CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning was the Word …

*The Gospel According to Saint John*¹

I calmly write: “In the beginning was the Deed!

Wolfgang Goethe²

Words are deeds.

Ludwig Wittgenstein³

**The Problematic**⁴ of Religious Language

The term ‘religious language’ means the use of natural, ordinary language in contexts that are enmeshed with what one

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⁴ I use the word ‘problematic’ in the original German sense [*problematik*] to denote a set of interrelated problems and not in the sense found in Kant, Althusser, Kuhn or Foucault – see “problematic” in Thomas Mautner (1996) *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, Oxford / Cambridge, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, p. 342.
might call religious character. The employment of this term can possibly be misconstrued in two senses. First, it should not be taken to mean that one is here speaking of a language peculiar to religion as in the case of the varieties of languages we employ in our linguistic activity like English, German, Hindi etc. That means the question, ‘Do you speak English or German?’ makes perfect sense whereas the question ‘Do you speak religious?’ makes no sense at all. Second, it is mistaken to think that religion is restricted to any particular type of natural language like Sanskrit, the language of the Veda; Hebrew and Greek, the language of the Bible; Pāli, the language of the Buddhist Tripitakas; or Arabic, the language of the Quran. A conceptually more focused and linguistically sharpened term would be the ‘religious use of language’.

In the domain of the religious uses of language, one encounters enormous multiplicity and pointed diversity. As William Alston has rightly pointed out:

Utterances made in religious contexts are of many sorts. In the performance of public and private worship men engage in acts of praise, petition, thanks, confession, and exhortation. In sacred writings we find historical records, dramatic narratives, proclamations of law,
predictions, admonitions, evaluations, cosmological speculations, and theological pronouncements. In devotional literature there are rules of conduct, biographical narratives, and introspective descriptions of religious experience.\(^5\)

Symbiotically woven into the fabric of religious language, an important and related category that arouses much philosophical interest is that of language. In a very primary sense ‘language’ symbolizes self-embodiment. Further it may be seen as the vehicle for the expression, exchange and transmission of thoughts, concepts, emotions, knowledge and information. In a significant way it also embodies silence which is a fundamental category in religious language. And as such it is to be differentiated from other possible languages such as animal communication and artificial languages.\(^6\) In that sense language is


essentially communicative in nature and can be both verbal and non-verbal. Hence religious language too is both verbal and non-verbal. In recent approaches to the study of language, one finds a sort of Homeric struggle between the theorists of communication–intention (e.g. Paul Grice, John Austin and the later Wittgenstein) and theorists of formal semantics (e.g. Noam Chomsky, Gottlob Frege and earlier Wittgenstein). In our discussion, the focus would be on the instantiation of religious language in its verbal (not to be seen as the binary opposite to the category of gesture and silence!), linguistic and communicative dimension. In that restrictive sense, I take ‘religious language’ to be synonymous with ‘religious utterances’. I also keep in mind the soteriological motif that characterizes the domain of religious narrative and religious experience that forms the bedrock of such a narrative.

In philosophical literature, usually the terms ‘religious language’ and ‘religious speech’ are used synonymously. However, in philosophy

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7 For a critique of the attempt to focus the analysis of religious language exclusively on its verbal dimension see Margaret Chatterjee (1984), The Religious Spectrum, Delhi, Allied Publishers, p.13ff.
of language, a distinction can be drawn between ‘language’ and ‘speech’. Speech is said to comprise the totality of concrete verbal behavior that takes place in a given community. And language is taken to be the abstract system of identifiable elements and the laws that govern their combinations, instantiated in a given concrete verbal, linguistic activity. In this sense, religious language would mean religious use of language, that is, ‘religious speech’. To my mind, any serious and worthwhile inquiry into the nature, meaning and significance of religious language cannot be done in isolation from two other philosophical disciplines, namely, ‘philosophy of language’ and ‘hermeneutics’.

I am aware that a philosophical discussion on the problematic of ‘religious language’ and its connection with ‘philosophy of language’ and ‘hermeneutics’ is bound to give rise to what is often called the ‘label polemics.’ It also evokes sharp differences generated by the purported thesis of ‘incommensurability’ among the main currents in contemporary philosophy, namely, continental and analytical traditions, non-western

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11 I use the this word in the original German sense of problematik to denote a set of interrelated philosophical problems and not in the other senses found in the writings of Kant, Althusser, Kuhn and Foucault – see Thomas Mautner (1996), A Dictionary of Philosophy, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., p.342.
and western philosophical *weltanschauung*, etc. It is beyond the scope of
the present discussion to go into the details of this debate. Though
without minimizing the significance of varied ways and methods of
philosophizing, what is important to note here is that the labels we
employ are meant to be a heuristic device and are indicative of certain
academic arbitrariness. To my mind, if one were to go beyond the
polemics and politics of labeling and venture to understand *philosophia* in
a very fundamental sense as critical reflection on human experience, that
is, the *logos* of the *anthropos*, then one can successfully resist the
temptation of turning a blind eye to the socio-cultural reality of
philosophical and religious pluralism that gives rise to cross-cultural
semblances as well as differences and the resultant mutual fecundity of
ideas and concepts. Such a view together with its varied nuances can be
found in the writings of thinkers like Karl-Otto Apel, Van A. Harvey,
Dagfinn Follesdal, Wilhelm Halbfass, J.N. Mohanty, Ramchandra
Gandhi, Daya Krishna, A.K. Ramanujan, Raimon Panikkar, Gerald James
Larson, Eliot Deutsch, J.L. Mehta, Michael Krausz and Raul Fornet-
Betancourt.\(^{12}\)

\(^{12}\) Karl-Otto Apel (1973), *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, London,
One can approach the linguistic edifice of religious discourse and more particularly the soteriological predication about reality in many ways. Heuristically, one may speak of the metaphysical, the

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epistemological and the semantic approaches.\textsuperscript{13} In the metaphysical approach, the crux of the matter is how ‘reality is conceived’ and if one embraces naturalistic metaphysics according to which ‘reality’ is confined to the ‘natural’ order, then religious statements about realities like ‘God’, ‘soul’ become problematic. In the epistemological approach, the main issue is whether one has sufficient grounds for taking religious assertions to be true. In the semantic approach, the objective is to analyze the meaning of the words employed in a given religious discourse. In other words the idea is to decipher the cognitive meaning. And for this, one may take recourse to the verifiability criterion of meaningfulness according to which a sentence has factual meaning only if it is in principle possible to verify or falsify it on the basis of observations. Philosophers like Antony Flew who subscribe to such an approach conclude that religious statements are pretend-statements because they are immune to empirical testability.\textsuperscript{14} Another response to the semantic approach took shape in what is called the non-assertive construals of religious statements. Accordingly religious utterances are interpreted as expressions of attitudes and emotions or as descriptive of a policy of


action rather than as statements of facts. What is of significance here is that religious beliefs are construed as life-orienting or life-directing in their mythical and narrative forms. Another way of making sense of religious statements in this approach is to conceive them as symbolizing the ultimate reality that is transcendent and hence not amenable to any attempt at conceptualization.

Further it is important to note that most of the philosophical literature, particularly in the analytic tradition, has focused on the problem of literal description, meaning and interpretation of theological predication, and the assertive-nonassertive character of utterances about a transcendent reality. William P. Alston and John Hick have tried to bring out the multifaceted dimensions of this problem. Further, Arthur C. Danto clearly presents the problematic of theistic predication in this way:

Suppose I am told of a new theological discovery, namely that Brahma wears a hat. And then I am told that it is divine hat and worn infinitely, since Brahma has neither head

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nor shape. In what sense then is a hat being worn? Why use *these* words? I am told that God exists but in a “different sense” of *exists*. Then if he doesn’t exist (in the plain sense) why use *that* word? Or that God loves us – but in a wholly special sense of *love*. Or God is a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. But this is then to have neither a center nor a circumference, and hence not to be a circle. One half of the description cancels out the other half. And what is left over but just noise?16

In his most celebrated work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James, applying C.S. Peirce’s standard in developing a thought’s meaning by determining what conduct it is fitted to produce and further taking that conduct as its sole significance, engages the employment of the metaphysical attributes of God in natural theology. His conclusion is that the metaphysical attributes are devoid of any intelligible significance. In his own words:

> Take God’s aseity for example; or his necessariness; his immateriality; his ‘simplicity’ or superiority to

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the kind of inner variety and succession which we find in finite beings, his indivisibility, and lack of the inner distinctions of being and activity, substance and accident, potentiality and actuality, and the rest; his repudiation of inclusion in a genus; his actualized infinity; his ‘personality’, apart from the moral qualities which it may comport; his relation to evil being permissive and not positive; his self-sufficiency, self-love, and absolute felicity in himself: - candidly speaking, how do such qualities as these make any definite connection with our life? And if they severely call for no distinctive adaptation of our conduct, what vital difference can it possibly make to a man’s religion whether they be true or false?17

On the other hand, if for a moment one were to picture religious utterances as constituting the body of a text, that is, a literary text, then the attempt at theorizing meaning becomes all the more labyrinthine. Certainly, as Fredric Jameson has pertinently observed, the theoretical discourse regarding the construction, dissemination and practice of meaning has ceased to be the exclusive domain of the discipline of

philosophy or that of religion.\textsuperscript{18} Interestingly, the theory project has become inter-disciplinary as well as trans-disciplinary in nature and consequently the very idea of meaning has become a contentious concept. Contemporary literary theory engages the construction and appropriation of ‘meaning’ by using various models such as reader-oriented theories stemming from phenomenology, structuralist theories, Marxist theories, feminist theories, poststructuralist theories, postmodernist theories, postcolonialist theories and finally what has come to be known as gay, lesbian and queer theories.\textsuperscript{19} The point that I want to emphasize here is the wide spectrum of issues and debates generated by the multi-pronged inquiry into the hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language.

**Religious Language and the Category ‘Religion’**

One might, and rightly so, argue that such an understanding of religious language is logically and conceptually tied to a given philosophical description and understanding about the category called religion. But the problem is that of logically demarcating the realm of the religious and there by conceptually clarifying the contours that determine

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\textsuperscript{19} For an interesting discussion on these theoretical models see Raman Selden \textit{et al} (2006) \textit{A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory}, pp.15ff.
the character of the universe of religious discourse. In other words, the crux of the matter is to identify and delineate the constituent conceptual contours that make up what is called ‘the religious view’. Here I am aware that one is entering into arguably the most difficult problematic in the domain of philosophical thinking about religion. In this context, it is very significant to take note of what William James has said:

…the very fact that [religions] are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word ‘religion’ cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name…[L]et us rather admit freely at the outset that we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion.\(^{20}\)

Perhaps the most articulate and comprehensive discussion on the crucial problem of definability versus non-definability regarding the category ‘religion’ is found in Russell McCutcheon, Winston L. King, and

Gregory D. Alles. Some other thinkers who have engaged with this problem in a significant way are W.D. Hudson, John Bowker, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and John Hick. Concluding his critical review of the contemporary literature on religion and laying bare the presupposed ideological framework, McCutcheon quoting Waardenburg observes: “the current debate about the concept of religion is not as innocent as it may seem.” I think, the challenge before the theorists of religion is, as Mircea Eliade has succinctly pointed out, to grasp the religious phenomenon as something religious. In his own words:


…a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred. Obviously there are no purely religious phenomena… Because religion is human it must for that very reason be something social, something linguistic, something economic – you cannot think of man apart from language and society. But it would be hopeless to try and explain religion in terms of anyone of those basic functions…  

Simultaneously, one should be cautious, I believe, to ward off any attempt at converting a given theory of religion per se into a totalizing ideology or a grand meta-narrative. In the words of Richard Rorty: “we must be content … not to seek a God’s-eye view.”


An important dimension that constitutes the category of religion and God-talk is the framework of ‘transcendence’. In the matrix of Western philosophy, the notions of ‘transcendent reality’ and ‘God’ are most often seen as identical terms and they are taken to signify “that which exceeds the realm of human experience and empirical knowledge, the unconditioned, the Absolute.”26 A look at the contemporary debates about the nature and significance of religious discourse or God-talk shows that philosophers are sharply divided on this issue. Bernard Williams claims that religion is “incurably unintelligible.”27 And Richard Rorty pointedly sums up the mood of the militant atheists like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris when he says that religion is a conversation stopper. For, according to Rorty, “Many people think that we should just stop talking about God.”28 But to my mind,

Rorty himself commits the fallacy of reductionism by proposing the bifurcation between political philosophy and natural theology. In his own words:

Debate over … concrete political questions is more useful for human happiness than debate of the existence of God. They are the questions which remain once we realize that appeals to religious experience are of no use for settling what traditions should be maintained and which replaced, and after we have come to think natural theology pointless.\footnote{Richard Rorty (2002) “Cultural Politics and Arguments for God”, p. 76.}
But then philosophers like Charles Taliaferro have shown that such kind of bifurcation between political philosophy and natural theology is open to question. For a peep into the history of religious discourse shows that religious experience and natural theology have privileged concrete political questions and further, the debate over God’s existence has been conceptually tied to the notion of human happiness. A bird’s eye-view of the writings of classical religious philosophers like Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas would corroborate the truth of this claim.  

A possible way out of this dilemma is to look at the possibility of conceiving religion rather ploythetically and not monothetically. The idea is to resist the temptation to define religion essentially in terms of singular or plural properties. Instead the attempt is to conceive religion in terms of an explicit or implicit conjunction of characteristic features. In monothetic definitions all the characteristic properties of religion are seen to be necessary and further having taken them as a whole it is perceived to be a sufficient and necessary condition to define what religion is. To my mind, a classic case of monothetic definition is the one given by

Clifford Geertz in his celebrated essay ‘Religion As a Cultural System’ where he engages ‘religion’ as a culturally sensitive category:

“…a religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”


It is interesting to note that such universalist definitions of religion have been critiqued by scholars like Talal Asad. In his celebrated essay ‘Religion as An Anthropological Category’, Asad discusses the problems that come up when one takes a critical look at the widely acclaimed universalist definition given by Geertz. For Asad, Geertz’s universalist definition engages religion as a culturally sensitive category, but excludes how the authoritative function and status of religious myths, rituals, institutions, texts etc. are “products of historically distinct disciplines and
force."\textsuperscript{32} This remark of Asad indicates the implied Foucaultian sense of the disciplinarian associations, discourse, presuppositions etc. What is important to note here is the presupposition which governs Asad’s criticism. It is that the presumed \textit{sui generis} status of religion and the popular “theoretical search for an essence of religion invites us to separate it conceptually from the domain of power.”\textsuperscript{33}

Contrary to the monothetic definition of religion, in polythetic definition, one encounters what I call hermeneutic vagueness and fluidity woven into the very conceptual fabric of ‘religion’. And in hermeneutic understanding, vagueness is seen as a desirable semantic feature of a term. Further it denotes a plurality of relevant conditions that constitute its meaning and it is not to be taken in the sense of an undesirable feature of a given piece of discourse.\textsuperscript{34} On this view of vagueness as a semantic characteristic of the term ‘religion’, one sees no particular property necessary or essential to religion. Instead what is considered is a collection of properties understood in the sense of the Wittgensteinian metaphor ‘family resemblances.’ The significance of this conception is that it does not succumb to the craving for generality by holding on to the


\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 29.

view that there must be something essentially common to all the instances of a given concept. Instead it inaugurates a new paradigm of understanding in employing a given concept. That is, what holds the concept together and gives shape to its unity is not something like the single thread that runs through all the cases where the concept is employed. Rather it is the spectrum of the overlapping of different fibres as in the case of a rope.\textsuperscript{35} Employing such an understanding, William Alston has enumerated a list of what he calls ‘religion-making characteristics’:

1) Beliefs in supernatural beings (gods); 2) A distinction between sacred and profane objects; 3) Ritual acts focused on sacred objects. 4) A moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods. 5) Characteristically religious feelings (awe, sense of mystery, sense of guilt, adoration), which tend to be aroused in the presence of sacred objects and during practice of ritual, and which are connected in idea with gods. 6) Prayer and other forms of communication with gods. 7) A world view …

a general picture of the world as a whole and
the place of the individual in it.\textsuperscript{36}

Further Alston says that the presence of any of them or a cluster of these
caracteristics in a given cultural practice would make it a religion. It is
in this sense of conceiving religion polythetically and not monothetically
that I use the term ‘religion’ and its categorical correlates such as ‘the
religious view’ and ‘religious language’. What is important here is to
recognize that the universe of religious discourse is one of the domains of
imaginative construction of meaning entertained by the humans. And this
meaning constructing activity is primarily symbolic in nature and is
intertwined with in a community of shared understanding.

\textbf{Hermeneutic Character of Understanding and Meaning}

From what is discussed above, it is evident that the most crucial
question of understanding the meaning of the words employed in
religious statements is logically tied to the very conceptual architecting of
the category ‘religion’. The problem becomes all the more complex when
we analyze religious utterances against the background of everyday,

\textsuperscript{36}William P. Alston (2003) \textit{Philosophy of Language}, p.88. For a detailed discussion
see William P. Alston (1967a) “Religion” in Paul Edwards (ed.) \textit{The Encyclopedia of
mundane linguistic behaviour. To explicate this matter further, consider the following three groups of sentences:

A) 1. Thomas opened the door.
2. Alice opened her eyes.
3. The carpenters opened the wall.

B) 1. The cat is on the mat.
2. The cat scratched the dog.
3. The cat loves milk.
4. ‘Cat’ has three letters.

C) 1. ‘tat tvam asi’ (Thou art That)\(^{37}\)
2. ‘O Ānanda, be ye lamps unto yourselves\(^ {38}\)
3. ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want’\(^ {39}\)
4. ‘God give me strength! Amen! …May the spirit enlighten me.’\(^ {40}\)

\(^{37}\) Chāndogya Upaniṣad VI.8.7

\(^{38}\) Mahāparinibbānasutta, 2.36

\(^{39}\) The Holy Bible, The Psalms, Psalm 23:1.

\(^{40}\) When confronted with death during the War, this Christian prayer was said by Wittgenstein, ‘the man with the Gospels’, - See Brian McGuinness (1988) Wittgenstein: A Life, Duckworth, p. 221.
In the group A sentences, the literal meaning of ‘open’ is the same, but it is understood differently in each case. The main issue is that in each case the truth conditions marked by the word ‘open’ are different. That is to say that what constitutes opening one’s eyes is quite different from what constitutes opening a wall. To understand these sentences literally means understanding each of them differently, even though ‘open’ has the same semantic content throughout. In group B sentences, the meaning of the noun ‘cat’ alters significantly from context to context: a mere physical object, an unpredictable animal with claws, a domestic pet, a word in English language. In group C sentences, we have what I call paradigm cases of religious utterances and the focal point of my research is to analyze critically the problems one encounters in understanding and interpreting religious utterances such as these.

Usually in the study of the meaning of linguistic expressions undertaken by the discipline called semantics one can identify three levels of meaning. By expression-meaning what is meant is the meaning of a

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simple or complex expression taken in isolation. In utterance-meaning, the emphasis is on the meaning of an expression when used in a given context of utterance. And communicative meaning implies the meaning of an utterance as a communicative act in a given socio-cultural setting.\textsuperscript{43} William Alston speaks of three types of meaning: referential, ideational, and behavioural.\textsuperscript{44} And G.H.R. Parkinson rightly observes that we use the words ‘mean’ and ‘meaning’ in a variety of senses and these give rise to complex philosophical questions. On the question of meaning, he makes a distinction among denotation theory, image theory, causal theory, picture theory, verification theory, and use theory.\textsuperscript{45} Here it is significant to note that A.J. Ayer in one of his celebrated works goes on to claim that those who engage in metaphysical and religious discourse are disobeying the rule which govern the significant use of language. For him the metaphysical and religious assertions have their origin in linguistic confusions and are devoid of any literal significance at all!\textsuperscript{46} On the view of some other thinkers, since there is no privileged or ‘correct’ meaning


\textsuperscript{44} See William P. Alston (2003) \textit{Philosophy of Language}, p.11.


of an utterance, the most fundamental question that crops up while engaging religious discourse is ‘whose meaning is the meaning of the meaning?’

Significantly in the world of scriptures itself, this question of understanding and meaning is a very closely argued and debated one. Uddālaka has to make a strenuous effort to clarify the meaning of the utterance ‘tat tvam asi’ to Śvetaketu who was already well read in the Vedas! For the Buddha, the wrong grasping of the scriptures is analogous to the man who catches a big water snake by the body or by the tail only to be stung to death! The Jesus of the Gospels is seen emphasizing the right understanding and meaning of his parabolic sayings. It is here one comes to grip with the problematic of the hermeneutic character of understanding and meaning.

**The Conception of Hermeneutics**

The term ‘hermeneutics’ in Greek *hermeneia* - is derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuein* and it means to interpret, explain, express’

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etc. And by ‘hermeneutics’ what is meant is the intellectual discipline that probes into the nature and presuppositions of the interpretation of human expressions. The history of the Greek term *hermeneia* traces the etymological connection with the Greek God Hermes, the messenger of Gods.\(^49\) For some thinkers, this is related to the threefold structure of the act of interpretation:

i) a sign, message or text that needs

ii) an interpreter

iii) to convey it to some audience.

One encounters here the major conceptual issues with which hermeneutics deals:

i) the nature (*sitz-im-leben*) of a text,

ii) what does it mean to understand (*verstehen*) a text, and

iii) how the presuppositions and beliefs (*horizon, weltanschauung*) of the interpreter determine understanding and interpretation.

And as I see, interpretation is fundamental to all the intellectual disciplines. The predominant notion is that all human experience is fundamentally interpretative and that all understanding and meaning take place within a context of interpretation mediated by language, life and world beyond which one cannot go. Hence the focus of our discussion is on the hermeneutic character of understanding and meaning in the religious use of language. Here one can critique the so-called privileged or correct meaning of an utterance. And the basic hermeneutic problem can be summarized in this question, ‘whose meaning is the meaning of the meaning?’

Further, one can identify, as a heuristic device, four distinctive yet related ways of conceiving the basic problem of hermeneutic understanding and meaning. These four ways of conceiving hermeneutics can be briefly indicated as follows.

i) Hermeneutics can be conceived as an inquiry into the interpretation of texts. This we find in Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the “Kant of hermeneutics”. For him the most crucial theoretical issue that confronts one is the nature of language

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because one can get access to another person’s meaning only through the medium of language.

ii) One can also conceive hermeneutics as the foundation for the human sciences. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) embodies this approach. He makes a sharp distinction between understanding (Verstehen) in cultural sciences and explanation (Erklärung) in natural sciences.

iii) Hermeneutics can also be pictured as reflection on the conditions of all understanding. This approach finds its embodiment in Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). For Heidegger, human beings already find themselves in a world made intelligible to them by virtue of what he called the fore-structure of our understanding. It is the assumptions, expectations, and categories that we pre-reflectively project on experience and that constitute any given particular act of understanding. And every interpretation is already shaped by a set of assumptions and presuppositions about the whole of experience. Heidegger calls this the hermeneutic situation. Following Heidegger, Gadamer argues that interpretation also assumes a context of intelligibility and that the presuppositions and assumptions - Gadamer calls them prejudices - of the interpreter
are precisely what enable understanding as well as misunderstanding. In that sense one cannot think of a presupposition-less understanding. Here the stress is on the analysis of the inherent structure of understanding itself.

iv) One can also conceive hermeneutics as an analytic and mediating practice. Here the objective is a piecemeal investigation emphasizing any one or more of the following concerns: To analyze, to clarify, and if possible resolve conceptual issues surrounding explanation and interpretation in the various contexts in which they are employed; to establish the logical connection between meaning, truth and validity; to discover the various uses of language; and to ascertain what is meant by rationality and irrationality.

In a very broad sense, I shall be taking recourse to this conception of hermeneutics as analytic and mediating practice in our discussion.

From the foregoing discussion, one should not assume that the discipline of hermeneutics is of a monolithic and homogenous character. Rather it should be borne in mind that the very conception of hermeneutics in its origin, history and development does not always carry a precise and univocal meaning in the western philosophical tradition. As one author has comprehensively put it:
‘Hermeneutics’ is a term… that is now used in so many different contexts with so many different meanings that it no longer has a univocal meaning. …for hermeneutics represents not so much a highly honed, well-established theory of understanding or a long standing well-defined tradition of philosophy as it does a family of concerns and critical perspectives that is just beginning to emerge as a program of thought and research. … both a casual acquaintance with the widespread use of the term and a deeper grasp of the philosophical issues behind it indicate that hermeneutics wields considerable critical power indeed.\(^5\)

Besides being indicative of a family of concerns and critical perspectives, ‘hermeneutics’, to my mind, necessarily evokes a symbiosis between understanding, language and historicity. In an important sense, one can say that understanding, meaning, language and historicity constitute the fulcrum of hermeneutics. The nature and texture of this symbiosis and the emphasis on its various aspects may vary from one hermeneutic thinker

to another and from one school or style of thought to another. For the purpose of our discussion, as I have already indicated, I shall take ‘hermeneutics’ broadly to mean the philosophic-analytic practice of understanding and interpreting the meaning of religious discourse.

**Conceptual Contours and Presuppositions**

It is this conception of hermeneutics as an analytic practice that constitutes the conceptual contours of our inquiry. It means to analyze, to clarify and to resolve conceptual issues connected with understanding and meaning when we use words in religious contexts. And further I want to show that this method would enable us to clarify the logical connections between meaning, truth and validity in religious language. Some of the presuppositions that constitute the contours of our inquiry may be highlighted as follows.

The phenomenon called ‘religious language’ is primarily the *logos* of the *anthropos* and in that anthropological in character. That is to say, it is the human person who employs religious language; not gods, goddesses or spirits. As one author has rightly pointed out, even God cannot get around language. If God is to communicate, then God has to

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use some human language. And in that sense even God cannot escape language.\textsuperscript{53} By this I do not mean to say that religious language is necessarily anthropocentric or anthropomorphic or androcentric in character. What I want to emphasize is this: it is the \textit{homo sapiens} who is \textit{homo loquens} as well as \textit{homo religiosus}.

The human person who uses religious language is an embodied being in the given world. That is to say that the phenomenon of religious language has to be situated in the triad of language, life and world. And what we encounter in this triad are complex interconnections and contours. That means the stress on the human linguistic behaviour is to be seen in its rootedness in life and world. And one way of capturing its complexity is to analyze the various paradigms that are at work in the linguistic praxis of the humans. Heuristically, as one author has rightly pointed out, one can make a distinction among three paradigms at work here. First, the \textit{scientific paradigm} with the formula ‘\textit{S is P}’; second, the \textit{poetic (artistic) paradigm} with the formula ‘\textit{thou art}’; and third, the \textit{philosophic (mystic) paradigm} with the formula ‘\textit{I am}’\textsuperscript{54}

Ādi Śaṅkara, Wittgenstein and Derrida: A Trinitarian Ladder

In investigating the problem of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language, I propose to engage some chosen writings of Ādi Śaṅkara (c.788-820), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and Jacques Derrida (1931-2004). Here one might contest this proposal and radically question its logical appropriateness by stating that the philosophers mentioned above are embedded in different, heterogeneous, and even incommensurable philosophical traditions. Again one might be tempted to label them as ‘unholy trinity’. That is to say, if Ādi Śaṅkara constructed the strong and coherent foundational edifice of the non-dualistic philosophical school called the kevalādvaita (absolute non-dualism) tradition in the horizon of Indian philosophical thinking then Wittgenstein is said to have heralded ‘the linguistic turn’ in Western philosophy, cementing the movement called ‘the analytic tradition’. And Jacques Derrida has become almost synonymous with ‘différance

and deconstruction’ in the Continental tradition.\textsuperscript{57} There might be some merit in this question. But, my contention is that in grappling with the problem of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language, the conceptual issues they raise have a sort of ‘family resemblance’ and in that they do provide us with a heuristic device, the ‘trinitarian ladder’ in our investigation. And to justify my use of the neologism the ‘trinitarian ladder’ for the trinity of Ādi Śaṅkara, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida, I give the following reasons.

First, to contextualize the use of the neologism, I believe one has to take into account the incommensurability debate. As I have indicated earlier, it is illogical and unwarranted to presume two or more philosophical traditions to be either completely commensurable or incommensurable. A look at the contours of the incommensurability-commensurability debate in contemporary philosophy shows that there exists a fundamental tension between the “myth of the given’ and the claim that there is an objective ‘world’ that has some meaning

independent of any mode of conceptual description. Donald Davidson in his celebrated essay ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’ engages this multifaceted problem. In this essay, Davidson calls into question the intelligibility of the idea of a conceptual scheme, a framework or a paradigm that is often presupposed without critically examining it. He shows the incoherence of the thesis that a given conceptual framework in which we use sentences is presumed to be radically incommensurable with alternative conceptual schemes. For him, there is no intelligible basis on which one can say that the employed conceptual schemes are radically different. At the same time it does not imply that all speakers of language share a common scheme and ontology. That means “if we cannot intelligibly say that [conceptual schemes] are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one.”

Davidson goes onto challenge the dualistic ‘dogma of scheme and reality’ and the resultant radical notion of conceptual relativism according to which different people might have mutually un-interpretable beliefs. The point I want to note in the Davidsonian argument is this: there is neither perfect commensurability implying easy parallelisms nor radical incommensurability denoting

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closed, arbitrary and impenetrable conceptual schemes.\(^{59}\) This, argument, I believe will nullify the force of the counter argument that the use of the neologism ‘trinitarian ladder’ makes no sense because the three philosophers it signifies are radically incommensurable.

Second, my use of the neologism the ‘trinitarian ladder’ is not to be taken as a mere juxta-positioning of three disparate philosophers. Neither am I comparing them. Rather my intention is to elucidate the hermeneutic character of understanding and meaning in religious language by showing the contours of the conceptual logic that emerge from the texture that is available in these three philosophers’ engagement with the problematic of religious language. Further, I want to argue for the case that there is a thematic unity that manifests itself as a fulcrum in the chosen writings of this trinity of philosophers and this renders the neologism the ‘trinitarian ladder’, to my mind, thought provoking and significant. Here, the implied sense of hermeneutics, as I have discussed earlier, is that of analytic and mediating practice. And the contours of the link among them and the thematic unity will become evident as we progress in our investigation. And my contention is that this attempt will give rise to the trajectories of a fresh interpretation of understanding and

meaning in religious language. In the concluding chapter, I shall focus on this resultant epiphany of a fresh hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language.

Third, and more importantly, if *philosophia* is seen fundamentally as an attempt at civilizational dialogue of the humans in their local as well as global predicament, then such a dialogical conversation among various philosophical and religious traditions should not be seen as a mere luxury of the mind but a necessity in life. This is all the more significant when one wrestles with the problem of understanding and meaning in the domain of religious language. For religion is a human phenomenon which instantiates itself in diverse forms both locally and globally.

Here, parenthetically, I wish to add two important things before I proceed to Chapter One. First, as a philosophical inquirer my attempt is not to privilege any one particular philosophy and its allied religiocultural system whether it is Western or Indian, Continental or Anglo-Saxon, Abrahamic or Indic, Occident or Orient. Second, the operative conceptual framework at work in this thesis is qualified by its commitment to philosophical pluralism, religious diversity and the dialogical imperative. In all this the underlying conception of philosophical enterprise is that of a critical, creative and cross-cultural
universe of discourse in which one encounters the polyvalent fabric of religious narratives that humans have woven symbiotically to tell their own stories, and there by constructing, reconstructing and celebrating their own world-views.\(^6\)

Now I move on to the first step of this ‘trinitarian ladder’, that is, Ādi Śaṅkara.