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VITAL HERMENEUTICS:

[The Problem of Meaning in Life and its Relation to Religion

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.
>
> Shakespeare, *Macbeth* V, v, 25–29.

Paradoxical though it may seem to us, if the dramatist-poet were in fact right, he would never have considered these lines worth writing. Philosophically speaking, the negation of meaning of life entails an inherent contradiction, as even its meaninglessness demands a meaningful expression. This essay is a modest attempt to discuss the vital problem of *meaning in life* and the *relation it bears to religion*.

I

In order to have any philosophical significance, the question, 'Is life meaningful?', must be distinguished from its rather naive counterpart, 'Does man want to live?'. The latter admits a straight forward answer: self-preservation is instinctive to man. Rest, exercise, nutrition, medication and, at times, even yearning for immortality in a given culture, religious or secular, only corroborate man's instinct for the prolongation of life. The naive question views life and death as mutually exclusive, nay, contradictory. The former, on the contrary, is a philosophical question: it views life and death, far from being contradictory, as complementary; and far from being mutually exclusive, they interpenetrate. Life here is much more than biological. Its range extends beyond the cessation of physical death. Death is the final event, indeed an act, that happens not only *to*, but *in*, life. As far as man is concerned, there is a difference between dying and having to die. The problem of meaning takes into count both these aspects of death and subsumes them under the wider category of 'life'. Insofar as death is not

only an end (*teleios*) but also the goal (*telos*) of life, the meaning of (the total) life will have to be determined not only with reference to its origin but also its goal; life is thus necessarily intentional.

It is evident, then, that the problem of meaning, far from being a pseudo problem, is a vital philosophical problem, pressing for some kind of solution. Indeed, we can never afford to take it lightly as it is our *own* problem, ourselves as problematic. Its formulation, let alone its solution, is not possible without a second order of reflection. It is vital because, although evasive of an exhaustive conceptual definition, meaning is palpable and pervasive in every walk of our life. It literally 'in-forms' our thoughts, feelings and actions, thus being at once cognitive, emotive and connative. In every 'ultimate situation' the problem of meaning seeps through the many crevices of our living.

By 'ultimate situation' I understand, after Karl Jaspers, the situation that man is bound to experience alone as an individual, without anyone, howsoever close and well-meaning, being able to mitigate, much less bear, it for him. Such ultimate situations may arrive in the form of separation, alienation, loneliness, helplessness, sickness, death, guilt, confusion, anxiety, fear etc. True, they do have the potential of transforming one into a Buddha, a Christ, a Gandhi, a King but they *also* have the potential of completely destroying one. In all these, and a host of other areas, the question of meaning inevitably comes up. It is possible to suppress it for a while with a certain amount of cherished idealisms. But, sooner or later, we stand exposed in our self-deceptions, our idealism completely shattered. The problem of meaning is therefore inescapable so long as man is man. It is, in this sense, an intensely human problem. Although the task of formulating the question and of defining its boundaries may be left to the philosophers, it is a vital question that everyone faces, inescapably, at some time or other in his life.

II

Strictly for methodological convenience, we may distinguish the problem of meaning as three - dimensional and, accordingly, formulate three questions:

1. What are the *sources* of meaning? If we are not so naive as to dismiss life as meaningless, the source(s) of meaning, to the extent possible, must first be identified. Logotherapy, the third Viennese school of psychology, has done us an invaluable service by identifying the many possible

fountainheads of meaning in all the complexities of life: one's spouse, children, work, hobbies, social work, scientific and technological pursuits, sports, politics, faith and religion etc., — all of which, either severally, at times exclusively, or in various combinations, can make us cling to life and thus provide us with the sustaining force for the *qui vive* of life.[1] Thus, though meaning is one, its sources can be many. Each area, or compartment, of life can serve as a fountainhead of meaning in life.

2. How are the meanings that are fragmentarily obtained from the many sources *strung together*? The task of weaving them together, so that they can now become the warp and woof of a single unified life, is vital. For it is not uncommon that these are different areas, or aspects of life, and therefore meanings emanating therefrom, can at times be mutually exclusive and even opposed to one another. To cite just one example, the meaning that is derived from one's commitment to academic pursuits can be sometimes hostile to meaning that is derived from one's being a spouse or a parent. The Unification of meanings drawn from various compartments of life is a serious socio-psychological task. Serious because the task, while being necessary, is certainly not easy; it calls for a great deal of social and psychological acumen on the part of the individual to retain the diversity of various aspects of life and at the same time relate them all as emanating from a single unified life. It is a vertible *yoga* that harmonizes (*samatā*) the many values as belonging to a single life-phenomenon. If the ancient *varṇāśrama-dharma* of the Hindus really aimed at this harmony, at least in its scheme of the *trivarga*, it could be an interesting research area to the Indian philosophers; this, however, falls outside the purview of this paper.

Failure of a proper unification of meanings can not only paralyse but also destroy life. If this were not the case, it would remain inexplicable to us how people, otherwise apparently successful, could have taken that extreme step of putting an end to their life, declaring openly the futility and the meaninglessness of life. Their world of family, profession, vocation and economic enterprise may indeed have been full but unfortunately incomplete due to their dismal failure at unifying their world of meanings: It is tragic that they could not relate the fragmentary meanings to their whole life; that they could not reconcile the diversity with the unity of life. Caught in the cross-currents of this dichotomy they were paralysed. When the burden

1. Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, An Introduction to Logotherapy (St Paul Society : Allahabad, 1959).

of life is placed so precariously on a single foot, one is liable any moment to lose one's balance and collapse. The history of suicide, reconstructed from the copious notes of the victims, is an eloquent testimony to their imbalanced life tossed tempestuously on the sea of depression, violence, neurosis, fear, rage, alienation, in short, a total lack of self-worth. Unlike the little fountains that aim heavenwards but fall on the arid ground to be lost soon, life must be a single continuous stream fed and enriched by many tributaries.

3. How are the meanings, once they are strung together, experienced as a single *integrated* meaning? Experience of meaning is more than an experience of the diversity in unity; it is rather an experience of a totality in which all the particular meanings have coalesced. The emergent totality is not a mere sum total of the diversity of harmoniously united fragments but something new and thoroughly integrated in experience. Unification is a matter of forming an ensemble–it is more a property of mechanics. Integration, on the other hand, is a matter of assimilation — it is exclusively a quality of life. . It goes not only beyond the ordering of the physical parts but also of the socio-psychological roles that human beings are called upon to play. Integration affects life not only in its entirety but at its deepest level. Life is more an art than a science, much less a science like that of 'motor-cycle maintenance'. So long as the integration of meaning does not emerge, there is always a gnawing feeling of self-division, even when, under the impact of unification, one has succeeded in acquiring a semblance of a balance in life. For the fear of losing one's balance is always there. Without integration life is only functionally one but really many.

The problem of meaning therefore, at its deepest level, is not one of inert mechanics but of vital dynamics wherein fragmentary meanings will have to coalesce into an integrated whole. Let me call the coalesced and the integrated whole a *Gestalt*, a 'configuration'. (*Gestalt* to me is not a category of psychology, rather it is metaphysical in its content, though phenomenological in its construct). Life, functionally many, thus can give rise to its own configuration. The *Gestalt* cannot be derived from any *one* particular compartment of life, because it possesses within itself the total significance of life. Indeed, it is the *Gestalt* that gives meaning to the particulars. The *Gestalt* is the end (*teleios*) and the goal (*telos*) of the dull particulars. This is the reason why I maintain that the isolated meanings, flowing from a compartmentalized life, cannot satisfy the demand for the fulness of meaning that lies at the core of one's *being*. The poignant cry of St. Augustine,

irrequietum est cor nortrum donec requiescat in te[2], recorded in a religious context though, may be interpreted as the anguish of a soul in search of an integrated meaning in life. Meaning then lies at the core of our being; and the problem of meaning in life is essentially metaphysical.

By way of substantiating my contention, let me contrast the metaphysical meaning with its psychological counterpart. Victor E. Frankl's admirable formulation of the principles of logotherapy was largely made possible by a detailed analysis of the tragic experience of the prisoners of war in the Nazi concentration camp. Take, for example, some of his keen observations: The death-rate in the concentration camp sharply rose immediately in the new year, as the prisoners' hope, that the year-end would witness the end of the war and that they would be set free, was belied. Again, the prisoner who hoped that there was some friend or relative still waiting outside for him, withstood the hardships of the concentration camp better. Frankl, in my opinion, speaks of a psychologically balanced personality that has succeeded in putting the burden of the camp-life on certain functional attitudes to life and is therefore enabled to make life's given situation of hardships bearable. The meaning that Frankl painstakingly discovers in his therapeutic enterprise is primarily psychological. This is not to deny the philosophical insights of Frankl's enterprise. His insights are due to the fact that he not merely theorizes on a collective experience of a group of people in a given situation but also reflects on the events in which he himself was a participant. It is rather meant to indicate that Frankl's enterprise of meaning is one of (social) psychology. It really corresponds to the second dimension delineated by me in the problem of meaning. But it does not go far enough to the deeper reaches of human existence, the level of human *being*, as distinct from the level of his society or even psyche. My approach to the problem is therefore intended to be metaphysical rather than sociological or psychological. Hence, I need not make an apology if I build up in the course of my discussion of meaning such metaphysical constructs as *Gestalt*, notwithstanding its prevalence in psychology.

III

'Meaning' today is a widely used word in linguistic philosophy. The western linguistic philosophers in recent times and the classical *śabdhavādins* in ancient India raised intricate and significant questions regarding the *linguistic* meaning. I do not intend to enter into the extremely complicated

2. *Confessions*, 1.1.1.

theories of linguistic meaning, as I am not directly concerned here with it. But I would like to draw upon some of their basic insights insofar as they apply to the field of hermenutics in the hope that the principles of hermeneutics may throw some light on the problem of meaning in *life*. Hence, the title of the paper: vital hermeneutics. If the adjective used here refers to the importance of the substantive, the substantive itself has its content or substance in the concerned adjective.

Linguistic meaning is constituted of the sentential meaning which, in its turn, is constituted of the verbal meaning, the word being the basic unit. Though the word itself is made up of letters of the alphabet, if written, or of sounds, if spoken, the unit of meaning however is taken to be a word. What is the verbal meaning? In order to answer this question it needs to be borne in mind that all meaning-structures are meaningful only in a *context*; meaning is context-bound. This is the central thesis of the logical positivism: the meaning of a given word is determined by its use. The use is nothing other than fitting the particulars coherently within the whole. Thus, a coherent combination of the spoken or written words, within the context of a sentence, therefore of verbal meanings, gives us the sentential meaning. Since the meaning is context-bound, it goes without saying that the revelation of meaning, verbal or sentential, is against the background of public convention. Such a background for verbal meaning is a sentence, even as the background for sentential meaning is a discourse. We can thus say that the discourse is the context of the sentential meaning, because the latter results from the process of relating the words as parts with the whole viz. sentence against the wider background of a discourse. The meaning of the discourse, in its turn, should have its own context.

The widest and yet the simplest possible context for the discourse is *reality* itself. It is the widest in virtue of being all-inclusive and, the simplest in virtue of being the most fundamental. Reality is therefore the ultimate context of all meaning. Its apprehension by man in myriad forms is what I call public convention. Reality and the public convention are the objective and the subjective aspects of the one and the same context that governs all meaning-structures, be they linguistic or non-linguistic. In its objective aspect it is metaphysical but, in its subjective aspect, it is a system of public meanings. All our enterprise of 'science' is therefore a system of meaning in which the objectivity and subjectivity are the two sides of the same coin. Pure objectivity is no less a myth than a pure subjectivity. True, it is the *being* that is apprehended as the object; it is however equally true that it is

I, as the subject, determined by a number of factors of public convention and determining constantly the same convention, who apprehend the being. Linguistic meaning is a linguistic *Gestalt* that includes at once objective and subjective aspects.

From what has been said above, it is easier to discover a relation of an analogy or even a parallelism between language and reality. But this is not all; the relation between the two is deeper, since reality is the ultimate context, or the foundation, of a discourse. While the reality ontologically determines our language, language too phenomenogically determines reality itself, at least insofar as it is apprehended i.e. experienced and expressed. Hence, we could possibly speak of the 'semantic' structure of reality itself. Positing of a semantic structure here to reality as such is clearly in anticipation of eliciting meaning out of it, non-linguistic though. Linguistic meaning emerges as a whole from the coherent combinations of the particulars of a language system. Likewise meaning of reality as such emerges as a whole from the coherent combinations of 'realities' as they are apprehended in one's 'understanding', more fundamentally, in one's *experience.*

Meaning in life has to be derived from our experience of reality. For what is 'life but a conventional blanket term for the totality of human experience, not only cognitive but also affective, connative and even purely biological. Life is then an apprehension of realities in an attempt to coherently and significantly relate them to oneself. Hence the meaning of life should refer ultimately to the totality of human experience, but necessarily in the context of a polarity of subject and object. For experience is a continual process of subjectivating the object in the very act of objectivating the subject. It is a two-way traffic: The subject constantly projects itself over the object to be sustained by the relative solidity of the object, thus obtaining a stability to its own fluid subjectivity. Likewise the object is constantly incorporated into the subject to be liberated of its rigidity, thus sharing in the value and freedom of the subject. For life then, both ontologically and phenomenologically, the touch-me-not attitude of either the object or the subject is a myth. What is more; in this twofold process of objectivating the subject and subjectivating the object, the object is apprehended in the measure of the subject, be it cognitively or emotively. Thus, to know or to love an object is to incorporate it in the measure of the subject knowing and loving it. Likewise, in the same act, the subject is also concorporated in the measure of the object known and loved. Thus, there is not

only (cognitive) validity but also (moral) value in the assertion that one is what one comes in contact with in one's experience.[3]

IV

The semantic structure of a discourse makes possible a hermeneutics of a discourse, especially as it finds expression in an ancient (religious) text. Likewise, if we can speak of the semantic structure of reality as such, and there is no reason why we should not, we could possibly speak of a hermeneutics of life as well. What does a religious text mean? What does life mean? Both seem to be legitimate hermeneutical questions; indeed, the latter is more so, as meaning in life overarches the linguistic meaning.

We err grossly if we think that the hermeneutics of a religious text consists in a mere encounter with the text. It rather consists in apprehending, or more accurately, 'feeling', the text *with* its context. This is in a special way true of the hermeneutics of life. Life's context, proximately and generally, is a state of affairs but, ultimately and philosophically, reality itself as apprehended by each one. In the area of vital hermeneutics each one is a hermeneutician. The recognition of reality as the ultimate context of life, or the acceptance of the semantic structure of reality, is not just helpful but imperative. For it makes for both creativity and discovery because meaning is both bestowed and discovered. Hence the task of the hermeneutician is both creative and heuristic. Creative because the hermeneutician is not a mere observer and recorder of events and state of affairs but an interpreter. He interprets by way of reconstructing the latent meanings of his experience, even as the religious hermeneutician does in regard to his religious text. Thus, in a sense, he bestows meaning. But, his task is also heuristic. The task of interpretation involves fidelity to reality in order to discover what is given; for meaning is the manner of our being related to reality.

When speaking of fidelity to what is given, it is important to note that the range of the given (reality) extends beyond what is given in the present; it includes, besides the present, the past as well as the future. For the present is the reality that is being experienced now, even as the past is the reality remembered; and, the future is the reality both projected and anticipated. Time (also space) in all its divisions is a dimension of all reality

3. An elaboration of this extremely interesting relation between epistemology and ethics, and of their being grounded in metaphysics, is beyond the scope of this paper.

under conditionality. While each of these temporal spheres is important in its own way, the future as reality projected exhibits a certain preminence in life, since life is lived to a large extent in the strength of goals projected in the future, howsoever limited and finite in scope. Therefore, the apprehension of meaning takes place not only in the context of what we experience in the present and of what we remember of the past but, to a larger extent, of what we anticipate in the future.

In vital hermeneutics fidelity to reality is at once fidelity to experience. For all experience entails meaningfulness of reality, a principle that can never be overlooked. We can speak of meaning in life because reality is essentially meaningful. Meaning is the manner of man's being, both incarnated in and concorporated with the world – physical, psychological, social, and even transcendental if any. *How* implies the *what* in the realm of meaning. In every human experience there is then a meaning, indeed a totality of meaning as we shall soon argue out, silently asking to be discovered. And, the discovery is a perennial enterprise with a preponderance of the future, for the more the meanings are discovered the greater is the need for integrating them into a totality, The preponderance of the future in the discovery of meanings and their integration into the total meaning need to be explained at some length.

Every activity in life, from simple to complex, is characterized by a *Gestalt*, a meaning-configuration. For in everyone of them we anticipate meaning and search for some significance, lest we become unauthentic. Freedom and purpose, goals and ideals, howsoever subjective in apprehension, are at the core of our authenticity. Authenticity obtains its authentication only against a totality of life, especially in the context of our freedom and goals projected in the future.

What does all this amount to say but that there are no bare facts without their 'confacts, (to coin an expression), even as to a religious hermeneutician there are no bare texts without their contexts. Just as text and context together give us the hermeneutical meaning, so too, fact and confact *together* give us the existential meaning in the hermeneutics of life. An integral understanding in the hermeneutics of a religious text is imperative because the textual narration is not a bare descriptive account of an event vis-à-vis the experience but, more often, a concretization of his day-to-day as well as the eschatological expectations in their fulfilments and frustrations. The textual hermeneutician has to feel it. Thus, a text on Jesus' resurrection

cannot be understood apart from the apocalyptical expectations of the apostolic community that is said to have experienced the Christ-event. Or, the *Gītā* text on Kṛṣṇ's theophany cannot be understood without Arjuna's apocalyptical expectations - and for that matter of all those who take the place of Arjuna today in their relation to Kṛṣṇa -, to whom the Kṛṣṇa-event is a unique experience. A similar integral understanding of any event in the hermeneutics of life is all the more imperative, as no event in life can be cut off from the totality of life to which it belongs as a part. Here as each one is a hermeneutician, he has to feel for himself the totality of life and its meaning. Meanings of events emerge and get integrated into the totality of meaning, or a supreme *Gestalt*, only against the background of the totality of life. Facts are not like burnt out cinders but rather like a lump of hard coal, seemingly inert but potentially kinetic, charged with the energies of human perception, memory and, above all, anticipations.

In virtue of anticipations of life, and without them there is no life worth the name, the primacy attributed to the future serves as the spring-board of meaning in life. An event is meaningful insofar as one relates it to the totality of one's life. But, does one possess the totality of one's life at any given time? Life is not static but dynamic; it is not being but becoming; it is not a (finished) product but a project that continues as long as life lasts. To be sure, life with all its temporality is historical but it is a historical *process* yet to be completed. If so, we cannot *apparently* possess the totality of life at a given time. And yet, in a sense, we *can* (and must) possess the totality of life, for without it we cannot launch upon the meaning-enterprise: We possess it by way of *anticipating* the totality. Anticipation indeed infuses dynamism into all our search for meaning. The historical elements of our experience are neither cancelled nor eclipsed by the primacy given to the future but, on account of the anticipation of the totality of life, are rather enriched. For we operate within the ultimate context but its understanding is only provisional. The total meaning of history is comprehended only with reference to the end of history. Likewise the total meaning of life should lie in a final future of man, which let me call the 'horizon' of man.

V

It is precisely at this juncture that religion figures in my discussion. Religion to me is an *immediate awareness* on the part of man *of his horizon.* Since horizon stands for the totality of meaning, obtained from anticipating the totality of life, religion may also be described as the immediate awareness

of the totality of meaning in life. The term 'horizon' may indicate something that is spatially out there, far beyond, therefore far removed from man. One is likely to contrue that religion, consistent with its etymology, is a binding between oneself and the horizon. But this is not my understanding. Horizon is not something extrinsic, as it is popularly believed; it is the dynamic range of human perception; it arises from the centre of human experience and refers back to the same core of his being. Accordingly religion is intrinsic to man; it is indeed man's depth dimension. Hence religion should be understood in terms of a depth within rather than a binding with a *das ganz Andere* that by its nature cannot fall within the purview of meaning. I qualify the awareness under consideration with an immediacy to ensure the internality of horizon and, therefore, of religion. Religion then is a direct and immediate awareness (*sāksātkāra*) of the meaning that lies at the core of our being.

Religions of the world have spoken of the horizon using a variety of names: *Mokṣa, Brahman, Nirvāṇa, Satori, Kaivalya*, God, Beatific Vision, Eternal Happiness, Immortality and so on. Their conceptions of the horizon may have wide-ranging differences but they all agree on one point, that only in its range is man what he ought to be. It is the meaning of all our anticipated totality of life. Fragmented meanings, flowing from any direction, receive their significance in and through the horizon. Thus the totality of meaning is presupposed in every event proleptically, although not possessed entirely. Life, with its successes and failures, elation and dejections, joys and sorrows, is a sojourn in the twilight of this horizon. How it will be present with, beside, and in us, depends on our sensitivity to its presence.

Indeed, our horizon is by its nature an eternal presence. In saying that it is the meaning of our life, it is implicitly accepted to be the direction, goal and the ground of our being. Hence we cannot be totally outside its presence even if we try; nor can be consciously flee away from it. I am inclined to believe that the personal as well as the social history is a progressive revelation of its presence. Hence the final discovery of the fully liberated man and society should be the immediate awareness of the horizon, since it is the meaning of one's personal as well as social humanity. Hence our God, or *Nirvāṇa*, is the way we see ourselves in the eternal presence of the horizon or the totality of meaning. Therefore the 'God' of the coming kingdom is the power of the horizon, the final future of man. Even well-meaning materialistic ideologies possibly got only a shadowy glimpse of this horizon

in such concepts as millennia. This at once gives us a clue to the source of personal and social liberation sought by modern culture.

VI

In spite of its frantic and, at times, frenetic concern for personal and social liberation, what has the modern culture made of them? Modern culture, for all its social openness, scientific knowledge and technological skill, suffers from a profound loss of meaningfulness of life. Meaningfulness of life is no longer a matter of fact to the modern man; truly, meaninglessness seems to be eating the vitals of his life.

At the risk of being misunderstood, it may be stated that the ancient man possibly felt a little closer than his modern counterpart in his effort to grasp the meaning of life. It was a common historical phenomenon in ancient civilizations that a township grew invariably around a sacred spot, say, a temple. 'Primitive' life, characterized by its fascination for the problematic and the mysterious, by its wonder at the manifold aspects of nature and by its fear of the unknown, was spontaneously drawn to the sense of the 'numinous'. It is an altogether different issue whether the sense concerned gave rise to the gods or goblins, deities or demons, magic or the reverential faith and fervent prayer, philosophical wonder and science or rank superstition. Irrespective of the nature of the diversified concretizations of the sense, it served the primitive man as a powerful force to view his life as a single sacred phenomenon. Sacrality thus bestowed an integration to his otherwise disintegrated life and thus enabled him to some extent to grasp the totality of meaning.

This observation is not at all meant to suggest that modern man should retrace his steps from the path of scientific and technological progress and adopt the primitive modes of thinking and acting. Indeed, modern man cannot feed on the primitive sense of the numinous in his search for meaning thanks mainly to the extended frontiers of social and scientific knowledge. It is a welcome feature of our culture that scientific knowledge has freed us from the bondage to the fear of the unknown; it is significant that he has now come increasingly to fear the known. At any rate, his is a secular, scientific and rational culture. Unlike in ancient civilizations, townships now flourish around strictly and purely secular citadels, or institutions: a council hall, a parliament, an industrial plant, a bank, a stock-exchange market etc. Such abodes of sanctity as a temple, a church, a mosque, an *āśram* are compelled to move to the periphery of the town. It is true that

religious freedom has been enshrined in the Constitutions. Constitutions have further clarified that secularism does not entail a religionless society but that all religions are treated as equal. But, it is equally true that all religions are treated equally as tangential to one's public life. We may not believe that today there is a total absence of 'god' and religion in our society; but it cannot be denied that today indifference to anything theological or religious is not uncommon.

At the centre of his day-to-day attitude and existence, modern man is secular. It is not unlikely that, if he is Christian, he serves his God only on Sundays, but for the rest of the week he is in the service of Mammon; he does not feel within himself a self-division, because he has not honestly and deeply felt the Christian dichotomy of God and Mammon. It has, thus been possible for him to be a Christian without being religious. The sociologists of our times are not averse to speaking of a post-Christian era. 'Religion' and 'God' are in keeping with the spirit of modern culture; they smack too much of antiquarianism that ill befits the secular, scientific and liberal spirit of modern culture. Far from being cowed down by the fear of the unknown, he is now endowed with confidence of the mastery over nature; far from being plagued any longer with the ghostly, he is now armed with the power of science and the skill of technology. In a very different but practical sense, he surparses his ancestors in upholding the thesis that knowledge is power. Oh! the immensity of power that now lies in his hands! Never before did he have such tremendous power for his personal and social liberation.

Yet, modern man, in inverse proportion to his acquired power, suffers from a growing sense of the meaninglessness of life. The purpose of contrasting the ancient with modern culture here is only to suggest that certain features of modern culture can stifle the question of meaning in infinite ways. For example, modern culture has at times exhibited a dangerous, one-sided and analytic, vis-à-vis a salubrious, multidimensional and synthetic, attitude to life. We spend hours dissecting the living to study the phenomenon of life, and even speak of it in precise quantifiers, in itself a highly commendable scientific enterprise, but fail to recognize the paradox that life is lost in the very act of dissection and the process of analysis. We may, consequently, fail to look at the phenomenon of life as a synthetic, integral whole. This example, again, is not meant to cast aspersions on the life-scientists and their work, but to lay bare the lurking dangers of our culture. It is not my intention to present the naive thesis that meaning was less of a problem to ancient than to modern man. If anything, I rather want to assert that so long as man is man, the question of meaning cannot but demand attention

as it is a typical human problem; man has to face it, there being no escape. But the tragedy of modern man lies in the circumstances in which he has to operate as these may hinder the experience of the totality of meaning, implicit in every event. His excessive confidence in his acquired scientific power may even suppress for a while the rise of the problem itself. However, when the complacent personal idealisms that he has built around himself as the protective covers burst, the problem comes up with all its vehemence. Even after its resurgence, he may persist with his folly of presuming that the problem of meaning is one among the many scientific or societal problems, and of applying in vain the scientific solutions to it.

My contention here is that there is no genuine personal or social liberation except insofar as it has its moorings in man's horizon, or the totality of meaning. In other words, true liberation is necessarily rooted in religion. For it is the function of religion proximately to provide us with a framework wherein we can ask the significant questions relating to the totality of meaning in life, and also to indicate the directions in which the answers lie. And, the ultimate function of religion is the maintenance itself of an immediate awareness of the totality of meaning. In other words, religion takes upon itself the task of providing us with the totality of meaning in life by way of unifying and meaningfully integrating the reality as such. This is something which our modern secular culture needs desperately, as it is used to viewing and living life only fragmentarily.

VII

In recent times, religion has been seriously engaging the attention of the social scientists. What do they have to say about religion in society? Some social scientists, especially of the Freudian and Marxist bent of mind, are of the opinion that society would be better off without religion. Religion to them is what one does with one's solitude for pastime. In this sense religion is an illusion, at times useful since it caters to an important need of the human psyche, but more often useless since it lingers in man as an infantile fancy. Others, claiming to be radical positivists and humanists, argue that religions have usually served as divisive forces in society; that in their name 'holy' wars have been fought, causing much bloodshed. Hence, they advocate that modern society ought to be secular, in the sense of being religionless. Yet some others claiming to be moderates, suggest that religion must be practised as a private, personal affair; it must not be mixed with our public life, especially of politics and business; it should be strictly confined

to the places of worship or, at best, to one's own home. The influence of the moderates is considerably more wide-spread today in society. They have advocated for modern society an ideal of 'privatization' of religion, which is yet another meaning of secularism. Through privatization it is sought to effect the desired unity of the society in the midst of religious plurality.

There surely are elements of truth in the theses of the social scientists, especially in the context of religions as they have existed and operated in history. Nonetheless, the philosophical foundation of the substantially Feuerbachian theory of the illusoriness of religion is not beyond doubt; I have discussed elaborately it elsewhere.[4] Secondly, historically speaking, religions have been divisive forces in many a society. The radical positivists and humanists are quite right in their observations. Misguided religious intolerance, frenzied Inquisitions and persecutions, hunting of the heretics, the burning of the witches, crusades and holy wars, religious riots, the institution of state religion etc. have surely been the deadly fall-out of religion in the society. In the hands of the shrewd and unscrupulous rulers and leaders, religions have served as devices to opiate and suppress the masses. But the point to be noted is that unity in society is achieved throughout human history in the midst of a multiplicity of religious *Weltanschauungen.* At times one religious world-view is played against another, as it became expedient to the ruler to give a cohesion to his own hegemony. We have only ourselves to blame if we transform what is an intrinsical value into an instrumental device in the service of egotistic pursuits. The value of religion, more than anything else, seemed to have suffered this fate. Uniformity of religion seemed to have been appealing as more potent to the aristocratic forms of governments, whereas privatization seemed to have commended itself to the modern democratic forms of government for the same purpose of achieving the social unity.

Let us now careful consideration to the claims of privatization of religion, advocated by the influential moderate social scientists. Even men of all-round culture and education sing its praises, despite deep ambivalence in their personal life. The sociologists, advocating privatization of religion contend that mutual tolerance and liberty are the fruits of privatization for a society that was for ages plagued by religious intolerance and confined to a thoughtless individual surrender. But, if we care to analyse the problem more closely, we will be forced to admit that both tolerance and liberty are

4. Agera R.Cassian, 'Freud's Psychoanalytical Atheism : An Appraisal, in *Rationality and Philosophy*: Ed. V.K. (Bharadwaja : Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 1984).

negative in content. It is the minimum that one practises, when such positive virtues, considered even purely on a social scale, as love and freedom have become difficult. Thus, we seem to have purchased tolerance at the cost of love, and liberty at the cost of freedom. No wonder, then, that tolerance easily degenerates into mutual suspicion, and liberty into licentiousness. Both mutual suspicion and licentiousness in their wake give rise to a culture of deep alienation that affects oneself and the other alike. The society that one lives in is now a veritable 'hell' and the other an 'enemy'. Sartre did have an insight into this unfortunate societal fact, but he failed to locate its right causes in his rather simplistic phenomenology of human mode of existence. Ours is, then, a culture of loneliness generated by alienation for all its superficial religious tolerance and personal liberty. The craving for personal meaning has thus become in modern culture a desperate frenzy.

Let me now explain why the privatization, more so the dismissal, of religion from public life has resulted in the crippling of modern culture. If religion aims at providing us with a perennial and immediate sense of the meaningfulness of the unity of reality as such, it cannot be left out even for a moment from any sphere of our life, private or public. If it is to give us an immediate awareness of the totality of meaning of life, its dismissal would be fatal to both personal and corporate life.

Indeed the modern secular culture is already reaping the fatal consequences of this tragic privatization (and dismissal). Privatization of religion *desiccates* every agency of our life that is sought to prvide us with meanings, however fragmentary they be; its dismissal not merely deprives our life of the integration of meanings but destroys the very sources of their vital sap. The sources – be it politics, education, art, science and technology, sexuality, sports, even ethics – become a matter of more subjective discretion without a meaning-centre. We now get used to relating ourselves to these meaning-agencies merely with consumer attitudes; with these attitudes, they become more manoeuring tactics. Without the perspective of the totality of meaning, politics becomes only a hegemonistic domination, education a self-conceited erudition, art a haughty display of creation', science and technology merely manipulative magic, sport a channel for the release of rude muscle power, sexuality an animal appetitive satisfaction and, ethics only a moral-craft. In short, the more the modern culture grows secular, the more does it encounter meaninglessness in it. Alas! We are a witness to this tragic fact both in our personal and public life!

I have already pointed out that the problem of vital hermeneutics is essentially metaphysical. Hence, my plea for religion in the life of the individual and the society must not be construed after the manner of some well-meaning psychologists, to whom religion is a useful, nay more, necessary, phenomenon to stabilize the human emotional life, although such of its terms as spirituality, immortality, god and soul are said to be actually empty psychological constructs that get filled with emotions to become piety, devotion, trust, faith, love, surrender and so on. In an imperfect world where human beings are constantly betrayed and buffetted in the practice of values, it is said, they psychologically need some imaginarily stable and absolute kingdom lest they lose balance and sink into a fatalistic cynicism. To me the problem of meaning is deeper than that of achieving psychological stability as already argued out.

Nor should my thesis be construed after the manner of some well-meaning sociologists, who advocate the usefulness or even the necessity of religion as a social control for guaranteeing man's unquestioning conformity to an ordered and organized way of (social) life. Religion did serve as a powerful instrument in the hands of potentates to secure both social conformity and obedience to their mandates The passage from the divine right of kings to emperor-worship was rather smooth: Caeser did become Augustus. Sociologists point out that in modern socialistic as well as capitalistic democracies, Caesars may have been toppled from their thrones but religion is retained by the states as an important instrument of social control. To me the problem of meaning is much deeper than that of achieving social stability.

The plea for religion is neither for the psychological exigency nor for the sociological expendiency. Not that these are cancelled but subsumed in the totality of meaning in life, whose immediate awareness is the ultimate goal of religion. Surprisingly, both the antogonists and the protogonists of religion among the social scientists uphold their respective thesis in the name of individual and social liberty. A part of this claim was questioned by me while critically examining the fruits of privatization. I now want to argue out in the final phase of this essay that the totality of meaning is intimately related to the flowering of true *freedom* of the human person, distinct from liberty. Indeed, yet another name for my concept of the totality of meaning is freedom.

For critics of religion it is an illusion and 'God' an anthropomorphic vestige for a mankind that refuses to grow out of puerility. Both the illusion and the anthropomorphic vestige are said to alienate man from himself and the society because they debar him from grasping the reality principle. The charge has an element of truth, if religion is understood in the traditional sense of a *belief* in the supernatural; and God in the traditional sense of an omniscient and omnipotent being after the manner of any existent physical being. The problems, arising from such conceptions both at the practical and the theoretical levels, are insurmountable and philosophically untenable. More importantly, an omniscient and omnipotent God seems to be incompatible with man's freedom. But, if 'God' is understood as man's horizon, or the totality of meaning, or his final future, and religion as man's immediate awareness thereof, then, both God and religion constitute the ground of human freedom (and being as well); for man's very subjectivity is made possible by them. Hence we could redefine religion in the light of our above discussion as the fundamental trust built on our realtionship to the totality of meaning in life, as well as its total becoming in freedom.[5]

5. In the preparation of this paper I have been influenced by the many insights of the theologian Pannenberg (*Ethics*, 1981; *The Church*, 1983; *Christian Spirituality*, 1984; *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive*, 1984), although the immediate inspiration has been through a short report ('The Eclipse of Meaning: Religion and Self-Discovery in Pannenberg's Recent Thought) by J Michael West, the Editor, of the Harvard Divinity Bulletin Vol. xiv, No. 3, pp. 10–12). But I have kept clear of their perspective of Christian theology to remain within the purview of the philosophy of religion.