CHAPTER III

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The term 'religion' has been defined in very many ways. The nebulosity of the word has lent itself to alternative interpretations that are sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory.

The Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead observes that religion is what the individual does with his solitariness. Whitehead recognised that no man can be wholly abstracted from society. Yet he insisted on the aweful, ultimate fact that every human being is, in the final analysis, alone with himself facing a universe he does not wholly understand. "The search for meaning, the search for what makes humans human, the elusive qualities of mystery, imagination and awe point us to the religiousness that is part of our human heritage."¹

Whitehead noted four aspects of religion because he recognised that the religious impulse demands social expression and that this need has led to institutions ranging from primitive cultic assembles. First ritual-definite procedures for carrying out the religious act, second, emotion, for some a profound sense of awe and wonder mixed with fear, for others feelings of helplessness and unworthiness for still

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others a sense of gratitude for the gift of existence and love for the creator who made life possible. He claimed that the great religious conceptions which haunt the imaginations of civilized mankind are scenes of solitariness. At the heart of belief there remain an element of the unproved or unprovable. The dogmatic frame of mind and doctrinal intensity of political and social ideologists similarly have led observers to rank them among the 'religious' and the objects of their loyalty. Wherein Marxism, Fascism, Nationalism, or even upper class feudalism as later day religions. The psychological response these movements elicit undoubtedly has much in common with the reaction to traditional religion. Tillich points out "we are all labouring under the yoke of religion: sometimes we try to throw away the old dogmas, but after a while we return to them again enslaving ourselves and others in their servitude." Understandably, many agnostics resent being classified this way, because it would mean that a deeply held belief alone makes a religion. Religiously committed persons often agree with them. Nevertheless, Tillich in holding that there are actually no irreligious people but only those whose ultimate concern is God and those with a less worthy object for their loyalty had a point. Few terms conjure up

so many different ideas as does the term religion. It is associated with institutions such as churches, synagogues and temples, with attitudes such as devotion, faith, belief and prayer, with traditions and systems of thought, with objects such as supernatural being or God. The vastness and variety of forms religion takes, makes it difficult to determine the meaning of the word. No definition of religion has ever been framed which touches its every aspect of life, and none has found even a considerable measure of general acceptance. The reason is that religion is so amazingly complex. Religion is both individual and social, it embraces both belief and conduct, reason and emotion. It is enshrined in creed and custom and yet it lies independently of either in the heart. Kant's & Hegel's view of religion as given by John Caird, "the knowledge possessed by the finite mind of its nature as absolute mind. According to Kant religion is the recognition of all our duties as divine commands." 3 Whitehead's epigram that religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness - may apply to some more developed minds, but is not descriptive of religion as a whole. An American psychologist, went to the opposite extreme in simply equating the religious with the social.

Herbert Spencer is of opinion that religion was an hypothesis, supposed to render the universe comprehensible, and that its message was that all things are manifestations of a power that transcends our knowledge. Religion is an emotion resting on a conviction of a harmony between ourselves and the universe at large. In adding emotion to conviction, it goes a step nearer than Spencer, even though, the idea of God does not enter. Emile Durkheim states that a religion is a 'unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, things set apart and forbidden. It is necessary to note that definitions of this type avoid the mention of God or Gods in characterising religion, a course which Durkheim approves. Historical forms of religion afford overwhelming evidence that the idea of the gods is their common feature. Another class of definition relates to the aspect of religion in which it appears as a form of valuation, or of conserving values. It omits reference to God and therefore comes under the same criticism.

The World Book of Encyclopedia defines religion "as man's attempt to achieve the highest possible good by adjusting his life to the strongest and best power in the universe". This power is usually called God. In general,
religion is a collective enterprise although every person tries to follow his own religion, and religious beliefs in his personal life. It is possible for a person to develop his own private religion. Most religions are organised systems of beliefs based on traditions and teachings. Science deals with whatever is amenable to scientific explanation. History deals with what is significant in human past, but religion includes everything within its purview. The attempts to define religion, however, seem to have been made in the light of only a very partial view of the great diversity of facts. Normally a definition seems to consider the facts of a particular religion, dismissing the rest as only 'superstitious'.

The great diversity of religious beliefs and practices suggest that the essence of religion cannot consist of any particular set of them. But, some writers believed, that it must rather be defined ultimately in terms of certain important functions which religion discharges. Some have held, that a religion is any set of beliefs that are matters of faith. The observances, attitudes, injunctions and feelings tied up with the beliefs tend to perform certain function in the individual and collective life. "All the religions have certain basic belief, traditions and philosophies." 5

5. ibid.
Religion is concerned not only with belief in God but with prayer, ritual, ecclesiastical activities. Philosophy of religion is concerned with the understanding of the religious belief. "We discover what are a man's inductive standards by discovering the dynamics of his beliefs."  

Belief in the supernatural or 'the beyond' is not an essential feature of religion. It is testified by great religions in the world. For example, Buddhism is usually considered to be a religion but it contains no belief in God. Some hold that belief in the fundamental goodness of man is a religion, and that an ideology such as communism is a religion, because it is the highest value to those who hold it. "In this sense one's religion is whatever value one holds highest in life, or whatever is one's ultimate concern." But if the meaning of the word is stretched to this extent, it is doubtful whether it can fulfil the genuine religious demands of human beings. Ordinarily, the word religion is all through associated with belief in God. In Western religions, for example, the most fundamental theological claim is that there is an


all perfect being, God. For that reason, one of the most fundamental questions in the philosophy of religion centres around the truth and falsity of that belief. Is there any reason to suppose that God exists, i.e. proof for his existence? Or is there some reason to suppose that he does not exist i.e. proofs for his non-existence? And if neither of these proofs exists, what ought a reasonable person to do? Philosophy however, although may not be able to penetrate very far into the mystery of God. It investigates the meaning of God in human experience and enquires whether the belief in such a being is consistent with the science and reasoning and whether it fulfils any actual need in our experience. In his famous *Critique of Pure Reasons*, Kant reduced different proofs for the existence of God to three the cosmological, teleological and the ontological. The cosmological argument argues that there must be a God to create the world or nothing would exist in the world. The teleological argument, argues that there must be a God or the world would not be the orderly, harmonious, purposively adoptive place. In ontological argument Anselm begins with the very conception of God as all perfect being, than which nothing greater can be conceived - and goes on to argue that God must exist and that this existence is entailed by His nature. These so called proofs for the existence of God have all been
thoroughly criticised and proved to be defective. The ontological argument starts from the idea of God as an absolutely perfect being. Such an absolutely perfect being must exist, for non-existence would be an imperfection and a more perfect being which exists, to be imagined. But such a proposition is opposed to the first principle with which the argument started. Therefore God exists. Kant points out that existence is not an attribute like goodness or wisdom and cannot be involved in the conception of any idea in our minds. There are many things which exist in our imagination. We have an idea of a perfect circle but does not mean that the perfect circle exists. The idea of God is no exception and God's existence cannot be deduced from the conception of God.

The causal argument is not less unsatisfactory. It proceeds on a series of untenable assumptions. An infinite series of causes and effects is not impossible to conceive. If causality is interpreted as meaning that the contingent implies the necessary, it begs the whole question. We take the world as created and then argue that it must have had a Creator. Again, causality relates happenings in nature and we cannot by means of it go outside of nature and reach the creative source of things. The given world is a contingent fact. It is conceivable that there may be no world at all or only an irrational and fortuitous one. It is therefore,
conceivable that there may be no God. At best, for causality, God is only a contingent being. But the God of religion is an absolute being, in no sense fortuitious. We have seen that the moral arguments fail since attempts are made to account for the development of the moral sense by a process of natural selection.

What is relevant here, is, neither to prove nor to disprove the existence of God but to show that the concept of religion is meaningful independent of the existence of God. R.M. Hare points out "one can have a christianity without any commitment to or belief in the supernatural."\(^8\)

What most people mean when they use the word God is a supernatural being, spoken of as a spirit, who is righteous and supremely powerful, who has a certain control over our destiny, and with whom we may come into friendly relations, if our own character and attitude are right. They regard him, perhaps, also as the creator of the world, and as moral law giver and judge, and believe that he is everywhere present in the world as an indwelling presence.

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An analysis of this or any current conception shows that the God idea resolves itself into the idealisation of certain fundamental and characteristic values which have ranked high in human experience, particularly power, righteousness, love, justice, and personality. These are the things which appeal to us as of supreme worth, and God is the embodiment or personification of these ideals. In our own lives, which have from the beginning been social, we have experienced the joy of power when we ourselves exercise it, and the fear of it when exercised by others. As for righteousness, it has been the condition of all social life. Love is equally fundamental in human intercourse, not only in the family, but also in the collective life. Justice is the proper adjustment of rewards and punishments to conduct. It caters to a deep inner demand of the heart.

God is the mysterious and unknown power, fearful yet friendly, which manifests itself in the productive power of nature. He made the world and made us. He demands righteousness and justice. He has a kind attitude towards man, responding to his prayers. The best of attributes have always been ascribed to God as Absolute, eternal, Infinite, Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent. According to Emerson God is the over-soul, the wise silence, the universal beauty, the Eternal one, while for Wordsworth, He is a presence that disturbs the joy of
elevated thoughts ... He needs no proof of God, for he is felt, and felt as a presence, a presence disturbing, yet disturbing with the joy of elevated thoughts. The mystics of all ages have in a similar way felt and experienced God rather than thought or reasoned about him, and felt him as life or love or infinitude. Nothing definite has been known as to whether God exists or not. The picture which William James gives of a world of spiritual reality which, though beyond this physical order, gives meaning to it. James as a true pragmatist shows that God is what we live by. In many of our experiences, we seem to touch another dimension of existence than the sensible and merely understandable world. Call it the mystical or the supernatural we feel a real connection with it, we get real power from it, and in it we find the source of our ideal impulses. The concept of the supernatural gives a picture which seem to be mystical and too religious, without any scientific basis.

We are living at a time when the idea of God is gradually losing its significance in our conceptual framework. John Dewey holds the view that the gradual emancipation of religion from the dominance of the idea of the supernatural will enhance its social value. The so called religion foster the idea of escape from society. It suggests solitude and prayer and communion, not with other people, but with God. It suggests a feeling of
dependence on some other being.

An important step in considering the application of religion to life is to understand some of the more serious problems that man encounters today. It is an age of anxiety, revolt and an age of reason. There was a time when belief in God was universal. The scientific framework has no room for the concept of the supernatural. This poses a problem for the secularisers of Christianity - that is, those Christians who are attempting to preserve their religion in the face of secularisation - are feeling it necessary to face. Paul Van Buren remarks that as members of a secular society "we no longer know how to use the word at all." They are attempting to 'desupernaturalise' a supernatural religion, because the notion of the supernatural is losing its significance gradually. Some people have thought that religion of any kind is impossible without the notion of the supernatural. T.S. Eliot is one of those who felt that no religion can survive which is not a religion of the supernatural. There are questions to be discussed as to how the concept of the supernatural has been banished by science. What is the basis for our claim that a scientific world view and belief in the supernatural are incompatible? The supernatural phenomena came to be

eliminated with the advent of modern science. By the beginning of the twentieth century certainly the great bulk of what had once been regarded as 'manifestations of spiritual agency' had become scientifically disreputable. With the discussion on the concept of the 'supernatural' we are led to examine how secularisation affects the problems of the meaning of religious language.

The problem of religious language is one of the core issues in philosophy of Religion. Philosophy as a second order activity concerns itself with an understanding and analysis of concepts. Wittgenstein observes "all philosophy is critique of language."10 Philosophy of religion is related to religion as philosophy of science is related to science. A philosophical thinking about religion does not mean providing philosophical justification for religious beliefs, but it consists in philosophical analysis of religious concepts. "There may also be a linguistic analysis of meaning affirmations in religion."11 "With the emergence of linguistic philosophy one of the persistent issues concerns itself with the logic of theological discourse."12 Strawson remarks that "Philosophers


12. Ibid.
concern with language has been the most important and pressing themes during the present century."

The positivists fail to find any cognitive significance of the theological language. Since religious statements are neither analytic nor synthetic, they are pronounced as patently nonsensical. They are not analytic because they claim to be about the ultimate truths. They are not synthetic because they are not verifiable even in principle. The principle of verification is a criterion of meaning by which the literal significance of a given proposition is determined. According to them, such statements as 'God is truth', 'The Absolute is perfect', though grammatically sound are semantically odd. Such statements can at most have emotive significance. They can successfully be used to express the emotion of the speaker or evoke the desirable sentiment in the hearer. Such statements can also be taken as consolation - statements providing the necessary emotional proposition or anchorage to a man otherwise in distress. For the positivists "there are no meaningful affirmation in the entire discourse of religion in creeds, in theologies and in scriptures."  

The linguistic analysts would of course take a relatively liberal stand in opining that religious statements have logic different from that of sciences. This is well brought out by Wittgenstein in the celebrated analogy of language - game. As there are different games with rules of their own, there are different languages with the logic of their own. As different games are played for different purposes, language is also used to discharge multiplicity of functions. As one game cannot be played by the rules of another, one form of discourse cannot be understood with the logic of another. This makes them construe that the religious language has a logic of its own which differentiates it from the language of science and other forms of language - use. Wittgenstein maintains that science and religion just involve different system of thought and that what counts as truth in each. He observes "we do not talk about hypothesis, or about high probability in religious contexts." 15

The analysts advance the doctrine of functional analysis in spelling out the nature of religious language. According to this, words by themselves are mere marks or sounds signifying nothing. They acquire meaning only in their actual employment.

in particular contexts. Understanding the meaning of an expression therefore would consist in tracing the way it functions in particular contexts. Here the meaning is defined in terms of its function in particular universe of discourse. Mischievously this led the analysts to hold that statements in religion are meaningful even without postulating a supernatural agency or the mystical elements that are otherwise considered as constituting an essential part of religion.

According to Bultman, religious statement is a declaration of belief about the nature of God or about the dependance of a person's life upon God. In contrast, a philosophical analyst may speak about such religious affirmations without any religious conviction. His qualifications may be exclusively linguistic, in so far as he has a knowledge of the rules of language. There are no important studies of the phenomenon of religion today which do not take account of the nature of language.

Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* emphasised the role of language. The thesis of the book is that what is essentially religious is the numinous consciousness - which cannot be reduced to language and cannot be handed down in concepts. What is distinctive of Otto's view is that the distinctive thing in religion is the numinous experience which cannot
be put into words. Otto's study of religion comes within the scope of linguistic philosophy in so far as its basic thesis is that the nature of religious experience cannot be articulated or formulated in language. According to Otto,

More of the experience of the numinous lives in reverent attitude and gesture, in tone and voice and demeanour, expressing its momentousness, and in the solemn devotional assembly of a congregation at prayer than in all the phrases and negative nomenclature which we have found to designate it. 16

Notwithstanding the very great differences between philosophical analysis and existentialists analysis there are some points of similarity in these two approaches to religion. Marcel points out that the question about the existence of God do not have any definite answer. He points out that the impossibility of understanding the exact meaning of such a question makes it impossible to give an intelligent answer. Attempting to understand the meaning of assertions about God is something which modern existentialists share in common with contemporary

philosophical analysis. The real difficulty for the believer is not the problem of proof, but the problem of meaning.

Our studies of religion with reference to the phenomenon of language would remain incomplete if it did not take account of Martin Buber's writing i.e. *The Eclipse of God*, where Buber too is concerned with the use of language that has lost its meaning. He points out for instance, "that the term God does not as such express religious significance, since it is so often used in discourse without a shread of religious meaning." 17

Bultman's interest in scripture is in the language of myth, as distinguished from the language of faith. According to him, the language of myth may or may not be a handicap in affirming a religious assertion, since its adequacy depends upon the meaning in which such metaphorical language is used. In so far as myth is metaphysical or a figure of speech, and in so far as metaphors are characteristic of such language in religion, the problem of scrutinising

myth in religion is almost coterminous with reflecting on religion itself. My purpose in this chapter is not to illustrate Bultmann's procedure, but merely to point out that this procedure comes within the scope of linguistic analysis. Since myth is a figure of speech, demythologising is an operation upon language.

It should be pointed out that the emphasis upon language by the recent philosophers is not new. It may be traced to the beginning of western philosophy itself. It is to be examined how far secularisation has succeeded in bringing about a revolution in the human race and what form of religion can meet the human demands in the true sense of the term. I intend to discuss the religious and the secular in connection with the problem of religious language. It is to be mentioned here how secularisation affects the problems of religious language.

Philosophy of religion would thus be a study of religious concepts as they are embodied in religious beliefs, or, religious language. Since systems of religious beliefs or religious language are so widely different from one religion to another it is doubtful, if a philosophical reflection on the concepts of a religion can really have any important bearing on our understanding
of the concepts of another religion. Brockington says, "Translation is at best an echo. Such statements must have been expressed by practically everyone who has attempted to express in one language the literature or thought of another." 18

When a word occurs both in theological and secular contexts it is clear that its secular meaning is primary in the sense that it has developed first and have accordingly determined the definition of the word. The meaning of such a term when it is applied to God is an adoption of its secular use. Consequently although the ordinary, every day meaning of such words as 'Good', 'loving', 'forgives', 'commands', 'hears', 'speaks', 'wills', 'purposes' is relatively unproblematic, but such terms raise a multitude of questions when applied to God. The scholastic thinkers were well aware of this problem and developed the idea of analogy to solve the problem of meaning. Aquinas, the pioneer of the doctrine of analogical predication maintains that when a word, such as 'Good' is applied both to a created being and to God it is not being used univocally in the two cases. Nor, on the

other hand, do we apply the epithet 'Good' to God and man equivocally, as when the word 'bat' is used to refer both to the flying animal and to the instrument used in baseball. There is a definite connection between God's goodness and man's reflecting the fact that God had created man. According to Aquinas, then, 'Good' is applied to creator and creature neither univocally nor equivocally but analogically. The positivists like Ayer claim that the theological statements are not propositions at all, but are meaningless concatenations of words.

For Braithwaite "a religious assertion is the assertion of an intention to carry out a behaviour policy, subsumable under a sufficiently general principle to be a moral one, together with the implicit or explicit statement, but not the assertion, of certain stories." 19

Paul Van Buren has a similar view. He points out that statements of faith, are to be interpreted as statements which describe or command a particular way of seeing the world, other men and oneself - "statements of faith cannot be understood today as referring to anything that has the least hint of the supernatural about it." 20


Those who treat the notion of the supernatural as incoherent maintain that when people talk about the supernatural world they are in reality talking in a covert way about the secular world. John Wisdom answers by saying that there can be facts in the world which are not establishable by experiment and it is among this non-experimental kind of fact that the facts of religion alleges, are to be found. Braithwaite and Van Buren recognise that statements about God cannot be taken as straightforwardly as factual ones. The logical positivists argue that "factual statements had to be open to empirical verification, and draw the conclusion that theological statements were not factual and therefore meaningless." 21

Paul Tillich makes an important contribution by his doctrine of the symbolic nature of religious language. Tillich distinguishes between a sign and a symbol. Both point to something beyond themselves. A sign signifies that to which it points by arbitrary

21. ibid., p.37.
convention, for instance the red light at the street corner signifies that drivers are ordered to halt. This is purely external convention but a symbol "participates in that to which it points."²² Tillich argues that a flag participates in the power and dignity of the nation that it represents. Because of the inner connection with the reality symbolised, symbols are not arbitrarily instituted, like conventional signs, but grow out of the individual or collective consciousness. A symbol opens up levels of reality which are otherwise closed to us. And at the same time unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul, corresponding to the new aspects of the world that it reveals. That the symbol participates in the reality of the symbolised is a very important point. However, this usage will be greatly disputed by the empiricists. According to them whenever one thing stands for another thing quite naturally without much of human convention, then the former is said to be a sign. In this sense a sign is an index of the other things. Whereas a 'symbol' is employed to refer only to those cases where one thing has been made to stand for another, by a decision

of some human being or group of human beings.

Tillich holds that religious faith, which is the state of being 'ultimately concerned' about the ultimate, can only express itself in symbolic language. Whatever we say about that which concerns us ultimately, whether or not we call it God, has a symbolic meaning. It points beyond itself while participating in that to which it points. In no other way can faith express itself adequately. "The language of faith is the language of symbols." 23

There is according to Tillich, one and only one literal, non-symbolic statement that can be made about the ultimate reality which religion calls God—that god is Being-itself. Beyond this, all theological statements such as, that God is eternal, living, good, personal, that he is the creator and that he loves his creatures are symbolic. Tillich's conception of the symbolic character of religious language can be developed in either of two opposite directions. Tillich's doctrine can be developed theistically and at the same time a naturalistic interpretation can be given to it as was done by J.H. Randall.

23. ibid., p.45
Antony Flew lays down a challenge to the religious believers. He says that any meaningful statement must be capable of being falsified. For the theist, Flew suggests, no evidence could possibly count against God's existence. Therefore, "God exists" is not a genuine assertion at all since it cannot possibly be false, but if it cannot be false, as per his condition, it is meaningless.  

John Hick points out that the notion of verification is itself by no means perfectly clear and fixed. It may be that as per some views of the nature of verification the existence of God is verifiable, whereas according to other views it is not. The central core of the concept of verification is the removal of ignorance or uncertainty concerning the truth of some proposition. That P is verified means that something happens which makes it clear that P is true. "A question is settled so that there is no longer room for rational doubt concerning it. He said verification is a logico-psychological rather than a purely logical concept." In reply to


Antony Flew he hold verification and falsification are symmetrically related. They do not necessarily stand to each other as do the two sides of a coin, so that once the coin is thrown it must fall on one side on the other. Thus he accepts the verification principle in a modified form and tries to show that 'God exists' is a genuinely factual assertion. Wisdom is of opinion that the theists and the atheists "react in different ways to the same set of facts. They are not making mutually contradicting assertions but are rather expressing different feelings." They both really feel about the world in the ways that their words indicate.

E.S. Mascall says that man makes use of language - because he is an intelligent social being. A large part of language which theology employs does not differ in any relevant respect from that ordinary discourse and raises certain special problems. He says that the only way to discover that a statement or a concept is meaningful is to see whether people can understand it. But for a linguistic empiricist to declare that he cannot give any intelligent meaning

26. ibid., p.86.
to the sentence 'God exists* may indicate nothing more than that he has never made a serious effort to enter into the linguistic community of those who affirm His existence. Fredrick Férré points out that theological discourse is characterised by responsive significance. Its words deal with symbols of great potency. "The words or phrases of theological speech possess the greatest power which affect the interpreter of this language."

Positivist philosophy is commonly held to be an enemy of religion. Modern positivistic philosophy has been developed by men of scientific bent of mind. Scientific statements are empirically verifiable, and whatever is not verifiable is held to be nonsensical. Ayer says, "The arguments for God can be neither meaningful nor verifiable." Positivistic philosophy has done a service to religion. When Positivists say that theological statements are nonsensical, here it means that they are non-verifiable by sense experience but not literally nonsense, or absurd.


It should be clear that we can never use language literally when referring to God. All our words literally refer to some aspect of experience, all our words apply only to finite experience and hence not to God. One may conclude that either 'God' is meaningful or that the language is inadequate to define God. No linguistic statement can do justice to the complexity of the experience to which it refers. So whatever we may try to say in explication of the term 'God' something vital must be left unexpressed. "The understanding of religion should start with an analysis of man's being in the world rather than with the reports of specific experiences, behaviour, patterns etc."

Religion is an integral part of human culture. As Randall says, "Religion, we now see, is a distinctive human enterprise with a socially indispensable function of its own to perform." It is true that Religion exists, the most important questions are about the purposes that it serves in human life, and


how its cultivation is to be developed. It is in this perspective that the views of Vivekananda as regards to religion, its nature, function, forms are most pertinent and enlightening.