Abstract of the Ph. D. Thesis entitled *Hermeneutic Understanding and Meaning in Religious Language: An Elucidation with Reference to Ādi Śaṅkara, Wittgenstein and Derrida* by Devasia M. A.

The key problematic that constitutes the fulcrum of my philosophical exploration is the multifaceted question of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language with reference to Ādi Śaṅkara, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida. I begin my inquiry by taking a close look at the problematic of religious language and the matrix of inter-related problems that emanates from it. Religious language means the religious use of natural, ordinary language and the inquiry into its meaning and significance is connected with the ‘philosophy of language’ and ‘hermeneutics’. This has to be seen in the backdrop of understanding the human person as *homo loquens* as well as *homo religiosus*. Here one confronts the metaphysical, the epistemological and the semantic issues involved in interpreting religious language. One has to note that the theoretical discourse regarding the constitution, dissemination and practice of meaning has become largely inter-disciplinary as well as trans-disciplinary in nature. In this context I discuss the problematic of conceiving ‘religion’ as an anthropological, philosophical and cultural category. Particularly I focus on the debate between Clifford Geertz and Talal Asad in comprehending religion. As a possible solution, I argue for a polythetic description of religion instead of a monothetic definition. In polythetic description, the emphasis is on the semantic ambiguity, fluidity and indeterminacy of the religion-making characteristics. Further, I attempt to show the hermeneutic character of understanding and meaning in religious language by discussing the major conceptual issues in
hermeneutics. After tracing the trajectories of the origin and development of hermeneutics, I focus on the conception of hermeneutics as an analytic and mediating practice in which the emphasis is on clarifying conceptual issues regarding interpretation by establishing logical connections between meaning, truth and validity in the various uses of language. It is this conception of hermeneutics that is operative in this study. And to elucidate the problem of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language, I engage the thought-world of Ādi Śaṅkara, Wittgenstein and Derrida. And I use the term the ‘trinitarian ladder’ to refer to them. To justify my use of this term, I briefly respond to the objections coming from the incommensurability debate, the claimed singularity of a given philosophical tradition and the alleged mere juxtaposing of three disparate philosophers. Seeing philosophsia fundamentally as an attempt at civilizational dialogue of the humans, my objective is to elucidate the hermeneutic character of understanding and meaning in religious language by showing the thematic unity and the conceptual logic that emerge from these three philosophers’ engagement with religious language.

In Chapter 2, my attempt is to climb up the first step of the trinitarian ladder by investigating the conception of vākyārthavicārana and the analysis of the mahāvākyā ‘tat tvam asi’ in Ādi Śaṅkara. I preface this by discussing the Śaṅkara conception of adhyāsa as a logical and hermeneutic category. After locating it in its original context in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, I come to the Śaṅkara interpretation that it is a significant non-tautological identity statement. The Śaṅkara tradition uses the category of jahad-ajahallakṣanā here. This leads to an important
issue: the Self and its predication. After a detailed discussion on this problematic, I point out the hermeneutic ambiguity, fluidity and indeterminacy involved here. And this may be exploited socio-culturally to construct the Self in exclusive categorial predication and that needs to be critiqued.

Chapter 3 embodies the philosophical attempt to engage the second step of the ‘trinitarian ladder’, that is, Wittgenstein. After a detailed discussion of the problem of ‘many Wittgensteins’ in the backdrop of hermeneutic multiplism, I point out how Wittgenstein anchors the problematic of faith and reason in the matrix of language, life and world. Then I move on to the pivotal conception of the depth grammar. In a significant sense, I argue that the conception of depth-grammar epitomizes the hermeneutic intimacy of meaning, use and understanding in religious language. This becomes evident when one analyses the interpretation Wittgenstein gives to Christian beliefs and practices such as the Last Judgment, the Resurrection, the Holy Eucharist etc. To emphasize this dimension further, I narrated the story of Tolstoy ‘The Three Hermits’ which was the favorite faith narrative of Wittgenstein. I also brought into focus the problems of fideism, relativism, and apocalyptic atheism and contended that their ascription to Wittgenstein is a mistaken move.

My effort to comprehend Derrida’s thinking on religion forms the content of Chapter 4. Here the focal point of my discussion is the celebrated Capri Lecture of Derrida. I preface it by locating the philosophical space of Derrida. And I go along with Rorty’ assessment that Derrida is a quasi-transcendental philosopher. In order to situate
Derrida’s Lecture conceptually, I discuss in detail the Capri Seminar with its focus on religion in its contemporaneity. I also indicate the postmodern *weltanschauung* of the Seminar and particularly Derrida’s claim that one of the questions he will not avoid is that of religion. Derrida’s emphasis is to hold together both the heterogeneous and the homogenous in the domain of religion. For that possibility, Derrida questions the primacy of ‘the reflective faith’ over ‘the dogmatic faith’ in Kant’s work on religion. Further he analyses the Kantian notion of *parerga* and takes recourse to the Paltonic concept of *khora* to theorize religion. To think religion in this way, Derrida suggests that one should withdraw to the desert of abstraction.

In the concluding Chapter, I attempt to philosophically weave together the emerging trajectories that constitute a fresh look into the problematic of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language. Perceiving the humans as embodied persons situated in the matrix of language, life and world, it captures the polyvalent hermeneutic ambiguity, indeterminacy and fluidity built into the very nature of religious language. What emerges here is an epiphany of hermeneutic understanding and meaning, one that perceives religious language not merely as the fabric of orthodoxy but as enlightened orthopraxis, where the problematic of the word and deed gets enmeshed in mutual fecundity and symbiosis in the womb of contemplative silence. It is a silence that privileges neither the homogenous nor the heterogeneous in religion but holds them together in creative tension. To my mind, this celebrates the dialogical imperative in the encounter of *advaita* and *agape*, *kenosis* and *kairos*. 