CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We shall not cease from exploration,
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive at where we started,
and to know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot

***

I might say: if the place I want to get to could only
be reached by way of a ladder, I would give up trying
to get there.
For the place I really have to get to is a place
I must already be at now.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

The key problematic that constituted the fulcrum of our
philosophical exploration thus far has been the question of hermeneutic
understanding and meaning in religious language with reference to some
chosen works of the trinity of philosophers: Ādi Śaṅkara, Wittgenstein

---

and Derrida. In this concluding Chapter, by way of ‘philosophical harvesting’, I shall first attempt at a philosophical assemblage by putting together the main points of our investigation. And then, secondly, I shall attempt to weave together the emerging new trajectories that constitute a fresh look into the problematic of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language.

I began this philosophical exploration by taking a very close look at the problematic of religious language and the matrix of inter-related issues that emanates from it (see Chapter One, pp.1-40). In a very primary sense, I described religious language as the religious use of any given natural language. A brief look at the extant religious uses of language shows that it is characterized by pointed diversity and enormous multiplicity. Further I contended that the domain of religious language is symbiotically connected with the human phenomenon of language. And in a wider sense, this includes both the verbal and non-verbal communication because both silence and speech constitute the fulcrum of religious language. Any serious inquiry into the problem of meaning in religious language has to be done in dialogue with two other related domains, namely, ‘philosophy of language’ and ‘hermeneutics’. One may object to this idea by claiming that there exists incommensurability among the main currents of contemporary philosophy such as analytical
and continental traditions, western and non-western weltanschauung etc. My contention is that without minimizing the significance of varied ways of philosophizing, the imperative is to see philosophia as a rational human activity engendering critical and dialogical reflection on human experience. In this significant sense, it is the logos of the anthropos. And it is the homo sapiens who is homo loquens as well as homo religiosus. Keeping in mind this conceptual background, I indicated various approaches to engage the problematic of meaning in religious language and the metaphysical, the epistemological and the semantic issues involved (see pp. 7ff.). Besides pointing out the problem of ‘theistic predication’, I also indicated that the contemporary theoretical discourse regarding the constitution, dissemination and practice of meaning has become largely inter-disciplinary as well as trans-disciplinary in nature. Then I moved on to show the connecting links between the phenomenon of religious language and ‘religion’ conceived as an anthropological, philosophical and cultural category (see pp.12ff.). After a detailed discussion on the multifaceted problem of defining religion as found in the writings of various thinkers, I focused on the debate between Clifford Geertz and Talal Azad regarding the problematic of conceptualizing religion (see pp. 18ff.). Then I contended that the problem can justifiably be solved if one prefers a polythetic description of religion over its
monothetic definition of religion. In polythetic description what we have is the conception of religion-making characteristics, where as in monothetic definition, the focal point is the essence of religion. Simultaneously I also pointed out the semantic ambiguity, fluidity and indeterminacy built into the very notion of ‘religion’.

Further in wrestling with the problem of meaning in religious language, I ventured into the domain of hermeneutics and showed the significance of the hermeneutic character of understanding and meaning in religious language (see pp. 22ff.). The major conceptual issues in hermeneutics are the nature of a text, the meaning of understanding a text, and the presuppositions and beliefs that constitute the horizon of the interpreter. In this context, I briefly pointed out the trajectories of the origin and development of hermeneutics in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer (see pp. 28ff.). Then I made an attempt to clarify the conceptual contours of hermeneutics as analytic and mediating practice. In this conception of hermeneutics, I showed that the objective is to emphasize any one or more of the following concerns: to analyze and to clarify conceptual issues surrounding explanation and interpretation in a given context; to establish logical connections between meaning, truth and validity; to discover the various uses of language; and to ascertain what is meant by rationality.
and irrationality. Broadly it is this conception of hermeneutics as analytic and mediating practice having its roots in the matrix of language, life and world that is employed in our discussion. It is in the backdrop of this conceptual framework that I chose the trinity of Ādi Śaṅkara, Wittgenstein and Derrida to elucidate the phenomenon of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language. And I employed the neologism the ‘trinitarian ladder’ to refer to these three philosophers. To justify my use of this neologism the ‘trinitarian ladder’ I briefly responded to the possible objections such as the incommensurability thesis debate, the alleged idiosyncratic juxtaposing of three disparate philosophers and the claimed singularity of each philosophical tradition in which they are embedded. Taking the conception of *philosophia* fundamentally as an attempt at civilizational dialogue of the humans in their local as well as the global predicament, I see the employment of my neologism the ‘trinitarian ladder’ as a response to the much needed dialogical imperative. My intention is neither to merely juxtapose three disparate philosophers nor to compare them. Rather the attempt is to elucidate the hermeneutic character of understanding and meaning in religious language by showing the contours of the thematic unity and the conceptual logic that emerge from these three philosophers’ engagement
with religious language. Further I will like to argue that these contours, if woven hermeneutically, do give us fresh insights into the problematic of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language. I will attempt this hermeneutic act of weaving in the last part of this concluding chapter.

In **Chapter Two** (see pp. 41-85), I strive to philosophically climb up the first step of the trinitarian ladder by engaging the conception of vākyārtha-vicāraṇa in comprehending the Śāṅkara interpretation of the most celebrated mahāvākya ‘tat tvam asi’. I contextualised this mahāvākya in the wider framework of the fundamental religio-philosophical inquiry called Brahma-jijñāsā in the weltanschauung of Ādi Śāṅkara (see pp. 44ff.). In support of my interpretation of Brahma-jijñāsā as involving the religious use of language, I discussed the Śāṅkara argument that Brahman is the most desired object to be comprehended by a human person and that the realization of Brahman is the highest human objective. Then I proceeded to show the conceptual contours of Brahma-jijñāsā by discussing the problematic of the knowledge of Brahman in the subject-object mode of thought (see pp. 47ff.). Further, I clarified the idea that the Self or Brahman cannot be proved because it stands as the basis of all proof and is thus established as
the logical postulate of all proof. Further to delineate the soteriological significance of *Brahma-jijñāsā*, I pointed out the pivotal role of the cluster of eligibility conditions called *sādhanacatuṣṭaya* in Ādi Śaṅkara (see pp.49ff.). Then I moved on to analyse the nature of *vākyārtha-vicāraṇa* (see pp. 51ff.) as the conceptual, logical and linguistic analysis of the meaning of a given *mahāvākya*. It becomes praxis, I contended, when it is instantiated in the triple steps of śravaṇa (hearing), *manana* (reflection) and *nididhyāsana* (meditation). Here I took note of the paradigmatic distinction Ādi Śaṅkara makes between *Brahma-vid*, who is a Brahman-realized person, and śāstra-vid, who is seen as a mere possessor of the theoretical knowledge about Brahman. Further, to understand the full significance of the project of *Brahma-jijñāsā*, I argued that one should engage the presupposed notion of *adhyāsa* (see pp. 53ff.). Further I indicated that *adhyāsa* is postulated as the hermeneutic and logical category which serves as the condition for the very possibility of language, life and world. Then I discussed the three-fold definition given by Ādi Śaṅkara to elucidate this pivotal notion. Basically it means seeing something as something else. Then I discussed why Brahman cannot be objectified as the object of our
understanding, for it is the unique subject, that is, object-less subject. If so what is the most appropriate mode of comprehending Brahman?, one might ask. It is contemplative silence. This does not mean that linguistic constructions cannot denote Brahman at all. Rather the contention is that they cannot signify Brahman directly but only indirectly. In the backdrop of this understanding of Brahman-language, I attempted to decipher the contours of the Śāṅkara interpretation of the most celebrated mahāvākya ‘tat tvam asi’. After a brief note on its original home in the dialogical conversation between Uddālaka and Śvetaketu in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (see pp. 62ff.), I go on to develop the concept of lakṣaṇā by distinguishing it from abhidhā and paribhāṣā. And I argued for the case that jahadajahallakṣaṇā is employed as the hermeneutic technique to comprehend the soteriological meaning of the mahāvākya ‘tat tvam asi’ (see pp. 65ff.). It implies the use of the auxiliary exegetical method called anvyaya-vyatireka. As I indicated, there arises a problem here. If jahadajahallakṣaṇā means the exclusive cum non-exclusive metaphorization of the Self (see pp. 68ff.), how can one say that the mahāvākya ‘tat tvam asi’ is a case of meaningful identity-statement? For, in the act of metaphorization, the difference between the given two
entities are maintained and not resolved. In response, I pointed out that in the framework of the Śāṁkara interpretation, the initially perceived difference between the embodied Self and Brahman is maintained but gradually transcended when understanding dawns celebrating the non-difference between the two postulated entities. This leads, in my perception, to the problematic of predication, usually termed as the puzzling question of the “Self and its Other” (see pp. 72ff.). Placing it in the context of the discussion on the subject-object duality as found in the adhyāsa bhāṣya of Ādi Śāṁkara, I indicated a sort of hermeneutic ambiguity, fluidity and indeterminacy that emerge here. And there exists the possibility of exclusive predication of the Self. And I see it as a case of ‘hermeneutic violence’ which may be exploited in the domain of the socio-cultural and religious construction of the Self as a tool for hegemony and exclusive appropriation of power (see pp. 82ff.). Hence, I contended, the significance of the religio-philosophical and cultural challenge to critique it as the case maybe.

**Chapter Three** (see pp. 86-143) embodies my next move in my philosophical journey and my philosophical attempt to climb up the second step of the ‘trinitarian ladder’, that is, Ludwig Wittgenstein. In engaging the thought-world of Wittgenstein, the focal point of my
discussion is the conception of the depth grammar and its emerging contours in some chosen works of Wittgenstein. And my contention is that the conception of the depth grammar gives us the key to hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language with reference to Wittgenstein. I prefaced my investigation by making a detailed effort to understand the ‘problem of many Wittgensteins’ and I discussed it in the backdrop of hermeneutic multiplism (see pp. 88ff.). I pointed out the various interpretations of Wittgenstein and their ensuing implications available in the writings of Antony Kenny, Moyal-Sharrock, Alice Crary, Cora Diamond, Norman Malcolm, Peter Winch, D. Z. Phillips, Stephen Mulhall and Stanley Cavell. In particular I dwelt at length on the contra-distinguishing interpretive stance taken by Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch regarding the ‘religious point of view’ in Wittgenstein (see pp. 95ff.). Related to this, I discussed at length D. Z. Phillips’ attempt to construct a ‘contemplative philosophy of religion’ after Wittgenstein and the critique it has evoked particularly from Stephen Mulhall (see pp. 98ff.). All these varied and sometimes conflicting interpretations, I contended, are indicative of the hermeneutic multiplism in reading Wittgenstein. To critically appreciate the stance of Wittgenstein on religious language, I discussed in a detailed way the problematic of faith and reason in the domain of theorising religion (see pp. 102ff.). Then I
showed how Wittgenstein pre-empts this binary problematic of faith and reason, nullifying it by focussing on the particularity of religious language and its rootedness in its natural habitat of humans’ use of language. Then I went on to show this specificity of religious language by analysing some his remarks on Christian religion (see pp. 106ff.). Here I also indicated the affinity Wittgenstein shares with Kierkegaard and surprisingly Nietzsche. What becomes clear in this discussion is the attempt of Wittgenstein to show the polythetic, distinctive and autonomous character of religious language. This took us to the pivotal conception of the depth grammar of religious belief (see pp. 114ff.). The ‘surface grammar’ refers to the obvious syntactic features of the sentence and the words of which it is composed. In contrast, the depth grammar describes the overall use of the relevant expression by surveying its combination possibilities and impossibilities, the circumstances of its use and of its consequences. The emphasis here is on the combinational possibilities of words, seeing propositions as different moves in the language-game and taking note of their different logical relations and articulations. In this significant sense, I further argued that the conception of depth-grammar epitomizes the hermeneutic intimacy of meaning, use and understanding (see pp. 118ff.). After a brief note on the interpretation of meaning as use, I indicated its affinity with Dilthey’s conception of
‘explanation’ and ‘understanding’. To elucidate further, I gave a detailed description of Wittgenstein’s treatment of certain Christian beliefs and practices such as the Last Judgement, the Resurrection, the Holy Eucharist etc. (see pp. 123ff.). And I tried to show how Wittgenstein takes great effort to treat them as ‘grammatical remarks’ in a distinctive language-game and further having regulatory, life-sustaining effect on the believer. To emphasise this dimension further, I briefly narrated the celebrated story of Tolstoy, ‘Three Hermits’, which was the most favourite narrative of faith for Wittgenstein. I also brought into focus some significant philosophical problems like fideism, relativism and apocalyptic atheism that emanate from Wittgenstein’s engagement with religion. I did this by pointing out primarily the objections raised by Kai Nielsen and Brian Clark. And I responded to them in the light of what Cyril Barrett, Genia Schonbaumsfeld and Tim Labron have said on these issues. I argued against fideism by saying that the hermeneutic intimacy of doctrine and practice nullifies the alleged logical and conceptual binary of faith and reason in Wittgenstein. I also attempted to critique the ascription of extreme relativism to Wittgenstein by saying that the multiplicity and the distinctive character of ‘language-game’ and ‘form of life’ do not necessarily imply radical incommensurability. But I pointed out that one might justifiably ascribe a sort of ‘moderate relativism’ to
Wittgenstein in the backdrop of this indisputable fact that a human person’s linguistic and conceptual moves are relative to his or her beliefs and practices. I critiqued the charge of ‘apocalyptic atheism’ by saying that it is based on the failure to grasp the celebratory hermeneutic intimacy of word and deed as found in the Hebraic view of religion.

Moving ahead in my investigation, I attempted to climb up philosophically the third step of the ‘trinitarian ladder’ by engaging the celebrated Capri Lecture of Derrida as the paradigm of his thinking on religion. This forms the content of the discussion in Chapter Four (pp. 145-185). I prefaced this intellectual engagement by locating the philosophical space of Derrida in the midst of oscillating views regarding the intellectual significance of the oeuvre of Derrida. In this context I pointed out two widely divergent assessments. According to Anthony Kenny (see pp. 147ff.), Derrida instead of promoting better understanding and clarity in thought has actually introduced new terms whose cumulative effect was to confuse ideas that are perfectly distinct. Further I indicated Kenny’s view that the philosophical method of Derrida as nosegay and asserts that Derrida is a skilful rhetorician and literary critic of some worth but not a serious philosopher at all. On the other hand, I pointed out in some detail the critical assessment of Richard Rorty that Derrida can justifiably be considered a quasi-transcendental philosopher
(see pp. 148ff.). And in my discussion, I went along with this assessment of Rorty on Derrida. I also indicated the critical influence of Derrida in contemporary theoretical engagement with the domain of religion. Then I proceeded to discuss Derrida’s Capri Lecture. In order to capture its philosophical significance, I made an attempt to locate it in the context of weltanschauung of the Capri Seminar on religion (see pp. 150ff.). And I briefly noted the reflections of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Gianni Vattimo on the relevance of the Capri Seminar in the contemporary human predicament. The focal point is the inescapable question of religion in its contemporaneity. Further, in engaging the question of understanding and meaning in religious language with reference to Derrida, I focussed on the interface between hermeneutics and Derrida’s philosophical practice. This I did with reference to the writings of David Hoy and Michael Forster on this issue (see pp. 160 ff.). The main point that came up was that the interface between hermeneutics and the philosophy of Derrida gives rise to break and continuity, symmetry and asymmetry. Then I pointed out the postmodern weltanschauung that constitutes the theoretical framework of all the theoretical presentations on religion in the Capri Seminar. To my mind, this is the reason for engaging religion not only in its alleged ‘primal purity’ but also significantly in its contemporaneous manifestations which include terror and violence. In
my analysis of the Capri Lecture of Derrida, I emphasised the fact that Derrida’s focus is thinking religion in its manifested contemporaneity and linking it to a cluster of conceptual categories. For this Derrida dwells on the various sites of religion such as ‘religion and machine’, religion and cyberspace’, religion and digitality’, religion and globalatinization’, ‘religion and terror’, ‘religion and capitalism’, ‘religion and politics’ etc.(see pp. 165ff.) Further I pointed out that Derrida alludes to the inbuilt etymological ambiguity, plurality and indeterminacy of ‘religion’ by engaging the two possible Latin roots of ‘religion’: ‘relegere’ and ‘religare’. Further I tried to show that Derrida attempts at a hermeneutic symbiosis of faith and knowledge by questioning the transcendental privileging of the binary distinction between faith and knowledge especially as found in Kant’s engagement with religion. Derrida’s theoretical interest is the binary distinction Kant draws between ‘the reflecting faith’ as opposed to ‘the dogmatic faith’. For Derrida, this binary opposition comes out very clearly in the Kantian conception of parerga. In Greek, ‘parerga’ means subsidiary or supplementary work. For Derrida, these parerga embody the fringe where one can inscribe one’s reflections on religion in its contemporaneity. In fact, what Derrida is doing here is to question the Kantian legacy embedded in the philosophical practice of emphasising the foundational, transcendental
origins of religion in theorising religion. And the transcendental interrogation of religion poses the twofold question: what is religion? And how is religion possible? To overcome the implicit lacuna in the Kantian response to this question, that is the alleged dogmatic opposition between ‘the reflecting faith’ and ‘the dogmatic faith’, Derrida suggests the possibility of holding together the heterogeneity of faith and knowledge in hermeneutic symbiosis by ‘withdrawing to the desert of abstraction’. That is perhaps the only way, according to Derrida’ to ward off the temptation to knowledge. Here I pointed out that for Derrida, the distinguishing factor is that in knowledge one has ‘certainty’ where as in faith one has ‘uncertainty’. To understand this heterogeneity and otherness that constitute human experience, Derrida introduces the Paltonic conception of *khora* and emphasises the semantic slipperiness of this term. Conceptually it provides place and space, but does not in any way determine what occupies that space. For Derrida, to *think religion* means to *think khora*. And the withdrawal to the desert of radical abstraction is an invitation to think *khora*, to engage with religion both in its primal purity and its contemporaneity. Further, I indicated the influence of Derrida’s thought on some of the contemporary approaches to religion such as ‘negative or apophatic theology’, ‘death of God
theology’, ‘diacritical hermeneutics’ and the ‘hermeneutics of the desire for God’.

Thus far, I have provided a synoptic summary of the philosophical engagement with the three heuristically separate but to my mind thematically interrelated steps of the trinitarian ladder. The characteristics that exhibit the thematic unity are the significance of religious language as a human phenomenon in humans’ self-understanding and the inviolable intimacy between word and deed in religion. Thus the process of intellectual engagement what we have undertaken thus far gives rise to, I believe, trajectories of a fresh interpretation of the problematic of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language and simultaneously makes explicit a certain conceptual logic of ‘the religious’. 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. In this way what emerges 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 homogeneity
nor heterogeneity but hermeneutically holds them together in a creative tension. Here one celebrates, I think, the dialogical imperative in the encounter of advaita and agape, kenosis and kairos. This is the enlightened horizon which opens up, I believe, after having climbed up the trinitarian ladder. In a significant sense, the trinitarian aphorisms with which we began our philosophical journey - “In the beginning was the Word”\(^3\), “I calmly write: “In the beginning was the Deed!””\(^4\), and “Words are deeds”\(^5\) - signify this enlightened horizon. In fact, such an interpretive understanding is true of any genuine philosophical and religious inquiry. For, as T. S. Eliot observes: “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive at where we started, and know the place for the first time.”\(^6\) Further this is what, perhaps, Wittgenstein had in mind when he made this philosophically significant remark: “… if the place I want to get to could only be reached by way of a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place I really have to get to is a place I must already be at now.”\(^7\)

\(^4\) Johann Wolfgang Goethe (2001) Faust, p. 34.
\(^7\) Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980) Culture and Value, p.7e.