists influence choice of research objects, their observations and the process of interpreting those observations.

The idea that science also relies on metaphysical assumptions has complicated philosophy's attempts to purge itself of metaphysics by emulating science. With the argument that even science cannot meet the criteria of verificationism, in the rejection of religious language, the criterion of verification has been replaced by the criterion of falsification. Antony Flew employed the principle of falsification against religious statements. Flew attempts to illustrate the nature of religious claims through a parable;

> "Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, 'some gardener must tend this plot.' The other disagrees, 'there is no gardener.' So, they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. 'But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.' So, they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. […] But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. 'But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.' At last, the Sceptic despairs, 'But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an

[4] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 176.

> invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differs from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?'"[5]

Flew argues that cognitively meaningful propositions are factual statements that can describe a particular area of the world. Unlike Ayer, Flew maintains that for a statement to have cognitive meaning, the conditions under which it could be disproven and ultimately demonstrated to be false must be clearly specified. In other words, if the factual conditions that a proposition denies are unclear—that is, if the conditions for its falsification are ambiguous—then the proposition does not put forth any real claim. "Thus, perhaps the simplest way of finding out whether or not a statement is an assertion is to ask whether or not it could be falsified, whether or not any conceivable set of circumstances could show it to be false."[6] Therefore, if a statement is a genuine assertion, it must be equivalent to the denial of its negation. a claim denies nothing, it does not genuinely assert anything. According to Flew, the believer's claim loses its status as a genuine assertion by being exhausted through the qualifications added to the original statement. As a result, the distinction between the propositions "There is a gardener tending the garden" and "There is no gardener tending the garden" becomes blurred. Such qualifications are inherent to religious claims. Believers constantly delimit their assertions in such a way that no empirical fact can count against or falsify them. Theological assertions inherently limit themselves by avoiding counterevidence.

> "Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made—God's love is 'not a merely human love' or it is 'an inscrutable love', perhaps—and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that 'God loves us as a father. […] We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God's

[5] Antony Flew et al., "Theology & Falsification: A Symposium", *The Philosophly of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Pres 1971), 1.

[6] Stephen T. Davis, "Theology, Verification and Falsification", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6/1 (March 1975), 24.

> (appropriately qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say, 'God does not love us' or even 'God does not exist'"?[7]

According to Flew, all religious statements are incapable of specifying the conditions under which they could be falsified. While it is possible to determine the conditions under which the negation of a proposition would occur in scientific claims, this is not possible in religious claims. Religious propositions, with their metaphysical content, are exempt from the criterion of falsifiability. Regardless of what happens in the world, believers do not abandon their faith, as they don't allow for any reasonable event or evidence that could falsify the existence of God.

Flew's claim that 'believers will not abandon their faith, no matter what happens in the world" can be refuted. Numerous instances exist of individuals who have transitioned from theism to atheism or from atheism to theism due to their experiences. Since human experiences are subjective, encountering specific states of affairs may have led someone to a religious or non-religious life. Therefore, Flew's definition of religious people is not universally valid. For some theists, certain states of affairs could explicitly serve as the negation of the proposition 'God exists', and their religious commitment may rest on the fact that such states of affairs have not yet occurred. Thus, the existence of believers who disregard evidence against religious claims does not imply that all believers behave in this manner.

Natural theology, which adopts evidentialism as its epistemological approach to religion, argues that reason can evaluate faith and that belief in God should be grounded on rational and empirical evidence.

> "This traditional approach to religious epistemology basically involved examining any evidence for the existence of God that could be found in the world of nature and then attempting to draw some conclusion about whether or not God's existence could be inferred on the basis of

[7] Flew et al.,"Theology & Falsification: A Symposium", 2.

> the evidence found. Natural theology has always reached a favorable conclusion on this issue."[8]

This view asserts that "the religious beliefs […] can be justified, inferred, or given a foundation by reference to these other aspects of human life. Indeed, it is claimed that these possibilities constitute the rationality of the beliefs."[9] Religious evidentialists seek an objective foundation for religion with logical and scientific arguments. According to this view, evidence for the existence of God must be formulated based on logical principles and framed within the structure of cause and effect, thereby a rational stance toward religion must be adopted. Belief in God, from an epistemological perspective, requires justification through rational reasoning. The claims that the existence of God can be demonstrated using both a priori and a posteriori arguments, grounded in scientific language and the objective-natural world, have led to the development of various types of arguments. In contemporary philosophy of religion, figures such as Richard Swinburne, William Craig, Dallas Willard, Steven Cahn, and Robert Adams have contributed to the rational explanations of God and religion, offering epistemological analyses of religious claims and advancing modern arguments for God's existence.

According to this view, evidence for the existence of God must be formulated based on logical principles and framed within the structure of cause and effect, thereby requiring the adoption of a rational approach toward religion. Belief in God, from this epistemological perspective, requires justification through rational reasoning. The assertions that the existence of God can be demonstrated through both a priori and a posteriori arguments, grounded in scientific language and the objective-natural world, have led to the formulation of various types of arguments. In contemporary philosophy of religion, scholars such as Richard Swinburne, William Craig, Dallas Willard, Steven Cahn, and Robert Adams have contributed to the rational explanations of God and

[8] Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman, *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4.

[9] D. Zepheniah Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (London: Macmillan Press, 1986), 14.

religion by engage in epistemological analyses of religious assertions and formulating contemporary arguments for the existence of God.

The ontological argument form of these arguments attempts to demonstrate the existence of God based on a priori principles, without resorting to empirical data. For instance, according to Anselm's proof of God;

1. Humans possess the concept of greatest possible being.

2. Suppose that the greatest possible being exists only as an idea in the mind.

3. To exist in reality is greater than to exist merely in the mind.

4. Therefore, we can conceive of a being greater than the greatest possible being, namely, a being that exists in reality.

5. However, there cannot be a being greater than the greatest possible being.

6. Therefore, the greatest possible being exists in reality.[10]

The cosmological argument aims to demonstrate the existence of God by reasoning from a part of the external world. Craig's contemporary cosmological argument is as follows:

1. Everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence.

2. The universe began to exist.

3. Therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence.[11]

Craig presents the contemporary version of the kalām cosmological argument, originally formulated by Al-Kindī and Al-Ghazālī. According to Craig, an infinite regress of causes is not actually possible in reality, but only potentially, and therefore the universe must have a beginning. Craig bolsters his claim about the universe's beginning by invoking the Big Bang theory from physics.[12] Accordingly, if the universe has a beginning, it can only be possible through a cause. The most plausible explanation for this cause, Craig argues, is God. Swinburne, on the other

[10] Michael Peterson et al, *Akıl ve İnanç*, trans. Rahim Acar (İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2015), 131.

[11] William L. Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (New York: The Macmillian Press LTD., 1979), 63.

[12] William L. Craig, "Philosophical and Scientific Pointers to Creatio ex Nihilo", *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 192.

hand, employs the teleological argument to argue for the existence of God, drawing upon scientific data. He argues that "almost all objects in the world behave in a highly regular way describable by scientific laws."[13] According to his fine-tuning argument, the universe exhibits harmony rather than chaos. Scientific laws are finely tuned to make life in the present world possible.[14] So, proponents of the teleological argument conclude that the existence of a creator who preferred the existence of this world over its non-existence is a plausible explanation. Evidentialist epistemology's recourse to rational and scientific hypotheses to substantiate the existence of God discloses the connection between belief and rationality. Phillips' functional analysis of religious language rejects both the rationalistic refutation of religious beliefs by Ayer and Flew and the rationalistic grounding of religious beliefs by natural theology. Since both assert that religious beliefs must be grounded in a rational justification.

2. The Claim That Religious Beliefs are Self-Evident: Reformed Epistemology

The establishment of reformed epistemology was made possible by a new epistemological approach to belief in God, developed by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Reformed epistemology, adopting the theological principles of John Calvin, rejects attempts to seek an external foundation for religion. According to Calvin, the most precise way of acquiring knowledge about God is by directly reference to the Scriptures. Logical reasoning about God is invalid, because it is carried out by the limited human intellect. In this view, God has engraved traces of His knowledge into the hearts of humans from the moment of creation.

> "Men of sound judgment will always be sure that a sense of divinity which can never be effaced is engraved upon men's minds. Indeed, the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely, that there is some God, is naturally inborn in

[13] Richard Swinburne, "The Argument from Design—a Defence", *Religious Studies* 8/3 (September 1973), 193.

[14] Swinburne, "The Argument from Design—a Defence", 194.

> all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow. […] Each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget, although many strive with every nerve to this end."[15]

Reformed epistemologists base their arguments on Calvin's theological views. The foundational principles of reformed epistemology, inspired by Calvin, are as follows:

1. Since God, inherently, transcends human understanding, God cannot be proven through logical reasoning.

2. God has implanted certain knowledge about His own nature in humans as an innate intuition

3. Divine knowledge, which transcends human reason, is certain and self-evident. Thus, these knowledges function as axioms in logical reasoning, with all other propositions being validated through these axioms.

Taking these principles into consideration, Plantinga formulates a new religious epistemological view. Plantinga defends the existence of basic propositions through a divine sense, granted by God to humanity.[16] According to Reformed epistemologists, self-evident basic propositions derive their origin from a divine intuition. This view argues that seeking evidence in favor of God's existence is unnecessary, as belief in God constitutes properly basic propositions.[17] In essence, both reformed epistemology and natural theology share the same method, and for this reason, they can be classified under foundationalist epistemology. However, the question of which propositions are to be considered properly basic is their main point of disagreement, and this disagreement radically alters the nature of their views. But Phillips, by asserting that both evidentialist and Reformed epistemologists are essentially foundationalists, rejects foundationalism in religious epistemology altogether. As an epistemological method, foundationalists emphasize the necessity of first principles that constitute the basis of our knowledge. For instan-

[15] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christion Religion Volume 1*, trans. Ford Battles, ed. John NcNeill (Lousville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 45-46.

[16] D. Zepheniah Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 101.

[17] Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God", *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 81.

ce, according to Descartes, foundational first principles are self-evident and precise because they do not rely on any other beliefs or knowledge for their justification.[18] All other beliefs can only be validated through deduction from these foundational principles.

Religious evidentialists argue that belief in God cannot be a basic belief and, therefore, must be justified by other foundational beliefs. Reformed epistemologists, on the other hand, assert that belief in God is a properly basic belief, and does not require justification through other beliefs. According to Alvin Plantinga, the fact that a believer holds a belief in God without any evidence does not mean that their belief is irrational. For natural theologians, in order for a belief to qualify as basic, it must either be conceptually self-evident (a priori) or empirically verifiable (a posteriori). Since belief in God meets neither of these criteria, it cannot be considered a basic belief and thus requires justification through foundational beliefs. However, Plantinga argues that because of the way God created this world, "when we contemplate flowers, observe the starry sky, or reflect on the vastness of the universe, we are inclined to believe that this type of flower or the vast and complex universe was created by God".

According to Plantinga, a believer's faith in God, even in the absence of evidence, does not indicate that their belief is irrational. For natural theologians, a belief is only properly basic if it is either conceptually self-evident (a priori) or empirically verifiable (a posteriori). Since belief in God meets neither of these criteria, it cannot be considered a basic proposition. Therefore, it requires justification through basic propositions. Plantinga argues that "there is in us a disposition to believe propositions of the sort of this flower was created by God or this vast and intricate universe was created by God when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe."[19]

According to Plantinga, belief in God is a more inherently human condition than disbelief, since belief in God is embedded in human

[18] Rene Descartes, *Metot Üzerine Konuşma*, trans. Murat Erşen (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2019), 21.

[19] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God", 80.

nature as an innate instinct. From this epistemic standpoint, it is unnecessary to search for a rational foundation for the belief in God, since belief in God is epistemically properly basic. Since human creation is programmed to accept the existence of God, we should regard belief in God itself as a rational foundation, rather than seeking other rational foundations. To claim that belief in God is not rational is to deny the instinctual tendencies inherent in human nature. "Belief in God, like other properly basic beliefs, is not groundless or arbitrary; it is grounded in justification-conferring conditions."[20]

Evidentialist epistemologists assert the validity of justification solely in religious matters. These justifications a result from a quest for a rational foundation. Logical justifications based on a rational foundation can determine the truth or falsity of belief in God. However, according to reformed epistemologists, any attempt to prove existence of God through reasoning is invalid, as God is considered a rational foundation. Plantinga argues that certain evidence can be obtained not only through objective processes that relate to the five senses but also through subjective experiences. Those who have access to the experience of God creating humans possess a justified and appropriate foundation for their belief. Plantinga illustrates the invalidity of an argument-based belief in God, which arises under the pressure of evidentialism, with an example:

> "If my belief in God is based on Argument, then if I am to be properly rational, epistemically responsible, I shall have to keep checking the philosophical journals to see whether, say, Anthony Flew has finally come up with a good objection to my favorite argument. This could be bothersome and time-consuming; what I do if someone does find a flaw in my argument. Stop going to church?"[21]

From Plantinga's perspective, rational arguments cannot provide a foundation for belief in God. However, Phillips argues that this situation arises from the grammatical feature of religious language, namely the grammar of belief in God. The unique grammatical structure of religious language exposes that it cannot be validated by the criteria applicable

[20] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God", 91.
[21] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God", 67.

to other languages and that it possesses its own criteria for validation within its practices. Therefore, a rational stance toward religious belief would imply the possibility of individuals who reject faith upon reading Flew's arguments and later return to religion upon being convinced by Swinburne's counterarguments. This situation is incompatible with the nature of both religious beliefs and the ways of life of believers. For both functionalists and reformed epistemologists, belief in God cannot be built on the existence of philosophers who are potentially triumphant. However, must anyone who adopts a rational stance toward religious beliefs continuously revise their beliefs? Can a rational believer not consistently uphold the same religious beliefs throughout their life by grounding them in rational foundations, or can a rational atheist not reject religious beliefs throughout their life simply because they cannot find a rational basis for them? Anyone adopting an epistemologically rational stance toward religious beliefs, the revision of their beliefs is possible at one or several times throughout their life. The assumption that a rational individual's beliefs can be changed through weekly magazines is a somewhat unjust criticism. For a rational stance toward the belief in God does not requires constant changes in belief through ongoing searches, but rather a steady and rational attitude in relation to the belief in God.

3. Functional Analysis of Religious Language and its Relation to Fideism

Fideism argues that rational arguments hold no authority in determining religious belief in the relationship between reason and faith. For instance, according to Blaise Pascal's fideism, reason is impotent in matters concerning God. Because "the existence or non-existence of God cannot be proven."[22] Reason and faith are two elements that absolutely exclude each other. According to Pascal, God is not a God comprehensible by reason, but rather "the God of love and consolation, a God who nourishes the heart and soul."[23] Since the universe is ambiguous in signifying

[22] Blaise Pascal, *Düşünceler*, trans. Zeki Eyüboğlu (İstanbul: Say Yayınları, 2011), 71.
[23] Pascal, *Düşünceler*, 77.

to the existence of God, cosmological arguments cannot prove God's existence. Consequently, a religious doctrine must be established with the heart, not with the reason.

Søren Kierkegaard's fideistic views bear resemblance to Wittgenstein's analysis of religious language. According to Kierkegaard, since religious faith is based on trust rather that reasoning, although reason is to present as a process in religious matters, it plays no role in the acceptance of faith. Any rational attempt to reach a judgment for or against belief in God is futile, as reason is incapable of comprehending God. Attempting to comprehend religious faith through reason drives it into an abstract and objective realm, while religion, by contrast, belongs to the realm of subjective and concrete experiences. "The movement of faith is not a transaction within the bargaining compass of the understanding. But to believe against the understanding."[24] In this regard, Kierkegaard's view evokes Wittgensteinian religious language suggesting that the core of religious belief is accessed through subjective experiences without rational justifications. Consequently, fideism represents an approach in which reason is suspended in religious matters and absolute submission takes place. Wittgensteinian religious language is considered fideistic as it rejects rational justification in religion.

Phillips rejects the claims that functionalist view is fideistic. According to Phillips, there are two different grounds that lead to the mistaken inference that Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is fideistic. The first ground includes five fundamental claims:

1. Religious beliefs are logically cut off from all other aspects of human life.

2. Religious beliefs can only be understood by religious believers.

3. Whatever is called religious language determines what is and what is not meaningful in religion.

4. Religious beliefs cannot be criticised.

[24] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 196.

5. Religious beliefs cannot be affected by personal, social or cultural events.[25]

In addition to these five claims, the second ground that leads to the view that Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is fideistic lies in the similarities between Wittgenstein's views on religion and those of Kierkegaard. Phillips also rejects these claims of similarity.

John Hick argued that religious beliefs are logically disconnected from other aspects of human life. According to him, since religious propositions inherently contain mystical and metaphysical elements, religious language within language games becomes isolated. Thus, religious language, which cannot extend beyond its own borders, has meaning only within its own limits, becoming a form of "protected discourse". Religious language, when reduced to a factual foundation, not only loses its ability to convey ancient universal truths but also no longer shares any common ground with other languages.[26] Phillips objects to Hick's claim. Since various linguistic activities are more or less in contact with each other, they cannot be sharply separated from one another. According to Wittgenstein, "what we call 'sentence' and 'language' […] is a family of structures that are more or less interconnected."[27] Therefore, such criticism focuses solely on one aspect of Wittgenstein's theory of language games. According to this, each language game establishes its own criteria and rules, thereby constituting its uniqueness. However, every individual language game, including religious language, is necessarily interconnected with others. Such criticisms overlook this second aspect of Wittgenstein's analysis, accusing Wittgensteinian religious language of being esoteric. On the contrary, "religious discourse is not something isolated, sufficient unto itself."[28] For Phillips, religious beliefs in an individual's life can be challenged by non-religious factors. They

[25] Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, 5-15.

[26] John Hick, "Sceptics and Believer", *Faith and the Philosophers*, ed. John Hick (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1964), 239-240.

[27] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 66.

[28] Kai Nielsen, "Wittgensteinian Fideism", *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 42/161 (July 1967), 207.

are not cut off from the human experiences such as joy, sorrow, hope and despair.[29] Since religious practices are intertwined with social life, the hope, joy, sorrow, and despair that encompass human existence play a role in prayer to God.[30] Phillips, so far from denying the connections between prayer and these features of human life, he argued that if such connections are severed, the religious pratices becomes problematic. The importance of religion cannot be understood simply by distinguishing between religion and other aspect of social life. The belief in God involves elements such as the desire for eternal life and solidarity that permeate human existence. Therefore, to isolate religious beliefs is to sever them from the natural context in which they are embedded.

The claim that religious beliefs can only be understood by believers is particularly influenced by the insider-outsider distinction in Wittgenstein's theory of language games. The insider of religious language are the believers who inhabit the aforementioned language and practice religious beliefs in their lives. These insiders shape their lives around concepts enabled by religious language. The worldview that religion offers to the believer is referred to as a "world picture" in Wittgensteinian terminology. This picture represents the paradigm of beliefs in the believer's life. However, outsiders to religious language are deprived of the world-picture offered by religious beliefs and practices. Since they do not engage with religious practices in their lives, it is claimed that they cannot grasp the meaning of religious concepts such as God, the afterlife or sin. This claim has led Wittgensteinian philosophers to be characterized as fideists. This dual classification was primarily developed to respond to rationalist critiques of religion made by outsiders. Accordingly, religious beliefs are exempted from logical and scientific research. However, this does not imply that outsiders are absolutely incapable of understanding religious phenomena. What is emphasized here is "the logical independence of beliefs from the confusions attributed to

[29] Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, 8.
[30] D. Zepheniah Phillips, *Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 116.

believers by many philosophers."[31] Thus, Phillips rejects the claim that religious belief can only be understood by believers.

Accordingly, the assumption that outsiders cannot criticize religious beliefs due to their lack of epistemic access to them is incorrect. Since religious language is closely intertwined with moral language, moral and religious expressions cannot be sharply separated. Therefore, outsiders can still achieve a certain understanding of religious pictures, although these pictures may not have a transformative impact on their lives. Religious doctrines and worship rituals would not have importance if they were not connected with practices beyond those that are specifically religious. When a man prays to God for forgiveness, for instance, his prayer would be worthless did it not arise from problems in his relationships with other people. "Because of such connections between religious and non-religious activity, it is possible to convey the meaning of religious language to someone unfamiliar with it."[32] So a person can comprehend the nature of religious belief and its grammar, even if he does not practice religious worship.

Religious doctrines and rituals gain their significance from their ties to broader, non-religious human practices. For instance, a prayer for forgiveness would lack meaning if it were detached from a person's moral difficulties with others. Because of such connections between religious and everyday life, the meaning of religious language can be communicated even to someone unfamiliar with it.

The claim that religious language determines what is meaningful and meaningless in religion suggests that what can be considered truth, knowledge, or evidence is determined solely within a subjective linguistic framework. Michael says the following regarding this:

> "Since our very conceptions of intelligibility, validity, knowledge and the like are a function of the linguistic system we use, it is impossible for us to attain a neutral Archimedean point in virtue of which we could evaluate the comparative adequacy of our own and other linguistic frameworks. Conceptual relativism is inescapable; we are caught in a lingua-centric

[31] D. Zepheniah Phillips, *Death and Immortality* (London: Macmillan Press, 1970), 30.
[32] Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, 11.

> predicament and in claiming superiority for our own linguistic framework we are - inescapably - simply being ethnocentric."[33]

Nielsen's claim of a language-centric construction of reality can be challenged from a Wittgensteinian perspective. According to the Wittgensteinian view, religious language, like other language games, determines what is meaningful — that is, the meanings of religious concepts and practices — but it does not do so in isolation from all forms of life. On the contrary, it constructs the criteria of meaningfulness in relation to other forms of life. "Wittgenstein says that these pictures are unshakeable beliefs in the sense that they form the framework within which those who live by them assess themselves and the events that befall them."[34] From the perspective of functionalist religious language, an Archimedean standpoint that exists outside the context of language games and constructs reality and unreality cannot be defended. Phillips rejects the idea that the meaningfulness of religious language and concepts can be determined by the Archimedean criteria that Logical Positivists attempt to develop. Religious language, while determining meaningfulness in relation to other languages by avoiding becoming esoteric, develops its own criterion based on its grammatical distinctiveness within its language game. For instance, the fact that the practices of fitra (charity) and zakat (almsgiving) are meaningful in religious language does not imply that they lack social, moral, or individual roles. The proposition that religious language establishes its own criteria of meaningfulness aims to protect the nature of religious belief from being undermined by external criteria of verification or falsification.

Frederick Copleston has discussed the claim that religious beliefs cannot be criticized:

> "For one thing, the idea of autonomous language-games, each of which can be understood only from within, by those who actually play the game in question, and which is therefore immune from all external criticism, seems to me open to objection. [...] If it is carried to a point at which any fruitful dialogue between religious belief and critical philosophy is

[33] Nielsen, "Wittgensteinian Fideism", 96.
[34] Phillips, *Death And Immortality*, 68.

> excluded, theology retreats into a kind of ghetto, cut off from the cultural life of which philosophy is one expression."[35]

The claim that religious beliefs cannot be criticized, alleges their beings are a form of special-case language. Special-case language is a language that contains esoteric concepts isolated from culture and social life. Conversely, Wittgenstein argues that nothing can precede experience. According to him, "The world is the totality of facts, not of things. [Therefore] the world is determined by facts. [...] For the totality of facts determines both what is the case, and also all that is not the case."[36] In the Tractatus, a transcendental logic that determines the formal conditions of all experience is rejected. Wittgensteinian functional religious language asserts that no religious concept can precede experience, social life, practice or culture. Rather, the source of the evaluation mechanism for religious beliefs lies in the practices of the believers. Therefore, the assumption that religious language can be criticized by isolating it from all surrounding structures is mistaken. Any attempt to portray religious belief as esoteric language distorts it by severing it from the natural context of its practices. For religious beliefs are connected with other aspects of human life.

4. The Claim That Religious Assertions Cannot be Epistemologically Justified

Wittgenstein opposes the search for foundations in human behavior and epistemology. Such searches for foundations lead us to construct abstract theories, which are the source of philosophical problems. In doing so, heterogeneous structures in ethics, epistemology, and ontology are overlooked, and imaginary homogeneities are constructed. For this reason, contemporary philosophy of religion that is under the pressure of foundationalism, seeks to establish philosophical, scientific, and logical foundations for belief in God. According to Phillips, foundationalism can never do justice to the true language of faith. In contemporary phi-

[35] Frederick Copleston, *Religion and Philosophy* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1974), 8.
[36] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, Universal-Bibliothek, 2022), 1.1, 1.11, 1.12.

losophy of religion, views seeking foundations for religious belief can be divided into two groups: Evidentialist Epistemology (Natural Theology and Logical Positivism) and Reformed Epistemology. According to Wittgenstein, attention should be given to the epistemic practices of the religious, as they cannot provide a foundation for their belief in God but instead rely on their existing epistemic practices. "Distinctions between sense and nonsense have their life in activities and ways of living we share with one another."[37] Sense and nonsense are established through the believer's prayer, worship, and actions. Wittgenstein opposes not only the search for a foundation for belief in God but also for other religious beliefs, such as the immortality of the soul and resurrection. Beyond the practices of religious participants, no universal evidence can substantiate the proposition "God exists".[38]

Beliefs such as that God created us or that Judgment Day will occur are neither based on evidence nor events that have happened in time. These claims reveal a person's world picture. Therefore, if someone says they believe in Judgment Day, it cannot be said that their belief is based on insufficient evidence. According to Wittgenstein, belief in the Judgment Day does not require evidence, as even a mere dream can serve as evidence for certain things.[39] The same applies to miracles, which, according to Phillips, involve the clues of a religious way of life. Our age's mistake is to discuss religious miracles from a scientific perspective rather than a religious one. Since the sense or nonsense of miracles depends on one's way of life, there is no universal answer to this question. The scientific world picture, which interprets it in factual and rational terms, evaluates the miracles in sacred texts as nonsense. The shift in this world picture creates the possibility for the ontological existence of miracles. Religious language, through its grammatical structure and the practices surrounding it, grounds the existence of miracles. In this sense, philosophy should not provide an objective criterion for sense or nonsense, as verification and

[37] Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, 2.
[38] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, trans. Cyril Barrett (California: University of California Press, 1967), 60.
[39] Wittgenstein, *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, 62-63.

falsification criteria do. A world picture, dominated by God's absolute providence, which includes a belief in a God who answers prayers, and the existence of prayer and worship practices, provides an ontological proof for the existence of miracles. While miracles may seem unreasonable from the perspective of scientific-secular language, within religious language, they possess a rational epistemological function. Since miracles are made meaningful by practices, the question is whether our existing practices can explain the causal relationships of miracles. Therefore, the acceptance or rejection of miracles is related to whether the way of life has a mystical dimension capable of defining miracles. Religious life, by allowing for miracles, can lead to a break in the chain of causality. But the dominant world picture of our age insists that every event must be understood within a cause-and-effect framework. Thus, adopting a reductionist stance that seeks to provide naturalistic explanations of supernatural events in line with scientific data should be avoided.[40]

According to Phillips, "if we do look at the role this belief plays in at least many believers' lives, we find that it is not a hypothesis, a conjecture."[41] For instance, the belief in the Last Judgment, where people are judged and ascend to heaven or descend to hell, does not involve a probability in the same way that scientific hypotheses do. Since religious beliefs do not serve the function of predicting the future, as scientific hypotheses and conjectures do. Instead, religious beliefs are the semantic framework through which believers interpret future-related events in their lives. In the religious language game, historical evidence or scientific coherence is not central, as scientific proof is set aside in favor of belief and reliance. Thus, the functionalist view rejects the search for rational foundations by evidentialist and reformed epistemologies regarding religious beliefs. Phillips contends that believers may regard this scientific uncertainty, which pertains to religion, as temporary and believe that, ultimately, evidence in favor of God's existence will emerge.

[40] Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, 190.
[41] Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, 124.

> "They continue, in the face of conflicting evidence, to believe in God. More radically, they have never had, and neither has anyone else had, sufficient evidence for belief in God. Such evidence, it may said, is never available in his life. They believe, however, that this evidence will be made available after death. [...] They might argue that the presence of sufficient evidence would destroy and negate the character of faith and the very need for faith. Faith, it might be said, is living in the trust and hope that there is evidence for the existence of God in the absence of such evidence here and now."[42]

Phillips argues that belief does not require proof, grounding, or justification. The God whose existence is doubted is not the God of sacred texts, as the possibility of His non-existence contradicts the language of those texts, wherein the God is presented as the agent of all possible phenomena and the ultimate source of the universe. However, from the evidentialist perspective, it seems more plausible to assert that a God unproven by arguments does not exist. Yet, the method employed to establish the rationality of religious belief, and the probabilistic language used distort its nature, as scientific evidence conflicts with the grammar of belief in God. Thus, the epistemological foundationalism that dominates contemporary philosophy of religion undermines the role of practices and belief in the life of the believer.

Conclusion

Evidentialist and Reformed epistemologists emphasize the importance of evidence, justification, foundations and reasoning in religious belief, asserting that belief in God is rational. Such evidence, if it can be found, will constitute the foundation of the belief. If it cannot be found, it will have been shown that there is no good reason for believing in God. According to Evidentialist Epistemology, it is wrong to believe in anything without sufficient evidence. For instance, Richard Swinburne highlights the importance of evidence in favor of belief in God, while J. L. Mackie highlights the evidence against it.

[42] Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism*, 9.

Flew and Ayer, while acknowledging that believers act in accordance with their religious epistemic claims, argue that belief in God is not rational. Both theist and atheist evidentialists share the same mistake regarding religious language as they seek a foundation for belief in God. Neither believers nor non-believers can demonstrate why belief in God is or is not a foundational belief. In this case, the genuine grammar of language games, which does not demand evidence or a foundation, and the plurality of perspectives are disregarded. Thus, while belief in God is not a universal foundational proposition, it nevertheless possesses explanatory and informative content.

According to Phillips, no epistemic practice is better off than religious epistemic practices. However, evidentialists distinguish rational from non-rational beliefs, as if they possess a criterion of rationality. For Flew, a proposition that contains a real assertion is equivalent to the negation of its denial. If there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either: and so it is not really an assertion." Phillips argues that religious pictures cannot be analyzed in such terms. As Flew demands rival pictures to challenge religious ones, Phillips contend that these rival pictures are meaningless to the religious believer. They were not established by means of evidence and cannot be overthrown by means of evidence either. Religious pictures transcend philosophical counterarguments, and as long as people adhere to them, abstract metaphysical hypotheses lose their significance in their life.

Religious individuals may negate all criteria as a consequence of their faith practices. In this context, Both Ayer and Flew, who argue that religious language lacks justification and foundation, and Swinburne and Craig, who assert that it possesses both, make the same mistake. This mistake is the thought that religious language must have a foundation that reformists make too. That mistake, which Phillips argues Reformed thinkers also commit, is the assumption that religious language requires a rational foundation reformed epistemology asserts that, contrary to evidentialist claims, belief in God is properly basic (foundation), meaning it does not rely on any propositional evidence to justify God's existence.

From Plantinga's perspective, a priori and a posteriori propositions are not prerequisites for proper foundationalism, allowing belief in God to be rationally justified belief. The divergence between Wittgenstein's view and reformed epistemology lies in the status of religious propositions; for Reformed thinkers, they are foundational, whereas for Wittgenstein, they are not.

According to Wittgenstein, no proposition, including belief in God, can qualify as a basic belief. For instance, propositions such as "There are people, a world, and material objects" are not believed because they are proven, but because they serve functional roles within their respective language games. Without first accepting them as true, we wouldn't know how to engage with reality in various contexts. The basic propositions, which become axioms through experience, come together to form the structure Wittgenstein refers to as the world picture. However, this world picture neither serves as the foundation of thought nor generates foundational propositions. Thus, Wittgensteinian religious language opposes the reformed epistemology's tendency to isolate foundational propositions. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, both the evidentialists' search for a rational and universal criterion for religious propositions and the Reformed Epistemologists' assumption of universal basic propositions are flawed. If a child is raised with practices that instill a God-centered world picture, the proposition that 'God created the world" becomes foundational to their other beliefs. However, for someone not raised within religious practices, belief in God cannot function as a foundational proposition.

Despite lacking evidence to demonstrate why belief in God should be foundational for non-believers, Plantinga imposes his perspective on others. Propositions are foundational not due to any epistemological superiority, but due to the place they occupy in human life. Whereas Plantinga argues that only belief in God is foundational. Wittgensteinian religious language asserts that foundational propositions derive their status from life practices. Thus, no proposition within language games can be determined arbitrarily, since the foundationality of belief is demonstra-

ted through practices. Attempting to demonstrate fixed foundations for self-evident propositions, as both evidentialists and reformed epistemologists do, leads to a separation from the life and cultural conditions that surround them. The proposition 'God exists' becomes foundational only through the awareness of the world as God's creation, belief in sin, and the experience of gratitude towards God. Wittgenstein comments on this issue as follows:

> "The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e. it learns to act according to these beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it."[43]

Evidentialists and reformed epistemologists reject the idea that faith propositions are accepted through learning within practices and through world picture. They regard these propositions as transcendent truths reached through logical reasoning. According to Phillips, instead of conjuring up a philosophical use "reasoning to religious conclusions", we should attend to the sense of the exemplars, something which would itself be a proper pursuit for philosophical enquiry. Therefore, the claim made by Reformed epistemologists that beliefs originate from the truth bestowed upon humanity by God is unacceptable to the functionalist approach to religion. Since the functionalist first examines what the term "God" means for both believers and nonbelievers. While believers form their worldview from a God-centered perspective, for others, the word "God" holds no meaning at all. The reformed epistemology imposes the world picture it has chosen from the plurality of worldviews onto another world picture. Reformed and evidentialist epistemologists lack an inclusive metaphysical system that can encompass both believers and nonbelievers. They reject opposing theories, claiming that they alone represent ultimate reality. By clinging to their own understanding of reality, these schools overlook the possibility of alternative conceptions of reality. Consequently, they begin to search for foundational propo-

[43] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. D. Paul and G. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 144.

sitions to support the theory they defend with metaphysical necessity. However, Wittgenstein argues that reality and the ways we think about it are diverse, and within this diversity, none can be considered superior to the others. Since there is no common foundation on which different conceptions of reality can be compared.

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