'Superstition' as a Contemplative Term : a Wittgensteinian Perspective

Hermen Kroesbergen [a,b]

[a]Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria,
Private bag X20, Hatfield, Pretoria 0028, South Africa
[b]Justo Mwale Theological University College, PO Box 310199, Chamba Valley, Lusaka 15301, Zambia
e-mail: hermen.kroesbergen@gmail.com

Abstract:
Can a contemplative philosopher describe a particular religious practice as superstitious, or is he thereby overstepping his boundaries? I will discuss the way in which the Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion D.Z. Phillips uses 'superstition' as a contemplative term. His use of the distinction between genuine religion and superstition is not a weakness as is often supposed, but a necessity. Without contemplating 'superstition' and 'genuine religion' Phillips would not have been able to elucidate the meaning that religious beliefs have in the lives of both the faithful and their critics.

I will defend the aptness of Phillips's use of this term and illustrate his approach using examples such as the concept of genuine friendship or gratitude, and then I apply this approach to the question whether, from a philosophical point of view, particular Christian practices such as the prosperity gospel are genuinely religious or should be called superstitious.

Keywords:
Superstition, Genuine religion, D.Z. Phillips, Prosperity gospel, Contemplative conception of philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein

Introduction

'Do you want better health? Do you want more wealth? This year you will get it. God has prepared a miracle with your name on it. Just believe!' 'Be faithful in your giving and God will reward you financially' – The prosperity gospel is booming in Africa. Many people look for a faith that promises them health and wealth. They want to wear the same glamorous suits and drive the same expensive cars as their pastors do. The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, is expected to give them a comfortable life. One might be tempted to call this 'superstition' rather than 'a genuine form of religion,' but would a contemplative philosopher be justified to use such terms?

The Wittgensteinian philosopher D.Z. Phillips thinks he is justified to do so, and he (1965, p. 119, italics in original) even uses the term 'superstition' in describing a much less controversial religious practice: 'parents who pray for a dying child, "O God, don't let her die!" If the prayer is not to be regarded as superstition, it cannot be thought of as an attempt to *influence* God to heal the child.' Is Phillips overstepping his boundaries by calling it superstitious if the parents want to influence God? Has he become a theologian arguing for a particular type of Christianity? Does the pejorative character of the term 'superstition' make this term unusable for a philosopher who wants to do no more than describe or contemplate practices? Does a philosopher as philosopher have the right to say something is superstitious, or should he let people decide for themselves what is genuinely religious?

In this article I will address these questions from Phillips's Wittgensteinian perspective. Since Peter Bloemendaal has recently provided the most elaborated criticism of Phillips's use of 'superstition' as a contemplative term, I will provide a systematic response to the way he argues this case. I will illustrate Phillips's own approach using the examples of concepts such as genuine friendship and gratitude, and then I will return to the question whether the examples above of the prosperity gospel and parents praying for the recovery of their dying child are genuinely religious or should be called superstitious. Finally, I will answer the question whether a philosopher as

philosopher has the right to say that something is superstitious, or whether should let people decide for themselves what is genuinely religious.

'Superstition' as Contemplative Term Disputed

Wittgensteinian philosophy claims to leave everything as it is. This philosophical approach is said to contemplate the world without meddling with it. D.Z. Phillips (1999, p. 166) describes his contemplative conception of philosophy as 'one that reflects on our discourse, our understandings of the real world, endeavouring to let them be themselves.' However, the very same D.Z. Phillips uses the distinction between genuine religion on the one hand, and superstition on the other. He has often been criticised for using this distinction. How can he let our understandings of the world be themselves when he uses such an emotionally charged distinction?

Many philosophers argue that this is impossible. Brian Clack (1995, p. 113), for example, rules out the use of this pejorative term altogether: 'the class of superstitions is not a genuine category, for the term 'superstition' has no positive, non-pejorative sense.' Terrence Tilley (2000, p. 350) phrases the critique thus: '"Superstition" is at home in critical discourse in which religious rituals or beliefs – typically of others' rather than one's own tribe – are rejected as not worthy of one's practice or belief. To redefine "superstition" as a merely descriptive term is not a move Phillips could make and be consistent with his philosophical practice.' And Mikel Burley (2012, p. 172) recently spoke of 'Phillips' judgementalism' which 'manifests itself poignantly [...] in the distinction that he insists upon between religious beliefs and superstition.' Burley (2012, p. 172) argues that in connection with superstition Phillips's 'statements can hardly be read as descriptions offered from a disinterested point of view. They come across as evaluative judgements made by someone with strong religious views of his own about what counts as edifying and what counts as degrading or confused.'

Many other philosophers agree and have argued that Phillips cannot claim to be contemplative on the one hand, and use the concept of superstition on the other hand. The list of well respected philosophers who criticise Phillips for using the term 'superstition' is long and includes: Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001, p. 62f.), William Wainwright (1995), Richard Swinburne (1977, p. 92), Kai Nielsen (2005), and Lance Ashdown (1993). Nonetheless, I disagree, I will argue that they are making a logical mistake by thinking that using the term 'superstition' and being purely descriptive or contemplative are mutually exclusive.

According to Phillips, 'superstition' can, and moreover: should be an acceptable term in a contemplative type of philosophy, which lets our understandings of the world be themselves without meddling with them. He does not deny that 'superstition' is a pejorative term. However, in his opinion, the pejorative character of the term 'superstition' does not exclude its use in a contemplative philosophy. Phillips (2005, p. 248) admits: 'giving a description does have prescriptive force, but this force comes from spelling out what is involved in the actual use of words. It is not the prescription of preference.' Elsewhere he (1993, p. 245) explains: 'Whether a ritual is superstitious is shown in its practice. Philosophy, in making this explicit, is not prescriptive,' even if *after* such a description people will start to revise, since in this case it would be only 'revisionary in its consequences' as Stephen Mulhall (2001, p. 110) phrases it. In this article I will show that it is possible to use the term 'superstition' without falling in the trap of 'prescription of preference.'

Critics assume that by using the term 'superstition' Phillips stops being disinterested and lets his preferences guide his reflections, as Clack (1995, p. 114) says: 'Phillips is best seen as making propaganda for what he sees as "true religion", and employing the religion / superstition distinction to do so.' However, in fact, as will become clear, it is the response to Phillips's work that people should decide for themselves what is genuinely religious which fails to be descriptive.

I will establish this by providing a response to Peter Bloemendaal who in his *Grammars of Faith* (2012) presents the most elaborate criticism of Phillips's use of the distinction between 'genuine belief' and 'superstition' to date. Starting with the common observation that it is a small and very

particular group of authors that Phillips refers to when he describes Christianity, Bloemendaal raises the question how Phillips deals with other possibilities in Christianity. How does Phillips respond to religious beliefs which do not fit his account? According to Bloemendaal Phillips is placed for a dilemma: either he should accept that he is a revisionist, someone who from within Christianity argues against these other possibilities, or he should weaken or even give up his criticism of traditional philosophy of religion: he should admit that these philosophers simply describe other grammars of faith, and that Phillips's own analyses only have a 'regional worth' as Bloemendaal (2012, p. 426) quotes Klaus von Stosch. I will try to establish that there is a third possibility, but for that we will first need to refute Bloemendaal's arguments.

Bloemendaal starts by questioning, what he calls, Phillips's 'descriptive licence.' Bloemendaal says that Phillips has the descriptive licence to claim in particular cases that the believer thinks this is what he believes, whereas what he actually believes is something else. But, according to Bloemendaal (2012, p. 391), this 'can only go so far [...] before one damages one's credibility.' The use of descriptive licence is limited. Maybe there are not as many counterexamples to Phillips's account as there seem to be at first sight. Either the philosophers or the believers themselves may misunderstand Christianity. In that case their *representations* of Christian faith will be contrary to Phillips's rendering, but the actual lived faith may still be in accordance with it. However, if Phillips wants to hold that all Christianity is the way he describes it, he would have to either disregard many authors including Anselm, Augustine and Aquinas as not Christian, or demonstrate that their writings have been misconstrued. Without further argument Bloemendaal dismisses both options as unrealistic, and he (2012, p. 392) concludes: 'Phillips cannot deny the existence of genuine counterexamples, i.e. examples which can be justified by an appeal to religious practice.' There are so many cases that do not seem to fit Phillips's analysis, some of them *must* be justifiable by an appeal to practice, seems to be Bloemendaal's underlying argument.

According to Bloemendaal, these counterexamples that must be there, are regarded as 'superstition' by Phillips. Bloemendaal critically examines what Phillips sees as the defining characteristics of superstition – such as confusion, but for his main argument the concerns raised do not really matter. For Bloemendaal (2012, p. 403 f.) asks: 'Even if we accept that a given practice or belief is confused, why should we accept the additional claim that it is, therefore, superstitious?' Bloemendaal (2012, p. 407, italics in original) holds that: 'this seems more of a stipulation than a description. One is simply stipulating that a religious practice motivated by instrumental concerns is not *genuinely* religious.'[1] Bloemendaal (2012, p. 403) follows Clack in claiming that the pejorative character of the term 'superstition' renders it radically unworkable for a descriptive or contemplative type of philosophy, since, Bloemendaal (2012, p. 412) continues, the very use of this term 'presupposes a normative concept of religion, which, though perhaps theologically valid, cannot be justified philosophically by an appeal to practice.'

So, according to Bloemendaal, first of all, not every Christian practice will fit Phillips's descriptions, and, secondly, Phillips cannot call these other practices 'superstition,' without giving up his descriptive or contemplative conception of philosophy. Therefore, either Phillips is theologically arguing for a particular kind of Christianity, or he should recognize that the scope of his arguments is limited. Phillips cannot call particular concepts of God 'confused,' but at most 'confused by reference to what *some* mean by the reality of God' (Bloemendaal 2012, p. 416, italics in original), whereas for others this will be their genuinely religious concept of God. According Bloemendaal it is not for a contemplative philosopher to apply the distinction between superstition and genuine religion. In the next section I would like to show that Bloemendaal's arguments to support this are flawed, and that

[1] Bloemendaal (2012, p. 410) dismisses the possibility that the distinction between genuine religion and superstition is made from within religion, for either so-called superstitious practices are part of religion and therefore just as genuinely religious, or they are not part of religion, but then *within* religion there is no distinction to be made, for then there is no superstition within religion. The problems with this argument will be discussed towards the end of the next section.

'superstition' can be a contemplative term, by comparing the concept of religion to concepts that are a bit less controversial, like friendship and gratitude.

Other Concepts as Comparison

Like the distinction between genuine religion and superstition, there is a distinction between genuine friendship and not-genuine or fake friendship. If you are someone's friend only because he gives you presents or a job, we would say that that is not genuine friendship. Michel de Montaigne (1958, p. 139) describes the concept of genuine friendship by stating that his friendship is not because of something, but 'Because it was he, and because it was I.' That could be seen as a disinterested description of our concept of genuine friendship.

In Holland there is a pop-song 'Friendship is an illusion', but even this statement presupposes the concept of genuine friendship. Without the concept of genuine friendship the statement and song would make no sense. This concept is used even by people who doubt whether this concept ever exists in its pure form in real life.[2]

We say that genuine friendship cannot be bought. This is a grammatical remark, it is purely descriptive of the way concepts are used and would fit a Wittgensteinian contemplative conception of philosophy perfectly. The 'we' in this remark does not necessarily imply everyone: people could have had a different concept of friendship. The concept that we do in fact have, and which is described by Michel de Montaigne, is a concept 'which we believe to be shared by some perhaps all – other men,' as Frank Cioffi (1998, p. 6; quoting Simmel 1965, p. 296) says about the Wittgensteinian use of 'we.' According to Fergus Kerr (1997, p. 188, italics in original), Wittgenstein had a special gift to recognise these concepts 'we' use: 'Wittgenstein's confidence that he is speaking for us all, when he notes what we are naturally inclined to say, rests on his being free enough to own to that rancour against *life* that keeps us, in our philosophical moments, from coming into our own.' Like Wittgenstein uncovers concepts that 'we' use, the concept of genuine friendship as described by De Montaigne is shared by me and many people I know, and is presupposed in the agreements and disagreements that we do have involving friendship. As Wittgenstein (2009, #241) said: 'This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life,' and this form of life can be described by disinterested philosophical enquiry.

The terms 'genuine friendship' and 'fake friendship' therefore can and should be part of a contemplative account of this particular shared practice in which these terms are emotionally charged. The contemplative philosopher does not meddle with them, but just describes the concepts as they are used. Someone like Michel de Montaigne may show us what is involved in the concept of genuine friendship that we all use.

'Friendship for external reasons – reasons beyond "Because it was he, and because it was I" – is fake friendship,' would be a purely descriptive, grammatical remark, which – as Wittgenstein (1967, p. 72) said – 'can only be verified by the consequences he [*in this case* the one involved in friendship] does or does not draw.' Therefore, to verify his description, the contemplative philosopher should get the people involved to judge themselves out of their own mouths, using what Phillips (2004a, p. 14) calls 'the Socratic character of Wittgensteinian discussion.' 'A simple Gallup poll of initial accounts will not do,' he (2004a, p. 7) adds. Elsewhere he (2001, p. 150) explains why philosophy by Gallup poll will not do: 'because when reference is made to what people mean, the reference is to the role the words play in their lives, not to the account they would give if asked.' And (2008, p. 7): 'How is one to tell the difference between genuine [...] differences and confusion, if not by drawing out the implications of our words and their surroundings?' So a contemplative philosopher has to go beyond simply asking someone the reasons for his friendship. For, even if someone begins to mention external reasons like how useful it is to have friends, then still it might

[2] Clarity about a relationship may lead to changes in the relationship or it may not - someone might say 'Okay, our friendship is not entirely what we would call 'genuine friendship' but we carry on nonetheless.'

be genuine friendship, namely, if in his life it is visible that these are not the real reasons – for example, the friendship continues after the usefulness has ended. A contemplative philosopher has to ask the right questions to bring out which consequences people do draw.

An illustrative example of this Socratic strategy is given by Phillips (2005, p. 206) when he mentions Jesus' ascension: 'If you went on to ask how high [Jesus] was raised, Christians would laugh at you.' In a Gallup poll a Christian might have given as initial account of his belief in the ascension that Jesus was raised up high in the ordinary sense. But by asking how high Jesus was raised, he is shown that he has given a confused account of his own belief. His laughter shows that he does not draw the conclusion that was implied in his initial account. Asking the right questions is a way to show the concepts that we use. You may meet a Christian who does not laugh when you ask him how high Jesus was raised, he may give you a specific answer without any irony, but I for me would not know what to make of that – he would not be part of our 'we.'

If someone initially claims that he disagrees with Michel de Montaigne's concept of friendship, you may ask him whether the song 'friendship is an illusion' is a mystery to him then. Or you may ask him how much money he asks to become your friend – and hopefully he is honest enough to laugh.[3] Based on De Montaigne's observation a contemplative philosopher may formulate a distinction between genuine and fake friendship which is justified by practice, even if an initial Gallup poll may be completely at odds with it.

A similar case could be made for the expression of gratitude: in our practices there is a distinction between genuine and fake expressions of gratitude, or even between expressions of gratitude and only apparent expressions of gratitude. A contemplative philosopher may try to clarify these distinctions which are already present in our practices themselves. If someone says 'Words cannot express how grateful I am,' very often this will in fact be a successful, genuine expression of gratitude. Whereas, if a politician explicitly thanks his predecessor for what he has done for the country, this might be a mere formality and not be a real expression of gratitude. What at first sight looks like an expression of gratitude or a failure to express gratitude, may turn out to be the opposite. We have to look at the consequences people within the practice draw to see whether we have a case here of a genuine or a fake expression of gratitude.

The importance to look at the wider context is clearly visible in Phillips's reflections on the notion of the will of God. If something terrible has happened, and one asks 'Why is this happening?', a response may be 'It is the will of God.' This may look like an answer to the question, an explanation of why this is happening, but, as Phillips (1988, p. 282) points out, the notion of God's will 'is formed, not in a search for explanations, but in the abandonment of explanations.' What Phillips claims here, is that the consequences that are drawn from saying 'It is the will of God' are very different from consequences drawn from explanations like 'It is a virus' or 'It is a result of climate change.' Even if someone would want to call 'It is the will of God' an 'explanation' or 'an answer to the question "Why is this happening?",' then still the role this expression plays in our practices is very different from the role played by other expressions that are called 'explanation.' To this difference, present within the practice itself, Phillips as a contemplative philosopher wants to draw our attention in his descriptions.

Bloemendaal argued that it is unlikely that every Christian practice will fit Phillips's descriptions, that at least some counterexamples *must* be justified by practice. This seems to be a quite emotionally charged 'must,' avoiding the uncomfortable dismissal of many philosopher's analyses and many believers' self-descriptions. According to Bloemendaal it is only likely that there are at the very least some non-conformers, some religious practices which do not fit the way Phillips describes religion in his work, so without feeling the need to specify these not-conforming practices, the question

[3] Showing that something is fake friendship may lead to changes in a relationship, but that does not imply that describing it as fake friendship was not purely descriptive in the first place.

Bloemendaal raises, is how Phillips deals with these non-conformers. This sounds like a common sense argument, however, once we apply this argument to the concepts discussed in this section we see how misleading this argument is.

Some say friendship only exists when one gets something out of it, De Montaigne claims that genuine friendship goes beyond that – however difficult it may be to untangle the two types of friendship in real life. Some may say De Montaigne's conception of friendship is misguided, and no more than a fiction, and that ordinary, real-life friendship is always a matter of give and take.[4] Now, by calling De Montaigne's concept of friendship misguided and a fiction, one is still not a non-conformer, since one still acknowledges the *distinction* between the two interpretations of friendship. One might use other words to describe the distinction – for example: real vs. foolish, instead of: fake vs. genuine – but, thereby, he conforms to the conceptual difference which De Montaigne draws our attention to. In fact, if someone does not share this distinction at all, it will be very hard to follow even the most shallow Hollywood-movies. De Montaigne sees the conception of friendship he describes, as admirable, someone else may see it as foolish, but still both conform to the same conceptual structure. It is very hard to imagine someone who does not do so.

Bloemendaal (2012, p. 388) says: 'it will not do to discard any account opposing one's own as the result of one's opponent's misapprehension of the grammar of the expressions under investigation.' This sounds reasonable, however, as long as we do not have a clue as to what it means *not* to have the distinction between the two types of friendship, we logically cannot acknowledge someone who claims to oppose this distinction, however willing we are to accommodate everyone. To simply suggest that there *must* be at least some counterexamples justified by practice, that it is only likely that there are at the very least some non-conformers, as Bloemendaal does, will not do.

At first sight someone may claim that, according to him, there is only the give-and-take type of friendship, but when we take a closer look we will probably see that he says this to argue against De Montaigne's conception of friendship, which he thereby acknowledges. At first sight someone saying that words cannot express his gratitude, seems to fail in expressing his gratitude, but he may be shown by the consequences that are drawn in his practice to have succeeded in expressing gratitude nonetheless. We need to look beyond the words at how they are used.

Phillips claims that saying 'It is the will of God' is 'the abandonment of explanations.' Now, it does not matter whether someone says that 'It is the will of God' really is his 'explanation' for what happened, the point that Phillips made, would only be refuted, if it could be shown that this person draws the same consequences from 'It is the will of God' as he would draw from other explanations.

Bloemendaal suggests that people who have a factual belief that God exists and that 'God' refers to something, may provide a genuine counterexample which does not conform to Phillips's analyses. He (2012, p. 382) says about such beliefs: 'it does seem extremely difficult to deny that the Christian world-picture has involved, and still involves, such beliefs.'[5] This sounds reasonable, however, as Phillips's teacher Rush Rhees (1969, p. 132) says: 'I might say that the language about God certainly does refer to something. But then I should want to say something about what it is to "talk about God," and how different this is from talking about the moon or talking about our new house or talking about the Queen.' Someone is not non-conforming to Phillips's accounts by claiming that God factually exists, but one would only be non-conforming if one, in his practice, does not have access to these differences that Rhees mentions here.[6] As Phillips (1970, p. 71, italics in original) says:

[4] Not everything that looks like friendship lives up to the standards of genuine friendship set by De Montaigne, some may even claim that this kind of friendship does not exist in real life.

[5] Bloemendaal suggests that Anselm, Augustine and Aquinas do not seem to fit Phillips's descriptions of Christian faith. To see whether this really is the case, we need to check, not the words they use, but the way they use them.

[6] Phillips does not, for example, rule out a belief in bodily resurrection or in miracles, as Bloemendaal (2012, p. 413) suggests, but shows which differences should be accounted for, if these beliefs are to count as genuinely religious: like the one that Bloemendaal (2012, p. 301) approvingly quotes from an encyclopaedia: that immortality in the Bible is 'not a condition simply of future existence.' A contemplative philosopher points out

'I have no doubt, however, that *the same* believers who say that the existence of God is a fact would, if pressed, admit that the discovery of God is not like the discovery of a matter of fact, and that there is no question of God ceasing to exist, of having existed for a certain length of time, or of having come into existence.' Just like in the case of friendship, what matters is if someone conforms to the distinctions in the use of a concept.

Bloemendaal is too quick in assuming that there *must* be non-conformers: we would not know what to make of non-conformers in the case of friendship, what to make of people who do not acknowledge the *distinction* between De Montaigne's description of friendship and a more prudential, give-and-take conception. Bloemendaal's second argument challenges the way we describe this distinction. Even if, for sake of the argument, we admit that the distinction exists, Phillips cannot use a pejorative term such as 'superstition' to describe one side of the distinction, without giving up his descriptive or contemplative conception of philosophy, according to Bloemendaal.

Let us apply this again to the two concepts of friendship: if a philosopher identifies the distinction between the two, should he call De Montaigne's concept 'genuine' or 'foolish', should he call the give-and-take concept 'fake' or 'realistic', or should he refuse to use such normative terms at all? Bloemendaal's argument that a contemplative philosopher should avoid normative terms completely, again, sounds like a common sense argument, however, it is misleading.

If someone claims that all friendship is just a matter of give-and-take and that De Montaigne's concept is a foolish fiction, then he will no longer be able to distinguish 'friendship' from other prudential or instrumental relationships, such as between retailer and customer for example. The only reason he could give why some of these prudential relationships are called 'friendship,' is that people have this – according to him: misguided – association with De Montaigne's – according to him: fictional – concept. He may not want to see this.[7] However, from a contemplative philosophical perspective, even in this case, De Montaigne's concept is *determining* the use of the concept of friendship, and it would be no more than fair to call this concept 'genuine', although someone may of course hold that this genuine friendship is foolish and not something to strive after.[8] So the normative concept of 'genuine friendship' is given in practice, in the practice shared by both those who believe in this type of friendship and those who do not. This practice can only be described properly, if the contemplative philosopher acknowledges the normative concept of genuine friendship that is present in the practice itself.

Now, Bloemendaal (2012, p. 410) dismisses the possibility that the use of pejorative terms in contemplative philosophy may be justified by an appeal to practice, claiming that either the pejoratively described practices are part of the practice and therefore just as genuine, or they are not part of the practice, but then *within* that practice there is no distinction to be made. However, this argument presupposes a too strict conception of boundaries of practices. Compare that in soccer it is not allowed to throw the ball into the goal, so when you do so nonetheless, that will be regarded as not to be part of the soccer-game, however, the fact that this action is excluded is part the practice of soccer itself. Fake friendship is not really friendship, but that is decided from within our dealings with the concept of friendship. A practice can only be described properly, if the contemplative philosopher acknowledges even the normative – pejorative – exclusions that are present in the practice itself.

Whatever someone may claim himself, practice may show that by saying 'Words cannot express how grateful I am,' someone is genuinely thanking the other person. The consequences that are and are not drawn, may show that 'It is the will of God' is not used as an ordinary explanation.

---

such differences which are part of our shared practices, whatever a believer may tell someone conducting a Gallup poll concerning his own beliefs.

[7] It is not true, as Bloemendaal (2012, p. 200) suggests, that everyone wants to see the conflicts in which he is engaged, 'in a truer light', for clarity may jeopardise his cause.

[8] As mentioned above, even if someone says 'friendship is an illusion', he presupposes that De Montaigne's concept of friendship is what real friendship is, or would have been.

These distinctions are present within the practices themselves, and contemplative philosophy should bring them out, without shying away from the normative terms used to describe them. This holds for the distinction between genuine religion and superstition as well.

If we reach clarity on how, in our practices, we use the distinction between genuine religion and superstition, then we will be able to judge whether a particular practice is sometimes or always superstitious. When is a kind of religion superstitious and when is it not – given the standards that are already present in our shared ordinary discourse? For Bloemendaal's primary argument that pejorative terms are never allowed in contemplative philosophy, his critical discussion on Phillips's conception of superstition did not really matter. Now we have established, however, that contemplative philosophy should bring out distinctions within our practices, even when this implies using normative terms such as superstition, it becomes relevant to look at the content of the distinction between superstition and genuine religion. When do we call something superstition?

Wearing a White Shirt

Some things we call superstitious, and other things we regard as genuinely religious. This distinction is present in our practices themselves. For example, the soccer coach of Zambia wore a white shirt during the first game of the 2012 African championship. Zambia won and so he kept on wearing this white shirt until the finals of the tournament. I presume that even the coach himself would admit that his practice was superstitious, although nonetheless he carried on.

On the other hand, the members of some churches in Zambia always wear something white. This refers to their being baptised and shows their dedication to God. So these people are wearing white shirts too. I presuppose that this is, or at least could be, genuinely religious.

D.Z. Phillips in his work presents several suggestions as to what is involved in the distinction between superstition and genuine religion. First of all, he refers to Wittgenstein's hint that superstition is about fear whereas genuine religion is an expression of trust. Secondly, something is superstitious when it presupposes queer or erroneous quasi-causal relationships. Finally, according to Phillips in superstitions internal, religious relationships are turned into external, prudential relationships.[9] Superstitions, according to Phillips, confuse internal, religious relationships with external, prudential ones; due to this confusion these beliefs are not so much mistaken as nonsensical.[10] Phillips (2001, p. 170) asks: 'Can we say that sticking pins in the picture [believing it will harm the one portrayed] might have been effective, but in fact is not?' We would have no idea what that would mean. If we look at it from this angle it would be a blunder concerning causal relationships. Or not even a blunder, Phillips says in his later work, it would be – in Wittgenstein's phrase – too big for a blunder, so it must be a confusion, in particular the confusion of locating the effect of words or actions (such as sticking pins in a picture) in these words or actions themselves, instead of in the role they play in our practices.

Regarding Phillips's description of superstition Bloemendaal raises four concerns. First, does Phillips acknowledge the difference between religious concepts and other, ordinary concepts, given

[9] Note that these discussions are not intended to suggest that Phillips presents a *theory* about superstition. He would not want to present any theory. I have just deduced from his work some aspects that we might look at when we discuss religious practices and superstitions. The philosopher has to look to the practice to see what these perspectives on superstition come to in specific cases. Phillips's suggestions are meant to help us looking at practices, not to be part of a theory that can be studied in itself, apart from practice.

[10] Bloemendaal (2012, p. 397) notices that there seems to be a development within Phillips's work moving from the second to the third criterion: 'Phillips's later analysis does not deny that [superstitions] involve a belief in some queer causal connection. However, it emphasises that such beliefs are not so much *mistakes* as *confusions*.'

that not everyone is engaged in specifically religious practices? Second, if confused beliefs are meaningless, what *do* people belief? Third, not all confusions are superstitions and not all superstitions seem to confusions of this kind. And, fourth, superstitions often seem to exert a fascination, to have a curious depth, which cannot be accounted for by regarding them as mistakes or confusions. I will respond to these concerns after applying Phillips's criteria for superstition to two examples.

The three criteria to distinguish superstition from genuine religion that I have deducted from Phillips's work, can be clarified by the example of the white shirt. The first criterion, about fear and trust, by itself is not very clear however. One might say that the soccer coach feared to lose his next game, whereas the church member trusts that whatever he will meet in life he will receive it as a child of God. However, one might say as well that the soccer coach trusts to win the next game, whereas the church member fears what kind of person he becomes when he would no longer dedicate himself to God by wearing a white shirt. Nonetheless, the kind of things that are feared and trusted differ and this distinction is brought out by the other two criteria.

The soccer coach seems to fear or trust that he will lose respectively win the next game. Maybe he does not fear or trust this himself, but he assumes that his players or his audience are superstitious in this way and he does not want to let them down.[11] Either way we have here an erroneous causal connection between the wearing the white shirt and the result of the next game. The winning or losing is factual, what it comes to remains the same whether you are in the grip of this superstition or not. The result depends only in an unspecified, immediate, erroneously causal way on the coach's wearing a white shirt. This is an external, prudential relationship.

The church member, on the other hand, trusts that everything he will receive, will be a gift to him as a child of God. And he fears to become something less than the faithful believer he is. These things are not related in some mysterious causal way to his wearing a white shirt, but his wearing a white shirt is just an expression of and a part of his entire life as a believer. The importance of his white shirt is connected to his entire life and world view. The results – such as receiving everything as a child of God or to be (no longer) a faithful believer – would not be the results they are without this belief and life. This is a genuinely religious, internal relationship.

Now, how about Bloemendaal's concerns? He challenges whether religious concepts such as superstition or prayer can be treated in the same way as ordinary concepts such as pain. He (2102, p. 263, n. 147) says: 'Compare Phillips's analysis of the concept of "prayer" with Wittgenstein's conceptual reminders of the language-games we play with the concept "pain." In the latter case, would it not be rather curious to say that, although there are instances which do not fit readily into Wittgenstein's exposition, we should not say that they are not instances of pain?' However, 'superstition' is just as ordinary a word as 'pain' or 'friendship.' Whether you believe in friendship or not, whether you believe someone is in pain or not, whether you regard something as superstitious or not, we would be at a loss in understanding what you mean when you do not conform to certain distinctions concerning these concepts in your use of these concepts. It is irrelevant whether you are religious or not: your statements would make no sense to us. 'Superstition' is just another word which is used in our practices – practices which are share by believers and non-believers alike. A contemplative philosopher describes this use. Now, are Phillips's description apt? This brings us to Bloemendaal's other concerns.

What does, for example, the soccer coach believe if it is meaningless to believe that his white shirt causes his team to win? He may say he believes his white shirt works, he may act as if he believes his white shirt works – for example by becoming very upset, if he cannot find it, however, still, I think we should say that in a way he does not really believe it. For if he would believe that such queer causal connections exist – within his whole life and not just in a particular instance of confusion – then in many ways we could no longer talk to him, just like we could not talk to someone

[11] I thank Ingolf Dalferth for pointing out this possibility.

who does not have access to the distinction between genuine and fake friendship discussed in the previous section. If his white shirt can cause a win, then anything can, the world has lost its predictability where some things stand in causal relations to one another, and others not. Even the most superstitious person presupposes this predictability in the majority of cases, otherwise we would diagnose him with psychosis or something, and then we do no longer know what is meant with saying 'to believe' in his case. As Phillips (1976, p. 109) says about superstitious people: 'It is not that these people do not mean what they say. They do. The point is to emphasize is that what they want to say cannot be said,' and so they do not really say it. They may think they do, but their life as a whole shows otherwise. The soccer coach does not really believe that his white shirt causes his team to win.

Thirdly, Bloemendaal is worried that Phillips is no longer able to draw a distinction between confusions and superstitions. However, Phillips has never suggested that all confusions are superstitions, and the other way around, I do not really see the problem with calling all superstitions confused. The counterexamples that Bloemendaal (2012, p. 399) presents are only counterexamples against limiting confusions to *linguistic* confusions: 'there are many acts, commonly thought of as superstitious, which are not so easily recognised as linguistic confusions. Think of such practices as knocking on wood, the use of a lucky charm, the refusal to walk under a ladder, the saluting of magpies, and so on.' Once we expand linguistic confusions to all confusions, there is not much difference left between for example a lucky charm and sticking pins in a picture that was discussed above: someone ascribes a meaning to practices in themselves which they could only have within the whole flow of life. This is similar to confusedly locating the difference that it makes whether a church member wears a white shirt within the white shirt itself, instead of in his life as a whole.

Fourth, does Phillips fail to account for the depth attached to superstitions? Bloemendaal (2012, p. 402, italics in original) acknowledges that Phillips accounts for a certain depth – given with the hopes and fears connected to our superstitions – however, not for the 'fascination that envelops us when we entertain the notion that [an object in a superstition] *might actually have the property ascribed to it*.' What if the white shirt really did cause Zambia to win?

I think here a misunderstanding surfaces that is also visible in Bloemendaal's failure to understand in Phillips's discussion of miracles. In connection to the latter Bloemendaal (2012, p. 296) states: 'A seemingly insurmountable chasm opens up between, on the one hand, Phillips's claim that the problem with miracles is not in accepting that they occurred – "if it happened, it happened" – and, on the other hand, his insistence that talk of miracles cannot be taken to be either explanatory or descriptive.' We cannot explain everything, so if in this case the white shirt miraculously caused Zambia to win, then so be it: this is simply one of the things we do not understand. If, however, we draw further consequences from it, if this implies that anything can, if the world has lost its predictability, then 'the white shirt caused Zambia to win' is no longer a descriptive statement within the world as we know it, but a sign of our psychosis for example. Therefore, the fascination mentioned cannot be in the idea that the white shirt might actually have the property ascribed to it, for either this is an irrelevant weird phenomenon – 'if it happened, it happened' – or, if it is more, it changes everything, it is not limited to this shirt and its properties.

However, the confusions involved in superstitions do show the precariousness and arbitrariness of our practices: these are what they are, but there is no reason why they could not have been different. That is what brings in the fascination or curious depth of superstitions that Bloemendaal alludes to. We share practices with language, practices in which for example we distinguish between fake and genuine friendship, or superstition and genuine religion. The fascination that may envelop us when dealing with superstitions is in what it shows about our ordinary practices with language – as for example poetry can do as well by using language differently. Therefore, Phillips (1995, p. 124) agrees with Clack, whom Bloemendaal is following here, insisting 'on the essentially poetic nature of such acts. They are not blunders about causality.' The depth is not in the notion that its object might actually have the property ascribed to it.

As we have seen above Bloemendaal is too quick in assuming that there *must* be non-conformers: we would not know what to make of non-conformers in the case of friendship, and neither would we know what to make of non-conformers in the case of superstition. It is no more than an emotionally charged misconception that everyone for him- or herself can decide what is genuinely religious and what superstitious – such distinctions are already given in our shared practices. A descriptive or contemplative conception of philosophy requires us to describe our practices including the normative distinctions that are used in them, such as those between superstition and genuine religion.

In the previous section we saw that contemplative philosophy should unveil such normative distinctions within our practices; in this section we have been able to apply the way in which Phillips accounts for the distinction between superstition and genuine religion to some examples, and we have countered Bloemendaal's concerns regarding this account. Now, we are ready to apply Phillips's criteria for the distinction between superstition and genuine religion to the two examples with which we started.

Superstitious Practices?

Are the examples at the outset of this article – the prosperity gospel and praying for a dying child – superstitious? Can we show that they presuppose erroneous causal connections and external, prudential relationships rather than internal, religious relationships? Let us start with the prosperity gospel.

Within the prosperity gospel it is clear which relationship is central: the relationship between giving to God and prosperity. Remember the statements from the prosperity gospel such as: 'Be faithful in your giving and God will reward you financially.' Now we have to identify whether this relationship is an erroneous causal relationship, and whether it is an external, prudential relationship, or whether it is an internal, religious relationship. The glamorous suits believers aspire to are something factual, externally related to the faith and giving. And also the physical health and financial wealth that is promised in the prosperity gospel is often construed as something that could be checked objectively. It is more like the winning and losing of soccer matches, than like the receiving things as a child of God or being a faithful believer in the case of the white shirts.

Just stating this, however, will probably not be enough to convince someone that his gospel is superstitious. You have to ask the right questions to bring it out, in the same way as Phillips would ask Christians how high Jesus was raised to show them what they themselves do and do not believe concerning the ascension. In the case of the prosperity gospel you may ask for example whether someone would sell his hammer or spirit level to be able to give more to the apostle, since you are promised a return of a hundredfold. For many Zambian carpenters their hammer is their means to earn money, as is for brick layers their spirit level. Or you may ask whether someone has ever seriously contemplated bringing his tithing money to the stock market or a betting office rather than to the church.

If someone laughs at these questions, like he would if you asked him how high Jesus was raised, then that may show that the confusion is in the account of his practice. The laughter shows the kind of confusion that is involved. He does not really believe in the erroneous causal, external connections that he claims to believe in, and he should be willing to rephrase his initial account of what he believes. His practice may for example be an expression of hope or thankfulness rather than instrumental in the way the prosperity gospel is normally presented.

However, someone who laughs, may continue with his superstitious practice as well, like the soccer coach would probably recognise his superstition and laugh if you pointed it out, but nonetheless he would continue to wear his white shirt. His practice presupposes an erroneous causal and prudential connection between his faithful giving and the external result of prosperity, nonetheless, he carries on.

If someone does not laugh, but answers seriously without irony, either there is something wrong with our description of the concept of superstition or there is something wrong with his self-awareness. Of course, there is the possibility that the people you talk to do not belong to the 'we' who use the distinction between genuine religion and superstition in this way.[12] As we have discussed before with regard to the distinction between fake and genuine friendship, however, this would be a huge claim, communication with such people would be very difficult.

How about the example of praying to God when your child is dying? The 'request' to God plays a very different role from the request to the doctor 'Don't let her die!,' just like we discussed above that the consequences that are drawn from saying 'It is the will of God' are very different from consequences drawn from explanations like 'It is a virus' or 'It is a result of climate change.' This difference is present within the practice itself. It is too big for a blunder to presuppose that 'O God, don't let her die!' plays the same kind of role as 'O doctor, don't let her die!', whereas you may be confused in believing that there is no fundamental difference here.

If you pray to *influence* God to heal your child, you would presuppose a causal relation between your prayer and the health of your child, whereas in other parts of your life you do not expect such a connection. For example, you do not presuppose that in a soccer match the team wins that prays the most. There you do not presuppose this kind of causal connection, so it would be superstitious and confused if you expected this in the case of your prayer.

This does not mean that the prayer 'O God, don't let her die!' is always superstitious. It may be genuinely religious. Phillips (1965, p. 120f.) says about such prayers such that they are 'best understood, not as an attempt at influencing the way things go, but as an expression of, and a request for, devotion to God through the way things go.' Bloemendaal (2012, p. 136) comments: 'In a sense, then, and without wanting to be coarse, the life of the child drops out of the equation.' In a way that is true: however strong your desire for the recovery of a child may be, in a sense you would hope that the conviction 'Not my will, but Thy will be done' is even stronger. Religiously speaking to establish that is one of the main reasons to pray a prayer such as 'O God, don't let her die!' If you would pray 'O God, don't let her die!' to influence God, it would be superstition, if you pray the same words to dedicate what is most important in your life at that moment to God, it is genuinely religious.

This distinction can also be made with respect to the prosperity gospel: someone can in a genuinely religious way receive prosperity as a gift from God. But if you receive prosperity as a gift from God religiously, then this prosperity, this gift is internally related to your religion. In a way, you pray for prosperity in order for the prosperity to drop out of the equation. Your faith does not depend upon what you receive, however, what the things you receive come to, depends upon your faith.

This may be clarified by comparing it to friendship again. We saw earlier that genuine friendship does not depend upon the gifts that friends give each other. However, this does not imply that no gifts can be exchanged. Friends give each other presents. However, these presents have their meaning within the friendship. A watch is not just a watch, it is a token of someone's friendship. This gift is internally related to the friendship, it would not be the same without or outside of the friendship.

Just like being someone's friend does not necessarily imply he gives you presents, being religious does not necessarily imply that God gives you a specific kind of life. Religion may be celebrating the good things that you receive as a child of God, but as a genuine religious believer you would receive whatever happens as a gift from God. There are no expectations, there is no prediction

[12] That the prosperity gospel is so popular in Africa, might tempt us to think in this direction. However, they would have to account for the many American teachers of the prosperity gospel who visit Africa: they appear to speak the same language and use the same concepts as these teachers who live in the Western, American society.

about the specifics of God's gifts in genuine religion.[13] A genuinely religious response presupposes no expectations, every course of events is compatible with it. If something bad happens to a person he may say with Job 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised,' or he may say 'This shows God is not with me after all.' In this latter case we would say he has lost his faith, but this is not caused in a direct sense by what happened – since he might have responded differently, that is: from genuine faith.

A genuine religious believer accepts whatever happens – in our examples in wealth or health issues – as a gift from God. Maybe nobody lives this genuine religion in a pure form. Just like maybe no friendship is pure, genuine friendship. Maybe faith is always mixed with some superstition – any believer may expect at least some happiness or some strength from his or her faith. However, the expectation of such external results is not part our shared concept of genuine religion. That a genuine religious believer accepts whatever happens as a gift from God is the way we use the concept of genuine religion. Our own faith, and even the faith of saints and faith heroes may not be entirely free from superstition. They may know it is not, they may regret it is not – in fact they must regret it, that is involved in 'superstition' being a pejorative term. But that does not imply that the terms 'superstition' and 'genuine religion' cannot be used in contemplative Wittgensteinian philosophy, as we have shown in this article.

Neither has Phillips become a theologian arguing for a particular type of Christianity, nor is he only describing the perspective of a particular group: the distinction he uses is given in our shared practices. A philosopher as philosopher has the right to say something is superstitious. By suggesting that Phillips oversteps the boundaries of contemplative philosophy by distinguishing between superstition and genuine religion, Bloemendaal and other critics have backed themselves into a corner, no longer able to see important aspects of our practices. To claim that the philosopher should let people decide for themselves what is genuinely religious, is to shy away from the philosophical task to describe these practices. Especially a philosopher who wants to do no more than describe or contemplate practices has to use pejorative terms such as 'superstition' since they are part of our practices. By refusing to do so, Bloemendaal and other critics suggest being open, but in fact they are closing their eyes for what is given in practice.

Conclusion

The terms 'superstition' and 'genuine religion' are part of our ordinary discourse and therefore it is a Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion's job to give a contemplative account of the conceptual space these terms occupy. Peter Bloemendaal (2006, p. 422) and many other philosophers hold that Phillips in using these terms 'can no longer lay claim to be doing no more than elucidating the meaning religious beliefs have in the lives of the faithful.' However, the opposite is true: without contemplating superstition and genuine religion Phillips would not have been able to elucidate the meaning religious beliefs have in the lives of both the faithful and their critics.

According to Bloemendaal, Phillips is placed for a dilemma: either he should accept that he is a revisionist, someone who from within Christianity argues against these other possibilities, or he should weaken or even give up his criticism of traditional philosophy of religion, he should admit that these philosophers simply describe another grammar of faith. Countering Bloemendaal's arguments I have established that there is a third possibility: Phillips describes fundamental distinctions such as the one between superstition and genuine religion which are present in our shared practices.

[13] When Phillips (2004b, p. 186) tries to give a contemplative description of a genuinely religious response to evil, he is dissatisfied when he finds that: 'There still seems to be a predictive element in the religious belief I have described.' The genuinely religious response Phillips wants to contemplate does not have any predictive element.

References

Ashdown, L. (1993). D.Z. Phillips and His Audiences. *Sophia 32/3*, 1-31.

Bloemendaal, P. (2006). *Grammars of Faith: A Critical Evaluation of D.Z. Phillips's Philosophy of Religion*. Leuven: Peeters.

Bloemendaal, P. (2010). Contemplating Possibilities of Religious Sense. In I. Dalferth and H. von Sass (eds.), *The Contemplative Spirit: D.Z. Phillips on Religion and the Limits of Philosophy*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Burley, M. (2012). *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life; Wittgenstein and D. Z. Phillips*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Cioffi, F. (1998). *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clack, B. (1995). D.Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and Religion. *Religious Studies 31/1*, 111-120.

Kerr, F. (1997). *Theology after Wittgenstein; Second Edition*. London: SPCK.

Montaigne, M. de (1958). *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Mulhall, S. (2001). Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Religion. In D.Z. Phillips and T. Tessin (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 95-118.

Nielsen, K. and Phillips, D.Z. (2005). *Wittgensteinian Fideism?* London: SCM Press.

Phillips, D.Z. (1965). *The Concept of Prayer*. London: Routledge.

Phillips, D.Z. (1970). *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry*. London: Routledge.

Phillips, D.Z. (1976). *Religion Without Explanation*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Phillips, D.Z. (1988). *Faith after Foundationalism*. London: Routledge.

Phillips, D.Z. (1993). *Wittgenstein and Religion*. London: Macmillan.

Phillips, D.Z. (1995). On Giving Practice Its Due – A Reply. *Religious Studies 31/1*, 121-127.

Phillips, D.Z. (1999). *Philosophy's Cool Place*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Phillips, D.Z. (2001). As Voice C, in Voices in Discussion. In D.Z. Phillips and T. Tessin (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 144-150.

Phillips, D.Z. (2004a). *Religion and Friendly Fire*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Phillips, D.Z. (2004b). *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*. Minneapolis: SCM.

Phillips, D.Z. (2005). As Voice C, in Voices in Discussion. In D.Z. Phillips and M. Von Der Ruhr (eds.), *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Phillips, D.Z. (2008). 'God' and Grammar: An Introductory Invitation. In D.Z. Phillips (ed.), *Whose God? Which Tradition? The Nature of Belief in God*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1-17.

Simmel, G. (1965). The nature of philosophy. In K.H. Wolf (ed.), *Georg Simmel: Essays on Sociology, Philosophy and Aesthetics*. New York: Harper & Row.

Swinburne, R. (1977). Religious Talk: a Mere Viewpoint. A Review of 'Religion Without Explanation'. *The Expository Times 89/3*, 92.

Tilley, T. (2000). The Philosophy of Religion and the Concept of Religion: D.Z. Phillips on Religion and Superstition. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion 68/2*, 345-356.

Wainwright, W. (1995). Theism, Metaphysics, and D.Z. Phillips. *Topoi 14/2*, 87-93.

Wittgenstein, L. (1967). *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. (2009). *Philosophical Investigations; Fourth Edition.* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Wolterstorff, N. (2001). Reformed Epistemology. In D.Z. Phillips and T. Tessin (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 39-63.