CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION - RELEVANCE OF KIERKEGAARD'S ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE TO CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL SITUATION
An attempt has been made in the preceding pages to examine critically the basic thoughts of Kierkegaard. To sum up, Kierkegaard's whole philosophy revolves around the problem of individual reality, his entire attitude has been to supersede the objectification of man. Kierkegaard is one of the very first thinkers to direct our attention towards the individual. Against the contemporary currents of scientific modes and objectification of thinking, it is exceedingly important to direct our attention towards the individual; especially when man is being totally dehumanised and alienated in the contemporary age.

No doubt, Kierkegaard has added a new dimension to the problems of human existence and freedom, but his overemphasis on individualism neglects a number of factors which are essential for a proper understanding of man. His indifference towards others reduces man to a 'windowless monad'—having a completely lonesome existence. In fact, it appears that to visualise his uniqueness and subjectivity, Kierkegaard deems it essential for man to isolate himself from others. Thus society seems to be regarded by him as antagonistic to the individual's subjectivity and freedom. That is why,
for him, the choice becomes wholly authentic and personal only at the religious stage when the individual breaks all the ties of the world. At the religious stage, the authentic individual rises above the social norms and connections. Undoubtedly Kierkegaard has taken great pains to argue out the uniqueness of the individual in its complete purity, but he seems to forget an equally important dimension of the individuality of man — in active relationship to others. The personal and the social are two integral components of existence. Kierkegaard could not relate the two. Perhaps because he was primarily interested in asserting the distinct reality of the individual thus denying the reality of any theoretical construction of the whole. He speaks of the individual and society as if they are two opposite poles. The social self is viewed by Kierkegaard as an inauthentic part of the individual. Kierkegaard's analysis of the existential situation of man in the world is somewhat inadequate. Social participation of the individual should be considered an authentic mode of being. Human action can never be contemplated except in the social environment. The question is whether Robinson Crusoe has any need of ethics. Most of our moral injunctions and prohibitions — in fact almost all of them concern the relation of man with his fellow-beings. The idea of freedom, therefore, should not be
purely a theoretical construct but may attain significance in and through the actual social-relationships. Moreover, man's relationship with God may or may not have relevance to moral problems. Although Kierkegaard, to some extent, separates the ethical from the religious, he appears to confuse the two in his analysis of the nature of freedom, choice and decision.

It is impossible to speak of the individual in isolation from his environment and social milieu in which he lives. Man's dimensions are so many that he participates in various social and economic activities and they do influence the choice of the individual. Human mind functions in society through the principles of imitation, identification, interaction and the like. Surely man can increase his freedom but not in a vacuum.

Further, Kierkegaard's notion of authenticity leads us to some insurmountable difficulties. The individual according to Kierkegaard realises his authentic self only when he is true to himself i.e. when he isolates himself from others. Such a description would arbitrarily restrict authenticity only to a situation of alienation from others. Kierkegaard does not visualise the possibility of an individual being fully authentic and at the same time being in an actual reciprocal relationship with his fellow-beings. No human situation in reality can isolate a social dimension
from the sphere of authentic existence because we need some paradigm to judge the authenticity of any individual. Kierkegaard unfortunately does not visualise any such paradigm of authenticity. His often referred myth of Abraham is not adequate to mark out a distinction between the authentic and inauthentic. Rather it further denies the possibility of any definite paradigm.

Kierkegaard's attack on apostolic and dogmatic Christianity makes a positive contribution to the philosophy of religion. He is right in holding that Christianity is to be lived and not to be preached. He claims to interpret Christianity in a more authentic manner than his predecessors and contemporaries. However, Kierkegaard's contributions to the philosophy of religion are not to be interpreted only in terms of a protest formulated by him against speculative theology, but his ideas may be brought together into a consistent system. Kierkegaard's unique way of interpreting religious experience makes a radical point of departure from the speculative 'natural theology', in so far as he emphasises the subjective and personal way of encountering the Divine. The idea of God is not a matter of intellectual construction or of inference through speculative reasoning. It has already been stressed that Kierkegaard's analysis of religious experience is neither a psychological
nor a speculative type of analysis; it is rather existential, inward, free and therefore non-cognitive. Kierkegaard gives a convincing explanation of religious experience, which according to him, is to be distinguished from scientific explanation, because the former owing to its distinctive nature, cannot be put into universal categories and laws. Religious experience cannot be conceptualised, yet it is different from a mere emotional experience, which Kierkegaard has called as aesthetic experience. Religious experience is considered by Kierkegaard as the highest level of an intimate contact with the Divine, rooted in 'infinite resignation'.

Kierkegaard rightly points out that religious experience cannot be reduced to a theology, i.e. to a statement and attempted proof of a set of theoretical propositions about God. In this case it would become static and dogmatic. Thus Kierkegaard's views would rule out the very basis of the so-called natural theology. The approach of natural theologians to resolve religion into a speculative knowledge of divine nature is sharply criticised. A case in point is the natural theologians' belief that a natural explanation of the existence of God is possible in the same way as explanation of the existence of other objects. To regard reason as an appropriate instrument to apprehend the Divine is still a common practice among certain philosophers who attempt
to explain God ('to find a place for God') in conformity with their philosophy in general.

Thus natural theology\(^1\) is often called the 'rational' theology because it asserts that knowledge of God is possible by means of reason unaided by revelation. Since the end of last century quite a few philosophers, scientists and theologians — their names are far too well-known to be mentioned here — have found 'a place for God' in their systems; the Gifford Lectures delivered in the various universities of Scotland have mostly been of the nature of armchair approaches to the problem of religious experience. And these attempts have been made, in spite of Kierkegaard's powerful criticism of speculative theology long before these lectures were endowed. The tendency of theology and metaphysics to propound, like science, an objective set of doctrines, is not to be traced however, only to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when science and scientific ways of thinking have overwhelmed human civilisation. Long before the advent of modern theoretical science, philosophers and theologians have advanced arguments

\[^1\text{It is called 'natural' on the ground that reason is natural to man and not supernatural.}\]
for the existence of God, passing from a discovery of order and purpose in the physical world to a knowledge of a Creator, a divine architect, a divine purpose. God is interpreted in terms of an analogy which is no doubt symbolic but far too inadequate to represent His nature. The natural theologians suppose that God, like other facts in the universe can be investigated by speculative and scientific methods. The philosophers of existence have criticised Descartes and his successors for reviving this conception of *mathesis universalis*. Kierkegaard like other existentialist philosophers of recent times, has criticised this tendency by holding that religious experience cannot be separated from authentic individual experience; pure thought cannot serve as the foundation for the experience and knowledge of God.

Religious attitude has suffered greatly owing to the advancement of science and technology. Science makes a claim to universality and interpretations of religion have taken a scientific form in recent years. Philosophers of this century or scientists who attempt a theological or philosophical speculation cannot help exhibiting influence of science in their ways of thinking.
Bergson for example, represents one way in which scientific attitude has invaded the realm of religious experience. Many thinkers of this century, even if they are not out and out anti-religious under the influence of science, at least have a tendency to bring in scientific methods for the study of religion. Or they bring in the conclusions of science in our knowledge of the external world and connect them somehow with traditional religious doctrines. Pringle Pattison's philosophy of religion is also a case in point, although the work of Pringle Pattison is about 50 years old and is even forgotten. Writers like S. Alexander, A.N. Whitehead, Toynbee, F.R. Tennant, and many others have written on natural theology, and all of them take the same position rejected by Kierkegaard as inauthentic. It is surprising how the views of this important Danish thinker have been consistently ignored by such a galaxy of well-known thinkers. In Europe however, thanks to the so-called existentialists, the interest in Kierkegaard is abiding. They present a view of religious experience which maintains its own field against the onslaughts of science, technology and nihilist metaphysics. Kierkegaard's views unfortunately have not made much headway into English-speaking philosophical circles, which are influenced still by the neo-positivists' programme. A neo-positivist does not examine religious experience,
but only analyses religious assertions, perhaps with a view to establishing the meaningless propositions of religion. A.J. Ayer for instance attacks theology in a radical way as meaningless. Attempts are made by several contemporary philosophers to reconcile science and religion. But one of the results of our enquiry into Kierkegaard's philosophy of religion is the impossibility of applying scientific criteria to authentic religious experience. Religious truths are not verifiable. They do not have cognitive meaning and therefore these propositions of religious experience are meaningless for the positivists, because they are not verifiable. Nor do religious assertions fall into the category of analytical or a priori propositions. Analytical propositions are true by definition like the propositions of logic and mathematics, although their validity is purely formal saying nothing about the world. The propositions of Euclidean geometry are examples of such analytical propositions (or tautological propositions). The seventeenth century rationalists' attempts to connect

2"For to say that 'God exists is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance." (A.J. Ayer: Language, Truth and Logic. London, 1971, p. 152).
God, man, and the external world, formally in the manner of propositions of Euclidean geometry, have been long discredited. The neo-positivists (who themselves fall into various types) do not in general accept that religious, moral or aesthetic propositions are either verifiable or tautological. So the religious problem is a pseudo-problem from the scientific standpoint. The terms nonsensical, senseless, meaningless etc. have a peculiar connotation in neo-positivism i.e. such propositions do not fall into either of the above categories. But neither Wittgenstein nor Ayer rule out the possibility of such propositions having emotive meaning. Ethical propositions, poetry, religious assertions etc. have an emotive meaning.\(^3\)

In spite of their divergent viewpoints, logical Positivists and Kierkegaard come close on one issue. Strangely enough, we can see that Wittgenstein also points out that religious statements cannot be analysed as a linguistic categories. But he is different from

Kierkegaard in his fundamental standpoint. He analyses religious statements from the point of view of language, for him all significant ideas should be shown to be logical constructions. He holds that religious statements are not factual; God is not a being among other beings, who can be factually verified, God is also not a name of a thing. Religious statements, therefore, are meaningless expressions, because nothing can be said about them. But it is clear that Wittgenstein, at the end of his *Tractatus*, does not deny the possibility of a sphere beyond the realm of what can be expressed in speech. He only says that we have to be silent about such a realm. On the contrary, Kierkegaard does not call religious experience as nonsensical, but only individual and private.

Logical positivism propounds a purely academic standpoint. Kierkegaard's criticism of the 'professors' who expounded system in all grandeur without involving themselves in it, may very well apply to the logical positivists. The question here is not about the objective truths of scientific propositions. It is not even about the distinction between 'emotive' and 'scientific' problems. One can give an abstract systematic explanation with regard to questions in the realms of logic, mathematics and the sciences. Kierkegaard's fundamental question is whether such
objective methods of looking at reality could be applied at all to religious experience, which is purely subjective and individual relation of oneself to God. Religious language cannot be subjected to analysis, because an individual expression cannot be subjected to any general criteria or rules.

But in spite of this, and in spite of Kierkegaard's opposition to system-building, his own philosophy is not fragmentary, but can be called a systematic development of his fundamental standpoint. There is no contradiction here, because one may oppose the application of universal methods and rules to the study of religious assertions and still express an individualist outlook in a consistent and systematic way. Whatever Kierkegaard has said — analysis of subjectivity, the three stages of life, freedom, faith or experience of God — he has done in an authentic and sincere manner. And perhaps to express his views on these varied dimensions of human existence, he was compelled to take recourse to a systematic analysis, however, antipathic he was to any system-building. For, he was aware that all linguistic constructions categorise and systematise, and hence are detrimental to the fundamental uniqueness of the human reality. Of course an exhaustive criticism of Kierkegaard in such
circumstances might fail because any criticism, will have to apply certain universal criteria of meaning and interpretation, and this may not be possible because Kierkegaard's thought is highly individualistic.