

**A Critical Analysis of William Alston's View of Religious Language, with a  
Comparison with Classical and Modern Islamic Theories**

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## **Abstract**

### **A Critical Analysis of William Alston's View of Religious Language, with a Comparison with the Classical and Modern Islamic Theories**

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Department of Religion, Concordia University, 2000

The Twentieth century is considered to be the century of the linguistic turn. Because of the close relation between philosophy and religion, this recent philosophical interest in language has had a great effect on the understanding of religious language. The present work concentrates on two controversial questions regarding religious language: 1) What are the characteristics of religious discourse? Is there a language peculiar to religion? 2) How should we interpret religious statements? Should we conceive them symbolically, analogically, literally, or in other ways? I critically analyze the treatment of these questions by William Alston (1921-), a distinguished American philosopher of religion. Alston developed new approaches to the topic. Unlike most of the theories proposed regarding religious language, Alston's theory expounded, in his recent works, defends a moderate traditional position regarding religious language. Alston accomplishes this by employing current approaches, including analytical philosophy and functionalism. Alston's answer to the first question lies in his realism, while he answers the second with a theory of 'partial literalism.'

I also compare Alston's view with other contemporary theologians, including D. Z. Phillips, Paul Tillich, John Hick, and finally, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabâṭabâi, a contemporary Iranian Muslim theologian and philosopher. In the light of the last comparison, we can see what kinds of common or different elements are found in the analysis of religious language of two different belief systems, Islam and Christianity

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Transliteration Table

	Arabic	Persian		Arabic	Persian
ب	B	B	ض	Ḍ	Ż
پ		P	ط	Ṭ	Ṭ
ت	T	T	ظ	Ż	Ż
ث	TH	S	ع		
ج	J	J	غ	GH	GH
چ		CH	ف	F	F
ح	Ḥ	Ḥ	ق	Q	Q
خ	KH	KH	ك	K	K
د	D	D	گ		G
ذ	DH	Z	ل	L	L
ر	R	R	م	M	M
ز	Z	Z	ن	N	N
ر		ZH	ه	H	H
س	S	S	و	W	V
ش	SH	SH	ی	Y	Y
س	Ş	Ş			



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## Introduction

When future philosophers evaluate the major emphasis of twentieth century philosophy, they certainly will consider it the century of the linguistic turn.<sup>1</sup> It means that attending to language is considered to be the best way to address philosophical problems. The importance of language and meaning is also clear in the view of French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), when he holds that the human is “condemned to meaning.”<sup>2</sup> Twentieth century philosophy shows both an expression of warm approval of this term and brings up several questions regarding the creative power of language. “For good or ill, perhaps never before has language been so much the center of attention.”<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur (1913-), the French philosopher, explains our situation as follows:

The same epoch holds in reserve both the possibility of emptying language by radically formalizing it and the possibility of filling it anew by reminding itself of the fullest meanings, the most pregnant ones, the ones which

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<sup>1</sup>See: Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language Sign, Symbol, and Story* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 1; and Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism, How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception, International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p. 44.

are most bound by the presence of the sacred to man.

It is not regret for the sunken Atlantides that animates, but hope for a re-creation of language. Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the close relation between philosophy and religion, this philosophical interest in language has had a great effect on the understanding of religious language in this century.<sup>5</sup> Religion, of course, has always had a concern for language. We see in the Genesis creation story that “God spoke the world into existence, and then Adam named the animals, representing the power of human language to construct a meaningful world through language.”<sup>6</sup> The prophets spoke God’s words to people. Jesus Christ, according to Christians, is the Word of God.<sup>7</sup> Religious texts and their interpretation are central in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>8</sup>

Language has such a significant position in religion that Karl Barth (1886-1968), calls theology a ‘theology of the Word.’ For him the ‘Word of God’ is the subject of theology and the main responsibility of the Church is to criticize and revise the language of the Church about God.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan, Religious perspectives Series, vol. 17 (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 349.

<sup>5</sup>Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>*The Bible*, John: 1-3.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>9</sup>John Macquarrie, *God-Talk An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1967), p. 42.

The main philosophical questions regarding religious language can be divided into three following categories:

A. Can we find any meaning in religious statements or they are empty sentences?

B. What are the characteristics of religious discourse? Is there a language peculiar to religion? Or is there one and the same language for multiple disciplines, including religion, philosophy, history, science, and so on?

C. Supposing that the language of religion is meaningful, how should we interpret religious statements? Should we conceive them symbolically, analogically, literally, or in some another way?

I will not concentrate on the first question, since, as we will see in chapter on the 'literature review', there is not much controversy on this topic. Most contemporary theories on religious language presuppose the meaningfulness of religious teachings. The idea of the meaninglessness of religious belief, which was supported by David Hume, Alfred G. Ayer, and Antony Flew has been rejected by numerous scholars and does not have any distinguished followers nowadays. It does not, however, mean that there is no relation between these questions. Instead, most ideas expressed to answer the second question are reactions to the first problem.

The second and the third questions are current controversial problems for scholars of religion. The roots of the arguments on the second question are in the later thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) regarding language-games. The importance of this discussion is evident in Bryan Magee's conversation with modern

British philosophers and thinkers, including Ninian Smart (1927-), Professor of Religious Studies at Lancaster University (1967-1988). Introducing Smart, Magee holds that “the philosophy of religion is now enjoying a revival. Among its best known practitioners in this country is Ninian Smart.”<sup>10</sup> In this conversation Smart says: “Probably the most important single work since the War (Second World War) in philosophy of religion was *New Essays In Philosophical Theology*<sup>11</sup>...It was a series of essays much concerned with the problem of analysis of religious language in the context of questions about verification and meaning.”<sup>12</sup> Smart refers to various reactions to the affirmation that religious statements are meaningless. In his opinion, of these several approaches, perhaps the most significant is that influenced by the later work of Wittgenstein, which has in turn its roots in the writings of Friedrich Waismann (1896-1959), and John Langshaw Austin (1911-1960). For Smart, a fruitful, although rather variegated, attempt is what has been done to apply Wittgenstein’s view to specify the characteristics of religious discourse.

This issue has not been properly worked out and it is a current controversial debate among philosophers of religion. As Dan R. Stiver maintains: “It is safe to say...that the impact of Wittgenstein’s thought for religious language continues and

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<sup>10</sup>Bryan Magee, *Modern British Philosophy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971), p. 167.

<sup>11</sup>Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays In Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955).

<sup>12</sup>Magee, *Modern British Philosophy*, p. 167.

has not been fully worked through.”<sup>13</sup> Most thinkers have followed the direction he indicated. Among contemporary philosophers of religion, William P. Alston (1921-) is one of the very few distinguished thinkers who (although he accepts some part of Wittgenstein’s position and its impact on religious language) criticize him and his contemporary followers. Moreover, he presents his own analysis of religious discourse.

Alston bases his analysis of the second question upon a realistic conception of truth. For him, by taking an unrealistic position we would lose the center of religious tradition.<sup>14</sup> Since he thinks that irrealism empties Christianity of its essence, he tries to reject this position and support a realistic view.

While most of the theories raised regarding religious language attempt to give a subjective account of the issue, Alston is a distinguished thinker who provides an objective account, with his own, original analysis. Therefore, Alston is trying to challenge a predominant trend of thought, which is supported by several scholars. Alston himself considers that his realistic interpretation of religious belief is in contrast to “most contemporary liberal theologians and religious thinkers.”<sup>15</sup> In his recent works, he attempts to defend a moderate traditional position regarding

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<sup>13</sup>Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>15</sup>William Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London, 1989), p. 6.

religious statements by using much up-to-date philosophical and psychological equipment, including analytical philosophy and functionalism.<sup>16</sup>

As far as the third question is concerned, Alston attempts to defend a kind of literalism, which he calls 'partial literalism'. This view of Alston stands in contrast to the dominant theories regarding religious discourse. What most contemporary theologians accept is that we cannot literally say anything true about God. Alston proposes two different ways to prove his view of partial literalism regarding the possibility of speaking about God using our common language: one by discussing irreducible metaphor in theology, and the other, by his functionalist account. Both these ways seem to be original in the field. Therefore, Alston uses new tools to prove his theories, and he is one of only a few scholars whose answer to both questions (the second and third), are in contrast to the most present dominant theories. Moreover, his theory has had great impact on the methods of interpretation of religious statements and sacred texts and justification of religious beliefs. Thus, apart from the importance of the topic of language and religious language itself, the elaboration and critique of Alston's arguments contained in this thesis addresses a current and controversial trend of thought that has not yet been subjected to sustained examination.

Alston has not elaborated his detailed position in any particular place in his work. I try to grasp his view from his various writings and to present it in a coherent

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

way. I will also show the fundamental roots and philosophical bases of his arguments. In addition, I will compare in a number of places Alston's view of religious language with several other distinguished philosophers and theologians such as (here in the order in which they appear in this thesis) Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), Dewi Zephaniah Phillips (1934-), Peter Winch (1926-), M. Jamie Ferreira, Patrick Sherry (1938-), Steven Lukes (1941-), Paul Tillich (1886-1965), John Hick (1922-), and D. Gordon Kaufman (1925-). This comparison would provide us a deep comprehension of the main points of challenge and controversy among scholars of religion regarding religious language. Among theologians with whom I will compare Alston's view are also some Muslim scholars, particularly Muḥammad Huṣayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (1901-1981), an Iranian theologian and philosopher. This comparison is between scholars from two different traditions, Christianity and Islam. In the light of this comparison we can see what kinds of common or different elements can we find in the analysis of religious language of two different belief systems. In the light of comparing Alston with others, including Muslim thinkers, I will try to give, on the one hand, a better perspective on Alston's position, and, on the other hand, deeper answers to the key questions brought up with respect to the status of religious statements.

Finally, I want to see whether Alston's argument in answering the key questions regarding religious language is successful or not. To what extent is his theory acceptable theory? I will show that there are several deficiencies in both his main analysis of religious language and the philosophical bases of his argument. There are



also aspects of the issue that have not been developed, and even have been neglected in his discussion. I thus will attempt to elaborate the basic flaws and inconsistencies in his arguments and will complete his view of religious language.

### Thesis Structure

As mentioned earlier, among three key questions regarding religious language, the present thesis concentrates on the second and the third problems. The present thesis consists of four parts. Part One includes a chapter on Alston's Life and Works and a Literature Review. Following this introduction, Part Two, including chapters three and four, deals with the second question. Part Three, containing the next four chapters, centers on the third question; this followed by Part Four, Examination and Conclusion. A more detailed picture of the chapters is as follows:

The first chapter will briefly review Alston's career. We will survey his education, his positions in universities, his main interest in scholarly studies and researches and his professional works in various fields.

The second chapter will review the literature on religious language. This chapter will provide us a historical background for Alston's view. Various theories on religious language will be divided into two categories: non-cognitivist and cognitivist. We will briefly look at the views of David Hume, Alfred G. Ayer, Antony Flew, R. M. Hare, Braithwaite, Paul Van Buren, David Tracy and Gordon Kaufman, as examples of the former, and St. Thomas Aquinas, Matthew Arnold, and Willem F. Zuurdeeg, as examples of the latter category. In this chapter we also review the falsification controversy and multiple reactions to it.

The next chapter will discuss whether Christian discourse is a distinct language-game, or not. To answer this question, we will first clarify sharply the features of a distinct language-game. Then we shall see to what extent can these features be applied to Christian discourse? Then the argument will turn to find how can we realize religious concepts.

Chapter four includes three sections: The first section seeks the criteria of judgment about religious statements. Is there any concept of truth applicable in various language-games, including religious language, or can we only do this job inside each language-game? We will see that, on the one hand, Alston's view is in contrast to those of D. Z. Phillips, Peter Winch, and M. Jamie Ferreira. Alston's position, on the other hand, is almost similar to that of Sherry and Lukes.

Section two of the fourth chapter turns to Alston's main criteria of the truth of any proposition, including religious statements. Alston's main doctrine regarding the truth of religious statements, which distinguishes him from Phillips, Winch, Wittgenstein, and several other thinkers, refers to a deep philosophical point, namely a realistic conception of truth. We will see what is the basis for Alston's position of a concept of truth applicable in all language-games. What is the relation between truth and epistemic consideration? Does the former depend on the latter?

The third section shows the result of Alston's realistic conception of truth on his view of religious realism. What kind of relation does he see between religious language and the kind of approach that he takes regarding the concept of truth? A basic question about religious statements, such as 'God exists', is whether the

evaluation of this and other religious statements as true or false can be connected to an objective reality or not. To what extent is that reality “independent of our cognitive machinations? Or do they have some other status? Is their truth to be assessed in some other way?”<sup>17</sup> Alston’s realistic theory of truth would lead him to follow the same doctrine regarding religion. To clarify Alston’s position, I will explain the meaning of religious irrealism. I will then compare Alston’s position with different doctrines, including the views of the Expressivists, Tillich’s symbolism, John Hick, and D. Gordon Kaufman.

Part Three, including chapter five to eight, is an attempt to see how is it possible to speak about a divine issue by a human language. One of the main answers to this problem is considering the language of religion a symbolic language. Chapter five gives us Alston’s reaction to this answer. Chapter six and seven discuss the possibility of speaking almost literally about religious statement. They give Alston’s two different ways to prove his partial literalism in religious language: one by discussing irreducible metaphor in theology and the other, by his functionalist account. Chapter eight will compare Alston’s partial literalism with the position of some Muslim scholars, particularly Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabâtabâ’î.

In the concluding chapter I will review Alston’s position regarding the two key questions in religious language, which are the focus of the present thesis and raised at

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<sup>17</sup>Alston, “Realism and Christian Faith,” in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 38 (1995), p. 40.

the outset of introduction. I will then give my detailed criticism and outline the modifications of his views I believe to be necessary, as well as offer my own answers to these two crucial questions.

## **Part One**

In this part, which presents preliminary background discussions for the thesis in two chapters, we will talk about Alston's life and works and the literature review of multiple positions regarding religious language.

## Chapter 1. Alston's Life and Works<sup>18</sup>

### 1.1. Introduction

This chapter briefly reviews Alston's career. We will survey his education, his positions in universities, his main interest in scholarly studies and researches and his professional works in various fields. William Payne Alston, an American analytic philosopher, was born in Nov. 29, 1921 in Shreveport, Louisiana. His mother's name was Eunice (Schoolfield) and his father's name was William Payne (a salesman). In August 15, 1943 W. Alston married Mary Frances Collinsand with whom he lived 20 years. They were divorced in 1963 and he married Valerie Tibbetts in July 3 of the same year. Alston has one child, Frances Ellen from his first marriage.

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<sup>18</sup>The sources of data in this section are as follows:

Stuart Brown, Diane Collinson, and Robert Wilkinson, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Philosophers* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 19-20.

"Alston, William P(ayne)," in *Contemporary Authors. First Revision*, 5-8 (1969), p. 29.

"Alston, William P(ayne)," in *Contemporary Authors. New Revision Series*, 7 (1982), p. 21.

"Alston, William P(ayne)," in *Contemporary Authors. New Revision Series*, 37 (1992), pp. 15-16.

"Alston, William Payne," in *Who's Who In America*, 53rd Edition (1999), p.73.

## 1.2. Alston's Education

Alston did his higher education studies in the Centenary College of Louisiana from which he got his B. M. in 1942. Then he followed his studies in the University of Chicago from which he got his Ph.D. in 1951.

## 1.3. Alston's Career

Alston's career can be listed as follows:

Instructor of philosophy at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, from 1949 to 1952

Assistant Professor at University of Michigan from 1952 to 1956

Associated Professor at University of Michigan from 1956 to 1961

Professor at University of Michigan from 1961 to 1971

Professor of philosophy at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N. G., 1971-76

Professor of Philosophy at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign 1976-80

Professor of Philosophy at Syracuse University, New York, 1980-90

Visiting assistant professor at University of California, Los Angeles, 1952-53

Visiting lecturer at Harvard University, 1955-56

Fellow at Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, 1965-66

Besides teaching at universities, Alston has had the following appointments:

Chairman of philosophy section of Michigan Academy of Art and Sciences,  
1954

Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at University of Michigan, 1961-64

Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at University of Illinois, 1977-80

President of the western division of American Philosophical association, 1978-79

President of the Society for Philosophy and Psychology, 1978-79

The first president of the Society of Christian Philosophers, 1979-81

Editor of several Journals, including *Philosophical Research Archives*, 1974-77 and *Cornell Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 1987-

Alston is also the founding editor of *Faith and Philosophy*, 1982-90 “a journal which has been a major vehicle for a movement characterized, like his own work, by the rigorous application of modern philosophical and logical techniques to traditional question in the philosophy of religion.”<sup>19</sup>

Alston’s interests are philosophical theology, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophical psychology, and modern philosophy. He has also paid special attention to the relationship between philosophy and psychology. He says of himself:

I have long been interested both in philosophy and psychology and in their interplay. I feel that psychology in this country, in its (commendable) drive to be empirical, has neglected the critical examination of its basic concepts, and that it would profit from such an examination, of the sort philosophers are trained to carry on. I have done some of this and hope to do more.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Brown, et al., *Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Philosophers*, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup>*Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series*, 37 (1992), p. 16.



However, “Alston’s major influence has been in the philosophy of religion and in epistemology.”<sup>21</sup> He has been influenced by Reid, Hegel, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin and Wilfrid Sellars.<sup>22</sup>

#### 1.4. Awards, Honors

Alston has received several awards, including: Rackham summer research fellow, 1954, 1957; American Philosophical association fellow, 1955-56; Ford Foundation fellow in behavioral science, 1962; D.H.L., Church Divinity School of the Pacific, 1988; National Endowment for the Humanities fellow, 1988-89; and Chancellor’s Exceptional Academic Achievement award, Syracuse University, 1990.

#### 1.5. Works

Alston is the author of more than one hundred articles and several books. His major published books are as follows:

(Editor with G. Nakhnikian) *Religious Belief and Philosophical Thought*, Harcourt, 1963

(Editor with G. Nakhnikian) *Readings in Twentieth Century Philosophy*, Free Press of Glencoe, 1963

(Translator with Nakhnikian) Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Nijhoff, 1964,

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

(With R. B. Brandt) *The Problems of Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, 1967,  
3d edition 1978,

*Philosophy of language*, Prentice-Hall, 1964

*Divine Nature and Human language*, Cornell University Press, 1989

*Epistemic Justification*, Cornell University Press, 1989

*Perceiving God*, Cornell University Press, 1991

*The Reliability of Sense Perception*, 1993

*A Realistic Conception of Truth*, 1996

Alston has been contributor to several books, including the following:

*Faith and Philosophers*, St. Martin's, 1964

*Philosophical Interrogations*, Holt, 1964

*The Philosophy of Psychology*, Macmillan, 1974

*Values and Morals*, Reidel, 1978

## 1.6. Summary Comments

Alston's life and work show that his main interest is in interdisciplinary discussion between philosophy, psychology and religion. His religious arguments concentrate on philosophical theology. Alston's psychological works also tend to focus on the relation between philosophy, psychology, and religion. His functional analysis of religious language<sup>23</sup> is an example of his tendency to psychology and

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<sup>23</sup>See Chapter 7 of the present thesis.

philosophical psychology. On the other hand, although he draws on all three disciplines, since Alston's main background is in philosophy, his writings on religion are philosophical more than psychological.

Part One of the present thesis includes preliminary discussions for Alston's view of religious language. After finishing the chapter on 'Introduction' and a brief review of Alston's life and work as such a background discussion, the present thesis still needs another introductory topic, namely a brief survey of various doctrines regarding the language of religion, what is the center of debate in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to give a literature review of examples of classical and modern theories of religious language, with particular attention to the problem of sense and reference for such a language. This problem is crucial to Alston's perspective on talking of God. This chapter will provide us a historical background for Alston's position and will show us the exact location and context of his view.

I will divide the various opinions on religious language into two categories: non-cognitivist and cognitivist. The former includes scholars who do not see any factual information and any real reference for talk of God. This group will be divided into two subgroups according to their difference in giving any sense to God-talk. Such talk for one group is nonsense and for the other is meaningful, although without any real reference. David Hume, Alfred G. Ayer, and Antony Flew are major examples of the first subgroup, and R. M. Hare, Braithwaite, Paul Van Buren, David Tracy and Gordon Kaufman are of distinguished thinkers who belong to the second subgroup. The cognitivists are those who find both sense and reference for religious talk of God. Among who belong to this category I will refer briefly to the positions of St. Thomas Aquinas, Matthew Arnold, Willem F. Zuurdeeg, and Alister McGrath.

### 2.2. Non-Cognitivists

Throughout the course of human history, people have talked of the gods and God. People have generally taken for granted that their speech concerning God or

gods is meaningful. Various thinkers, however, have challenged the assumptions underlying this attitude. Among them are the empiricists most of whom have objected to religious belief to begin with. Empiricists are those philosophers who limit human knowledge to experience.<sup>24</sup> Yet all empiricists do not have the same position regarding talk of God. They can be divided into two major groups: those who believe such talk to be nonsense, and those who consider talk of God to be meaningful, although without any real referent.<sup>25</sup> I briefly explain their views as follows:

### 2.2.1. The First Category

#### *A. David Hume*

David Hume (1711-1776) has brought up one of the clearest objections to religious ideas. Hume rejected the idea that speaking of God has any meaning. Hume holds that

If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but

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<sup>24</sup>Terrence W. Tilley, *Talking of God. An Introduction to philosophical Analysis of Religious Language* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 1.

<sup>25</sup>John Grime, *An Advaita Vedanta Perspective on language* (Delhi, India: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991), pp. 170-171; and Tilley, *Talking of God*, p. 2.

sophistry and illusion.<sup>26</sup>

For Hume, what he called the 'religious hypothesis' is nonsense and useless. He limits himself to observed facts and concludes, "No new fact can ever be inferred from the religious hypothesis...beyond what is already known by fact and observation."<sup>27</sup> Thus, belief in God is nothing more than sophistry and illusion.

### *B. Alfred J Ayer*

A more recent thinker in this line is Sir Alfred Julius Ayer (1910-1989), whose name is often associated with logical positivism. This is a philosophical movement which sprang from the meetings of scholars, including mathematicians and logicians, between 1922 and 1936 in the famous 'Vienna Circle.'<sup>28</sup> Ayer is one of the most eloquent representatives of the movement of logical positivism in England.<sup>29</sup> He tried more than others to expand and promote the discussions of the Vienna Circle in the English-speaking world. His particular work on logical positivism, *Language, Truth, and Logic*,<sup>30</sup> has been considered one of the most influential books of the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> This movement raised the problem of the verifiability of all philosophical

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<sup>26</sup>David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1902), vol. 12, p. 164.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>28</sup>Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, p. 39.

<sup>29</sup>Brown, et al., *Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Philosophers*, p. 884.

<sup>30</sup>A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1949).

<sup>31</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, p. 40.

discourse. For positivists, Ayer maintains, before any attempt to determine the truth or falsehood of any proposition, we should consider whether it is meaningful or not. The criterion for being meaningful is verifiability.<sup>32</sup> As Ayer puts it:

We say that a sentence is factually significant to a given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express - that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true or reject it as being false.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, empirical observation is the only criterion of truth and falsity of any sentence.

Ayer applies his view to religious utterances. The theist, he argues, may consider his experiences factual experiences. Nevertheless, "we may be sure that he is deceiving himself,"<sup>34</sup> except if he offers us empirically verifiable propositions. He concludes that, "those philosophers who fill their books with assertions that they intuitively 'know' this or that...religious truths are merely providing material for the psychoanalyst."<sup>35</sup> Like Hume, Ayer attempts to establish the meaninglessness of religious beliefs. Like Hume, he believes that only two types of statements can be considered meaningful: tautologies (which define themselves, for instance, 'B equals B') and that which can be verified empirically. Therefore, religious claims that are

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<sup>32</sup>Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, p. 120.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

not empirically verifiable or falsifiable are dubbed 'meaningless.' He briefly gives his position on speech about God as follows:

For to say 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance...all utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical.<sup>36</sup>

For Ayer, since talking of God does not offer any new fact about the actual world, it does not have any literal meaning. Such talk does not establish any fact. It can be only an expression of one's attitudes and feelings.

### *C. Antony Flew and Falsification Challenge*

In a literature review of religious language, we cannot ignore the basic role of the "Falsification Challenge" which was raised by a number of key scholars in a conference held in 1950. A distinguished thinker in this challenge is Antony G. N. Flew (1923-) who is an atheist philosopher. In this conference, which had significant effect on the philosophy of religion for the next quarter century, several scholars discussed the issue of religious language. The result of their discussions, known as the *University* debate, was published in the journal *University*. Scholars in this debate had been influenced by logical positivism, which emphasizes the univocal approach to language in general. This philosophical movement had particular result for religious language. It brought up the meaninglessness or senselessness of religious language.

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 115.



In the *University* discussion, Antony Flew argues that a meaningful factual statement should be empirically falsifiable. He clarifies his view through a parable derived from an earlier essay by John Wisdom.<sup>37</sup> According to Flew's story, two explorers went to a jungle and found a clearing with multiple flowers and weeds. One of them said, "There is a gardener for this plot." The other denied that. They stayed there to find out which one is correct in his claim. They did not see any gardener. The Believer said, "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." They established a barbed-wire fence being electrified. They posted bloodhounds. Yet they did not find any sign of a gardener. Still the Believer insisted on his claim, saying: "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves."<sup>38</sup> Finally the Skeptic, disappointed, said, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"<sup>39</sup> In the opinion of Flew, when we are going to qualify our claim

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<sup>37</sup>The essay which, according to Antony Flew, is a haunting and revelatory article has been published in several books, including the followings: John Wisdom, "Gods," in *Logic and Language*, ed. Antony Flew, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), pp. 187-206; and E. D. Klemke, ed., *Contemporary Analytic and Linguistic Philosophies* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1983), pp. 338-352.

<sup>38</sup>Flew and MacIntyre, eds. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 96.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 96.

we should be careful not to lose our original assertion. "Someone may dissipate his assertion completely without noticing that he has done so. A fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications."<sup>40</sup> This story, according to Flew, leads to particular danger for theological assertions. On the one hand, we should notice that "If there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either: and so it is not really an assertion." On the other hand, the Skeptic asked the Believer, "Just how does what you call as invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"<sup>41</sup> By this question he was asserting that the original statement of the believer had been destroyed gradually by qualification so that it was not an assertion any more. There seems not to be any understandable event or events that if they happen they are considered by religious people to be enough reason for accepting "God does not exist" or "God does not really love us." Flew finally concludes that since we cannot empirically falsify religious statements, we cannot consider them factual assertions.<sup>42</sup>

### **Richard M Hare's Answer to Flew**

Richard M. Hare (1919-), the Oxford moral philosopher, attempts to answer Flew's criticism of religious talk of God. His answer indicates that he does not

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p.98.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

belong to the company of those narrow empiricists who view religious statements as nonsense. He admits Flew's idea that talking of God is not a factual assertion. For him, nonetheless, such talk is the manifestation of the intentions and attitudes of the speaker. Hare maintains that we can understand religious language by referring to what he labels *bliks*.<sup>43</sup> Religious assertions make *bliks*.<sup>44</sup>

Although Hare does not propose his definition of *blik*, the stories through which he clarifies his view indicates that what he means by this term is "a fundamental attitude, stance, or presupposition that a person takes to the facts and/or the world."<sup>45</sup> There are different *bliks*. Everyone has a *blik*, and the *blik* can be of various types - sane or insane, productive or non-productive. Unlike most attitudes, *bliks* cannot be changed. Hare illustrates his view by giving an example. Suppose a paranoid believes that all dons intend to murder him. His friend tries to change his view by showing him various respectable dons who have conducted themselves very well toward him. After introducing the paranoid "to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them has retired, they say, "You see, he doesn't really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now"<sup>46</sup> But the paranoid says all these dons want to cheat me with their behavior; they are really plotting against me. In the opinion of Hare, the

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<sup>43</sup>"*Blik*" is a word with its specific meaning in Hare's own terminology.

<sup>44</sup>Flew and MacIntyre, eds. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, pp. 100-102.

<sup>45</sup>Tilley, *Talking of God*, p. 27.

<sup>46</sup>Flew and MacIntyre eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, pp. 99-100.

paranoid's belief that all dons are plotting against him is an insane *blik*. Insane *bliks* are very different from those of a more normal belief. Nevertheless, our belief, which is in accordance with human nature, is a sane *blik*. On the one hand, we cannot falsify a *blik*; thus, it is not a factual assertion. On the other hand, it is essential for us to have the sane *blik*, because it affects greatly our ways of conduct and communication with others.<sup>47</sup>

### **Basil Mitchell's Answer to Flew**

Basil Mitchell (1917-), a British philosopher and ethicist, answers Flew in a way different from that of Hare. In Mitchell's view, a religious believer understands that the existence of pain is not in harmony with his religious belief that "God loves human beings." However, because of his trust in God, he does not allow anything to count decisively against that statement. He is thus, not a pure observer of the statement "God loves human beings"; rather his attitude in this regard is the attitude of a believer. We can consider the believer's sentence, "God loves human beings" as genuine claim because on the one hand, he lets some things to count against this belief, and on the other hand, he can assert evidence for his position.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., pp. 100-102.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., pp. 103-5, For a critique of views of Hare and Mitchell see: Duff-Forbes, Donald R., "Theology and Falsification Again," in *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, 39 (August 1961), pp. 143-54.

### **Flew's Concluding Remarks**

At the end of the discussion Flew gives his own conclusion. His most significant point can be considered his answer to Hare's critique of himself. He asserts,

I nevertheless, want to insist that any attempt to analyze Christian religious assertions as expressions or affirmations of a *blik* rather than (at least would-be) assertions about the cosmos is fundamentally misguided. First, because thus interpreted they would be entirely unorthodox. If Hare's religion really is a *blik*, involving no cosmological assertions about the nature and activities of a supposed personal creator, then surely he is not a Christian at all.<sup>49</sup>

In Flew's view, believers do not want to consider their religious statements *bliks*, but they express them as factual assertions. We can find Flew's idea in more general and explicit way in his later book *God and Philosophy*.<sup>50</sup> In this book he holds that "Certain philosophers have tried to analyze the meaning of religious utterances entirely in normative as opposed to descriptive or would be descriptive, terms. This bizarre enterprise...is a mockery of the faith of the saints and Fathers."<sup>51</sup> In Flew's view, due to the fact that analysts of religious language consider talk of God non-cognitive, they are not able to present a satisfactory explanation of the way the saints and the Fathers talked. Flew believes that talk of God is possibly true. While this

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<sup>49</sup>Flew and MacIntyre eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>50</sup>Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966).

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 22-23; see also: S. E. Toulmin, *The place of Reason in Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1950), pp. 212-221; and E. L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy* (London: Longmans, 1949), pp. 49-62.

position of Flew is different from that of Ayer, both and also probably Hume have the same view regarding the falsehood of claims made by believers. "So a major part of the sense of talk of God is a claim as to the way the world is - a creation of an Infinite Creator."<sup>52</sup>

According to Flew, for most believers, God to whom we refer in our talk of Him is "A Being which is unique, unitary, incorporeal, infinitely powerful, wise and good, personal but without passions, and the maker and preserver of the Universe."<sup>53</sup> Such a Being is the reference for Christian talk of God.

### **John Hick's Answer to Flew**

There were several other answers to Flew's argument, some of which were pronounced in the same conference. This controversy, however, was followed later by several reactions, among which John Hick's (1922-) answer is regarded as one of the more influential.

Unlike Flew, Hick attempts to prove that divine existence is in principle verifiable. First, he defines the concept of verification as the removing of doubt or ignorance regarding the truth of some proposition. When we say that *p* is verified, it means that something can lead us to conceive clearly the truth of *p*. According to John Hick, verification in theological propositions is not purely logical. Rather, it is both logical and psychological. When we say that *p* is verified, it implies that

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<sup>52</sup>Tilley, *Talking of God*, p.13.

<sup>53</sup>Flew, *God and Philosophy*, p. 28.

someone has verified it. Thus, it deals with human consciousness. The psychological aspect of verification is that it involves particular experience in a human being - the experience of discovering the truth of a particular proposition. There is, however, at the same time a logical dimension in the notion of verification. Thus, verification cannot take place except with the fulfillment of both logical and psychological conditions.<sup>54</sup>

In Hick's view, different features of the concept of verification can be applied to the statement 'God exists.' Hick spells out his view by referring to the notion of eschatological verification. To elucidate his position Hick gives an example of two persons who are traveling jointly in the same way. Neither of them has passed this road before. They have, nevertheless, different ideas regarding the end of the road. One of them believes that the way will not lead anywhere, but that he has to continue, since there is no other choice for him. The other believes that there is a Celestial City at the end of the road. They have different interpretations about the pleasant and unpleasant happenings for them during their travel. The issue, however, they discuss is not experimental. They do not have different expectations regarding the coming details of the road, but they expect differently about their ends. Consequently, although their discussion is not about an experimental issue, it is a real

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<sup>54</sup>Basil Mitchell, ed., *The Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 54-55.

issue, because at the end it will become evident that one of them has been right and the other wrong.<sup>55</sup>

Hick does not forget that the acceptance of the idea of an eschatological verification of theism logically depends on another issue, that is whether our personal being will continue to exist after our death or not. This is a basic controversial issue that affects our present argument on the eschatological verification of theism. Here, Hick switches to this central question: to what extent can we speak about the criteria of personal identity between the inhabitants of this world and of the Resurrection World? Hick clarifies his view by giving three examples. First, supposing that in a particular meeting in this country someone suddenly and in a mysterious way disappears and at the same time the same person with all his characteristics appears in another meeting in Australia. As his second example he supposes that the person in the meeting in America dies, and at the same time someone who is similar in all his features, even with the same things in their memories, appears in Australia. In the opinion of Hick, in these two examples, the factors that direct us to use the word 'the same person' for both who was in a meeting in America and who is in Australia far outweighs the factors preventing us from this usage. If we use 'the same person' for such strange cases, it would not be irrational.

Hick's third picture is like the second example, with the difference that a replica of the deceased person appears in the other world, not in Australia. In Hick's view,

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., pp. 58-60.



the same point that he mentions for the first two examples can be applied to the third picture.<sup>56</sup>

The only thing that Hick wants to conclude from giving his examples is that the following idea is not self-contradictory: God will create again our bodies. Its creation will not be from physical matter. Nevertheless, our bodies in the other world with their different features, including their consciousness, will be so similar to our present bodies that we will be able to say for each person 'the same person' has been raised up again in a new life. Therefore, we cannot reject this idea at the very beginning as meaningless.<sup>57</sup>

Thus far Hick has argued that the doctrine of a survival prediction after death, can be a subject of verification in future. Hick, however, is aware that this does not imply the existence of God. Even if the resurrection of the body occurs, the atheist might say that what has happened is a surprising natural fact.<sup>58</sup>

At the beginning of his discussion, Hick defined the concept of verification as the removal of doubt or ignorance regarding the truth of some proposition. He considered this as the central core for the concept of verification. Here, he maintains that this feature of verification can be found in the statement, 'God exists.' Hick believes that if two possible experiences occur together, that will remove our rational

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., pp. 60-64.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., pp. 65-66.

doubt of God's existence. First, we experience that God's purpose for human life, as it has been explained in the New Testament, has been realized. Second, when we encounter the fulfillment of God's purpose, we realize that what has occurred is the fulfillment of God's purpose for human life, and we do not consider it as a natural state of affairs. What is necessary to achieve this goal is that we experience our communication with God. If we encounter such a Supreme Being, we may hope that he is God, but we cannot claim that we have recognized His infinity and greatness, since it is beyond our capability to realize Him.<sup>59</sup>

John Hick also points out that the verifiability of theism is for everyone. It is not possible for some people and impossible for others. Another characteristic of a verifiable prediction is that it may be conditional. If we look at the sentence, "there is a computer in the next room," we can say that there are conditional predictions involved with it, for example, "if someone enters into that room he will see the computer." However, we are not obliged to go to that room to see it. The same idea can be made regarding the statement 'God exists.' We said that this statement can be proved for us in the other world and it can be a subject for a future verification. Nonetheless, there might be a condition for such a proof of God's existence. The condition might be giving voluntary response to God's revelation in this world. If

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

this is the case, the only people who may find a support for their beliefs in the other world would be theistic believers.<sup>60</sup>

### 2.2.2 Second Category:

In this part we discuss the views of some scholars who do not see any factual information and any real reference for talk of God. Such speech, still, is meaningful, since it can serve some purpose. Among scholars who belong to this category are Benedict Spinoza, Richard Bevan Braithwaite, Richard M. Hare, Paul M. Van Buren, David Tracy and Gordon Kaufman. We reviewed Hare's position in the discussion of various scholars who participated in 'Falsification Challenge' in 1950. Hence, in the following discussion of these thinkers I will exclude Hare's argument.

#### *A. Benedict Spinoza*

According to Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677), a rationalist metaphysician and unorthodox Jew, the meaning of Scripture is not truth. Comprehending Scripture does not provide for us comprehension of God or truth. The true meaning of religion

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 70. For more discussions regarding Hick's view of eschatological verification see: Kavka, Gregory Stephen, "Eschatological Falsification," in *Religious Studies*, 12 (June 1976), pp. 201-5; and Nielsen, Kai, "Eschatological Verification," in *Canadian Journal of Theology*, 9 (October 1963), pp. 271-81; and Penelhum, Terence, *Problems of Religious Language*, Philosophy of Religion Series, (London: Macmillan, 1971; New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 66-86. In this book Penelhum provides a defense of Hick's theory of eschatological verification.

is the promotion of righteousness. Spinoza holds: “If a man, by believing what is true, becomes rebellious, his creed is impious. If by believing what is false, he becomes obedient, his creed is pious; for the true knowledge of God comes not by commandment but by Divine gift.”<sup>61</sup> The only thing that God requires from human being is “a knowledge of His divine justice and charity, and that not as necessary to scientific accuracy, but to obedience.”<sup>62</sup> In the opinion of Spinoza, what is of import for religion is not philosophical and scientific knowledge, rather obedience to God.<sup>63</sup> The function of religious language is to promote piety. What is essential regarding one’s religious ideas is not their truth or falsehood, rather how it promotes righteousness.<sup>64</sup>

### ***B. Richard Bevan Braithwaite***

Richard Bevan Braithwaite, a British philosopher of science (1900-1990), in his short book, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*,<sup>65</sup> considers moral

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<sup>61</sup>Benedict de Spinoza, “Tractatus Theologico-Politicus,” in *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, Trans. by R. H. M. Elves, 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: George Bell and Sons. 1889), p. 181.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., pp. 180-181.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., pp. 182-184.

<sup>65</sup>Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1955), reprinted entirely in Ian T. Ramsey ed., *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy* (London: SCM Press, 1966).

or ethical assertions as the primary element in religious talk of God. Regarding the criterion for being a Christian, he maintains that,

A man is not, I think, a professing Christian unless he both proposes to live according to Christian moral principles and associates his intention with thinking of Christian stories; but he need not believe that the empirical propositions presented by the stories correspond to empirical fact.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, according to Braithwaite, we should not ask about factual information in religious assertions. The criterion for their meaningfulness is their employment and benefit in human conduct.

Speaking of Matthew Arnold's (1822-1888) view as his guide, Braithwaite holds that Arnold's purpose was "cementing the alliance between the imagination and conduct' by regarding the propositional element in Christianity as 'literature' rather than 'dogma.'"<sup>67</sup> Arnold, however, allows that there is a reference for these literary pieces, something which he calls *Eternal not ourselves that makes for righteousness*. Rejecting Arnold's view, Braithwaite holds that the meaningfulness of religious utterance does not necessarily depend on accepting a reference for it.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Ramsey ed., *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, p. 68.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 69. The quotation is from Arnold Matthew, *God and the Bible A Review of Objections to 'Literature and Dogma'* (London Smith, Elder, 1875), p. 13.

<sup>68</sup>Ramsey ed., *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, pp. 68-70 Braithwaite's theory of religious language has been widely discussed and criticized by several authors. For more details in this regard see: Austin, William Harvey, *The Relevance of Natural Science to Theology* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1976), p. 32-47; and Ewing,

### *C. Paul M. Van Buren*

Paul M. Van Buren (1924-) follows Braithwaite and Hare in their conception of religious language. He concludes from various analyses of religious language that instead of a cognitive conception of faith, we have to choose a non-cognitive, 'blik' conception. His analytical view can be expressed in two theses: 1) For him, "The language of faith has meaning when it is taken to refer to the Christian way of life; it is not a set of cosmological assertions."<sup>69</sup> 2) He prefers a 'blik' conception of faith and "a blik, the discernment and commitment of faith, is by definition something that is lived."<sup>70</sup> Like Hare, Buren rejects the factuality of religious assertions. Yet, he tries to find the meaning of such statements in Hare's notion of blik.

### *D. David Tracy*

For David Tracy (1939-), an American catholic theologian, the 'meanings' present in the Christian tradition are different from the 'meanings' present in common human experience and language. The task of theology is to correlate these two 'meanings.' As Murphy rightly describes Tracy's view, for him, "investigation of the Christian tradition pertains primarily to the existential meanings expressed in

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Alfred Cyril, "Religious assertions in the Light of Contemporary Philosophy," in *Philosophy*, 32 (July, 1957), pp. 206-18.

<sup>69</sup>Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel: Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1963), p. 101.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 97,101.

the New Testament's Christological texts, in which metaphors, symbols, and images are used to express the religious significance of the proclamation that Jesus is the Christ."<sup>71</sup> Some readers of Tracy may think that he is supporting a cognitivist position in religious language, since he talks of the 'referents' of the text. For him, however, these referents are not "the meaning 'behind' the text," such as the actual goal of the author or the socio-cultural condition of the text. On the contrary, the referent is "the meaning 'in front of' the text, i.e., that way of perceiving reality, that mode of being-in-the-world which the text opens up for the intelligent reader."<sup>72</sup> Tracy explains this mode of being Christian such that the text opens up as "living as though in the presence of a gracious God."<sup>73</sup> Therefore, in Tracy's view, the use of the word referent is a basis to support a completely expressivist position of religious language. Hence, as Murphy accurately describes Tracy, for him, if there is any meaning in religious language, this is because it "expresses a way of experiencing reality that can be called religious."<sup>74</sup> Tracy maintains:

Religious language does not present a new, supernatural world wherein we may escape the only world we know or wish to know. Instead, that language represents our always threatened basic confidence and trust in the very meaningfulness of even our most cherished and most noble enterprises, science, morality, and

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<sup>71</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, p. 48.

<sup>72</sup>David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 51; see also Paul Ricoeur, "Interpretation Theory," pp. 12-19.

<sup>73</sup>Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, p. 52.

<sup>74</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, p. 48.

culture.<sup>75</sup>

Therefore, the job of theology is the interpretation of such a basic faith, plus the interpretation of the faith expressed in religious texts. Moreover, theology should try to indicate the identity or sameness of these two faiths.

### *E. Gordon Kaufman*

In the opinion of Gordon Kaufman, an American protestant theologian, the task of theology is the interpretation and critique of religious language that already exists in the culture. Theologians should try to comprehend the nature and root of such cultural religious language. For Kaufman, the broad experience of the whole culture possesses the origin of religious terms. Meaningfulness of words such as ‘God,’ ‘divine,’ and ‘holy,’ depends only upon their success in interpreting and forming experience.<sup>76</sup>

Kaufman sees religion as a response to life’s mystery: Who or what are we? What are the realities with which we have to deal in our life? What is the meaning of human existence? Various views, including some great religious traditions, have appeared in the course of history to answer such questions. Among each tradition there are commonly accepted ideas, rituals, and symbols, and numerous controversial

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<sup>75</sup>Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, p. 135

<sup>76</sup>Kaufman, Gordon D., *An essay on theological method*, Third Edition (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 10-11.



issues as well. The deepest and most significant symbol is 'God', for which we do not know what to say.<sup>77</sup>

### 2.3. Cognitivists

In this part we turn to name some scholars who not only find sense in religious talk of God, but also see reference for it. Nancey Murphy refers to this cognitivist approach as a "propositional" theory of religious language. She believes in a direct relation between such theories and modern referential theories of language. The only difference is that Ayer and company defend a materialistic metaphysic. They emphasize that "meaningful language must refer to and describe realities available to the five senses."<sup>78</sup> Murphy however, states that "conservative theologians recognize immaterial realities as well and claim that these are primary referents of religious language. Doctrines, if true, refer to and accurately represent these supra-empirical states of affairs."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, p. 29.

<sup>78</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, p. 42.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 42, For a distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism and the supporters of each position, see also J. Kellenberger, *The Cognitivity of Religion Three Perspectives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 22-36.

### *A. St. Thomas Aquinas*

According to Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), we can make reference to God to the extent that we are able to understand Him through nature. Nonetheless, in naming God and describing Him by various attributes, since he is infinite being he is still beyond our understanding. Consequently, we cannot capture him by any of the names that we give Him. The way that Aquinas suggests for talking of God is an analogical way, “for in analogies the idea is not, as it is in univocal, one and the same; yet it is not totally diverse as in equivocal.”<sup>80</sup>

### *B. Matthew Arnold*

Like Aquinas, for Arnold (1822-1888) religious talk of God has both meaning and reference. He rejects the idea that religious salvation is “unquestionably annexed to a right knowledge of the Godhead.”<sup>81</sup> In his view, the word ‘God’ in the Bible does not mean “a term of science or exact knowledge, but a term of poetry and eloquence, a term thrown out, so to speak, at a not fully grasped object of the speaker’s consciousness, a *literary* term, in short.”<sup>82</sup> Therefore, it is wrong, Arnold would argue, that we conceive God and its reference in a literal or scientific way.

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<sup>80</sup>Anton C. Pegis, ed., *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Two volumes (New York: Random House, 1945), vol. 1, p. 120.

<sup>81</sup>Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma: An Essay Toward a Better Apprehension of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1898), p. 6.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

For Arnold, the object of religion is *conduct* or *righteousness* which is ‘*three-fourths of life*.’ Because of such an objective, religion is similar to morality. Referring to the definition of religion, he holds that “the true meaning of religion is thus, not simply morality, but morality touched by emotion.”<sup>83</sup> Arnold gives a moral sense, which promotes right conduct, to religious language. Such a language talks of and refers to a Power that we can realize it in the context of human life and that promotes righteousness. Based on Arnold’s position, we cannot explain this Power in a literal way. Here, we can only use a poetic language.<sup>84</sup>

### *C. Willem Frederick Zuurdeeg*

Willem Frederick Zuurdeeg distinguishes three types of language: ‘use-language,’ ‘is-language,’ and ‘employ-language.’ ‘Use-language’ is a specific language according to specified strict rules for definite purposes. Such a language is often used in science for giving a hypothesis to explain particular phenomena.<sup>85</sup> The second sort of language, ‘is-language’, expresses one’s conviction, and thus, it is essential for religious utterance. For Zuurdeeg, the term ‘conviction’ means, “all persuasions concerning the meaning of life; concerning good and bad; concerning gods and evils; concerning representations of the ideal man, the ideal state, the ideal

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., pp. 18-20.

<sup>85</sup>Willem F. Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 59.

society; concerning the meaning of history, of nature, and of the all.”<sup>86</sup> ‘Conviction’ in Zuurdeeg’s terminology clearly includes religious beliefs. The reason that conviction is expressed in ‘is-language’ is that it deals with the whole personality. It shows what a person ‘is’ as a whole, whereas science deals only with the intellect.<sup>87</sup>

The certitude involved in conviction is much stronger than that of science and mathematics. This is the reason that a believer may give his or her life for the sake of a conviction. Based on such a difference between convictional belief and ordinary knowledge and science, Zuurdeeg concludes that “whereas we *use* a scientific terminology, we *are* our convictions.”<sup>88</sup>

While the language that we often use in religion is ‘is-language’, and what we always use in science is ‘use-language’ there is another sort of language, ‘employ-language,’ that we need in theology. Zuurdeeg defines this third type of language as follows:

Employ-language is akin to is-language in that it is related to and tries to express the personality center in regard to matters of ultimate importance. Employ-language is akin to use-language in that it implies an element of distance, of reflection. Employ-language differs from is-language because of this reflective element.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

Therefore, employ-language helps us to speak reflectively and to give an explanation of life and its meaning.

#### *D. Alister McGrath*

Alister McGrath (1953-) is a contemporary scholar who emphasizes the cognitive, referential nature of religious language. He does not consider, however, that human language is sufficient to speak of transcendent reality. He maintains that “the transcendent can never be wholly captured in finite language, so that we are obliged to rely upon image and models which elude precise definition.”<sup>90</sup> He who interprets theological terms from an instrumentalist position does not make any reference to something which is ‘really out there.’ Rather, such a theory relates religious beliefs to phenomena, to human perception. A realist interpretation, however, “carries with it a commitment to a belief in the reality of those things which constitute the denotation of the terms of the theological language of that theory.”<sup>91</sup>

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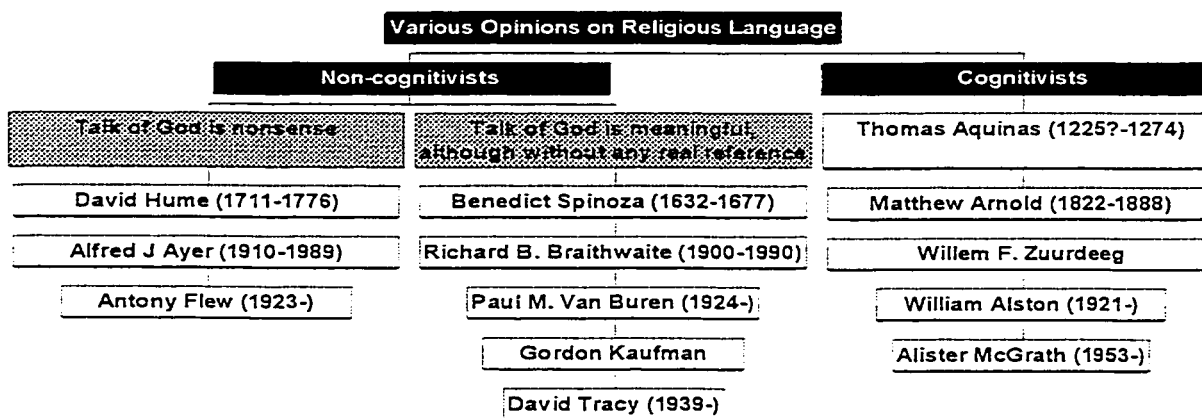
<sup>90</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

## 2.4. Summary Comments

We reviewed in this chapter examples of classical and modern theories of religious language. I divided the multiple opinions on religious language into two categories: non-cognitivism and cognitivism, that is those who do not and those who do see factual information and any real reference for talk. The former I also divided into two subgroups according to their difference in giving any sense to God-talk. Such talk for one group is nonsense and for the other is meaningful, although without any real reference. You can see the categories in (chart 1).

Chart 1.



This chapter indicated that the debate between cognitivism and non-cognitivism regarding religious language is highly controversial among current scholars of religious language. Most of the theoreticians I reviewed, are contemporary thinkers, such as Alfred Ayer (1910-1989), and Antony Flew (1923-) as non-cognitivism, and

Richard Braithwaite (1900-1990), Richard Hare (1919-), William Alston (1921-), Paul Van Buren (1924-), David Tracy (1939-), Gordon Kaufman, and Alister McGrath (1953-) as cognitivists.

It seems to this author that neither of these theories offers a comprehensive analysis of religious language. Therefore, it is necessary to delve more deeply into these theories and arguments.

I do not agree with the first group of non-cognitivists, including David Hume, Alfred G. Ayer, and Antony Flew, who are so influenced by empiricism that they reject any validity for religious belief. We cannot reject all meanings in religious belief when history demonstrates the powerful influence, both negative and positive, of religious belief on human beings.

As far as the other theories discussed in this chapter are concerned, it seems that there is always something missing in these analyses of religious language. These scholars often overemphasize one aspect and ignore the other. Among those who commit this error are the second group of non-cognitivists, mainly Benedict Spinoza, Richard Bevan Braithwaite, Richard M. Hare, Paul M. Van Buren, David Tracy and Gordon Kaufman. These scholars assert that there is no factual information and no real reference for talk of God - but such talk is still meaningful for them, since it can serve some purpose. This thesis disagrees with them in that it proposes a possible factual reference which can be found in religious assertions. Cognitivists, on the other hand, do not devote a comprehensive attention to all aspects of religious language. Zuurdeeg, for instance, while he accepts both cognitive and non-cognitive

aspects of religion, overemphasizes one aspect. While he is accurate in his emphasis on 'is-language' in religion, he does not pay proper attention to its descriptive aspect. Moreover, I do not see that his clarification of 'employ language' is convincing. What he presents to differentiate 'is-language' and 'use-language' is not clear in his theory.<sup>92</sup>

We will now turn to Part Two of the thesis, in which we look for the characteristics of religious discourse and its commonality or differences from other sorts of discourses.

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<sup>92</sup>Willem F. Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, p. 59.



## **Part wo**

Of the two main questions regarding religious language listed in the introduction to this thesis, Part Two deals with first question, namely: What are the characteristics of religious discourse? This question will be discussed in the two following chapters: “Alston’s view of language-game and religion,” and “Alston’s perspective on truth and religion.” In Chapter three I attempt to identify the features of the language of religion that distinguish it from other language-games. Chapter four is an attempt to find commonalities between religious and other discourses.

## **Chapter 3. Alston's View of Language-game and Religion**

### **3.1. Introduction**

In clarifying Alston's view of religious language, it is necessary that we look at its features. One of the most common discussions of religious language is the consideration of it as a sort of 'language-game' with its own characteristics. 'Language-game' and 'form of life' are two key concepts in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). The impact of language-game theory on considerations of religious language is a significant issue for philosophy of religion, since it deeply influences our comprehending of God's nature and our interpretation of theological concepts. There are several questions regarding the relation of language-game and religion, among which the following will be discussed in this chapter:

What are the definitions of language-game and form of life?

What is the effect of the Wittgensteinian view of language-games on Alston's perspective on religious language?

What are the characteristics of a distinct language-game?

How does Alston apply these characteristics to religious discourse? In other words, to what extent is Christian discourse, according to him, a distinct language-game?

### 3.2. Definition of 'Language-game' and 'Form of Life'

In his later work, *Philosophical Investigation*, Wittgenstein criticized his earlier position of language and the way of learning words.<sup>93</sup> He emphasized the different usages of words. We see in ordinary language that there are several appropriate uses for words, not just one kind such as a scientific one. Wittgenstein says:

Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.)

Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy.<sup>94</sup>

We can express this idea in another way and say that there are various sorts of 'language-games.' Wittgenstein refers to the process of learning language, during which the child utters a given word when the teacher points to a particular object or even in a simpler way, the learner repeats the words after the teacher. Both these processes, Wittgenstein says, "resemble language." He continues,

We can also think of the whole process of using words...as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games 'language-games' and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game.

And the processes of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone might also be called language-games. Think of much of the use of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses.

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<sup>93</sup>Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation* (Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 6.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game.'<sup>95</sup>

Wittgenstein compared language with a game played according to fixed rules. In his thought, there is a relation between systems of communication and games in everyday life. It is through games that children learn the language of their parents.<sup>96</sup> "The rules of these games are not identical with the regularities an observer might be able to detect. Rules naturally cause or support regularities of acting."<sup>97</sup>

'Form of life,' according to some interpreters of Wittgenstein, refers to an entire culture; while according to others, it means specific activities within a culture, including education, politics, different sorts of occupations, and the like.<sup>98</sup> Speaking of meaning of form of life, Norman Malcolm, an American philosopher and one of

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>96</sup>Piotr Buczkowski ed., *The Social Horizon of Knowledge* (Rodopi, Amsterdam, Atlanta, 1991), p. 8.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 8, For more details on Wittgenstein's view of language-game see: Monk, Ray, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Duty of Genius* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), pp. 336-346; James Wm. McClendon and Jr. James M. Smith, *Convictions, Defusing Religious Relativism* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994), pp. 21-25; Norman Malcolm, "The groundlessness of Belief," in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 100; John Churchil, "The Coherence of the Concept 'Language-game'," in *Philosophical Investigation*, 6 (Oct. 1983), pp. 239-259.

<sup>98</sup>Stiver, *The Philosophy of religious language*, p. 62.

Wittgenstein's interpreters, maintains that there are multiple forms of life, each of which has its own language. It is not a language such as English or French, but rather a method of talk involving suppositions and ways of reasoning that separate multiple forms. Science is a form of life. Religion is also another form; "it is language embedded in action – what Wittgenstein calls a 'language-game.'"<sup>99</sup>

Referring to the meaning of 'language-game' and 'form of life,' Alston maintains that there are ambiguities in Wittgenstein's writings regarding these two notions. Because of the ambiguities, these concepts are susceptible of different usages and explanations, not all of them mutually compatible.<sup>100</sup> Patrick Sherry also refers to the difficulty of realizing precisely what Wittgenstein means by his concept of 'form of life', since Wittgenstein gives few examples.<sup>101</sup> P. M. S. Hacker defines form of life as follows: "Agreement in language, possession of common concepts is

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<sup>99</sup>Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief," p. 100.

<sup>100</sup>William Alston, "The Christian Language-game," in *The Autonomy of Religious Belief, A Critical Inquiry*, ed. Frederick J. Crosson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 128.

<sup>101</sup>Patrick Sherry, *Religion, Truth and Language-games* (London: Macmillan Press, 1977), p. 22.

what Wittgenstein...calls 'form of life', a common way of conceptualizing experience together with the accompanying kinds of behavior"<sup>102</sup>

Speaking of meaning of 'form of life', Alston first points to the familiar understanding of 'form of life' in a religion. He says: "It is obvious that involvement in a religion is a 'form of life' in a natural sense of term. Moreover, this is not just one partial section of life among others, it imposes a certain form on the whole of one's life."<sup>103</sup> The way that a religious believer fulfils his or her responsibilities, works, feelings and communications with others is different from a non-believer's way of life. Religion affects one's way of seeing social problems and dispositions toward other people. Alston's use of the correlated Wittgensteinian notions of form of life and language-game is different from the familiar comprehending of these notions, although there are also similarities between them.<sup>104</sup> In the opinion of Alston, "a language-game is a more or less distinctive and more or less unified *practice* of using language. The term 'form of life' is thrown in to emphasize the point that a practice of using language is integrally connected with non-linguistic activities."<sup>105</sup> At the outset of his discussion about the Christian language-game, he

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<sup>102</sup>R. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion, Wittgenstein on Philosophy and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 220; see also: Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, p. 88.

<sup>103</sup>Alston, "The Christian Language-game," p.128.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129.

refers to the ambiguities of both Wittgensteinian notions - 'language-game' and 'form of life.' He concentrates, however, his argument on language-game and maintains that "In this article I will use 'language-game' rather than 'form of life' as being less ill-suited to the concept with which I shall be working."<sup>106</sup> Following Alston and clarifying his position, I will also concentrate on his view of religious language-game rather than religious forms of life.

### 3.3. Characteristics of a Distinct Language-game

Alston's main question regarding Wittgenstein's view of language-game concerns the characteristics of a distinct language-game. In Alston's view, Wittgenstein does not clarify this issue; rather he presents conflicting principles in his *Philosophical Investigation*.<sup>107</sup> Sometimes Wittgenstein considers diverse illocutionary<sup>108</sup> forces as founding various language-games. Some of his examples of language-games are as follows:

- Giving orders, and obeying them
- Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements
- Reporting an event
- Speculating about an event

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<sup>106</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>108</sup>Illocutionary act is "the act done *in* speaking." Illocution is "an utterance in which an illocutionary act is performed. Thus *in* uttering, for example, the word, "Look out," I may *warn* someone. Antony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Pan Books, 1979), p. 163.

Forming and testing a hypothesis

Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying<sup>109</sup>

According to Alston, Wittgenstein in “the earlier section with the ‘primitive’ language-games of giving orders and giving reports points in the same direction.”<sup>110</sup>

In some cases, Wittgenstein attaches ‘content’ limitations to illocutionary force - for instance, when he considers color-ascription, confessing motives as language-games, or when he says: “The language-game ‘I mean (or meant) this’ (subsequent explanation of a word) is quite different from this one: ‘I thought of ... As I said it.’ The latter is akin to ‘It reminded me of...’”<sup>111</sup> “He even suggests in one place that whatever we do with a given word, in this case ‘game’, counts as a distinct language-game.”<sup>112</sup>

Alston concludes from these passages of Wittgenstein that he does not intend to use ‘language-game’ with any particular and distinctive criterion. Rather, his main concern here, is to conclude that any kind of speech act forms part of a learned practice, which includes both linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions, and furthermore, “understanding some of the details of this [practice] in particular cases

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<sup>109</sup>Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, p. 11.

<sup>110</sup>Alston, “The Christian Language-game,” p. 129.

<sup>111</sup>Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, p. 217.

<sup>112</sup>Alston, “The Christian Language-game,” p. 129.



enables us to make a proper response to the philosophical problems that are raised about various spheres of discourse.”<sup>113</sup>

The main question for Alston concerning the relation between religion and language-game is whether Christian discourse is a distinct language-game or not. To answer this question first, he tries to clarify sharply the features of a distinct language-game, because Wittgenstein has used this term in several situations without mentioning any particular criterion of individuation. According to Alston, we can separate a particular language-game from others by referring to three aspects: ontology, epistemology, and ideology (see chart 2).<sup>114</sup> Here I will discuss Alston’s view of these aspects.

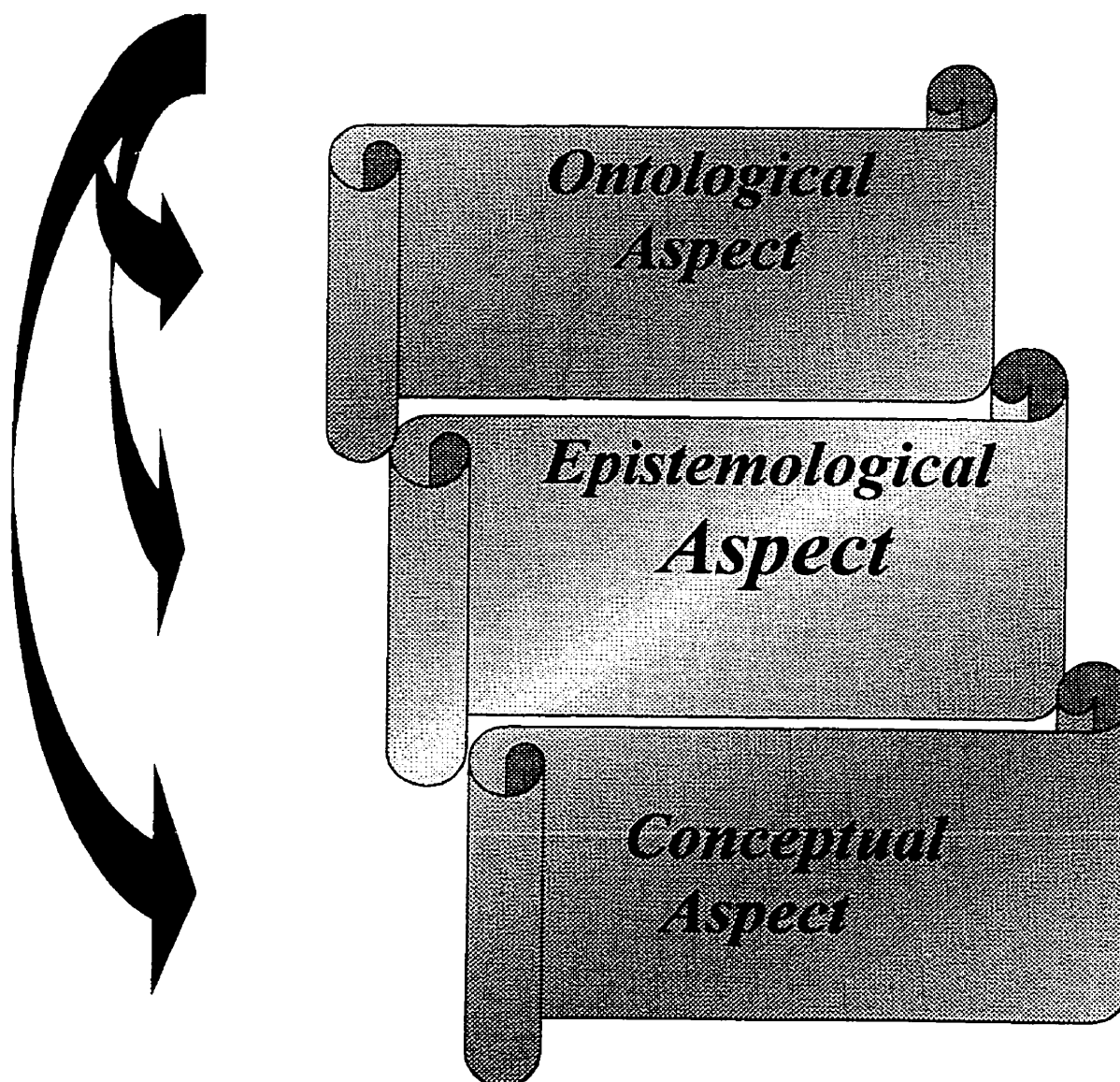
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<sup>113</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

Chart 2.

## Characteristics of a Distinct Language-Game



### A. Ontological Aspect

For Alston, each language-game relates to a particular kind of entity that has its own ‘categorical’<sup>115</sup> features. There is a difference between characteristics of ‘physical-world language-game’ and ‘human-person language-game.’ Some characteristics of the former are as follows:

- a) Their substances are relatively fixed so that their self-identity remains stable through changes.
- b) They have mass, shape, size and other physical features.

In a like manner, we see particular characteristics in the ‘human-person language-game’ such as follows:

- a) They have living body.
- b) They can use their minds and will for their actions.
- c) They can decide for their own future.<sup>116</sup>

### B. Epistemological Aspect

Language-games are also distinguished from one another in that the justification of claims in a particular game does not essentially depend on the acceptance of anything from other language-games. In other words, we may find a particular element, which can be called epistemic autonomy, in each language-game. In order

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<sup>115</sup>It is Alston’s terminology, which apparently means “categorical”.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

to clarify this idea, Alston maintains, “An essential part of what one learns in learning of a particular language-game is how to make (justified, approved) ‘immediate’ applications of some of the terms of that game, on the basis of experience.”<sup>117</sup> The reason Alston calls these applications ‘immediate’ is that the subject does not justify these applications by inference and does not base them on his or her other knowledge. The basis for these applications is rather experience. Thus, “the ‘player’ has acquired the ability to react differently to various ‘cues’ in his experience, without thereby taking those cues as themselves objects of knowledge or belief from which the applications in question are inferred.”<sup>118</sup> Consequently, the epistemic autonomy of the physical-world language-game means that the justification or rationality of a specific physical-object perceptual belief is that it is shaped as a component of a learned and reliable practice. The rationality of this belief does not depend on its derivation from true statements about the features of that experience.<sup>119</sup>

### C. Ideological Aspect

Ideology here refers to the ‘conceptual scheme’ or set of concepts that can be applied to certain things. In other words, a conceptual difference can differentiate a language-game from others. Different concepts are applicable to different situations.

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid., pp. 133-4.

The main point is that we can use particular types of notions for, e.g., physical objects, and we cannot apply them to other objects. Someone can ask whether a particular person is reading a book or not, but no one can ask whether a table is reading an article. It may be difficult, in the abstract, to distinguish between the categorical characteristics which are appropriate for one kind of objects, and to give special concepts for them. Nonetheless, there are also numerous obvious examples. For instance, spatial position and crystalline structure are two different categorical features of physical objects. While physical objects have the former in every possible world, they do not have the latter in some possible worlds.<sup>120</sup>

### 3.4. Application of the Characteristics of a Distinct Language-game in Christian Discourse

After explaining the three dimensions (the ontological, ideological and epistemological) by which we may separate a language-game from others, Alston tries to see whether he can apply these three dimensions regarding the distinctness of Christian discourse, or not.

With respect to ontological aspect, Alston maintains that God is the main distinctive ontological commitment of Christian discourse. This does not mean that Christian discourse is limited to God, since it also covers human beings, inner experience and the like. God, however, is the fundamental entity for this discourse,

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<sup>120</sup>Ibid., pp. 132, 6.

because creation is totally dependent on God's existence. Therefore, we can consider God as the main distinctive commitment of Christian discourse. God's entity has its own separate categorical characteristics such as being-itself, necessary being and infinite being which cannot be limited to any particular species. Talking about a distinct ontology for God would be more clear, if we were to reject the 'anthropomorphizing' tendency regarding God's existence, and not simply consider him a bigger or more perfect person, instead following the classic tradition in its emphasis on the uniqueness of God's existence and attributes.<sup>121</sup>

As far as the epistemological aspect is concerned, as Alston spelled out earlier, what is necessary for epistemic autonomy of a language-game "is that there be an established practice of immediate applications of terms on the basis of experience."<sup>122</sup> Alston believes that we can find this crucial requirement in the Christian language-game. Religious training in Christianity teaches a believer to see God's manifestations in multiple things in the world. A believer learns to see both good and evil events as God's blessings which are sent to people to test them and provide appropriate conditions for their moral development. One learns to trust in God in encountering a difficult situation. In Alston's view, all these cases include something that can be called 'mediated immediacy.' In all these cases we learn to see X as Y. In other words, what we had learned to consider a particular situation as

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<sup>121</sup>Ibid., pp. 139-140.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

involving an X, now we look at it as a Y also. Furthermore, the immediacy that we have here is epistemic. It means that our reason for recognizing X as Y is not rational thinking; rather it is our experience.<sup>123</sup>

Regarding ideology, Alston emphasizes the conceptual distinction between Christian and other language-games.

So far we have discussed three distinctive features of language-games and their application in Christian discourse. Now we turn to elaborate Alston's view of doxastic practice, since he sees a close relation between the Christian language-game and doxastic practice.

### 3.5. Wittgenstein's Influence on Alston's View of Doxastic Practice

Alston's account of doxastic practice is based upon Wittgenstein's treatment of language-games. Here, I will explain the meaning of doxastic practice, and I will then refer to the application of language-game in Alston's analysis of doxastic practice. "A doxastic practice can be thought of as a collection of dispositions or habits, each of which yields a belief as output that is related in a certain way to an

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<sup>123</sup>Ibid., P. 143.

input.”<sup>124</sup> Alston includes in his definition sense-perceptual doxastic practice, which covers different kinds of such habits.<sup>125</sup>

Alston sees a close relation between the Christian language-game and doxastic practice. In his discussion of language-game, he switches to the argument about doxastic practice.<sup>126</sup> This is because, according to him, when we discuss epistemic issues concerning belief, “we will achieve a more direct application in that topic if the practices to which we appeal are specifically practices of belief-formation.”<sup>127</sup>

Alston’s treatment of doxastic practice is related to Wittgenstein’s language-game in the following points:

1. Plurality of doxastic practices: There is an irreducible plurality of doxastic practices. There are several ways of forming beliefs. These ways are different in their methods of justification and their styles of moving from inputs to belief outputs. Various kinds of beliefs have different methods of assessments.

2. Pre-reflective genesis: Human beings acquire doxastic practices before they become clearly and consciously aware of them and try to evaluate them. Everyone is

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<sup>124</sup>William Alston, “Taking the Curse Off Language-games, A Realistic Account of Doxastic Practices,” in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, eds. Tessin, Timothy and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 34.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., p. 34.



inevitably engaged in doxastic practices by the time he or she reaches the age of reflection. “Practice precedes theory.”

3. Socially established: Most doxastic practices are completely social: “socially established by socially monitored learning, socially sanctioned and socially shared.”<sup>128</sup> For instance, the form of our perceptual beliefs is based on the conceptual design that we learn from our community. Alston does not reject the role of innate mechanisms and tendencies in the establishment of doxastic practices. What he emphasizes is that they are not the whole bases.

4. Engagement in wider spheres of practice: The practice of forming perceptual beliefs is closely connected to “learning to deal with perceived objects in the pursuit of our ends.”<sup>129</sup> In the same way, learning to form belief in God will lead oneself to change his or her behavior, attitudes and feelings toward God.<sup>130</sup>

On the one hand, Alston emphasizes that his idea regarding the characteristics of doxastic practice has been influenced in those aspects by Wittgenstein and by his followers’ views of language-game. On the other hand, he dissents from their position as follows:

1. Alston does not agree that there are separate concepts of truth and reality for each language-game.

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<sup>128</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>130</sup>For the last four points, see: Ibid., pp. 35-36.

2. Epistemic conception of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ should be replaced with a realistic perspective on both concepts. This point is connected to the previous one, since by accepting the second point we are able to apply one concept of truth to all language-games.<sup>131</sup>

3. As Alston dissents from Wittgenstein’s position, he, like agree with the view of D. Z. Phillips, one of the main followers and interpreters of Wittgenstein, regarding religious statements and beliefs. Phillips has an anti-realist position. He emphasizes an internalist criterion for each language-game. Alston, however, maintains that, at least in theistic religions, the commitment of oneself to the reality of a Supreme Being is necessary to (the usual) religious form of life. Such a Supreme Being is in no way tied up with the existence of any religious language-game.

4. As the result of previous differences, Alston states that “I have declined to go along either with the idea that nothing outside a given doxastic practice can have any bearing on the epistemic status of beliefs within the doxastic practice, or with the idea that there can be no external criticism of a doxastic practice.”<sup>132</sup>

### 3.6. Summary and Comments

Alston refers to Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘language-game’ to elaborate his view of religious language. Referring to the meaning of ‘language-game’, Alston

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<sup>131</sup>The details of Alston’s view of epistemic and realistic connection of truth will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

maintains that there are ambiguities in Wittgenstein's writings regarding these two notions. Because of the ambiguities, these concepts accept different usages and explanations not all of them mutually compatible.<sup>133</sup> In the opinion of Alston, "a language-game is a more or less distinctive and more or less unified *practice* of using language."<sup>134</sup> Alston's main question regarding Wittgenstein's view of language-game concerns the characteristics of a distinct language-game. In Alston's view, Wittgenstein does not clarify this issue; rather he presents conflicting principles in his *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>135</sup> Alston subsequently presents three characteristics of a distinct language-game: ontological (each language-game relates to a particular kind of entity which has its own categorical features), epistemological (the way for justification of claims in a particular game does not essentially depend on the acceptance of anything from other language-games), and ideological (conceptual scheme or set of concepts which can differentiate a language-game from others).

### Appraisal

While, like Alston, I believe in the distinct features of multiple language-games in general and of religious discourse in particular, I see several problems in his suggested perspective in both aspects, to which I will refer in Chapter 9, (Examination and Conclusion).

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<sup>133</sup>Alston, "The Christian Language-game," 128.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>135</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

Moreover, regarding ideology, Alston emphasizes the conceptual distinction between Christian and other language-games. Here, someone, nonetheless, may ask: How can we underscore this conceptual distinction, since we take theological terms from our talk of creatures? On the other hand, it is a famous idea that we cannot use words for God and creatures in the same meaning. How is it possible that we use terms like cause, make, love, speak, and so on, for a supreme necessary being with the same meaning that we use them for human beings? To recognize the conceptual distinction between Christian and other language-games depends on giving a clear idea regarding the way of acquiring religious discourse, mainly rejecting the possibility of taking theological concepts from our ordinary language. Nonetheless, since Alston's view in this regard is ambiguous, his perspective on conceptual distinction between Christian and other language-games would be ambiguous.

The ambiguity of Alston's view regarding the way of comprehending religious concepts can be elaborated as follows:

At one point, Alston says:

I have argued elsewhere that if we make our terms that apply to human beings abstract and unspecific enough they could conceivably apply in the same sense to God. Nonetheless, even if that is so, the fact remains that when we are dealing with concepts at a more specific level, the level at which we are actually working in most first-level religious discourse, we cannot fail to recognize that what it is for God to speak, love, forgive, or make must be radically different from what it is for human beings to do those things. And so insofar as our concepts embody that distinctiveness they will be significantly different from the concepts we apply to human persons. Of course that in itself does not show that these concepts are irreducible to concepts applying to creatures, but I am unaware of any promising

attempt to carry out such a reduction, at least among thinkers who fully recognize God's categorial uniqueness.<sup>136</sup>

The first sentence in this passage shows that according to Alston, we can use words that are applicable in our life, to God. Nonetheless, first we should make them abstract and unspecified enough to be able to use them for God. The second and the third sentences indicate that he is not very comfortable with his previous idea regarding the possibility of using the abstracted form of concepts that we apply to human beings, to God. The result of his second sentence is that, when there is such a distinctiveness in the concept that we use for God's action, there will be considerable difference between those concepts and that we use for human action. In the fourth sentence, however, he wants to raise the possibility of reducibility of religious concepts to the notions that we apply to creatures, but the problem that he sees here is that he is not aware of anyone "at least among thinkers who fully recognize God's categorial uniqueness"<sup>137</sup> who has made such an attempt.

After the fourth sentence, Alston brings up this question, "How is the Christian conceptual scheme to be acquired if it cannot be explained on the basis of conceptual schemes that apply to creatures?"<sup>138</sup> Alston's response to this question is based on the Wittgensteinian idea regarding the way of acquiring a language-game. Alston's answer can be explained as follows: One significant point of Wittgenstein is that

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<sup>136</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

learning a practice plays an essential role in obtaining the basic terms of a language-game. This practice deals with both linguistic and non-linguistic components. Our vocabulary regarding the physical-object is obtained neither from definitions constituted on a phenomenal base nor from 'ostensive definition', which means that someone brings different kinds of physical objects and he or she uses appropriate words in pointing them out.<sup>139</sup> "It is rather that in being trained to react appropriately to physical objects, in the light of their nature, condition, and distribution in space, we acquire the concepts, the terminology, and the practical skills at once, as a complete package."<sup>140</sup> We cannot obtain just part of this package. Alston emphasizes the role of Wittgenstein in the way of acquiring the meaning of words. He admires Wittgenstein's emphasis on 'use' as the clue to linguistic meaning. "We come to understand what it is for a word, phrase or sentence, to mean what it means by coming to understand (relevant features) of how the expression is used, what users of the language do with it."<sup>141</sup> Alston, after explaining the way of obtaining the physical object vocabulary, applies his idea in Christian discourse. He emphasizes the role of use and practice in comprehending Christian beliefs. Acquisition of meaning in both cases, religious and physical concepts, is "in the course of learning to react

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<sup>139</sup>see: Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, #257; and Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious language*, 59-60; and Alston, "The Christian Language-game," pp. 141-142.

<sup>140</sup>Alston, "The Christian Language-game," p. 141.

<sup>141</sup>Alston, "Taking the Curse Off Language-games", p. 17.

appropriately to the distinctive entities of that language-game.”<sup>142</sup> However, according to Alston, Wittgenstein has not made it clear that “what there is about use that determines meaning.”<sup>143</sup>

The question that Alston raises here and answers indicates that he does not insist on the applicability of the concepts and words that we are using in our life, to God. Rather, Alston’s idea here shows that there is no way to explain Christian concepts by referring to words that we apply to the creature. The only way is referring to the Wittgensteinian position regarding the role of ‘use’ in acquiring the meaning of concepts.

However, this view of Alston seems to be in conflict with his position elsewhere. What we may gather from his statement in another passage is that although he emphasizes the role of the Wittgensteinian concept of ‘use’ and ‘practice’ in the conceiving of religious terms, he does not see it as the whole story. He considers it to be one side of the picture.<sup>144</sup> Speaking of the other side of the picture, he by and large admits the role of analogy between religious concepts and what we use outside the religious context. We comprehend God’s lordship through comparing it with a king’s lordship in this world. God’s forgiveness is conceived, to

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<sup>142</sup>Alston, “The Christian Language-game,” p. 142.

<sup>143</sup>Alston, “Taking the Curse Off Language-games,” p. 17.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

some extent by referring to human forgiveness. If forgiveness were completely different between God and human beings, “we should never come to naming it.”<sup>145</sup>

There is another point in Alston’s writing which confirms that he does not see Wittgenstein’s view of the role of use in acquiring words as the only solution for comprehending religious language-game. This point is Alston’s answer to the question whether it is possible for someone who is outside a religious language-game to understand something from that game or not. In Alston’s view, each language-game has a ‘closed circle’ for its concepts. Although we can define all concepts of a particular language-game based upon concepts within it, there is not such a possibility of definition according to ‘outside’ concepts. He says: “The history of philosophy is littered with unsuccessful attempts to do just this – exhibit physical object terms as constructs out of phenomenal terms, P-predicates as definable physicalistically, action concepts as built up out of causal concepts, ethical concepts as definable psychologically, and so on.”<sup>146</sup> Therefore, according to Alston, the attempts to define physical object terms, or ethical concepts, and so on by concepts from other language-games have not been always successful. On the other hand, he believes that the language we utilize for religious concepts is not a separate language; rather we utilize the common language, which includes some particular terms. He rejects the claim that those who are outside a language-game do not have any access

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<sup>145</sup>Ibid., pp. 37-38.

<sup>146</sup>Alston, “The Christian Language-game,” p. 134.



to realize something from that game and the beliefs within it. This is an extreme view which is a result of emphasizing the role of the Wittgensteinian concept of 'use' in understanding religious terms.<sup>147</sup> Since those who are outside a religious language-game "can be fully in possession of the secular bases for the relevant analogies, they can have some grasp of the religious affirmations. And they can have some idea of the form of life involved without participating in it themselves."<sup>148</sup> A complete comprehension of Christian beliefs depends on being a believer of that religion. There are, yet, common understandings among human beings which provide enough opportunity for a discussion and dialogue between believers and non-believers regarding the rationality and justification of Christian affirmations.<sup>149</sup>

Alston's view of language-games is rooted, to some extent in Wittgenstein's thought and to some extent in medieval philosophers and theologians. The influence of Wittgenstein on Alston is evident in his emphasis on the distinctness of each language-game, his view of doxastic practice, and the way of acquiring religious concepts. The influence of medieval theologians is visible in Alston's ontological distinctive character. One of the features that Alston suggests for distinct language-games and then applies in Christian discourse is ontological. It seems, however, that ontological distinction between God and creatures is not an original view. Rather, it

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<sup>147</sup>Alston, "Taking the Curse Off Language-games," pp. 37-38.

<sup>148</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>149</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

has been also addressed by medieval philosophers and theologians such as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas and Avicenna. Considering this ontological difference as a basis for distinction among language-games seems, however, to be an original position.

As far as Alston's view regarding the way of acquiring the physical object vocabulary is concerned, I wish to argue that although he accepts Wittgenstein's rejection of 'ostensive definition,' emphasizing instead the role of use in comprehending the meaning of words, he should accept to some extent the possibility of 'ostensive definition.' This is because he does not consider Wittgenstein's position the whole story in perceiving all concepts of a language-game. Instead, Alston also refers to common understandings among human beings, which provide the possibility of a dialogue among different religions. According to this common understanding, Alston would be able to say that if someone does not know the name and characteristics of a physical object, we cannot to some extent introduce it to him or to her by pointing to it and using some general categorical words that he or she already knows. Thus, he cannot reject totally any possibility of learning a vocabulary by 'ostensive definition.'

In this chapter we addressed the question of the basis for separating religious language-games from other games. Now we should see if there is any basis for connecting religious discourse to other discourses. In other words, we should try to detect any common basis between various language-games. This is the center of the debate in the coming chapter.

## **Chapter 4. Alston's Perspective on Truth and Religion**

### 4.1. Introduction

Is there any concept of truth applicable in multiple language-games, including religious language? This is the aspect of Alston's view of religious language I will examine in this chapter. Alston in his discussion of religious language refers several times to common comprehension among human beings. While he believes that there are distinctive features for each language-game, and that we can accordingly separate religious language-games from other games, this distinction between various language-games does not, in his view, prevent there being a common comprehension of the truth shared by all language-games. In other words, he does not consider that Wittgenstein's idea of the role of 'use' explains all aspects of language-games, including religious language-games. It is possible for someone who is outside a particular religious language-game to comprehend to some extent religious statements and concepts expressed through it. Alston concludes that common understandings among human beings may facilitate dialogue among different religions.

As another example, Alston in his analysis of doxastic practice makes it clear that his ideas regarding the characteristics of doxastic practice have been influenced by Wittgenstein and his followers' view of language-games. He dissents, however, from their position in some aspects. Mainly, he does not agree that there are separate concepts of truth and reality for each language-game.

In order to examine Alston's assertion that all language-games, including religious statements, share in common principles and understanding, we must clarify his particular view of truth. We must also see whether there are any common truth-criteria for rationality and justification of a religious statement, or not. Alston's comprehending of truth has a key role in his understanding of religious language. We find that Alston does not have an epistemological conception of truth. Instead, he bases his analysis of religious statements and universal concept of truth on realism. I will examine what is implied by this view in three sections:

1. Contextuality and universality of truth-criteria in religious belief
2. Alston's realistic conception of truth
3. Alston's religious realism and its effect on several approaches in religious irrealism, including those of the expressivists, Paul Tillich, John Hick, and Gordon D. Kaufman.

## 4.2. Contextuality and Universality of Truth-Criteria in Religious Belief

I will first examine Alston's main claims regarding the issue. I will then compare Alston's views with those of D. Z. Phillips and Peter Winch, who tend to disagree with him, as well as those of Patrick Sherry and Steven Lukes, who tend to agree. Finally, I will review M. Jamie Ferreira's critical view of Alston.

The recent development of argument about religious belief is due to the rise of social scientific perspectives on topics such as the possibility of commensurability

between contexts and contextuality of contexts. As Ferreira puts it, “The best of the discussion has self-consciously attempted to walk the fine line of guaranteeing both the autonomy and the objectivity of religious belief - sufficient autonomy to satisfy the demands of devotion and sufficient objectivity...to satisfy the demands of reason.”<sup>150</sup> Alston himself attempts to ensure “a certain autonomy - ontologically, semantically and epistemological - (for Christian belief as a language-game) without sacrificing traditional claims to objective truth.”<sup>151</sup> On the one hand, in his view, there are common standards (beyond all language-games) for evaluating language-games and beliefs. On the other hand, Alston believes that truth is not the same in various contexts.<sup>152</sup>

Alston makes three main claims in support of this view:

1) There is a concept of truth applicable in all language-games. In the opinion of Alston, denial of the idea of the common sense notion of truth stems entirely from verificationist ways of thinking, which still play a significant role in our contemporary philosophy even though they should have been totally rejected by now.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup>Ferreira, M. Jamie, “Universal Criteria and the Autonomy of Religious Belief,” in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984), p. 3.

<sup>151</sup>Crosson, *The Autonomy of religious belief*, p. 162.

<sup>152</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>153</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 138.

2) When there is a concept of truth that we can use in multiple language-games, “the way is opened for assertions validated in one language-game to contradict assertions validated in another. Where it happens, it is clear that at least one of the games is off the mark, and the task of evaluating language-games takes on a special urgency.”<sup>154</sup>

3) Apart from his emphasis on the universality of the concept of truth for all language-games, Alston believes in the context-dependency of the ways that determine the truth (standards of justification). He maintains that “what is said by assertions in different language-games will be importantly different, because we will be referring and generalizing over different ranges of entities, and applying different concepts to them. (And hence what is required to be justified in an assertion will be correspondingly different.)”<sup>155</sup> We may also regard Alston’s acceptance of the Wittgensteinian concept of use and practice as indicating Alston’s defense of contextuality.

We can compare Alston’s view, on the one hand, with philosophers of religion such as D. Z. Phillips, Peter Winch, and M. Jamie Ferreira, whose methods contrast with Alston’s strategy, and on the other hand, with Patrick Sherry and Steven Lukes who have almost the same view as Alston.

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<sup>154</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>155</sup>Crosson, *The Autonomy of religious belief*, p. 138.

Alston's method of insuring autonomy is similar to that of Phillips and Winch in that they all agree upon the context-dependency of truth. What differentiates, however, Alston from Phillips and Winch is Alston's position regarding the universal concept of truth. Phillips and Winch believe that we have various concepts of truth and reality according to different language-games.<sup>156</sup> Alston's difference with Phillips and Winch has also been accurately mentioned by Ferreira. He points out that they do not posit a common concept of truth and reference. Alston, however, allows that truth may be examined according to neutral criteria such as consistency, sufficiency, or weakness of clarification. Furthermore, Alston suggests three 'positive' tests for objectivity (a) that "the language-game is played" (b) that it does

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<sup>156</sup>For Phillips' view see: his book, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 8; and his article, "Religious Beliefs and Language-game," in *Faith and philosophical enquiry*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 92-93. In this article, he tries to discuss and answer objections to saying that religious beliefs has distinctive language-game. For Peter Winch's position, see his following articles: "Asking Too Many Questions," in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, eds. Timothy Tessin, and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 208-9; and "Understanding a Primitive Society," in *Rationality*, ed. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), pp. 78-112; and his following book: *The Idea of Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), pp. 100-110.

not contradict anything “that is firmly established in other language-games we play” (c) that “it is internally coherent.”<sup>157</sup> Thus, again, Alston differs from Phillips and Winch in his realistic conception of truth. (I will enlarge on this in the next section.)

Sherry’s position on various types of truth is similar to that of Alston. He advocates John Austin’s (1911-1960) version of the correspondence theory of truth, according to which “a statement is said to be true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it ‘refers’) is of a type with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions.”<sup>158</sup> Therefore, the truth of any religious statement such as ‘The Lord sent Jesus Christ into the world’ depends on its describing rightly a historic state of affairs.<sup>159</sup>

In the opinion of Sherry, we should not talk about multiple types of truth, since it solves nothing.<sup>160</sup> He even rejects different kinds of truth between different religions. Instead of speaking about various types of truth, Sherry prefers to

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<sup>157</sup>Crosson, *The Autonomy of religious belief*, p.158; and Ferreira, “Universal Criteria and the Autonomy of Religious Belief,” p. 8.

<sup>158</sup>Sherry, *Religion, Truth and Language-games*, p. 178.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid., p. 178; see also Sherry, “Truth, and the Religious Language-game,” in *Philosophy* 47 (Jan. 1972), pp. 18-37; and George Pitcher ed., *Truth*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 22.

<sup>160</sup>Ibid., p. 182.



distinguish between various kinds of religious beliefs.<sup>161</sup> Because of varieties in religious statements, each may require a particular kind of verification. For example, verification of statements regarding spirituality “consist[s] in showing that a possibility of spiritual transformation is realizable and that it is appropriately described in terms of a particular model.” Verification of eschatological statements are “only in the future - which is not to say that one may not inquire now about the grounds someone has for making such statements.”<sup>162</sup>

However, despite the emphasis on the common concept of truth, Sherry also holds, like Alston, that depending on the context there are different methods for verifying the correlation. After his acceptance of the fact that what is often being described by religious doctrines are unique states of affairs such as God’s existence and His transcendence, he maintains that “Since these states of affairs are unique, their verification...may be peculiar. It often seems very difficult to conceive religious doctrines and to see how people can claim to know that they are true. We seem to be dealing with peculiar kinds of evidence.”<sup>163</sup>

Alston’s insistence on both the universality and contextuality of criteria in religious truth is also very close to Steven Lukes’ appeal to both autonomy and commensurability. Alston and Lukes have almost the same approach to the issue.

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<sup>161</sup>Ibid., pp. 180-181.

<sup>162</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>163</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

Lukes divides the criteria of rationality that we can use to evaluate the beliefs of a society into two groups: the criteria which are common for all kinds of beliefs in the society, which he calls 'rational (1)', and context-dependent criteria which can be applied only to particular beliefs, which he calls 'rational (2).' Lukes in his critique of Winch maintains that we cannot consider all criteria to be culture-dependent. On the contrary, "the existence of a common reality is a necessary precondition of our understanding S's language."<sup>164</sup> However, in Lukes' view, this does not imply that everyone should agree upon all the facts. Indeed, it is possible that we cannot translate into another language any given true statement in S's language and vice versa. Lukes' view thus, is that "'S' must have our distinction between truth and falsity if we are to understand its language, for, if *per impossible* it did not, we would be unable even to agree about what counts as the successful identification of public objects."<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, since members of both "primitive and modern cultures" predict almost in the same ways, and their languages are understandable for each other, they presumably share in an independent reality.<sup>166</sup>

In Lukes' view, the criteria of rational (1) are the "criteria of truth (as correspondence to reality) and logic"<sup>167</sup> which are "laws of identity and non-

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<sup>164</sup>Steven Lukes, "Some Problems About Rationality," in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan Wilson, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), p. 209.

<sup>165</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>166</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>167</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 210.

contradiction, and the concept of negation.”<sup>168</sup> All societies share in these criteria. If there are different criteria of truth and logic between us and the society S, there “would [be] no grounds for attributing to them language, thought or beliefs and [we] would *a fortiori* be unable to make any statements about these.”<sup>169</sup> The universal criteria, or rational (1), would help us to evaluate a belief as irrational in different ways, “including that of being inconsistent or contradictory, false, and being arrived at or held deficiently (on irrelevant or insufficient evidence, for example).”<sup>170</sup>

In addition to his emphasis on the universal criteria of truth, Lukes also points, like Alston, to the contextually-provided criteria of truth. As an example, he says, “Thus a study of Nuer religion provides the means for deciding whether ‘twins are birds’ is, for the Nuer, to be counted as true.”<sup>171</sup> Also, there are context-dependent criteria of ‘meaning’ as well as “criteria which make particular beliefs appropriate in particular circumstances,” “criteria which specify the best way to arrive at and hold beliefs” and “what counts as a ‘good reason’ for holding a belief.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>168</sup>Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>170</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>171</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>172</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

### 4.3. Alston's Realistic Conception of Truth

Alston's main doctrine regarding religious truth, which distinguishes him from Phillips, Winch, Wittgenstein, and several other thinkers, refers to a deep philosophical point, namely the realistic conception of truth. This is the basis for Alston's position of a concept of truth applicable in all language-games, including religious statements. As an unreconstructed realist, Alston maintains that "truth is independent of epistemic consideration, of what is recognized in one or another language-game as constituting justification, rationality, or acceptability."<sup>173</sup> The truth of a proposition depends only on the content of the proposition, on what it says.<sup>174</sup>

An overview of what I will discuss in this chapter is as follows:

Different meanings of realism

Alston's original source for his way of thinking of realism

The reason that Alston calls his position 'alethic realism'

The unconscious acceptance of the realistic conception of truth by different schools of thought

The main principles of alethic realism

Particular relation that exists between these principles

A brief review of different supporters of epistemic conception of truth

Alston's objection to this approach

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<sup>173</sup>Crosson, ed., *The Autonomy of religious belief*, p. 138.

<sup>174</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 138.

Alston's answer to an objection made to his view

#### 4.3.1. Meanings of Realism

What does realism mean? Realism in its traditional, medieval and contemporary senses is a metaphysical position. Realism in its traditional understanding has one of the following two meanings. A) The idea of belief in the real or irreducible existence of some kind of entity. B) Rejecting the view of the existence of everything as either mental or essentially dependent on the mental form. We see the metaphysical position in medieval realism regarding universals. The same position is found in contemporary realism regarding voluntary psychological postures or regarding moral features.<sup>175</sup> Alston's use of the term 'realism' is partially different from those metaphysical views. He proposes a new style which is "taking the realism-irrealism contrast to concern the understanding (interpretation) of a certain body of discourse - scientific, moral, evaluative, observational, religious, aesthetic, or whatever."<sup>176</sup>

Realism is among those deep and essential philosophical topics that date back to Plato and Aristotle. Plato rejected the idea that moral values are dependent on social conviction. His theory of forms is associated with one type of moral realism. On the other hand, since he tended to negate the reality of the objects of the senses, he is considered an idealist. Unlike Plato, Aristotle was a realist regarding the objects of

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<sup>175</sup>Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, pp. 299-300, and Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 37.

<sup>176</sup>Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 37.

the senses. His view had a great impact in the Scholastic tradition. His opinion was always an alternative even in early twentieth century, which was the time of the predominance of absolute idealism in American and British intellectual circles. In the 1890s, Russell and Moore were among those who revolted against absolute idealism.<sup>177</sup>

As Alston maintains, his original source for his way of thinking of realism is Michael Dummett, who writes, "Realism I characterize as the belief that statements of the disputed class possess an objective truth-value, independently of our means of knowing it; they are true or false in virtue of a reality existing independently of us."<sup>178</sup> However, Alston's concept of realism is not exactly the same as Dummett's notion.

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<sup>177</sup>Brown, et al., eds. *Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth century Philosophers*, pp. 897-8.

For more details of realism see the following primary sources: Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of science*, (Leeds: Leeds Books, 1975); Hilary Putnam, "Three Kinds of Scientific Realism," in *Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1982), pp. 195-200. As secondary sources, see: Michael Dummett, "Realism," in *Syntheses* 52 (1964), pp. 55-112; and Herbert Schneider, *Sources of Contemporary Realism in America*, (Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964).

<sup>178</sup>Michael Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 146.

Alston calls his position alethic realism, for a realistic conception of truth is the center of his view. The word alethic, which originates from the Greek aletheia, means truth.<sup>179</sup>

In Alston's view, every one with any thought can, and usually does, accept, in her or his right mind, the realistic conception of truth, such as Metaphysical realists and irrealists, who agree or deny the reducibility of physical objects to patterns of sensory experience, or who accept or reject the reality of abstract objects like numbers and properties. Alston states:

The usual run of departmental irrealists, including idealists, take it that their statements are made true or false by virtue of whether what they say to be the case actually are the case. The typical idealist or phenomenalist supposes that the claims he makes about the (mental or phenomenal) nature of the physical world are true if and only if that is the way the physical world is.<sup>180</sup>

It is obvious for everyone that "the statement that gold is malleable is true if and only if gold is malleable" However, Alston believes that those who embrace the epistemic conceptions of truth deny, whether they realize it or not, the realistic conception of truth. For in their view, what is necessary for the truth of a statement such as 'gold is malleable' is not just gold's being malleable; rather something else is also necessary.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup>Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," pp. 39, 58.

<sup>180</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>181</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

### 4.3.2. Main principles of Alethic Realism

Alston's particular sense of alethic realism is a conjunction of three claims regarding the assumed statements, S's, in a particular body of discourse, D.

- a). S's are genuine factual statements.
- b). S's are true or false in the realistic sense of those terms.
- c). The facts that make true S's true hold and are what they are independently of human cognition.<sup>182</sup>

These principles can be explained as follows:

a) "S's are genuine statements of facts, just what they appear to be." This point excludes any idea that considers statements expressions of feelings or attitudes, "or bits of fictional narrative."

b) The falsehood or truth of S's are in a realistic sense of these concepts. The content of the statement is the only condition that is necessary to comprehend the truth of that statement. If what a statement is about is as the statement says it to be, the statement will be true in a realistic sense. As Alston states the schema here is: "The statement that P is true if P. Any substitution instance of the schema obtained by replacing P with a declarative sentence that can be used to make one of the S's is a true, and, indeed, necessarily, analytically true, by virtue of the meaning of 'true.'"<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>183</sup>Ibid., pp. 37-38.



c) “For any such true statement that P, the fact that P (the fact that renders the statement true) obtains and is what it is independently of our attempts to cognize it - our theories, conceptual schemes, and the like.” In other words, “the range of facts that make the true statements of the class of S’s true, hold and are what they are independently of our cognitive doings.”<sup>184</sup> This point, which is a metaphysical constituent of a realistic conception of truth, attributes the independence of our cognitive doings to a particular realm of facts. Alston refers to this point as cognitive-independent realism. In his view, this point does not imply that the facts in question do not depend on mind at all. Rather, it is in harmony with Berkelyan and absolute idealism, because dependency of facts about reality for what they are on human cognition of the facts is acceptable for neither of these positions. Meanwhile, Alston maintains that his cognition-independent realism is not harmonious with Kant’s view of the physical world, because in his transcendental idealism he “takes the physical world to be structured by our cognitive activity. And, for a given domain, it rules out currently fashionable forms of conceptual-ontological relativism for that domain, and such far-out views as deconstructionism.”<sup>185</sup>

What is the particular relation between these three principles of alethic realism? In the opinion of Alston, these principles are ‘nested’, so that denying any of them leads to the denial of the following one and acceptance of any of them leads to the

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<sup>184</sup>Ibid., p. 39

<sup>185</sup>Ibid., pp. 38-39.

acceptance of its previous claim. Rejecting the first claim would imply the impossibility of second claim which says, 'S's are true or false in a realistic sense of these terms.' This is because the realistic conception in this claim is defined for statements of fact. By denying the second claim, "the question of the status of the facts in terms of which the statements are true or false in the realistic sense cannot arise (denial of 3)." On the other hand, "if we assert 3, we are committed to there being statements in the domain (1) that can be assessed for truth or falsity in terms of whether what they assert to obtain actually does obtain (2)."<sup>186</sup>

According to Alston, the statements regarding truth of Kant, the emotivists, theoreticians of coherence, and pragmatists regarding the meaning of truth, are all non-realist, because they deny one of his three principles of realism. Those who argue for emotivism regarding ethics are ethical irrealists, because they deny the first principle. They do not see any fact behind ethical statements except the expressions of attitudes or feelings. The theoreticians of coherence and pragmatists are alethically non-realists. Although they accept the first principle, they deny the second principle. According to these theories, "the truth of a statement consists in some epistemic status it has (being integrated in a coherent system, or 'leading' us fruitfully from one part of our experience to another) rather than in the actual obtaining of what the statement claims to be the case." An example of a position that is alethically non-realist because it denies the third, although not the first and second claims, is that of

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<sup>186</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

Kant, who believes that our cognitive activity determines the constitution of the physical world.<sup>187</sup>

### 4.3.3. Epistemic Conception of Truth

The chief alternative for those who do not accept the realistic conception of truth is supporting an epistemic approach to the issue. This position, according to Alston, is the basic foundation for someone like D. Z. Phillips who believes that multiple language-games have different concepts of truth. Non-religious and religious expressions have various criteria and meaning of truth and falsity. When we say that the sentence, 'God raised Jesus from his death on the third day' is true, we do not mean to convey the same sense of truth as when we say, 'The First World War occurred in 1914-18, in Europe, among most of the great Western powers.' In the same way, the word 'real' has various meanings in these statements: 'God really exists' or 'John Calvin really existed in 1509-64.'<sup>188</sup> "For a belief or statement to be true is for the subject to be in some favorable epistemic situation vis-à-vis that belief or statement."<sup>189</sup>

The epistemic conception of truth has been a common view in last 150 years. This view is evident from absolute idealism of the nineteenth-century until the contemporary American pragmatism. Examples of the supporter of the epistemic

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<sup>187</sup>Ibid., pp. 39-40.

<sup>188</sup>Alston, "Taking the Curse Off Language-Games," p. 21.

<sup>189</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

conception of truth in this period are: The British philosopher Francis Herbert Bradley (1846-1924), and the American philosophers William James (1842-1910), John Dewey (1859-1952), Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), and Brand Blanshard (1892-1987). Among more recent scholars who continued this line are the British Philosopher, Michael Dummett (1925-), and the American Philosopher, Hilary Putnam (1926-). For them, the truth should be explained in epistemic terms. Speaking of his perspective on truth, F. H. Bradley says: "If you ask what is truth, you are led to answer that it is that which satisfies the intellect."<sup>190</sup> What does satisfy the intellect? Answering this question, he holds: "an ideal expression of the Universe, at once coherent and comprehensive. It must not conflict with itself."<sup>191</sup> In the pragmatist's line there is William James, who asserts: "true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify."<sup>192</sup> John Dewey suggests an instrumentalist view of truth. It is determined by being instrumental to "an active reorganization of the given environment, a removal of some specific trouble or perplexity."<sup>193</sup> Then, if any theory, idea, or conception succeeds in accomplishing this work, it is reliable and true. If it increases confusion or fails to eliminate defects,

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<sup>190</sup>F. H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 1.

<sup>191</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>192</sup>William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 97.

<sup>193</sup>John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Enlarged Edition with a New Introduction by the Author (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1963), p. 156.

it is false.<sup>194</sup> For C. S. Peirce's "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth."<sup>195</sup> Brand Blanshard, however, explains the truth of a proposition first by its coherence "with experience as a whole, ultimately by its coherence with that further whole, all-comprehensive and fully articulated, in which thought can come to rest."<sup>196</sup> Putnam, a contemporary philosopher, however, criticizes what he calls 'metaphysical realism' because of its significant consequence, namely "that truth is supposed to be radically non-epistemic, ... so the theory that is 'ideal' from the point of view of operational utility, inner beauty and elegance, 'plausibility', 'simplicity', 'conservatism', and so on might be false."<sup>197</sup> The alternative that Putnam suggests is not describing truth with rational acceptability *tout court*; rather he says: "truth is an idealization of rational acceptability. We speak as if there were such things as epistemically ideal conditions, and we call a statement 'true' if it would be justified under such conditions."<sup>198</sup> In

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<sup>194</sup>Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>195</sup>C. S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *Collected Papers*, eds. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 268.

<sup>196</sup>Brand Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1948), p. 264.

<sup>197</sup>H. Putnam, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 125.

<sup>198</sup>H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 55.

Putnam's internalist position, truth "is some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability - some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experience as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system - and not correspondence with mind-independent or discourse-independent 'states of affairs.'"<sup>199</sup>

### *Alston's Objection to the Epistemological Conception of Truth*

Alston puts forward a schema to embody the fundamental characteristic of the concept of the truth of every statement or belief. The schema is: "It is true that P, iff P."<sup>200</sup> The truth-value, in its alethic realism version, of every belief "is a matter of whether what the belief is about is as it is believed to be."<sup>201</sup> My belief that 'The First World War occurred in 1914-18' is true if the First World War did happen at that time. This fundamental characteristic of the concept of the truth leads to a crucial problem for the epistemic approach to truth. Alston explains the problems through giving as an example the statement, 'God is omnipotent.'

Referring to the first problem, Alston maintains that, based on a realistic conception of truth, all that is required for the truth of this statement is that God be omnipotent. "We cannot impose any epistemic requirements for truth without

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<sup>199</sup>Ibid., pp. 49-50.

<sup>200</sup>Throughout this thesis, I follow Alston in using the term "iff" to mean "if."

<sup>201</sup>Alston, "Taking the Curse Off Language-Games," p. 22.

violating the truism in question, according to which God's being omnipotent is by itself sufficient for the truth of the proposition."<sup>202</sup>

In Alston's opinion, the only point that an epistemic theorist can raise regarding the first problem is that "the statement in question, contrary to appearances, really ascribes a certain epistemic status to the statement - the status varying with the particular form of epistemic theory in question."<sup>203</sup> This point, Alston says, would lead an epistemic theorist to the second problem, which is as follows:

It is evident that people, usually do not speak about the epistemic status of something. No one can claim that all of our religious and non-religious assertions are from such kinds of statements. Philosophers are not even involved all the time with epistemology. Furthermore, "our opponent will find it impossible to specify of what statement it is an epistemic status which is asserted by saying 'God is omnipotent.' The obvious choice would be the statement that God is omnipotent."<sup>204</sup> What the opponent has claimed is that all statements, including 'God is omnipotent,' are about the epistemic status of some statement. If we ask him 'Which statement do you mean?' he will not be able to answer this question except through an infinite regress, "in which at each stage the statement that is said to have a certain epistemic status is itself a statement to the effect that some statement (other than itself) has a certain

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<sup>202</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>203</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>204</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

epistemic status.”<sup>205</sup> Consequently, the second problem would lead the opponent to an incoherent position.

Then Alston goes further and maintains that even if we welcome the epistemic conception of truth, we cannot accept that there are multiple conceptions of truth for different language-games. In such a case also, all language-games will have the same concept of truth, although the methods to judge what is true vary according to different language-games.<sup>206</sup>

Alston here refers to one of the critiques of his view. According to this criticism, even though Alston’s view is right, it is not a significant position. The significant point is to clarify the way in which we state what is true, and those ways vary in different language-games such as religion, interpersonal relation, and so on. Alston accepts the second part of the objection in which there is emphasis on the significance of determining the ways, which are not the same in all language-games, to know how to tell what is true. He does not, however, agree that his view regarding a universal concept of truth is insignificant. The reason is that “if we miss this point, we will fail to realize that whether what we say or think is true or not, in the last analysis is up to us. It depends on how things are independent of our language-games, conceptual schemes, and other maneuverings.”<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>206</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>207</sup>Ibid., p. 46.



#### 4.4. Alston and Religious Irrealism

Alston sees a close relation between religious language and the kind of approach that we take regarding the concept of truth. A basic question about some religious statements, such as the existence of God, is whether the evaluation of religious statements as true or false can be connected to an objective reality or not. To what extent is that reality “independent of our cognitive machinations? Or do they [religious statements] have some other status? Is their truth (or other positive status, in case ‘truth’ is not applicable) to be assessed in some other way?”<sup>208</sup> Alston’s realistic theory of truth would lead him to follow the same doctrine regarding religion.

To clarify Alston’s position, I will explain the meaning of religious irrealism. I will then compare Alston’s position with different doctrines, including views of Paul Tillich, John Hick, and D. Gordon Kaufman. There are two reasons for choosing these scholars. Firstly, they have prominent role among scholars of religion. Tillich has written five hundreds works, and “his writings have been highly influential on Protestant theology in the second half of the twentieth century.”<sup>209</sup> Hick, one of the great philosophers of religion of the past thirty years, has been influential on several crucial topics in the field, including the rationality of religious beliefs, the problem of

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<sup>208</sup>Alston, “Realism and Christian Faith,” p. 40.

<sup>209</sup>Cohn-Sherbok, *Who’s Who in Christianity* (Routledge: London and New York: 1998), p.

evil, and life after death.<sup>210</sup> Secondly, what these scholars support, namely the particular expressivist theories of religious truth and realism, are in serious conflict with Alston's doctrine. Comparing Alston's opinion with these opposite views would provide us a better comprehension of both sides.

#### 4.4.1. Meaning of Religious Irrealism

We can realize from Alston's view of religious realism/irrealism that he is only concerned with one of its various forms, which he calls alethic realism/irrealism. Metaphysical irrealism regarding religion has multiple types. One of its well-known forms is atheism, the denial of the existence of God in any interpretation or as a supreme personal deity.<sup>211</sup> Some thinkers are atheists, but not alethic irrealists. For example, Bertrand Russell, who is an atheist, is not an alethic non-realist, since Russell supposes that there are objective facts according to which we can judge the truth or falsity of religious beliefs. What has made him an atheist is that he does not consider this objective reality a supreme personal deity. The same point is true regarding Julian Huxley, whose version of the Trinity is a naturalistic interpretation. For him, God the Father is the force of non-human nature; God the Holy Spirit is the ultimate objectives or goals for which people exert their best effort. He sees God the Son "as human life itself which is, more or less, utilizing the forces of nature in the pursuit of those ideals. The unity of these three Persons in one God is interpreted as

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<sup>210</sup>S. Brown, et al., *Bibliographic Dictionary of twentieth-Century Philosophers*, 330.

<sup>211</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 40.

the essential unity of all these aspects of nature.”<sup>212</sup> Huxley, in spite of his naturalist version of Christianity, takes there to be objective realities for evaluation of religious claims; however, these facts for him are not of a supernatural sort. In the following discussion I will compare Alston’s position with expressivism, then with those of Tillich, Hick and Kaufman.

#### 4.4.2 Alston and Expressivism

Expressivism, emotivism and non-cognitivism are different terms with almost the same sense which are well known in ethics and also have been applied to religion. An expressivist in ethics rejects the real status of moral statements and rather considers them as expressions of feelings and attitudes.<sup>213</sup> Alasdair Chalmers MacIntyre (1929-), a British analytic philosopher, defines the theory of emotivism as follows: “Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, in so far as they are moral or evaluative in character.”<sup>214</sup> He gives an example of the case of unity between a factual judgment and a moral judgment. He says: “‘Arson, being destructive of property, is wrong’

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<sup>212</sup>Julian Huxley, *Religion Without Revelation* (New York: New American Library, 1958), p. 240.

<sup>213</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>214</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue, A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 11.

unites the factual judgment that 'Arson destroys property' with the moral judgment that 'Arson is wrong.' But the moral element in such a judgment is always to be sharply distinguished from the factual."<sup>215</sup> According to emotivism, although factual judgments are true or false, moral judgments are neither true nor false. Furthermore, unlike factual judgments, moral judgments may not be secured by any rational method. The purpose of moral judgments is to express our own feelings and produce them in others. Charles Leslie Stevenson (1908-1979), an American analytic philosopher and a great advocator of emotivism, states that the sentence 'This is good' has approximately the same meaning as 'I approve of this; do so as well.' Other emotivists maintain that the sentence 'This is good' means 'Hurrah for this!'<sup>216</sup>

An example of expressivism in religion is George Santayana (1863-1952), a Spanish philosopher, who does not believe in God. Religious belief, or 'myth' as he prefers to say, has two constituent parts: (a) some kind of evaluation, which is (b) stated through a model of a story or picture. For example, "the Christian myth of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ and His sacrificial and unmerited death on the cross to atone for our sins can be regarded as a symbol of the moral value of self-sacrifice."<sup>217</sup> Instead of saying 'self-sacrifice is a valuable characteristic', religious doctrine gives us a story of sacrificial death of a supernatural person. In Santayana's

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<sup>215</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>216</sup>Ibid., pp. 11-12.

<sup>217</sup>Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 41.

thought, religious myths, besides being expressions of emotions and attitudes, direct and guide us in our life. He sees religion as poetry which has effects on human behavior. Thus, Santayana's doctrine can be referred to as an expressivist-instrumentalist approach to religion.

The term 'instrumentalism' has been taken from the philosophy of science. There are things known as quarks and positrons which we cannot observe and whose reality we cannot discern. When an instrumentalist speaks about such entities, he does not want to discover their reality; rather, naming and talking about them are useful tools which help a scientist to follow his or her research about observable phenomena. Likewise, talking of religion with an instrumentalist approach is for orienting human life.<sup>218</sup>

Here I will refer to the answers of Alston and Alasdair C. MacIntyre to expressivism. MacIntyre, who is among those scholars who reject expressivism, is currently a professor of Philosophy in the University of Notre Dame. I will discuss his view, since he is a distinguished contemporary and influential thinker who criticizes expressivism in a way different from Alston. Moreover, the former rejects expressivism in ethics and the latter in religion, so their views may be seen as complementary.

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<sup>218</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

### *MacIntyre's Answer to Expressivism*

MacIntyre criticizes the theory of emotivism which is another name he gives to expressivism, as follows:

1. According to one of his critiques, this theory involves vacuous circularity. If someone asks emotivists 'What kinds of feelings do you mean, when you say that moral judgments express attitudes or feelings?' they will reply 'Feelings of approval.' If we again ask them 'What kind of approval?' they may answer that there are several kinds of approval. MacIntyre states that "It is in answer to this question that every version of emotivism either remains silent or, by identifying the relevant kind of approval as moral approval - that is, the type of approval expressed by a specifically moral judgment - becomes vacuously circular."<sup>219</sup>

2. MacIntyre's second reason for rejecting emotivism is based on his distinguishing between personal and impersonal preference and evaluation. When you ask me to do something and I ask you, 'Why should I do so-and-so?' you can reply to me in two different ways. The first way is that you reply, 'Because I wish it.' This is a personal answer that does not give me any reason for the benefit of action itself. The second way is that you give me a reason for the action itself independent from you who utter it. After clarifying the difference between personal and impersonal preference, MacIntyre maintains, "This seems sufficient to show that

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<sup>219</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 12.

there is some large difference in meaning between members of the two classes; yet the emotive theory wishes to make them equivalent in meaning.”<sup>220</sup>

3. MacIntyre’s third reason for rejecting emotivism is that one should distinguish between the meaning of moral statements and their use. The use of moral judgments can be understood as purpose or function of these statements. He clarifies his view by giving an example of a teacher who has gotten angry because of a wrong answer of his or her student regarding an arithmetical question, and says angrily, ‘Seven times seven equals forty-nine!’ Then MacIntyre concludes that “But the use of this sentence to express feelings or attitudes has nothing whatsoever to do with its meaning.”<sup>221</sup>

#### *Alston’s Reply to Expressivism*

Alston also rejects expressivism. Among his reasons is that expressivism denies a real interaction between God and human beings in this world and the Day of Resurrection. This interaction is a fundamental element in Christianity, and it has two sides. From God’s side, God is considered an active being in the world who has particular plans for the creation of human beings. God effectively follows his purpose by “selecting the Hebrews for a special mission and destiny, communicating his will to us through them, rescuing them from bondage in Egypt, seeking to

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<sup>220</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>221</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

influence them through the prophets”<sup>222</sup>, and the like. From our side, for instance, we communicate with God through prayer. This interaction between God and people is considered to be in its real sense, implying the actual presence of God in the world as a Supreme Being independent from our existence and our cognitive system.<sup>223</sup>

This idea is denied by expressivism-instrumentalism. God in this doctrine is not a real object, but imaginary. Thus, we cannot assert real interaction with God on the basis of His imaginative form. “We can’t even suppose that we do, unless we are psychotic.” Therefore, by taking an expressivism-instrumentalist position we would lose the center of religious tradition.<sup>224</sup>

Another basic point in Christianity denied by expressivism-instrumentalism is “the status of God as the source of being for all other than himself.”<sup>225</sup> This is also a crucial point in Christian belief, even if it is less central than the previous one. We cannot keep such a belief by looking at God as “an imaginative construct or by a way in which the Real appears to us.”<sup>226</sup> Such a being does not have enough power to be the source of being for everything else.

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<sup>222</sup>Alston, “Realism and Christian Faith,” p. 45.

<sup>223</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>224</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>225</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>226</sup>Ibid., p. 46.



#### 4.4.3. Alston and Paul Tillich

For Paul Tillich, the only thing that we can deal with regarding the reality and real differentiation of God's attributes is symbol. "Real symbols provide no objective knowledge, but yet a true awareness."<sup>227</sup> Thus, we have the possibility of obtaining a true awareness of God. Nonetheless, "the criterion of the truth of a symbol naturally cannot be the comparison of it with the reality to which it refers, just because this reality is absolutely beyond human comprehension."<sup>228</sup> We would in fact be disappointed if we were to find any similarity between God and what we say about God. Our 'God' is being shaped by symbols of God, "which 'point to' His reality by 'participating' in His power and being."<sup>229</sup> In addition to what is ordinarily known as symbols, such as the lamb, water, and the shepherd, symbols include any concrete or conceptualizable thing such as the Holy Spirit and God. "Speaking of God the Father is an appropriate way of symbolizing Being Itself because fatherhood is one of the 'places' in the world where we are 'grasped' by the power of being, one of the aspects of the world that reveals or mediates Being to us."<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>227</sup>Sidney Hook ed., *Religious Experience and Truth* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 316.

<sup>228</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>229</sup>Tillich, "Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God," in *The Christian Scholar* 38 (1955), pp. 189-197.

<sup>230</sup>Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 42.

In comparing Alston's view of religious realism with Tillich's religious symbolism, we can see both a similarity and a difference. They both share in thesis 1 of alethic realism. By accepting this principle, Tillich will be separated from expressivism. Alston, however, thinks that Tillich's symbolism is clearly connected to expressivism. Meanwhile, Alston, by emphasizing an obvious relation between Tillich and expressivism, does not mean to equate Tillich with the expressivists. Rather, Alston believes that Tillich keeps himself away from expressivism's clear rejection of the traditional view that expressions of religious idea are statements of fact. Explaining accurately Tillich's position, Alston maintains that for Tillich religious statements have a particular basis, which is Being-Itself as an objective referent. Nevertheless, "the conceptual and cognitive inaccessibility of Being-Itself prevents us from assessing those affirmations as true or false of Being-Itself in a realistic sense."<sup>231</sup>

The main difference between Alston's realism and Tillich's position is connected with Alston's second and third principles of alethic realism, which are denied in Tillich's expressivism. Nevertheless, after hesitating to count Tillich as someone who accepts or rejects the second principle, Alston then maintains that he does reject it. He finally makes this assertion because he believes that "for Tillich a religious 'affirmation' is not really thought of as making a claim as to how reality is

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<sup>231</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

at some point (hence not really a factual statement), but as ‘pointing to’ some aspect of the world that effectively puts us in touch with Being-Itself.”<sup>232</sup>

#### 4.4.4. Alston and Hick's position

One of the main differences between Alston and Hick springs from Hick's similarity to Kant. Since Alston does not agree with Kant's epistemology, he would object to Hick, whose idea is very close to Kant's position. In Kant's theory of knowledge, he distinguishes between phenomenal and noumenal reality. Then he maintains that our theoretical knowledge cannot reach to the reality itself. It only grasps the phenomenal world, the ways in which reality appears to our senses. In the same way, Hick asserts that the Real as it is in itself, a noumenal reality, is completely inaccessible for us. In fact, he goes further than Kant, rejecting the possibility of applying our concepts to the Real. In the opinion of Hick, the Real “transcends human conceptuality.”<sup>233</sup> By applying Kantian concepts to religion, the Real would have several interpretations depending on the varieties of religious traditions, rather than one human schematization of various sensations by a unique set of categories.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>233</sup>John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 350, 266.

<sup>234</sup>Ibid., p. 350.

Another fundamental issue which separates Alston's religious realism from Hick is that he does not apply literal truth to religion. Instead, he replaces it with 'mythical truth.' "A statement or set of statements about X is mythologically true if it is not literally true but nevertheless, tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to X. Mythological truth is practical."<sup>235</sup> Thus, unlike Alston, the realistic conception of truth is not the criterion for the evaluation and judgment of a religious statement as being true or false. The criterion is that a specific religious belief evokes the proper attitude in believers.

#### 4.4.5. Alston and Kaufman's View

Almost in the same way that Alston's position is different from Hick, it is different from Gordon Kaufman, the Harvard theologian who presents a view similar to Hick. Just as we see a sort of distinction between phenomenal and noumenal reality in Hick, who follows Kant's approach to knowledge, Kaufman brings up a new idea of distinguishing between the real and the available referent of God. He maintains that we do not have any access to conceive or experience the real referent of God.<sup>236</sup> "It must remain always an unknown X, a mere limiting idea with no content."<sup>237</sup> The available referent is our imaginative construct of God.

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<sup>235</sup>Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 348.

<sup>236</sup>Gordon D. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 85.

<sup>237</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 85.

In the opinion of Alston (and here I agree with him), the main difference between Kaufman and Hick is that while Hick's emphasis is that the real is what we experience and relate to, Kaufman gives significant role to "the available referent as the object of religious responses."<sup>238</sup> This imaginative construct of God is the principal object of theological research. The task of theologians is to "examine the available (traditional) formulations of the concept, develop criteria for criticizing them, and propose more adequate reconceptions."<sup>239</sup> Although Kaufman does not see any possible knowledge of the real God, he stresses the role of available God in this world as an ordering principle for life.<sup>240</sup> Believer's orientation and devotion is connected and concentrated on this God. Nonetheless, "the real referent appears only as an I-know-not-what in the background that is somehow the ultimate ground of all this."<sup>241</sup>

Alston is also accurate when he maintains that Kaufman's tendency in his later works, *The Theological Imagination*, and *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, is to drop out completely the real referent. Kaufman replaces the real referent by 'mystery' which should not be taken as "descriptive of some object of theological awareness or knowledge," but rather "an intellectual bafflement in the

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<sup>238</sup> Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," pp. 43-44.

<sup>239</sup> Kaufman, *God the Problem*, p. 87.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>241</sup> Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 44.

face of ultimate questions.”<sup>242</sup> For Kaufman, referring to an available referent of God using our talk and experience is not (any more) an intermediary way to the real referent. Rather, God is within an imaginary scheme. “The image/concept of God does not function simply as referring to some being which is grasped and understood just in terms of itself; on the contrary, it functions as the principal focal point of an overall world-picture, and it is in terms of that interpretive frame that it must be understood.”<sup>243</sup> It is not necessary to assume a specific existent being, God. It is within the world of nature that we should realize all realities. “We should, in our attempt to construct conceptions and pictures of humanity, the world, and God, try to speak only in terms of this world, of the realities of this life.”<sup>244</sup>

The expressivist position in Kaufman regarding traditional theistic talk of God has less ambiguity than in Hick’s view. The realistic conception of truth regarding God-talk has been clearly rejected in Kaufman. A combination of expressivism and a sort of instrumentalism is another similarity between Kaufman and Hick. Kaufman clearly draws a parallel between instrumentalism in science and his idea of God. Having such an approach in any idea, whether in science or religion, implies the significance and value of those ideas for action, even if we do not have any access to

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<sup>242</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>243</sup>Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 37.

<sup>244</sup>Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 326.

understanding of its truth-value. “In this sense ‘right’ ideas do not necessarily coincide with ‘true’ ideas.”<sup>245</sup> After explaining the meaning of instrumentalism and its application in science, Kaufman states: “In a similar way, it may well be right to act in accordance with the conception of God and what that implies about our world and ourselves even though we are unclear whether or in what respects that notion is true.”<sup>246</sup> Thus, Kaufman in his recent writings presents a pure expressivism-instrumentalism’ view which leads to the denial of all three principles of Alston’s alethic realism.

Another similarity we see between Hick and Kaufman is that both emphasize the positive advantages of belief in God as a center for devotion and receiving guidance and orientation for our life. Both consider the issue of admitting a special imaginative construct a practical issue.

#### 4.5. Summary and Comments

In this chapter I traced Alston’s view of any possible concept of truth applicable in multiple language-games, including religious language. I elaborated the answer in three sections:

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<sup>245</sup>Kaufman, *God the Problem*, p. 108.

<sup>246</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 108.

#### 4.5.1. The First Section

In the first section, we looked at Alston's position on contextuality and universality of truth-criteria in religious belief. On the one hand, in his view, there are common standards (beyond all language-games) for evaluating language-games and beliefs. On the other hand, Alston believes that truth is not the same in various contexts.<sup>247</sup> It is the result of the commonality that we can evaluate assertions of various religions. His idea is in contrast to that of Phillips, Winch, and Ferreira. Alston's strategy, on the other hand, is very close to Steven Lukes' appeal to both autonomy and commensurability. Their positions, however, have been criticized by Ferreira. While, I would argue, Ferreira's objection to Lukes can be accepted (although it needs to be elaborated further), his criticism of Alston is problematic.

#### *Appraisal*

Lukes' main purpose is to offer 'criteria of rationality' by which we can determine the reason for belief in something.<sup>248</sup> We can evaluate any belief by referring to Lukes' universal and context-dependence criteria of rationality, when there is a clear line between these two types of criteria. In other words, in evaluating any belief we should know when we should refer to 'rational (1)' and when to 'rational (2)'. Otherwise, they may violate each other. There seems, however, to be

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<sup>247</sup>Crosson, *The Autonomy of religious belief*, p. 138.

<sup>248</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 208.



ambiguity in Lukes' view of these criteria. Ferreira apparently points to this ambiguity when he criticizes Lukes and says:

A potential problem emerges. There is a universal criterion of truth as well as contextual criterion of truth. There are supposedly universal criteria which allow one to criticize a belief for being arrived at deficiently, yet there are contextually-provided criteria which specify 'the best way to arrive at' a belief. Moreover, criteria of logic are said to be universal, yet beliefs in particular contexts "may or may not violate the laws of logic."<sup>249</sup>

To complete Ferreira's criticism, I may add that it is difficult to evaluate any belief on the basis of Lukes' criteria because, in his view, the contextually-provided criteria "may or may not violate the laws of logic."<sup>250</sup> While Lukes' 'rational (1)' does not let us violate laws of logic, his 'rational (2)' leaves open the possibility of its violation.

Alston's account of the universality of standards of truth has been criticized by Ferreira in several ways, including the following:

A) Ferreira states: "In Alston's account the question of the relation of context-dependency to universality is raised from two different directions." For the first direction he quotes Alston: "if a common concept of truth applies to all language-games, the way is opened for assertions validated in one language-game to contradict assertions validated in another. Where this happens...the task of evaluating language-

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<sup>249</sup>Ferreira, "Universal Criteria and the Autonomy of Religious Belief" p. 6, Ferreira's direct quote is from: Wilson, *Rationality*, p. 211.

<sup>250</sup>*Rationality*, p. 211.

games takes on a special urgency.”<sup>251</sup> Then he criticizes Alston and brings up the following question:

How to reconcile Alston’s requirement that we evaluate criteria of justification to see whether they conduce to truth (138) with his demand for the context-dependence of criteria of justification (on the basis of a distinct ontology, an ‘irreducible conceptual scheme’ (40), and the learned ‘immediate’ applications of terms (133-4). Alternatively phrased, it is the question of the relation between the ‘universal-ness’ or ‘common-ness’ of the concept as such and its contextual application.<sup>252</sup>

B) Speaking of Alston’s second direction, Ferreira quotes from Alston when he maintains that there are, “certain language-game neutral standards and criteria, e.g., consistency and parsimony, as well as more elusive criteria of adequacy of explanation, that, since neutral, can be used in the higher-level language-game of evaluating language-games.”<sup>253</sup> Then Ferreira raises again the same problem of the relation between the universality of criteria and their contextual application, and continues, “In so far, then, as Alston’s universal notion of truth and ‘neutral’ criteria are meant to allow contradiction and evaluation between contexts, one need to raise the question of the relation of common standards to their contextual application.”<sup>254</sup>

C) Ferreira refers to Alston’s similarity to Phillips and Winch regarding the admission of context-dependency and Alston’s difference with them regarding the

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<sup>251</sup>Crosson, *The Autonomy of religious belief*, p. 148.

<sup>252</sup>Ferreira, “Universal Criteria and the Autonomy of Religious Belief,” p. 5.

<sup>253</sup>Crosson, *The Autonomy of religious belief*, p. 149.

<sup>254</sup>Ferreira, “Universal Criteria and the Autonomy of Religious Belief,” p. 8.

universal notion of truth. Then Ferreira says: “We need to ask, however, precisely how the context-dependency Alston wants is mitigated so as to allow the contradiction and evaluation he sees the need to maintain (for clearly if context-dependency were total, neither contradiction nor evaluation would be possible).”<sup>255</sup>

D) Ferreira maintains that what Alston considers neutral standards, such as sufficiency of clarification, parsimony and consistency, do not guarantee the possibility of contradiction and evaluation. “Such standards in themselves don’t guarantee objectivity or commensurability since they need to be applied, and Alston’s account...does not effectively guard against their being applied in ways which violate their common or transcontextual intent.”<sup>256</sup>

According to the present author, as far as Ferreira’s objections to Alston are concerned, the following observations can be made:

A) What Ferreira calls the first and second directions in Alston’s view of the relation of context-dependence to universality are two bases in Alston’s argument for the necessity of having a concept of truth that applies to all language-games. In other words, Alston’s concern in the passages that Ferreira quotes here, is his view regarding the basis of the universality of truth, rather than the relation between universality and context-dependence.

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<sup>255</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>256</sup>Ferreira, “Universal Criteria and the Autonomy of Religious Belief,” p. 9, also see pp. 10-12.

B) It seems that Ferreira is aware of two reasons Alston has for holding that all language-games have a common concept of truth: a) opening the way for the possibility of contradiction among language-games and then their evaluation b) neutral standards and criteria, e.g., consistency and parsimony. I think, however, that there is one more significant reason that he has not addressed, and that is Alston's realistic conception of truth. This theory of truth plays a key role in Alston's view of a common concept of truth.<sup>257</sup>

C) Ferreira apparently considers Alston's view regarding a universal concept of truth and reference a correspondence notion of truth and reference. Ferreira says: "The strategy used (by Alston) to insure autonomy without loss of commensurability is to appeal to a concept of truth as correspondence and presumably a concept of justification as 'counting toward correspondence,' which are common to all contexts"<sup>258</sup> However, Ferreira's view may not be accurate, since Alston's version of truth is not the same as the correspondence theory of truth. We realize this point from some of his passages in which he maintains that there is a tendency to consider the realistic conception of truth as a particular type of correspondence theory. "The statement that P is true iff there is an actually obtaining fact (the fact that P, naturally) which it 'matches', or with which it 'corresponds.'"<sup>259</sup> Then he maintains

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<sup>257</sup>For the details of Alston's view in this regard, see: Chapter 4.3. Alston's Realistic Conception of Truth.

<sup>258</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>259</sup>Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 38.

that giving an acceptable form of correspondence theory is a difficult task, which requires a separate discussion; he says that he will not concentrate here on this issue.<sup>260</sup> Thus, Alston does not agree with some version of the correspondence theory of truth. Moreover, if it was the same as Alston's realistic conception of truth, he would not require a separate discussion for it.

D) Ferreira repeats several times the same question regarding Alston's view. The question is about the relation of universal criteria to their context-dependent application. It seems that this point is common in all last four critiques of Ferreira. It is explicit in the first two critiques, and implicit (even though it represents the core of Ferreira's critique) in the last two critiques. Ferreira's third critique is that the admission of context-dependency in a broad sense would prevent any possibility of contradiction and evaluation. Thus, his question is about the relation between universality and contextuality. When Ferreira has one question regarding Alston's argument, it is better to elaborate once without any repetition. Ferreira's fourth critique also apparently refers to the same question that he brought up already. His main concern in the fourth point is that there is a possibility of violation in applying both common and contextual standards.

E) As far as Ferreira's main question regarding the relation between universality and context-dependency in Alston's argument is concerned, the following point can be made:

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<sup>260</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

The way that we can prevent the possibility of violation between universal criteria and context-dependent criteria of truth is to clarify the area of each of the two kinds of criteria. If we consider the context-dependent standards total, so that they cover every standard, there will not remain any room for universal criteria. Even if each of these two kinds of standards is ambiguous, there will be the possibility of violation in their application. We may, however, distinguish between them. Universal criteria are like consistency, sufficiency or weakness of clarification. We can verify the truth of any language-game according to these neutral criteria. On the other hand, context-dependent standards are those which relate to variation that exists between different ranges of entities. Alston means the latter when he holds that we cannot accept the idea of philosophers such as Plato, Descartes and Locke who used to think about finding general principles of assessment for multiple kinds of beliefs. Religious belief, perceptual belief, and arithmetical belief each has its own principle for assessment. Principles such as "being founded on a sufficient ground" as the only way for justification of various beliefs, is a very unspecified principle which is not very useful.<sup>261</sup> Moreover, methods of research are different among multiple language-games. For example, the language-game in philosophy seems to be different from experimental sciences; research in the latter more than the former deals with experience. When there are various methods of research in different

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<sup>261</sup> Alston, "Taking the Curse Off Language-Games," p. 35.

language-games, each method has its own specific criteria of verification. Meanwhile, all methods share in common standards of truth like consistency.

G) There are two small errors in the reference Ferreira gives to Alston's article. P. 138 should be 148 and p. 40 should be 148.

#### 4.5.2. Second Section

In the second section I referred to Alston's realistic conception of truth as the basic foundation for his position of a concept of truth applicable in all language-games, including religious statements. Alston's particular sense of alethic realism is a conjunction of three claims regarding the assumed statements, S's, in a particular body of discourse, D.

- a) S's are genuine factual statements.
- b) S's are true or false in the realistic sense of those terms.
- c) The facts that make true S's true hold and are what they are independently of human cognition.<sup>262</sup>

Alston, on the other hand, rejects the epistemic conception of truth, since it is the main alternative for those who do not accept his position. We can find a second reason for Alston to reject the epistemic conception of truth, although he does not explicitly mention it. The reason is the close relation that he sees between an epistemic conception of truth and rejecting any commonality between multiple language-games. Whoever supports the former, cannot reject the claim that various

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<sup>262</sup>Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," pp. 39.

language-games have diverse concepts of truth and reality. We can conceive this point from Alston's reply to someone who wants to emphasize the epistemic conception of truth, while belief in the necessity of one concept of truth for all language-games. If someone asserts that even if we believe that different language-games have distinct contents of epistemic standards, there is still a general meaning of truth, "that applies across these differences - namely satisfying whatever epistemic standards are appropriate."<sup>263</sup> Alston rejects this view and says: "But it would still be true that what truth amounts to specifically would differ in different language-games."<sup>264</sup>

### *Appraisal*

While I agree, to some extent with Alston's alethic realism, I think it needs necessary modifications to which I will refer later.<sup>265</sup>

Alston in his discussion of truth in several cases considers Phillips' view as one of his opponents who defends an epistemic approach to truth. It seems to the present author, however, that Alston's view of Phillips' position is not coherent. Alston maintains that Phillips does not propose the reason for his position that multiple language-games have different concepts of truth. Although Alston does not agree with Phillips' view, he still attempts to find the possible reasons for Phillips'

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<sup>263</sup> Alston, "Taking the Curse Off Language-Games," p. 45.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>265</sup> I will discuss this point in Chapter 9.2.3



position. Referring to the reason for Phillips' argument, Alston maintains that "the only possible basis I can think of involves an 'epistemizing' of truth - holding that the truth of a statement or belief is to be construed as an ideally positive epistemic status of that statement or belief."<sup>266</sup>

Meanwhile, in another passage, Alston holds that to arrive at Phillips' idea, we require a combination of two things: an epistemic conception of truth, and relativisation of epistemic standards to various language-games. Since a statement would be true when it has suitable epistemic standards, and since there are multiple standards in different language-games, so there are several kinds of truth.<sup>267</sup> There is no harmony between these two passages of Alston, since according to the first passage, mentioned above, there is only one basis for Phillips' view, while according to the second passage, there are two bases for his position.

Another part of Alston's writing indicates more ambiguity in his position regarding Phillips' idea. We can realize from a passage of Alston in one of his articles<sup>268</sup> that in his view, Phillips' position of religious language is close to the naturalistic expressivist view of Richard Bevan Braithwaite - although Phillips wants to avoid it. Religious stories for Braithwaite are helps for independently constituted moral goals. In his attempt to separate his position from the naturalistic expressivist

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<sup>266</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>267</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>268</sup>Alston, "Taking the Curse Off Language-games," p. 30.

view, Phillips considers both religious stories and moral goals, to be externally related. Phillips' suggestion is that "the religious belief is itself the expression of a moral vision."<sup>269</sup> Referring to this view of Phillips, Alston holds "that (it) still leaves us within the confines of an expressivist account that does not go beyond the purview of the natural world."<sup>270</sup>

### 4.5.3. Third Section

The third section dealt with Alston's reaction to religious irrealism. Alston's realistic theory of truth led him to follow the same doctrine regarding religion. I compared his view with MacIntyre, Tillich, John Hick, and D. Gordon Kaufman. The last three scholars argue for the expressivist theory of religious truth and realism, which are in serious conflict with Alston's doctrine.

As far as the views of Alston and MacIntyre regarding expressivism are concerned, the following observation can be made:

#### *A. Examining Views of Alston and MacIntyre Regarding Expressivism*

While I do not agree with expressivism either in ethics or in religion, I think necessary modifications should be made in the manner in which both MacIntyre and Alston criticize expressivism. I can clarify my view as follows:

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<sup>269</sup>D. Z. Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), pp. 140-45.

<sup>270</sup>Alston, "Taking the Curse Off Language-Games," p. 30.

1. MacIntyre raised three problems regarding emotivism. As far as MacIntyre's views regarding the theory of emotivism are concerned, the following points can be made.

a) MacIntyre in his first critical point mentions that if someone asks emotivists to identify the kind of approval they mean, they cannot answer this question except in a circular way. This argument of MacIntyre, yet, may be rejected. This is because if someone asks emotivists 'What kind of approval do you mean?' they may answer that 'The approval of the speaker, who gives a moral judgment.' When Stevenson asserts that the sentence 'This is good' means 'I approve of this; do so as well' we can comprehend that the approval in this sentence is not a vague kind of approval, but rather it is the approval of the speaker who states that 'This is good.' Therefore, it does not involve a vacuous circularity, because everyone has his or her own approval. Furthermore, according to emotivists, there is nothing in moral judgments except the expression of feelings and attitudes. Hence, the approval that comes from moral judgment is also based on feeling, and everyone has his or her own feelings. Consequently, we may have different approvals based on the variety of feelings which cannot be adjudicated, hence conflict.

b) MacIntyre's second reason for rejecting emotivism is based on his distinction between personal and impersonal preference and evaluation. Speaking of this distinction, he maintains that, "emotive theory wishes to make them equivalent in

meaning.”<sup>271</sup> It seems to the present author, however, that emotivists do not make impersonal and personal preference equivalent in meaning. This is because they distinguish between factual and moral judgment. Nonetheless, they exclude moral judgments from impersonal meaning. According to emotivists, moral judgments do not have anything beyond feelings and attitudes, which are personal characteristics, not impersonal qualities. Thus, in the emotivists’ view, although there is a difference between personal and impersonal preference in meaning, there is no room for impersonal preference in moral judgments.

c) MacIntyre’s third reason refers to a distinction between the meaning of moral statements and their use. By proposing an arithmetical example, he maintains that although we can use a sentence to express feelings or attitudes, it “has nothing whatsoever to do with its meaning.”<sup>272</sup> Emotivists, however, can answer this by saying that MacIntyre cannot use an arithmetical example, which is a factual judgment, to draw conclusions about moral judgment. Emotivists differentiate between these two kinds of judgments. They believe that, unlike factual judgments, moral judgments are nothing but expressions of feelings. MacIntyre also does not give any proof for the necessity of distinguishing between use and meaning in both moral and factual judgments. Thus, emotivists may accept the difference between the use and meaning in factual statements, not in moral statements.

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<sup>271</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 13.

<sup>272</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 13.

d) It seems that MacIntyre's third criticism about emotivism will be complete if he clarifies the difference between the use and the meaning in both moral and factual statements. We may use or express a factual or moral statement with or without feelings, depending on various conditions. Furthermore, there is a clear difference between the 'implication' and the meaning of a statement. Emotivists maintain that 'This is good' has approximately the same sense as 'I approve of this.' Yet, in the opinion of the present author, they have confused the meaning of moral statements and their implications. Statements such as 'I approve of this' and so on are the implications of 'This is good.' Such statement as 'I approve of this' is an implication for every statement, whether moral or factual. For example, a factual statement such as 'The sky is blue' also implies that 'I agree with this.' Therefore, every statement implies our agreement with it. Likewise, when we reject any statement, it implies that we agree with the rejection of the statement. Hence, there is a difference between the sense and the implication of a statement; and emotivists have confused these two aspects in moral judgments.

e) The theory of emotivism can also be rejected by finding a way for the possibility of real rational basis for moral judgments. Emotivists assert that we cannot find any real rational justification for moral statements. By the word 'real,' they include the possibility of finding purported rational justification for moral judgments. We may, however, reject this argument by finding some universal and stable moral principles for all human beings. If there are such examples of moral judgments, we may find real rational justification for them. This is because we

cannot have any universal moral statement except with universal criteria and meaning for them. When there are universal meanings and criteria, these cannot be based upon personal feelings and attitudes, because the universality of a moral basis implies that basis to be the same among various people. In contrast, proposing a moral basis on feeling implies that basis to be different among people, because people are different in their feelings.

2. As far as Alston's reason for rejecting expressivism is concerned, I agree with him, except I think the following complementary points can be added to his argument:

a) Apart from Alston's critical points of expressivism, the last two points I made regarding MacIntyre can be considered bases for rejecting expressivism in monotheistic religions, since we can find real objects, like God, in their belief systems.

b) Alston holds that interaction between God and human beings is denied by expressivists. He apparently wants to criticize this doctrine because of its conflict with traditional Christian belief. If Alston, yet, has such purpose, he can also criticize expressivists for their denial of the existence of God. Rejecting the existence of God is also in conflict with traditional Christian belief. Moreover, I think from a logical point of view, the expressivists' denial of God's existence is more problematic than their denial of the possibility of real interaction with God. God's existence is a basis for the possibility of any interaction with Him. When expressivists reject the real

existence of God, interaction with such a God would be impossible, since interaction is performed between two sides.

c) We may realize from Alston's view that he has one more reason for rejecting expressivism - although he does not mention it when he tries to criticize this position. His main reason against expressivism should be his realistic perception of truth. Expressivism leads to the denial of all three theses of his alethic realism. Expressivists do not see any facts behind religious statements except the expressions of attitudes or feelings; this is completely contrary to Alston's thesis 1. According to this thesis, "S's are genuine statements of facts, just what they appear to be, as contrasted with, e.g., expressions of feelings or attitudes, or bits of fictional narrative."<sup>273</sup> Since expressivism denies thesis 1, it leads consequently to the denial of the other two theses of alethic realism, because, as I spelled out already, its principles are 'nested'.<sup>274</sup>

### *B. Examining Alston's View of Tillich*

On the one hand, I agree with Alston's understanding of Tillich, namely not equating his view with expressivism. Like Alston, it seems to the present author that Tillich is not an expressivist, since he emphasizes Being Itself as an objective referent for religion, although he considers this being an ambiguous concept. Expressivists, nevertheless, do not consider any referent for religious statements.

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<sup>273</sup>Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 37.

<sup>274</sup>See Chapter 4.3.2. Main principles of Alethic Realism.

Alston is also accurate in asserting that from Tillich's perspective any approach like alethic realism regarding the literal correspondence between our God-talk and the divine, should be rejected.<sup>275</sup>

On the other hand, I think Alston's analysis of Tillich's view of religious truth is incomplete. To find out Tillich's view of religious truth Alston should also look at Tillich's position on the truth of religious faith, something that is apparently missing in Alston's analysis of Tillich. His view of the truth of religious faith can be clarified as follows.

For Tillich, the truth of religious faith cannot be equated with any other kind of truth, whether scientific, historical or philosophical.<sup>276</sup> He believes that the meaning of truth in each of these three ways is different from the meaning of the truth of faith.<sup>277</sup> The attempt of science is to clarify the structures and relations in the universe. We can understand the truth of a scientific report if it can describe sufficiently the structural law which determines reality. Every scientific truth, yet, may change in its expressing adequately such realities. Furthermore, scientific progress and its changes do not lead to any changes of the faith. In Tillich's view, neither science nor faith has power to interfere with each other.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>276</sup>Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), p. 95.

<sup>277</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>278</sup>Ibid., p. 81.



Tillich suggests that the truth of faith is also different from historical truth. Historical truths are factual truths, but faith cannot guarantee factual truths. Faith should explain the meaning of facts from the point of view of man's ultimate concern. "Faith cannot be shaken by historical research even if its results are critical of the traditions in which the event is reported. This independence of historical truth is one of the most important consequences of the understanding of faith as the state of ultimate concern."<sup>279</sup>

For Tillich the truth of faith is also different from philosophical truth. According to a kind of pre-philosophical agreement about the meaning of philosophy, philosophical truth is truth concerning the structure of being, but the truth of faith is truth regarding one's ultimate concern. Consequently, scientific, historical or philosophical truth cannot affirm or negate the truth of faith. The truth of faith also cannot affirm or negate other kinds of truth.

In the opinion of Tillich, one can speak of the truth of religious faith only from the nature of faith as the state of being ultimately concerned which is an act of the whole personality. It is an inward action that occurs in the center of human self. An important element, in his view, is the word 'concerned,' which indicates the relationship between two sides: a person who is concerned for an object, and the object itself which is our concern. Tillich argues that man's ultimate concern must be

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<sup>279</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

expressed symbolically. He also considers God as the fundamental symbol of our ultimate concern.<sup>280</sup>

Tillich assigns two aspects to the truth of religious faith, a subjective and an objective aspect. Regarding the subjective aspect, faith is true if it sufficiently expresses an ultimate concern. From this aspect we can make all religions understandable as a history of man's ultimate concerns, because every religion has some type of genuine symbols which have sense for its own believers. Every religion has symbols that believers of that faith consider as genuine symbols. All believers in various religions have subjective experiences. From the objective aspect, faith is true if it contains what is really ultimate. This standard helps us to judge other religions in terms of a 'Yes' and 'No', but not in terms of rejection. Tillich means that we should not reject or condemn someone's religion. Our critique regarding other religions is to say whether their concern is truly ultimate or not.<sup>281</sup>

Tillich's main criterion for the truth of faith is that its symbol expresses the ultimate in a way which is really ultimate, not idolatrous. This criterion covers all monotheistic religions and provides a kind of similarity among such religions as Jewish, Christianity and Islam. This similarity can provide tolerance between the followers of these religions.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>280</sup>Ibid., pp. 1&6.

<sup>281</sup>Ibid., pp. 95-96.

<sup>282</sup>Ibid., pp. 95-96.

### *C. Examining Alston's View of Hick*

As far as Alston's views of Hick are concerned, the following observations can be made:

Alston sees Hick as positioned between two different strains, Kantian empirical realist-transcendental idealist, and semi-expressivist-instrumentalist. On the one hand, by referring to Hick's mythical truth, Alston regards Hick's position as being very close to Santayana's expressivism-instrumentalism. Although, in Alston's view, it is not true to hold that Hick "denies that what look like religious statements really are such, and thought he does not deny that a realist conception of truth applies to them"<sup>283</sup> meanwhile, "the most important dimension of evaluation for religious beliefs concerns a different kind (conception) of truth."<sup>284</sup> In taking this approach, Hick denies thesis 2 and 3 of alethic realism, or at least he makes a basic change in thesis 2. On the other hand, by referring to Hick's Kantianism, he regards Hick as a 'Kantian empirical realist' For, Alston argues, "If we think of the gods as having phenomenal reality in the way Kant thinks of the physical world, we could take beliefs about them to be true or false depending on whether the phenomenal reality they are about is as they take it to be."<sup>285</sup> Such a view accepts thesis 1 and 2 of

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<sup>283</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>284</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>285</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

alethic realism. The only missing component in this view is thesis 3, according to which the facts that make a statement true are independent of human cognition.<sup>286</sup>

However, firstly, unlike Alston's position, it seems to the present author that Hick's mythical truth leads to the denial of all three principles of alethic realism, not just principles 2 and 3. For Hick, the criterion of truth-value of a religious belief is "to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude."<sup>287</sup> Hick explains his view through an example. If we suppose that there is "a committee meeting at which what I regard as a viciously devious and unjust plan is being hatched."<sup>288</sup> I can say, using mythological term, that it is the work of a devil that is happening in this meeting. What is meant here is not that there is a real devil, in its literal sense, that directs the meeting. Rather, by expressing this statement I want to evoke in my audience doubt and hatred which are proper attitudes to what is happening here. The first principle of alethic realism is that religious statements are "genuine statements of fact, just what they appear to be, as contrasted with, e.g., expressions of feelings or attitudes, or bits of fictional narrative."<sup>289</sup> But Hick explicitly maintains that when he speaks of "the work of devil" as "what is happening in this meeting"<sup>290</sup> he does not want to give a

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<sup>286</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>287</sup>Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 348.

<sup>288</sup>Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>289</sup>Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 37.

<sup>290</sup>Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 348.

genuine statement of fact which is a requirement of the first principle of realism.<sup>291</sup> Moreover, Hick emphasizes that by his statement he wants to evoke a particular attitude.<sup>292</sup> Meeting the condition of the first principle is to avoid considering statements as expressions of feelings or attitudes.

Secondly, Alston argues that Hick's distinguishing between mythical truth and literal truth leads to the denial of thesis 2 or at least to a severe modification.<sup>293</sup> However, I may argue that this view of Hick's leads to the denial of thesis 2, not to its modification. When we reach the point that Hick's view of mythical truth leads to the denial of thesis 1 of realism, consequently it would lead to the denial of thesis 2 and 3, since, again as Alston maintains, these theses are 'nested.' Rejecting any of them would result the rejection of its successors. Moreover, the sufficient condition for the truth of a statement according to thesis 2 is that what a statement is about is as it says it to be, for example, the statement that sugar is sweet is true if and only if sugar is sweet. The sufficient condition for the truth according to Hick's mythical truth, nevertheless, is to evoke a proper attitude.<sup>294</sup>

Thirdly, Alston states that Hick's Kantianism would lead to the denial of the third principle only.<sup>295</sup> However, in the opinion of the present author this position

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<sup>291</sup> As you can see in Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 37.

<sup>292</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 348.

<sup>293</sup> Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 43.

<sup>294</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 348.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

also leads to the denial of thesis 2. Like Kant, Hick distinguishes between the real as it is and as it appears to us. When we look at any statement we should separate between the reality of its content as it is and as it appears to us. This distinction implies that we do not have any access to the understanding of reality as it is in itself. Yet, the implication of thesis 2 is that not only do we have access to the reality of a statement as it is, but also the only way to judge the truth of a statement is that “what it is about is as the statement says it to be”<sup>296</sup> Thus, the result of Hick’s Kantianism is the denial of both thesis 2 and 3.

The only way to consider Hick’s Kantianism a position which does not lead to the denial of thesis 2 is to modify this thesis by extending the meaning of ‘real’ or ‘reality’ to include both the real as it is in itself and as it appears to us. If Alston, however, accepts this extension, he cannot say that Hick’s Kantianism would lead to the denial of thesis 3. This is because according to thesis 3 the truth of any statement does not depend on human cognition. If Alston accepts that extension, human cognition itself will be part of the reality, and therefore there should not be any problem in considering the truth of any statement to be dependent to human cognition.

#### *D. Examining Alston’s View of Kaufman*

As far as Alston’s views of Kaufman are concerned, his opinions can be qualified as follows:

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<sup>296</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

1. There is a similarity between Kaufman and Tillich to which Alston has not referred. Like Tillich, Kaufman seems to be disappointed in his search for words that can be used literally in speaking about God. The only possible way to talk about Him is using symbolic language. As Kaufman holds: "Our concepts are at best metaphors and symbols of his being, not literally applicable."<sup>297</sup> This is like Tillich's position when he says: "Our 'God' is being shaped by symbols of God."<sup>298</sup>

2. Alston, by referring to passages of Kaufman's writings in his *The Theological Imagination*, and *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, attempts to show that "the real referent tends to drop out altogether."<sup>299</sup> Yet, I may argue that one of the passages in Kaufman's writings to which Alston refers to support his argument does not support Alston's position. Kaufman holds: "Living within the world-view which has God as its focus is no different from living in significant relation to that God who is the focal center for this world-view."<sup>300</sup> This passage shows that these two expressions lead to the same thing, living in relation to God and living in the world-

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<sup>297</sup>Kaufman, *God the Problem*, p. 95.

<sup>298</sup>Paul Tillich, "Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God," in *The Christian Scholars* 38 (1955), pp. 189-197.

<sup>299</sup>Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 44.

<sup>300</sup>Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination*, p. 38, and Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 44.

view that has God as its center. Unlike Alston's view, it does not imply Kaufman's tendency to "drop out altogether"<sup>301</sup> the real referent of God.

3. Alston uses the term expressivism-instrumentalism as to identify a trend in thought in conflict with alethic realism. He tends to regard instrumentalism in religion as he does expressivism in its conflict with religious realism. It seems, however, that instrumentalism implies neither realism nor irrealism. Instrumentalism is compatible with both approaches. Being compatible with irrealism seems to be evident. Since instrumentalism does not necessarily imply religious realism, Kaufman's emphasis on the essential role of religious belief in human life does not imply any truth-value, in its alethic realism version, for those beliefs. This is because in an instrumentalist position like that of Kaufman, we can talk about something which does not have any truth-value but is useful for a practical purpose. In other words, there is no contradiction between Kaufman's emphasis on the role of religious belief in human life and his denial of any knowledge of the real God. An instrumentalist can maintain a sort of belief in God because of its practical benefit for us; meanwhile he or she is not obliged to grant any truth-value, in its alethic realism version, to religious beliefs.

On the other hand, unlike expressivism, instrumentalism is compatible with alethic realism. Expressivism necessarily denies Alston's first principle, but it is not a necessary requirement for instrumentalism. Someone may accept the usefulness of

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<sup>301</sup>Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 44.



religion or any other idea for life, while he supports alethic realism. Moreover, it is the idea of religious believers, most of whom believe in the real existence of God, that religion gives orientation and guidance to their life. Consequently, mere emphasis on instrumentalism does not lead to the denial of any real object for religious beliefs. Taking this point into account, I can criticize Alston's view regarding Kaufman, when Alston considers him irrealist because of his explicit support of instrumentalism in religion and comparing it with instrumentalism in science.

#### *E. General Examination of Alston's View of Irrealism*

Alston in his doctrine of religion based on alethic realism and his critiques of irrealism apparently does not give much credit to the function of religion. He does not speak of the extent to which we can refer to the function of religious beliefs among human beings to comprehend the value of those beliefs. Instead, he considers theories like instrumentalism and pragmatism about truth in the line of the epistemic conception of truth, which he himself rejects. We may conclude from Alston's emphasis on a realistic conception of truth that for him, there is only one way of finding out the truth-value of religious beliefs. As he holds: "Whatever I believe, and whatever it takes to confirm or disconfirm it, its truth value, in its alethic realism version, is a matter of whether what the belief is about is as it is believed to be."<sup>302</sup> Nevertheless, it is not clear whether for him alethic realism is the only way to verify

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<sup>302</sup>Alston, "Taking the Curse Off Language-Games," p. 22.

religious beliefs. If this is what he means, his position seems problematic, since, I think, besides alethic realism, we can also refer to functional criteria as a helpful way for evaluating religious beliefs. The following functions, which come out of reason, can be taken into consideration:

a) There are numerous people who like to have a kind of relation to an absolute power which may be called God. They feel that they have a spiritual need which can be satisfied by having a relation to God. A valuable religion fulfills human's spiritual needs as one of the basic aspects of human being. This criterion is based on the acceptance of two different parts, body and psyche, in human nature. Each aspect relates to the other and requires its own fulfillment. A valuable religion is a significant factor that can help people to fulfill their spiritual need and to achieve well being.

b) The second function of a valuable religion is encouraging its followers to use and respect the human intellect. Such a belief system would not include unreasonable and irrational elements. If any religion includes superstitions and ridiculous stories and encourages its readers to accept them blindly, it would be a non-authentic religion.

c) Another function of a valuable religion is its role in both individual and society. I elaborate this point by referring to Tillich's position. In his view, religion has truth if it contains symbols that are alive. Such symbols will be capable of producing response, action and communication. Some religious symbols have been able to produce responses in a particular place or certain period of time in the past. It

is possible that they do not elicit a response in other times or places. We may say that such symbols have lost their truth. Any religion that does not create any interaction between its followers and what they believe in and does not have any dynamic process of reply and response, would be a false religion.<sup>303</sup>

Although according to Tillich one of the criteria of the truth of faith is whether or not it is alive, he does not consider this a precise criterion in any scientific sense.<sup>304</sup> Neither, would I argue, is this criterion completely reliable. It is just a practical criterion that can be applied to the past but not easily applied to the present. We cannot know when a symbol of a present religion will die or how long it will take to die.

Tillich refers to producing response and action as one criterion of the truth of religion in the past. Nonetheless, I wish to argue that merely being alive and active in people's actions does not suffice to make an authentic religion. What is necessary is that the text produces a *positive* effect on those who relate to it, and not a negative effect. If we find a religion that is alive in society but gives rise to negative attitudes and social characteristics, we cannot consider it a valuable religion. A true religion would for instance, not encourage hostility among human beings; rather it would emphasize respect and kindness. Furthermore, we may not consider a religion which is dead now as an invaluable religion. For it is possible for a true religion to lose its

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<sup>303</sup>Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p.95.

<sup>304</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

power and not produce any response and action, because of the mistakes of its followers or alteration of the religious text by special groups or person. In any case, it seems that one of the signs of an authentic and valuable religion is its power to create a society with good relations and communication between people, as well as power to reduce criminal actions and other negative social behavior.

d) Another function by which we can evaluate a religious belief is supporting social justice and providing its fundamental principles for human kind. Such a belief should help people to remove any kind of discrimination between multiple races in their communities. Social justice removes the superiority of men over women, or one nation or group over others. Any kind of discrimination or injustice among human beings which comes out a belief is a negative sign for its evaluation.

e) Evaluation of a religion would be positive if it gives tolerance to its followers regarding other kinds of beliefs and religions. This tolerance helps believers to avoid struggle and war among human beings. A non-authentic religion may cause war among societies. The history of human beings indicates that some religious beliefs have been one of the main causes for bloodshed between different groups and nations.

f) Another function for a valuable religious belief is emphasizing self-criticism. It helps its followers to purify their beliefs from idolatrous thought. A religion that does not encourage its adherents to criticize themselves would be considered a non-authentic system of belief. Tillich considers idolatrous faith the weakness of all faiths. He refers to Calvin's statement that the minds of human beings always

produce idols. This occurs in all religions. People of all religions, since they are all human beings, tend to create false ultimate concerns and false idols. Every kind of faith has an inclination to lift up its concrete symbols to absolute validity.<sup>305</sup>

A valuable feature that provides an opportunity for self-criticism is that a religion encourages and supports freedom of thought and beliefs in the society. Moreover, freedom of thought and belief is one of the individual and social freedoms, which human beings need most intensely in order to develop their potential. A valuable belief system should not suggest the imposition of belief on people and the use of any kind of force in this regard.

From two main questions regarding religious language, mentioned in the Introduction of the present work, we finished with the first question in Part Two. In this part, which included last two chapters, we were looking for the characteristics of religious statements, and any basis for commonality or differences between the language of religion and other sorts of discourses. The next step is to turn to the second question, namely the following: Supposing that the language of religion is meaningful, and possesses both commonality and differences with other languages - how should we interpret religious statements? Should we understand them symbolically, analogically, literally, or in some other way? These are the questions to which we turn in the next part.

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<sup>305</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

## Part Three

What is the appropriate method for analyzing religious statements? Should we interpret them symbolically, analogically, literally, or otherwise? This is the central problem of this part. We may gather from Alston's various writings that he is trying to defend partial literalism. This part clarifies his position in four chapters: In the first chapter, we will discuss Alston's critical reaction to Tillich's symbolism. In the second and the third chapter, we turn to the two different ways in which he proves his partial literalism: the irreducibility thesis in theology, and a functional account of religious language. The last chapter compares Alston's position with the ideas of some Muslim theologians.

## Chapter 5. Symbolic Language of Religion

### 5.1. Introduction

How is it possible to speak credibly about God employing human language? One frequent answer to this problem consists in considering the language of religion a symbolic language. In this chapter we will examine Alston's position regarding the symbolic language of religion. I will compare Alston's analysis of religious symbols with that of Paul Tillich (1886-1965). The reason for choosing Tillich is his distinguished role in theology in general, and in religious symbols in particular.<sup>306</sup> Moreover, Tillich's cognition of symbol has had a key role in his whole doctrine of religion, as he himself states, "The center of my theological doctrine of knowledge is the concept of symbol."<sup>307</sup> In addition, his doctrine of religious symbols has had great influence on other theologians who talk in terms of symbols.<sup>308</sup> In the opinion of Alston, the ignorance of scholars nowadays regarding partial literalism is rooted in "the prominence of those who, like Tillich, construe the otherness of God so

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<sup>306</sup>For the importance of Paul Tillich see also the present work Chapter 4.4. Alston and Religious Irrealism, p. 95.

<sup>307</sup>Paul Tillich, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in *The theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. Charles W., Kegley & Robert W. Bretall (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), p. 333.

<sup>308</sup>Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, pp. 21, 122.

radically as to leave room for no commonality of meaning”<sup>309</sup> between God and human beings. In this chapter, I will first review Tillich’s idea of religious symbol. In this regard, I will discuss his distinction between symbols and signs, the functions of symbols in general, the function and the nature of religious symbols, and their truth. I will then turn to Alston’s position on religious symbols by referring to his analysis and critiques of Tillich’s views.

## 5.2. Paul Tillich’s View of Religious Symbols

Paul Tillich<sup>310</sup> maintains that there are numerous arguments about the meaning of symbols among religious scholars. These arguments indicate that there are multiple questions and ambiguities about language in theology and in philosophy. We now understand that the language which is appropriate for mathematics and sciences does not suffice for grasping everything. There are various levels of reality.

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<sup>309</sup>Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language*, p. 82.

<sup>310</sup>Tillich elaborates his doctrine of religious symbols in several places. A brief but influential argument of this theory can be found in his books: *Dynamics of Faith*, and *Theology of Culture*, Edited by Robert C. Kimball (New York : Oxford University Press, 1964). Nonetheless, most of material in these books regarding religious symbols have been elaborated in more details in his article “Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God,” in *The Christian Scholars*, 38 (1955), pp. 189-197. Tillich’s last important essay on religious symbolism is his article, “The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols,” in *Religious Experience and Truth, A Symposium*, Sidney Hook ed., (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 3-11.



To approach these levels we require different languages. The language used in religion is symbolic language.<sup>311</sup>

Tillich's view of the nature of religious language can be clarified as follows:

What is the meaning of symbol? To comprehend its meaning we should know its difference from sign. Signs and symbols have both similarities and differences. The common characteristic between them is that both indicate something other than themselves. For example, each consonant of the alphabet is a sign for a particular sound. A symbol also points to something beyond itself.

The particular features of symbols in general and in religious context in particular by which they are distinguished from signs are as follows:

1. Unlike signs, symbols point to something different from their direct meanings. There are words in every language that are mere signs for a while, but then become symbols. "In the moment in which they get connotations which go beyond something to which they point as signs, then they can become symbols."<sup>312</sup> Tillich considers this feature as the most fundamental feature of all symbols.<sup>313</sup>

2. Symbols participate in the meanings and powers of that to which they point. For example, 'R', 'S', or other letters of the alphabet do not share in the particular

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<sup>311</sup>Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>312</sup>Tillich, "The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols," p. 4; and Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 55.

<sup>313</sup>Tillich, "The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols," p. 4.

sound to which they refer. The flag of a country, yet, shares in the power of which it symbolizes.<sup>314</sup>

3. Every symbol possesses its own specific power, which cannot be replaced by other symbols. Therefore, we cannot substitute a 'symbolic word'<sup>315</sup> such as 'God', by another word. Nonetheless, we do not see this characteristic in signs. A sign can be replaced by any other sign. This difference between signs and symbols may help us to realize that signs are willingly invented and removed, while symbols are born and die.<sup>316</sup>

Symbols are born from what can be called 'group unconscious' or 'collective unconscious.' A symbol cannot be invented except when the unconscious of a group accepts the symbol. On the other hand, when the relation between this inner situation of the group with a symbol disappears, that symbol dies.<sup>317</sup> Regarding the appearance of new symbols, Tillich maintains, "If new symbols are born, they are born out of a changed relationship to the ultimate ground of being, i.e., to the Holy."<sup>318</sup>

4. Religious symbols, as other symbols, open up a level of reality which cannot be opened in any other way. It is the reason that we need symbols. The function of symbols is similar to the function of art. For instance, poetry and music reveal levels

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<sup>314</sup>Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, p. 42; and *Ibid.*, P. 55.

<sup>315</sup>Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, P. 58.

<sup>316</sup>*Ibid.*, P. 58.

<sup>317</sup>*Ibid.*, P. 58.

<sup>318</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 59.

of reality which cannot be opened up in any other way.<sup>319</sup> Tillich calls this level “the depth dimension of reality itself.”<sup>320</sup> This is a basic level which is the ground of every other depth. “Religious symbols open up the experience of the dimension of this depth in the human soul.”<sup>321</sup>

5. Symbols have creative and destructive effects on both individuals and social groups. Symbols may have ‘healing power,’ which is a creative function on individuals. They can, on the other hand, produce destructive effects such as depression, anxiety, restlessness, and fanaticism. Examples of the creative function of symbols on social groups are the power of “a king, an event, a document in the political realm of representative symbolism, an epic work, architectural symbols, a holy figure, a holy book, a holy rite in religion.”<sup>322</sup> There are also destructive possibilities in the social realm such as “human sacrifices, doctrinal symbols producing a split consciousness, and so on”<sup>323</sup>

We can understand from these features the function of symbols. The basic function of every symbol is to represent something else in such a way as to participate in its meaning and power. The other function is to reach to the depth dimension of reality.

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<sup>319</sup>Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, P. 57.

<sup>320</sup>Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 42.

<sup>321</sup>Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 59.

<sup>322</sup>Tillich, “The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols,” p. 5.

<sup>323</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

Religious symbols are not themselves the Holy, but they are symbols of the Holy. The history of religion indicates that everything in time and space has been a symbol for the Holy. The reason is that all things which exist in the world depend on the ultimate ground of being.<sup>324</sup>

One of the interesting ideas in Tillich's view is his analysis of idols. According to him, since religious symbols, as other symbols, share in the reality and power of that to which they point, people have an inclination to substitute symbols to what they are supposed to point to. In such cases people look at symbols as something ultimate in themselves, and thus, symbols become idols.<sup>325</sup>

In the opinion of Tillich, we cannot reject religious symbols by any empirical criticism, such as referring to natural sciences or historical research. Their criticism has to be done based on their inner symbolic grounds, because "the truth of religious symbols is their adequacy to the religious situation in which they are created, and their inadequacy to another situation is their untruth."<sup>326</sup>

In sum, Tillich distinguishes between signs and symbols to clarify his symbolic approach to religious language. For him, religious symbols open up a level of reality which cannot be opened in any other way. Every symbol possesses its own particular function which cannot be replaced by other symbols. Furthermore, there is always

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<sup>324</sup>Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 59.

<sup>325</sup>Tillich, "The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols," p. 11.

<sup>326</sup>Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 66.

the possibility that symbols become idols. When symbols become ultimate in themselves, they will be idols. Religious symbols cannot be willingly invented and removed, rather they are born and die.

### 5.3. Alston's Analysis and Critiques of Tillich's Conception of Religious Language

We can understand Alston's view of the symbolic language of religion by reviewing his analysis and evaluation of Tillich's doctrine of religious symbols. The concept of religious symbols is essential to Tillich's reinterpretation of religion. Thus, examination of this concept is a very basic step for evaluation of Tillich's work. Alston's view of Tillich can be clarified by the following points:

1. Alston defines a religious symbol as "some concrete object or aspect of a concrete object which is taken to represent the ultimate object of worship or some aspect thereof."<sup>327</sup> For example, God's taking care of His creatures is represented by a shepherd. God's dignity or His perfection is represented by a mountain or hill, which are concrete objects.

After giving this definition, Alston holds that we should distinguish between symbolic language and the symbol in this fundamental sense. The former is symbolic in a derivative sense. Alston holds that Tillich occasionally confuses the former with

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<sup>327</sup>Alston, "Tillich's Conception of Religious Symbols," p. 12.

the latter. When we refer to God as our shepherd, the word shepherd is not a symbol in its own right, “but the utterance has the significance it possesses through the fact that ‘shepherd’ denotes what is a symbol, and thus, the utterance can be called symbolic in a derivative sense.”<sup>328</sup>

2. According to Alston, Tillich’s confusion between symbols and symbolic language lead to several problems. For instance, he says: “it is obvious that symbols cannot be replaced by other symbols.”<sup>329</sup> Nonetheless, interchange of symbolic language is quite possible. When we are speaking about God, we can change ‘holy’ with ‘kona.’ This is only arbitrary replacing one word with another, whereas we cannot substitute symbols. For example, substitution of Jesus Christ with Hitler, or substitution of God with dialectical movement of history is not possible. Meanwhile, Alston accepts the possibility of substitution in the latter and says: “These latter replacements could occur only as the result of very fundamental cultural changes.”<sup>330</sup>

3. When Tillich treats natural objects as symbols, he takes for granted their objective existence, whereas he does not have the supposition of objective existence when he speaks of religious symbols. Rather, when Tillich refers to the personal God of theism as a symbol, he says: “It is obvious that such an understanding of the meaning of God makes the discussions about the existence or non-existence of God

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<sup>328</sup>Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>329</sup>Tillich, “Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God,” in *The Christian Scholars*, 38 (1955), p. 191.

<sup>330</sup>Alston, “Tillich’s Conception of Religious Symbols,” p. 16.

meaningless.”<sup>331</sup> This position of Tillich, according to Alston, implies that “we cannot literally encounter the supernatural ‘symbol’ as another existent, but must ‘encounter’ it as conceived, imagined, or pictured.”<sup>332</sup>

4. For Tillich, financial or scientific success can be considered religious symbols.<sup>333</sup> Alston, yet, criticizes this view and argues, “obviously there are important differences in the ways we can relate ourselves to ‘symbols’ of these different sorts.”<sup>334</sup>

5. What does it mean that a shepherd represents God’s providence? It means that, Alston argues, thinking of a shepherd leads to particular feelings, such as deep gratitude, complete submission, which are right to God’s providence. Nevertheless, for Alston, considering a shepherd as a symbol for God’s providence depends on two conditions: to be both “able and willing to specify God’s providential care for his creatures as that which is being symbolized.”<sup>335</sup> These are two necessary conditions. By missing the first, one may recognize the symbolic meaning of the shepherd for others, but it would not have such symbolic significance for oneself. By missing the second, “we would be hard pressed to give any sense to saying that the object was taken to represent anything other than itself; it would simply be an effective stimulus

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<sup>331</sup>Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 46.

<sup>332</sup>Alston, “Tillich’s Conception of Religious Symbols,” p. 16.

<sup>333</sup>Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 3.

<sup>334</sup>Alston, “Tillich’s Conception of Religious Symbols,” p. 17.

<sup>335</sup>*Ibid*, p. 13.

for certain emotional states. Concepts without feelings are empty; feeling without concepts are blind.”<sup>336</sup> By the first condition, Alston does not mean that responding to x as a religious symbol in any time depends on specifying the ‘symbolizandum.’<sup>337</sup> What he emphasizes is that we should be capable of such a specification any time that we decide to do it. Moreover, “this in turn implies that it is possible to say this in non-symbolic language.”<sup>338</sup> These two conditions to which Alston refers here is a background for his main question of Tillich which can be explained as follows:

6. Alston’s main question regarding Tillich’s view is: how can he find a referent for religious symbols? How is it possible for symbols to symbolize, when “what was the ultimate referent of religious symbols in the traditional scheme has now become another symbol?”<sup>339</sup> Tillich does not want to see religion “as nothing but an organization of human activity and experience.”<sup>340</sup> Moreover, in his view, religious symbols do not symbolize any kind of being, but being itself. As he maintains: “the religious symbol has special character in that it points to the ultimate level of being, to ultimate reality, to being itself, to meaning itself. That which is the ground of

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<sup>336</sup>Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>337</sup>‘Symbolizandum’ is among Alston’s terminology. It means ‘what is being symbolized.’

<sup>338</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>339</sup>Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>340</sup>Ibid., p. 17.



being is the object to which the religious symbol points.”<sup>341</sup> A basic result of such a view, according to Alston, is that the religious symbol tends to be autonomous. In the ‘traditional’<sup>342</sup> perspective, one condition for using any word in symbolic language is the possibility of literally expressing it. If we want to use a shepherd as a symbol of God, it depends, at least, on “the truth of the doctrine that God providentially cares for His creatures, or does something else for which the activities of a shepherd furnish an analogue.”<sup>343</sup> But this is not an acceptable condition for Tillich. For him, being-itself is beyond all various kinds of being and we cannot characterize it in any way. He says:

The statement that God is being-itself is a non-symbolic statement... However, after this has been said, nothing else can be said about God as God which is not symbolic. As we already have seen, God as being-itself is the ground of the ontological structure of being without being subject to this structure himself... Therefore, if anything beyond this bare assertion is said about God, it no longer is a direct and proper statement, no longer a concept. It is indirect, and it points to something beyond itself. In a word, it is symbolic.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>341</sup>Paul Tillich, “Theology and Symbolism,” in *Religious Symbolism*, ed. F. Ernest Johnson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), pp. 109-110.

<sup>342</sup>As Alston calls it.

<sup>343</sup>Alston, “Tillich’s Conception of Religious Symbols,” p. 17.

<sup>344</sup>Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Three volumes in one (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 264-265; and Alston, “Tillich’s Conception of Religious Symbols,” p. 17.

In the opinion of Alston, since we can say nothing non-symbolically talking of being-itself, we are not able to express anything about it in a symbolic language. The former is a primary condition for the latter.

Alston subsequently attempts to find the meaning of Tillich's view that a religious symbol points to being-itself. In the traditional perspective, 'x being a symbol of y' means that x can elicit behavior and feelings which are suitable to y and that "the person for whom x is a symbol of y could, on demand, identify y as the symbolizandum."<sup>345</sup> Tillich will have a problem if he applies this traditional idea here. What can we say regarding the proper behavior and attitude that can be directed to being-itself? Since for Tillich being-itself cannot be characterized in any way, there is no way to direct to it any kind of attitude or feeling more appropriate to it than another. Consequently, Tillich's attempt to give a reasonable meaning for his view that a religious symbol points to being-itself is not successful.

Alston subsequently tries to solve this problem in Tillich's view by referring to his assertion that religious symbols, "although they are not the same as that which they symbolize, participate in its meaning and power."<sup>346</sup> However, Alston does not see this 'participation' as being very helpful for Tillich. To assert that religious symbols participate in the reality and power of being-itself does not give us a clear meaning of the idea that religious symbols point to being-itself. This assertion does

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<sup>345</sup>Alston, "Tillich's Conception of Religious Symbols," p. 18.

<sup>346</sup>Tillich, "Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God," p. 190.

not distinguish religious symbols from other things, since, according to Tillich, “everything constantly participates in being-itself, as a necessary condition of its being anything.”<sup>347</sup> Moreover, if there is a particular kind of ‘participation in being-itself’ for religious symbols, Tillich does not offer anything in this regard.<sup>348</sup>

7. In Alston’s view, it is possible that the reason for not finding a proper meaning for Tillich’s phrase ‘religious symbols points to being-itself’ is due to disregarding the relation between this phrase and Tillich’s view of ‘ultimate concern.’<sup>349</sup> Therefore, it is helpful if we refer to Tillich’s view of ultimate concern. His saying “religious symbols function as such only in the context of ultimate concern”<sup>350</sup> indicates that he sees an important relation between religious symbols and ultimate concern. Here I will refer briefly to the characteristics of ‘ultimate concern’ in Tillich’s position. For him, ultimate concern includes the following features: a) absolute surrender to something (x) and tendency to regard x to have complete authority over one’s life; b) a hope of receiving perfect fulfillment by having a relation with x; c) considering x a core of meaningfulness.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>347</sup>Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, p. 263.

<sup>348</sup>Alston, “Tillich’s Conception of Religious Symbols,” p. 19.

<sup>349</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>350</sup>Tillich, “Theology and Symbolism,” p. 111; and Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 10.

<sup>351</sup>Alston, “Tillich’s Conception of Religious Symbols,” p. 19.

Tillich says, "Man's ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically."<sup>352</sup> The function that Tillich gives to religious symbols here is that they express ultimate concern. According to Alston, however, although this point can be maintained regarding symbolic utterance, it is not true of non-verbal symbols. From Tillich's perspective, they have a "somewhat different role [as] objects or foci of ultimate concern - that to which the various attitudes and feelings which make it up are directed."<sup>353</sup> For Alston, this is one of the problems in Tillich's argument related to his confusion between symbols and symbolic language.<sup>354</sup>

What can Alston get from Tillich's view of ultimate concern which can illuminate his claim that religious symbols point to being-itself? Being-itself is the only thing to which really ultimate concern is directed. As Tillich maintains,

The question now arises: What is the content of our ultimate concern? ...  
*Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or non-being.* ... Man is ultimately concerned about his being and meaning. ... Man is unconditionally concerned about that which conditions his being beyond all the conditions in him and around him. Man is ultimately concerned about that which determines his ultimate destiny beyond all preliminary necessities and accidents.<sup>355</sup>

Speaking of this argument, Alston maintains that Tillich does not give an acceptable meaning for his claim that "man is ultimately concerned about his being

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<sup>352</sup>Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 41.

<sup>353</sup>Alston, "Tillich's Conception of Religious Symbols," p. 19.

<sup>354</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>355</sup>Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, p. 17.

and meaning.” Being concerned about something is almost ‘being worried about’ or ‘being anxious about.’ But this is not true of being-itself. It is evident that Tillich does not say that we are ‘worried’ about being-itself and its situation.<sup>356</sup>

8. There is, Alston adds, an ambiguity in Tillich’s view of the meaning of ultimacy in ‘ultimate concern.’ Occasionally he regards it to be psychological, which means that it “consists in the supremacy of that concern in the psychic structure of the individual.”<sup>357</sup> At other times, he considers supremacy to be ontological, that is the ground of all other beings. These are two separate meanings for ultimacy, and one of them does not necessarily implies the other. We cannot say that what is psychologically of ultimate concern should be a “concern directed to what is ontologically ultimate. But the verbal identity may make the transition seem obvious.”<sup>358</sup> According to Alston, we can find this idea in Tillich’s writing when he holds: “The unconditional concern which is faith is the concern about the unconditional. The infinite passion, as faith has been described, is the passion for the infinite. Or, to use our first term, the ultimate concern is concern about what is experienced as ultimate.”<sup>359</sup>

9. The criteria that Tillich suggests for the validity or, according to his terminology, the authenticity of religious symbols is “their adequacy to the religious

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<sup>356</sup>Alston, “Tillich’s Conception of Religious Symbols,” p. 20.

<sup>357</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>358</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>359</sup>Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 9.

experience they express.”<sup>360</sup> “Non-authentic are religious symbols which have lost their experiential basis, but which are still used for reasons of tradition or because of their aesthetic value.”<sup>361</sup> However, Tillich differentiates between the criterion for the authenticity of religious symbols and the criterion for their truth. The former is not sufficient for the latter. “The term ‘truth’ in this context means the degree to which it reaches the referent of all religious symbols.”<sup>362</sup>

Tillich suggests two ways, one positive and one negative, for understanding the question of the truth of religious symbols. The positive way concerns the quality of the symbolic material used in religious symbols. Symbolic material can be from multiple kinds such as human persons or stones, trees and animals. A religious symbol will be of higher rank and value when it uses a human person as its symbolic material.<sup>363</sup> The negative way is “their self-negation and transparency to the referent for which it stands.”<sup>364</sup> The truth of a religious symbol depends on the extent that it negates itself and points to its referent. In Tillich’s view, there is always a danger that religious symbols be confused with that to which they point. He calls this danger idolatry.<sup>365</sup> Symbols “always have the tendency (in the human mind, of course) to

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<sup>360</sup>Tillich, “The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols,” p. 10.

<sup>361</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>362</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>363</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>364</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>365</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

replace that to which they are supposed to point, and to become ultimate in themselves. And in the moment in which they do this, they become idols.”<sup>366</sup> When a symbol is replaced with the Ultimate, it becomes idolatrous. “In true faith the ultimate concern is a concern about the truly ultimate; while in idolatrous faith preliminary, finite realities are elevated to the rank of ultimacy.”<sup>367</sup>

In the opinion of Alston, Tillich’s view of idolatrous symbol is ambiguous. A symbol can point to another symbol and symbolize it “as the cross hanging in a church symbolizes the crucifixion, or perhaps, the atonement, which is itself a symbol, at least according to Tillich.”<sup>368</sup> The religious symbol here, which is the cross hanging in a church, has not become idolatrous. Nonetheless, it is possible, Alston argues, that for Tillich, the meaning of an idolatrous symbol is a symbol that does not point to anything, neither to what is supposed to point, nor to another symbol, and rather is regarded as an independent object in its own right.<sup>369</sup>

Tillich says: “Innumerable things, all things in a way, have the power of becoming holy in a mediate sense. They can point to something beyond themselves. But, if their holiness comes to be considered inherent, it becomes demonic. ... Holiness provokes idolatry.”<sup>370</sup> Referring to this passage of Tillich, Alston holds that

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<sup>366</sup>Tillich, “Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God,” p. 193.

<sup>367</sup>Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 12.

<sup>368</sup>Alston, “Tillich’s Conception of Religious Symbols,” p. 23.

<sup>369</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>370</sup>Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, p. 240.

when religious poetry, icons, or sacred music lose their pointing function and do not point to an ultimate object of worship, we may still find them valuable. In such a situation, however, we cannot call them religious symbols any more; therefore, there is no way to call them 'idolatrous symbols.'<sup>371</sup> For Tillich, "being a religious symbol is linked by definition to pointing to being-itself."<sup>372</sup>

#### 5.4. Summary and Comments

Tillich suggests four features by which symbol is distinguished from sign: a) pointing to something which is not their direct meaning; b) participation of symbols in the meaning and power of that to which they point; c) impossibility of replacing any symbolic word with any other word; d) opening up dimensions of reality which cannot be opened in any other way; e) their creative and destructive effect on both individuals and social groups.<sup>373</sup> While Tillich suggests these characteristics, Alston does not offer a clear definition of symbol. He likely presupposes the obviousness of its meaning. Meanwhile, we may comprehend his view by his reference to what he calls a traditional scheme of symbols. He maintains that in the traditional perspective, 'x being a symbol of y' means that x can elicit behavior and feelings which are suitable to y and that "the person for whom x is a symbol of y could, on

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<sup>371</sup>Alston, "Tillich's Conception of Religious Symbols," p. 24.

<sup>372</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>373</sup>Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 54-58; and Tillich, "The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols," pp. 4-5.



demand, identify *y* as the symbolizandum.”<sup>374</sup> He apparently presupposes the accuracy of this cognition of symbols, since he refers to it without offering any critique. Instead, he bases one of his criticisms of Tillich upon this analysis of symbol. Moreover, he applies this understanding of symbol in defining the statement, ‘Shepherd is a symbol of God or divine providence.’ Speaking of the meaning of this statement, he maintains that “It may roughly be defined as follows: seeing or thinking of a shepherd, or a picture of a shepherd, tends to call up a complex of feeling, attitudes, and thoughts which are appropriate to divine providence”<sup>375</sup>

The feature that Alston mentions for symbol implies that there is a relation between *x* (as a symbol) and *y* (as what it symbolizes). *X* has so strong relation to *y* that tends to provoke the same feelings which are suitable to *y*. Tillich does not mention directly this feature for symbol. I think, however, we can consider it as a result of the above characteristic that Tillich offers for symbols, namely participation in the meaning and power of what is being symbolized. A result of such a feature is that a symbol tends to call up a complex of feelings, attitudes, and thoughts appropriate to that to which it points.

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<sup>374</sup>Alston, “Tillich’s Conception of Religious Symbols,” p. 18.

<sup>375</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 13.

It seems to the present author that both Alston's traditional scheme of symbol and the first three of the four features that Tillich suggests for it are so general that they may include non-symbolic words.<sup>376</sup>

Although Alston emphasizes a traditional scheme of symbol, some of his passages are not clear enough to show that he is referring to a traditional view without giving an original description. For instance, according to Alston, considering shepherd as a symbol for God's providence depends on two conditions: to be "[first] able and [second] willing to specify God's providential care for his creatures as that which is being symbolized."<sup>377</sup> He emphasizes that, "Both conditions seems to me to be necessary."<sup>378</sup> While Alston in this passage gives us his own position, he does not refer to its source. It seems that he is confirming to an extent a traditional idea regarding symbolic language. For in another part of his writing, he considers the first of these two conditions a traditional view. He holds: "in the traditional scheme, to say that x is a symbol of y means... that the person for whom x is a symbol of y could, on demand, identify y as the symbolizandum."<sup>379</sup>

On the one hand, Alston rejects the symbolic perspective on religious language, namely Tillich's position. On the other hand, he proposes two different ways of

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<sup>376</sup>I will clarify this view with further critiques regarding Alston's perspective of religious symbols, in Chapter 9.

<sup>377</sup>Alston, "Tillich's Conception of Religious Symbols," p. 13.

<sup>378</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>379</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

proving the possibility of speaking almost literally about God using our common language. The present chapter dealt with the former. The next step is to turn to the latter, namely Alston's defense of partial literalism. He accomplishes this defense in two ways. One method has to do with irreducible metaphor in theology; the other emerges from Alston's functionalism. The following chapter treats the first method.

## Chapter 6. Religious Metaphor and Its Irreducibility

### 6.1. Introduction

One of the ways in which Alston tries to prove the possibility of almost literally talking of God is his discussion of irreducible metaphors in theology. A basic question regarding religious discourse is whether there are irreducible metaphors, which have no literal equivalent, or whether all metaphors are reducible. To follow Alston's analysis of religious language, we will turn, in this chapter, to his view of the irreducible metaphor in theology. In this chapter I will first refer to examples of theologians who support either the reducibility or irreducibility thesis. I will then explain Alston's position in this issue. Nevertheless, before going to the details of Alston's view of irreducibility of religious metaphor, we should know the difference between the metaphorical and literal meaning of a word. Alston himself points out that although these terms are frequently used, they are understood in a confused or loose way. In order to construct a viable definition of 'literal,' we need to distinguish between *language* and *speech*. Thus, I will clarify his terminology of these words. I will then see how Alston goes about proving that irreducible metaphors are not possible.

## 6.2. Various Positions Regarding the Reducibility Thesis

We can find an example of the ‘reducibility thesis’ in Ogden and Richards’ classic *The Meaning of Meaning*. According to their view, a metaphor is a ‘sign’ which makes its reference in an inexplicit way by using something similar to the object. We can always replace metaphors by literal utterance.<sup>380</sup>

On the other side, there is another position that emphasizes the impossibility of metaphor being replaced by a literal paraphrase. Poets and literary critics always support this doctrine. Among philosophers, we can see I. A. Richards who rejects the position of Ogden-Richards.<sup>381</sup>

Regarding religious metaphors, Ian T. Ramsey is one significant thinker who stresses the ‘irreducibility thesis.’ The interaction between a model and its qualifier is the key point in Ramsey’s method for the interpretation of religious metaphor. For instance, in the sentence, ‘God is our father’, the human model is ‘father’ and the qualifiers are ‘incomprehensible’, ‘eternal’ and ‘uncreated.’ By looking at qualifiers, we are able to avoid using the father model in the wrong way. These qualifiers, yet, cannot help us to recognize what kind of human father situation should we employ.

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<sup>380</sup>Andrew J. Burgess, “Irreducible religious metaphors,” in *Religious Studies*, 8 (Dec. 1972), p. 355.

<sup>381</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 365.

Since these qualifiers can only provide an ‘insight’, thus, depending on different ‘language strata’, we will hold various father situations.<sup>382</sup>

What is Alston’s view regarding the irreducible metaphor in theology? Before going to the details of his position, we should know the meaning of ‘language,’ ‘speech,’ ‘metaphorical,’ and ‘literal’.

### 6.3. The Difference Between *Language* and *Speech*

Alston confirms the distinction of the Swiss founder of linguistic Ferdinand de Saussure<sup>383</sup> (1857-1913), between *language* and *speech*. A (natural) language is an abstract system, a system of abstract sound kinds “or, in principle, types of other

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<sup>382</sup>Ibid., p. 357.

<sup>383</sup>Ferdinand de Saussure is known as the founder of modern linguistics, who reorganized the discipline along scientific lines. His influence had been not only on linguistics, but also on cultural studies in general. His book provides the foundation for the development of structuralism and semiology. See: Stuart Brown, et al., Eds., *Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Philosophers*, p. 697, McClendon and Smith, *Conviction*, pp. 28-33, Saussure’s view can be found in his lectures gathered and published by his followers as *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Paris, 1981), trans. Wade Baskin (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986) For further details of Saussure’s thought see: Starobinski, Jean, *Words Upon Words: The Anagrams of Fredinand de Saussure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), Holdcroft, David, *Saussure: Sign, System, and Arbitrariness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

sorts of perceptible items.”<sup>384</sup> A language has two systems, internal and external. Its internal system is the phonology, morphology and syntax of a language. Combinations of these elements can make larger units. The external system is understood by the semantics of the language - the ways in which units of the language represent things in the world and characteristics of the world. Although Alston gives such a definition for semantics, he maintains that there is no common acceptable view on the features of semantics. What he offers instead is a crude characterization of the word. We can consider a language as a means of communication. In contrast, *Speech* is the *use* of language in communication. When we say that a particular word or phrase has its meaning, we deal with a (semantic) fact about the language. Alston also refers to another interrelation between language and speech. “Language *exists* only as a set of potentialities for speech; the fact that speech is patterned in certain ways *constitutes* the reality of a natural language. If there were no speech, there would be no *actual* languages.”<sup>385</sup> The existence of actual languages depends on the existence of speech.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>384</sup>Alston, “Irreducible Metaphors in Theology,” in *Experience Reason and God*, ed. Eugene T. Long, (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1980), p. 131.

<sup>385</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>386</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 132; and Axel D. Steuer, and James Wm McClendon Jr., eds., *Is God God?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), p. 149.

## 6.4. The Meaning of ‘Literal’ and ‘Metaphorical’

When we state that a particular word or phrase has its own meaning, we are dealing with a fact about the language. “It is part of the semantic constitution of the language. Thus, it is a semantic fact about English that ‘player’ has among its meanings: 1. an idler; 2. a gambler; 3. an actor.”<sup>387</sup>

On other hand, the term ‘metaphor’ and ‘literal’ relate to particular ways of using words. These words are not several kinds of features of language, rather they are modes of speech. In other words, we *use* one term in a literal or figurative way.<sup>388</sup>

Giving a meaning to a predicate term is correlating it with some property. Various ways of looking at the nature of this correlation result in different theories of meaning. These theories offer multiple analyses of the nature of this correlation. For instance, according to Locke’s ‘ideational’ theory of meaning, “a meaning of a predicate term ‘correlates’ it with a certain property, P, *iff* the term functions as a sign of the idea of P in communication.”<sup>389</sup>

When we literally use a predicate term in one of its meanings, our expression of the sentence implies the claim that the feature indicated by the predicate is possessed

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<sup>387</sup>Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, p. 149 Definition of ‘player’ is from Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam, 1959).

<sup>388</sup>Alston, “Irreducible Metaphors in Theology,” p. 131; and Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, p. 150.

<sup>389</sup>Alston, “Irreducible Metaphors in Theology,” pp. 132-133.



by the subject; and if there is relational predicate, the characteristic holds between the subjects. Consequently, if I am literally using the word 'player' in saying 'He is one of the players', my claim is that this person has the property specified in its definition. If the person really has that property, we can say that the predicate is literally true of him. Nevertheless, when we metaphorically use a predicate term, we do not have such a claim that the property signified by the predicate is possessed by the subject. What we do here is that, first we imagine something of which the term can be literally used. The next important point, which is understood from a metaphorical statement, is that we can take the exemplar as an appropriate model of the subject. Therefore, what we expect from a metaphorical statement is not that it makes any truth claim about the subject. Rather, we extract from the resemblance between model and subject that which is being attributed to the subject.<sup>390</sup>

In recent times, the term 'literal' has been wrongly associated with words like 'specific', 'univocal', 'precise', 'empirical', and 'ordinary.' However, 'literal' in its distinctive meaning, mentioned above, does not imply any of these associations. One can talk ambiguously and vaguely, while using words literally. We should also not confuse 'literal meaning' with 'empirical meaning.' The latter does not follow from the former. It is not true to say that the only terms that can be used literally are those having empirical meanings.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>390</sup>Ibid., pp. 133-134 and Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, p. 150.

<sup>391</sup>Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, p. 151.

After giving this background, we can turn to Alston's central discussion regarding the status of irreducible metaphor in theology. Irreducible metaphor is a kind of metaphor that we cannot explain, even in part, in literal terms.<sup>392</sup> An example of a reducible metaphor is this sentence, 'John is a lion.' In this sentence, the word 'lion' has been used metaphorically not literally. Since John is a very brave man, we liken him to a lion, and then we consider him a lion to explain his courage. The metaphor (lion), which has been used in this sentence 'John is a lion,' is reducible, because we can explain the same metaphor or at least part of it by a literal term, which is 'brave.'

The main problem for which Alston attempts to find a solution is that all metaphors we employ when speaking about God are irreducible, because we cannot literally speak about God's actions and attributes. None of the metaphors used about God can be explained, even partially, in literal terms.

To solve this problem, Alston tries to prove that all metaphors, including those we use to refer to God's action or attributes, are reducible. In other words, there is no metaphorical statement the propositional content of which we cannot express, even only partially, in literal terms.

To explain his view, Alston distinguishes between two kinds of truth claims found in metaphorical statements:

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<sup>392</sup>Ibid., P. 26.

1. The first kind is whenever there is a very *unspecific* claim that the resemblance between the exemplar and the subject is sufficient enough to make the former a good model of the latter. Alston calls this kind of resemblance M-similarity. According to him, the predicate 'M-similarity' can be literally used to link any pair of entities, without any problem. Furthermore, any time that there is accurate metaphorical statement or when there is a suitable metaphor, the predicate 'M-similar' will be literally true for both exemplar and subject. Thus, it is evident that in any metaphorical statement, we may find the literal expressibility of that much of the propositional content.<sup>393</sup>

2. Second, is whenever there is a *specific* propositional content. In the opinion of Alston, this case is more complicated than the first kind. He tries, however, to prove that this kind can also be expressed in literal terms. The reason he gives is as follows:

We concentrate on the predicative part of the propositional content, and we take as an example, this sentence: 'God is my A'. We want to see whether the metaphor in this sentence is reducible or not. In other words, supposing that the speaker by this sentence wants to attribute the property A to God. Then we ask this question: can we express A in literal terms? The answer would be positive if we are able to attribute A to God through finding some predicative term that we literally use it in this sentence

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<sup>393</sup>Ibid., pp. 27- 28.

‘God is ---.’ Answering this question depends on following a very obscure issue which is analyzing the ways that terms acquire their meaning in natural languages.<sup>394</sup>

In the opinion of Alston, A can become the meaning of a predicate term in the language, if the members of a linguistic society can form a concept of A. For if it is possible for me to form the concept of A in my mind, it implies that I can connect an element of the language with A and then apply that element to ascribe A to something. How can one deny my ability to do such an action as long as I have ‘cognitive access’ to A? Furthermore, A’s accessibility for me as a human being indicates that it is cognitively attainable for other human beings and for the language society. Then, there should not be any obstacle to finding a word that can signify A in the language.<sup>395</sup>

Therefore, if I form a specific attribute in the propositional content of a metaphorical statement, I should have that attribute in my mind as what I mean to attribute to the subject. Then, when I have that attribute in my mind, I should have a concept for that attribute. This concept might be implicit. Accordingly, having any propositional content in a statement indicates that there are words in the language we use to literally express the meaning of that content.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>394</sup>Ibid., P. 28.

<sup>395</sup>Ibid., P. 28.

<sup>396</sup>Ibid., P. 28.

Alston then goes on to maintain that his argument proves that there is a real possibility of speaking about God. Practically, however, we may have problem in speaking about Him. This is because the basis for everyone to form a particular concept is his or her own experience of God. Thus, we should find a way to compare between various experiences of people to see how and to what extent they overlap.<sup>397</sup>

Although Alston emphasizes the possibility of literal expression, at least in part, in the propositional content of any metaphorical utterance, he does not claim that anyone who utters or comprehends a metaphorical remark is capable of restating the same remark (at least in part) by using literally another terms. Furthermore, Alston limits his conclusion only to metaphorical utterances that make *truth claims*.<sup>398</sup>

## 6.5. Summary and Comments

Irreducible metaphor is a kind of metaphor that we cannot explain, even in part, in literal terms.<sup>399</sup> Alston maintains that all metaphors, including those we use about God's action or attributes, are reducible. In other words, there is no metaphorical statement the propositional content of which we cannot express, even at least in part, in literal terms. As far as Alston's views of irreducible metaphor are concerned, I think the following observations can be made:

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<sup>397</sup>Ibid., P. 29.

<sup>398</sup>Ibid., P. 30.

<sup>399</sup>Ibid., P. 26.

1. Alston attempts to prove that even a metaphor with a specific propositional content can be expressed in literal terms. His idea seems to be ambiguous. I will clarify the ambiguity in the last chapter.<sup>400</sup>

2. Alston attempts to show that a metaphorical statement with specific propositional content can be expressed in literal terms. First, he gives a general reason for any such metaphorical statement, regardless of its usage in theology or any other field. Then he tries to apply it in theology. The example on which he concentrates to give his general reason, however, is from theology, namely one of God's attributes. I think this example is confusing for his argument. Since in the first part, he is going to give a general reason for his idea and then, in the second part, apply it in theology, the example that he gives in the first part should not be from theology.

3. There is a close relation between Alston's irreducibility thesis and his critiques of Tillich's conception of religious symbols. The former is the basis for the latter. As we discussed earlier,<sup>401</sup> Tillich stresses the irreducibility of symbols. Tillich believes that what is expressed by symbols cannot be expressed in any other way.<sup>402</sup> Alston rejects Tillich's view and emphasizes instead a traditional view according to which using any word in symbolic language depends on being able to use it in a

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<sup>400</sup>See Chapter 9. Examination and Conclusion.

<sup>401</sup> See: the present work, chapter 5 'Symbolic Language of Religion,'

<sup>402</sup>Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p. 122.

literal and non-symbolic way. The defense of this traditional view is one of Alston's results of his analysis of the irreducible religious metaphor.

Thus far, in the present chapter we have argued Alston's method of proving the possibility of speaking, to some extent literally about God using our common language. This method, nevertheless, is not the only way by which he supports partial literalism. There is still one more method for Alston to establish his position, namely functional analysis of religious concepts, which is the center of debate in the next chapter.

## Chapter 7. Functional Analysis of Religious Language

### 7.1. Introduction

Is it possible to speak literally of God? This is the main question raised by Alston when it comes to religious language. The present chapter discusses another way in which Alston attempts to give a positive answer to this question. To follow the discussion, I will first determine the exact location of his position among other thinkers. I will then identify the crucial point on which Alston concentrates his argument, and the reason for this concentration. Then, we will see what kind of difference Alston perceives between the negative and the positive predicates that we use for God. Comprehending his view depends also on clarifying the meaning of language, speech, literalness, and metaphor, all of which were defined above.<sup>403</sup> After these preliminary discussions we will turn to Alston's functionalist analysis of God's attributes. For this purpose I will first discuss two main theories about the comprehending of the attitudes one of which is functionalism. I will then refer to the difference between functionalism and behaviorism, then to Alston's proposed functionalist model of talk of God. Finally, I will add my critical observations.

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<sup>403</sup>I elaborated these terms in Chapter 6.3. and 6.4., so I will not repeat it in the present Chapter.



## 7.2. Different Views of Religious Language

In the literature review above, I divided the various positions on religious language into cognitivists and non-cognitivists. The latter group was also divided into two major groups: those who believed such talk to be nonsense, and those who saw talk of God as meaningful, although not referring to any real object. Both cognitivists and the second group of non-cognitivists believe in the possibility and meaningfulness of talking of God. Those who believe in such meaningfulness do not, however, suggest a common way of speaking of God. We can categorize their position into two main groups:

One is the possibility of univocally speaking of divine and human actions without any difficulty. In such a straight univocity, we can use ordinary terms in the same meaning for both God and human beings. The other side is denying such a view and looking for another way of speaking of divine actions. Theologians in this category emphasize that we cannot literally say anything true about God.

The latter category can be divided into three different subgroups:

A) Those who support some irreducibly analogical relation between the terms that we use for God and human beings. That is, we can apply human terms to God after giving them an analogical extension.

B) Those who use for God a figurative or symbolic form of human senses of terms.

C) Those who use for God a metaphoric form of human senses of terms.

The most popular reason, which is always given by contemporary and older theologians and philosophers of religion who belong to the latter group, is the transcendence of God or his 'wholly otherness.' Various theologians, from Dionysius through Aquinas to Tillich, who are the partisans of the 'otherness' of God are looking for something in the 'a' to 'c' range. Alston's attempt is to support a thesis of partial univocity in talking about God.<sup>404</sup>

### 7.3. Alston's Main Concern

How can we talk about God, who is an immaterial, absolutely perfect and timeless being? Each of these attributes seems to prevent us from literally talking of God using human concepts. Nonetheless, Alston devotes most of his attention to incorporeality. His reason for focusing on this attribute is that it has been widely accepted as God's attribute. Moreover, in some recent discussions, reference to incorporeality as a reason against the literal applicability of human concepts to God, is much more frequent than reference to other divine attributes.<sup>405</sup> Alston's main

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<sup>404</sup>Alston, "Irreducible Metaphor in Theology," pp. 129-130; and Alston, "Divine and Human Action," in *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 257.

<sup>405</sup>Our concern in this thesis is not to concentrate on God's attributes and various arguments regarding each of them. Some of them are more debatable than others. Incorporeality is less and timelessness is more controversial. For more details see: Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," in *Journal of Philosophy*, 68 (1981), pp. 429-58.

concern is subject-predicate statements in which the subject-term is used to refer to God. He wants to see whether in such statements “terms can be literally predicated of God.”<sup>406</sup> He maintains that the contemporary liberal Protestant theologians firmly believe in the impossibility of literal use of predicates in such sentences.<sup>407</sup>

What is denied is not the impossibility of making a statement in which some terms, used literally, are applied to God. Making such a statement is not beyond human power. What is being denied is “an impossibility of saying anything *true* about God while using terms literally.”<sup>408</sup> The main question is: can we *truly apply* to God human terms in their literal meaning?<sup>409</sup>

#### 7.4. Negative and Positive Predicates

Alston divides the predicates in subject-predicate statements which we use for God, into two categories: negative and positive or, as he calls them, extrinsic and intrinsic predicates. He does not discuss the former, since he believes that the possibility of literal usage of negative predicate, at least in some cases, is an evident issue. He holds that “no one who thinks it possible to refer to God would deny that some negative predicates are literally true of God - for instance, incorporeal,

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<sup>406</sup>Alston, “Can We Speak Literally of God,” in Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, p. 146.

<sup>407</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 146, 154.

<sup>408</sup>Alston, “Irreducible Metaphors in Theology,” p. 129.

<sup>409</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129.

immutable, or not-identical-with-Richard-Nixon.”<sup>410</sup> He uses ‘Richard Nixon’ as an example of a human being. For Alston, the reason for negative predicates being different is that they “do not tell us anything about the subject.”<sup>411</sup>

Among intrinsic predicates, Alston concentrates on a group of predicate that he calls ‘personalistic’ (or, following Strawson, ‘P-predicates’). By P-predicates, Alston means:

Those that, as a group, apply to a being only if that being is a ‘personal agent’ - an agent that carries out intentions, plans, or purposes in its actions, that acts in the light of knowledge or belief; a being whose actions express attitudes and are guided by standards and principles; a being capable of communication with other such agents and entering into other forms of personal relations with them.<sup>412</sup>

Such a conception of God as a ‘personal agent’ can be applied to Christianity and other theistic religions. God for them has communication with people, and has purpose, rules and regulations in His creation.<sup>413</sup>

Alston divides P-predicates into M-predicates and A-predicates. The former, which are mental or psychological predicates, include internal psychological states such as attitudes, emotions, wants, and cognition. The latter, which are action predicates, include, in its broad meaning, what an agent *does*.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>410</sup>Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, p. 146.

<sup>411</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>412</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>413</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>414</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 154-55.

## 7.5. Functionalism as a Theory of Meaning

### *Two Main Theories Regarding the Comprehending of Attitudes*

Alston has discussed functionalism in three articles written at different times. He believes, however, that he has done a better job in his most recent article.<sup>415</sup> I have, therefore, devoted more attention to his last article.

The psychological background for intentional actions (M-predicates) can be summarized into two concepts: attitudes and knowledge. Then the question is whether we can use these terms in the same meaning for both God and human beings. Regarding attitudes, Alston maintains that there are two main theories about the comprehending of such inner states. The first approach is identified with German-Austrian thinker Franz Brentano (1838-1917), and its current defender on the American scene, Roderick Milton Chisholm (1916-). According to this view, the concept of attitude and its difference with knowledge is not analyzable in terms of anything else. Although there are connections between attitudes and their multiple consequences for behavior, thought, and feelings, this does not imply that we can clarify the intrinsic nature of attitudes by referring to their results. The idea that intentional states are not analyzable in terms of other concepts has been rejected by numerous contemporary Anglo-American philosophers. They have suggested multiple ways to analyze these states. Among various views on a possible way for

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<sup>415</sup>Alston, *Divine nature and Human Language*, p. 89.

the analysis of intentional states such as belief and attitude, *functionalism* is currently the most popular and dominant idea in the current intellectual scene.<sup>416</sup>

Functionalism has two versions. It proposes not only a theory about the meaning of psychological words but also a theory of the nature of psychological modes, regardless of the meaning of such terms in our ordinary language. Alston concentrates his discussion on the former version, since he deals with the meanings of such words.<sup>417</sup> The basic idea of functionalism, which can be used for the analysis of psychological terms, is that “psychological states are a type individuated by their distinctive role within a complex network of states mediating the perceptual conditions and behavior of organisms or systems.”<sup>418</sup> We apply functionalism for the explanation of some material objects. In the case of a loudspeaker, for instance, we can comprehend its concepts by looking at its function as something that converts electronic signals to sound. We also define a mousetrap as a device for catching mice. The definition is neutral as to the structure of the instrument that performs in these ways. This is a reason that we can make a more advanced mousetrap with the

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<sup>416</sup>Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, pp. 263-265.

<sup>417</sup>Alston, “Functionalism and Theological Language,” in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 22 (July 1985), p. 223; and Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, p. 265.

<sup>418</sup>Robert van Gulick, “Functionalism, Information, and Content,” in *Nature and System* 2 (1980), p. 139.

same name.<sup>419</sup> In the same way as we comprehend and define loudspeaker and mousetrap, we can understand the concept of an attitude. That is, in order to analyze M-predicates such as the concept of a belief or an attitude, we should look at its specific function in the psychological process.<sup>420</sup>

Psyche plays a basic role in mediating between input (perceptual or other data) and output (behavior). “A particular psychological role is a particular piece of that overall mission, a particular way in which one state interacts with other states and with informational input to influence behavior.”<sup>421</sup> For example, a belief that it is raining now has interaction with other states, including a desire not to become wet as much as possible, and a belief that taking an umbrella is a helpful way to remain dry.<sup>422</sup>

There is a basic point in functionalism which helps us to locate common concepts applicable to both human beings and God. Speaking of this point, Alston maintains, “the fact that Y is widely different in constitution from X will not in itself

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<sup>419</sup>As Alston accurately maintains, he is indebted for such analogy to Jerry Fodor, *Psychological Explanation*, (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 15-16.

<sup>420</sup>Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, pp. 157-58; and Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, p. 265.

<sup>421</sup>Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, p. 265.

<sup>422</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 265.

prevent a univocal application of psychological state concepts, provided the crucial sort of function is being performed.”<sup>423</sup>

The analysis given in functionalism for any particular kind of psychological state concepts is based on the function of that state, regardless of its intrinsic character. Consequently, it allows us to apply the same psychological state concepts to various beings such as human beings, animals, computers, and even perhaps angels. If we find a somewhat similar function between human being and God in their knowledge, will, intention, and so on, we are able to apply the same words to refer to these features in both beings.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>423</sup>Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>424</sup>Ibid., p. 265; and Alston, “Functionalism and Theological Language,” p. 222, For more details on the formulations of functionalism, see: Ned Block, “Are Absent Qualia Impossible?” in *Philosophical Review*, 89 (1980), pp. 257-74; Ned Block, “Troubles with Functionalism,” in *Perception and Cognition: Issues in the Foundations of Psychology, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 9, ed. C. W. Savage, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978); David Lewis, “Mad Pain and Martian Pain,” in *Reading in the philosophy of Psychology* ed. Ned Block, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); David Lewis, “Psychophysical and Theoretical Identifications,” in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 50 (1972), pp. 249-258; Hilary Putnam, *Philosophical papers*, 3 vols, vol. 2: *Mind, language, and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), chapters 18-21; Sydney Shoemaker, “Some Varieties of Functionalism,” in *Philosophical Topics*, 12 (1981), pp. 93-120; Robert van Gulick, “Functionalism, Information and Content,” in *Nature and System* 2 (1980), pp. 139-162.



### Functionalism and Behaviorism

Functionalism is an improved view of behaviorism, which is a reductive theory. From this position, we can explain each psychological term by non-psychological concepts, physical conditions which are prior to a psychological state, physical behavioral reactions after that state, and the overall dispositional structure. Unlike behaviorism, “since functionalism does not take psychological states to individually determine behavioral dispositions, it cannot aspire to reduce or eliminate psychological concepts one by one.”<sup>425</sup> Thus, to define functionally any particular psychological term we need to refer to many other psychological terms. We should define psychological terms in terms of their relations to inputs (the cause from which they originate), outputs (behavior), and other mental states.<sup>426</sup>

We saw that in Alston’s view, functionalism can be regarded as a basis to locate a common language between God and human beings. The next question would be whether it is possible to apply the same functionalist account of human psychological states to God. Here Alston modifies van Gulick’s summary account of functionalism in order to extend his account to the divine psyche. For him, psychological states are “type individuated by their distinctive role within a complex network of states mediating the perceptual conditions and behavior of organisms or systems.”<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>425</sup>Alston, “Functionalism and Theological Language,” p. 224.

<sup>426</sup>Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>427</sup>Robert van Gulick, “Functionalism, Information, and Content,” p. 139.

According to Alston, this identification of human psychological states to identify divine psyche is acceptable, with some modification. First, since it is difficult to use ‘organisms’ or ‘systems’ for God, we should replace them with ‘agents.’ Second, God does not have sense organs to acquire information through ‘perceptual conditions.’ This is not, however, a disability for God, since He is omniscient and acquiring information for Him does not depend on using such temporal tools. Therefore, in giving a general functional model of functional psychological states for both God and human beings, we should omit ‘input’ from the picture and finally give the following simplified model: “psychological states are type individuated by their distinctive role within a complex of states that gives rise to action.”<sup>428</sup>

*Alston's Suggested Model of Functionalist Talk of God*

The model that Alston suggests to explain God’s pro-attitude is that a pro-attitude toward G is a kind of state which, if combined with the knowledge that the best way to achieve G is through performing A, will lead to a *tendency* to do A. Here we must ask: what does this tendency mean? Alston’s answer is that a tendency to do A is a state that leads to performing A, if there is no obstacle in its way.<sup>429</sup> But does this conflict with God’s Omnipotence or “Free Will”? If in the case of absence of interference, God’s tendency to do something leads automatically to His behavior, it would represent God without free will. Answering this question, Alston maintains

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<sup>428</sup>Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, p. 266

<sup>429</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 268.

that we should consider divine will one of the factors that can hinder tendency from leading to the performance of action.<sup>430</sup>

Since the combination of attitude and knowledge does not necessarily lead to the performance of an action, we need to recognize another intermediate factor between tendency and action. Alston calls this factor 'executive intention' which is, in fact, the strongest tendency among various competing tendencies. He distinguishes between *intention to do A* and *volition or executive intention to do A*. The former "may not issue immediately in doing A and ... may dissipate before A ever gets done,"<sup>431</sup> while the latter "issues in doing A unless the external world (external to the psyche), prevents it."<sup>432</sup>

Alston also sees as it necessary to make a bridge, which he calls 'action plan', between the tendency and the behavior. The "action plan" consists of the sequence of steps that should be followed to reach to the final goal. An intention to go to a particular university in another city would require the agent to intend to do other preliminary actions such as arising from chair, dressing properly, going out and so on.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>430</sup>Ibid., pp. 268-69.

<sup>431</sup>Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>432</sup>Ibid., pp. 268-70.

<sup>433</sup>Ibid., p. 270, For more details on Alston's view of 'action plan', see his article: "An Action-Plan Interpretation of Purposive Explanation of Actions" in *Theory and Decision*, 20 (1986), pp. 275-299.

The functionalist account that Alston suggests for intentional mental states is as follows:

Attitudes and cognitions are to be understood in terms of the way in which they interact to engender action tendencies. Tendencies, in turn, are to be understood partly in terms of this origin and partly in terms of the way they interact with each other either to determine executive intention or to influence volition, as the case may be. Finally, executive intentions and volition are to be understood in terms both of their background and of the way they determine overt action.<sup>434</sup>

In the opinion of Alston, we can think of his whole functionalist account of intentional mental states, “as deriving from conditionals like the following:

1. If S has pro-attitude toward G, then S will have a tendency to do whatever S takes to be a way of attaining G.

2. If S has a tendency to do A, then if this tendency is not successfully opposed by a stronger tendency or by an act of will, then S will do A, if the external world cooperates in the right way.<sup>435</sup>

These are two common crucial conditionals between God and human beings in their psychological process for action. Despite multiple differences between them, they share in the way in which cognition associates with attitudes to establish action tendencies, and the way in which action tendencies lead to the final executive intention.<sup>436</sup>

The reason Alston suggests a partial functionalist account is that by taking a functionalist analysis, there still remains multiple features which are different

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<sup>434</sup>Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, p. 271.

<sup>435</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>436</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 274.

between human and divine action and motivation. We cannot find a common conceptual analysis for these differences. While we understand, in a first-person sense, our hopes, feelings, intentions, beliefs, and so on, and what they are like to, we can hardly make the same claim for such attributes on the divine side. Because of our temporality and limited powers, our purposes and intentions can be the subject of various changes and different conditions and can be faced with unexpected difficulties and obstacles. Such things, which are absent in God, affect our understanding of human purposes and intentions. We know that if we intend to bring about G it may not lead to the actual existence of G. This affects our conception of the relation between an intention to do something and its actual performance. We cannot, however, apply such a conception to a supreme being.<sup>437</sup>

If we are to comprehend and analyze psychological concepts in God by their functions and overt behavior, then the question is whether it is possible for an incorporeal being to have such a behavior. Moreover, overt behavior requires bodily movement of the agent which is absent in an immaterial being. If Alston succeeds in solving this problem, it can be a good answer for Paul Edward (1923-), an Austrian analytic philosopher who brought up this problem, and Kai Nielsen (1926-), a Canadian analytic philosopher, who accepted it and gave it further development in his *Contemporary Critiques of Religion*<sup>438</sup>. Edward holds that “psychological

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<sup>437</sup>Ibid., pp. 276-78.

<sup>438</sup>London: the Macmillan Press LTD, 1971.

predicates are logically tied to the behavior of organisms.”<sup>439</sup> He does not mean that human beings are limited to their body, rather “much more than a body a human being may be, one cannot sensibly talk about this ‘more’ without presupposing that he is a living organism.”<sup>440</sup> For Edward, we cannot explain human action except by referring to his or her bodily movements.<sup>441</sup> Accepting the same idea, Nielsen maintains that “to make sense to speak of x’s acting or failing to act, x must have a body.”<sup>442</sup> He concludes that speaking of God’s ‘love’ of human being is meaningless, since God is an incorporeal being. Then he generalizes the problem for applying any other psychological concept to God.<sup>443</sup>

Alston tries to solve this problem and find a possible way of describing God’s attributes using human concepts. To do this job, first, he introduces the notion of *basic action*. Intentional actions of an agent can be divided into two types, what is done by performing another action(s), and what is done directly without any intermediate actions. The former is called non-basic and the latter basic action. For

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<sup>439</sup>Paul Edwards, “Difficulties in the Idea of God” in *The Idea of God*, eds. E. H. Madden, R. Handy, and M. Farber, (Springfield, Ill.: Charles Thomas, 1969), pp. 45. See also Peter Geach, *God and the Soul* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 16-17.

<sup>440</sup>Madden, et al., eds., *The Idea of God*, p. 48.

<sup>441</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 45-48.

<sup>442</sup>Kai Nielsen, *Contemporary Critiques of Religion*, (London: the Macmillan Press LTD, 1971), p. 117.

<sup>443</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 117.

instance, signing a paper is a non-basic action, since it is done by performing something else like moving someone's hand, but moving hand is a basic action if it is not done by doing something else. The examples of basic actions are a controversial issue. If moving someone's hand is done by any other intentional action like contracting muscles, then moving hand will be non-basic action. This controversy, yet, does not change the meaning of basic action.<sup>444</sup>

In the case of human beings, special kinds of human basic actions such as raising the arm, kicking, and stretching, require bodily movement. We cannot literally apply these A-predicates to an incorporeal being. The impossibility of such applications, however, is not important for theology. Our problem in theology is not finding a possible way of applying literally such predicates to God. There are other kinds of human non-basic A-predicates which are more relevant for theology. Some examples of such A-predicates are, 'commands', 'forgive', 'speak', 'make', and 'guide.' Do these actions require bodily movements?<sup>445</sup>

Moreover, Alston's main answer is that bodily movement is not a central concept of human action. What is its core concept is "bringing about a change in the world - directly or indirectly - by an act of will, decision, or intention."<sup>446</sup> We can

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<sup>444</sup>Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, p. 163.

<sup>445</sup>Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>446</sup>Alston, "Functionalism and Theological Language," p. 225.

easily apply such a concept to an immaterial being. God can effect changes in the world through a basic action accomplished directly, without any bodily movement.<sup>447</sup>

## 7.6. Summary and Comments

How can we talk about God, who is an immaterial, absolutely perfect and timeless being? Each of these attributes may be considered features which prevent us from literally talking of God while employing human concepts. The term 'metaphor' and 'literal' relate to particular ways of using words. These words are not several kinds of features of language; rather, they are modes of speech. In other words, we use one term in a literal or figurative way.<sup>448</sup> Giving a meaning to a predicate term is correlating it with some property.

Among various views of a possible way for the analysis of intentional states, such as belief and attitude, *functionalism* is currently the most popular and dominant idea in the current intellectual scene.<sup>449</sup> To analyze M-predicates such as the concept of a belief or an attitude we should look at its specific function in the psychological process.<sup>450</sup> The basic idea of functionalism which Alston uses in religious language is

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<sup>447</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>448</sup>Long, ed., *Experience Reason and God*, p. 131, and Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, p. 150.

<sup>449</sup>Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, pp. 263-265.

<sup>450</sup>Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, pp. 157-58; and Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, p. 265.



that the analysis given in functionalism for any particular kind of psychological state concepts is based on the function of that state, regardless of its intrinsic character.

The model that Alston suggests to explain God's pro-attitude is that a pro-attitude toward G is a kind of state which if combined with the knowledge that the best way to achieve G is through performing A, will lead to a *tendency* to do A.

As far as Alston's functionalist analysis of the possibility of literal talk of God is concerned, I think the following observations can be made:

1. It seems that there is no harmony in Alston's view of the possibility of talking literally of God. In some passages,<sup>451</sup> he defends a partial univocity, while in others,<sup>452</sup> he indicates that he is advocating a straight univocity, which means that our ordinary human words can be used in the same meaning for divine attributes. I think, however, this disharmony between Alston's passages may be solved by looking at the date of his writings. Since his support of partial univocity is in his later work, there is a possibility that he has qualified his early literalist views. Moreover, it seems that he is aware of the development of part of his earlier view of religious language, namely its functional analysis. As mentioned above, Alston has discussed functionalism in three articles written at different times, but he believes that he has done a better job in his most recent article.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>451</sup>Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, p. 257.

<sup>452</sup>Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, p. 146.

<sup>453</sup>Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language*, p. 89.

2. Alston mainly concentrates on the incorporeality of God's being to show the possibility of literally predicating human terms of God. His reason for focusing on incorporeality is that it has been widely accepted as God's attribute. Alston takes for granted the obviousness of the incorporeality of God's being. I may argue, however, that it is not an obvious attribute of God. If it was so obvious, we should not be able to find so numerous articles and discussions of incorporeality. Moreover, according to some religious traditions and many popular conceptions, God is not an incorporeal being.

3. Alston divides the predicates in subject-predicate statements which we use for God into negative and positive statements and he believes that the possibility of literal usage of negative predicates, at least in some cases, is an evident issue.<sup>454</sup> However, he does not make a sharp distinction between negative and positive predicates that we can use to describe God's nature. Instead he admits that "It is notoriously difficult to draw an exact line between positive and negative predicates."<sup>455</sup> One may, however, argue that if these negative predicates are so evident, we should be easily able to recognize and separate them from positive predicates.

The only criterion that Alston proposes to describe negative predicates is that they "do not tell us anything about the subject - about the nature or operations of the

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<sup>454</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>455</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

subject.”<sup>456</sup> The examples that he suggests for such predicates are incorporeal, immutable, and not identical with human beings. I would argue, however, that it is difficult to say that negative predicates always do not give us anything about the subject. Rather, they can describe the subject in several cases. The extent to which a negative statement can tell us something about a subject depends on the possible number of alternatives which remain to describe the subject. When we know that the predicate that can describe a particular subject has only two options, negating one predicate implies affirming the other option. If, for instance, God is either corporeal or incorporeal, negating corporeality implies confirming incorporeality to God. Therefore, the negative statement does communicate positive information about the subject.

4. It seems that Alston’s suggested functional model is applicable neither in divine action nor in human behavior. This criticism will be argued in Chapter Nine, below.

Thus far, in the last two chapters we have discussed Alston’s methods of proving partial literalism. In the next chapter we trace this position in the ideas of some Muslim theologians and compare the Islamic discussion with Alston’s doctrine.

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<sup>456</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

## **Chapter 8. Alston's Partial Literalism in the Light of Islamic Theories of Religious Language**

### 8.1. Introduction

Thus far I have discussed Alston's version of partial literalism in regard to religious language. Alston rejects symbolism and confirms partial literalism in talking of God. His proof rests on two theses: reducibility and functionalism. In this chapter I will compare Alston's view with the positions of several Muslim scholars, with special emphasis on Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabâṭabâ'î (1901-1981) an Iranian theologian and philosopher. This comparison of a Muslim thinker with a Christian one may serve to illuminate perspectives on religious language in the two belief systems. I focus on Ṭabâṭabâ'î because he is a modern Muslim scholar who is expert in both Islamic philosophy and interpretation of the Qur'ân – two areas which demand a consideration of the problem of religious language. Ṭabâṭabâ'î's philosophical and exegetical thought, particularly in his major work, *Al-Mîzân, an Exegesis of the Qur'ân*,<sup>457</sup> has also been very influential among Muslim scholars.

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<sup>457</sup>The full title of the text, which is in Arabic, is: *Al-Mîzân fî Tafsîr Al-Qur'ân*, 20 volumes (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-A'lamî lil Maṭbû'ât, 1973). Some volumes of this book have been

Finally, Ṭabāṭabā'ī has played a significant role in introducing modern Islamic thought to Muslims in general. His view of religious language and religious realism has had great impact on other *Shīite* scholars.

In this chapter, I first briefly outline the long-standing controversies among the various Muslims schools - including the *Ḥanbalites*, *Ash'arites*, *Mu'tazilites* and *Shīites* - regarding religious language. Using this framework, I then elaborate Ṭabāṭabā'ī's views. Finally, I compare these views with Alston's position.

## 8.2. Muslim Scholars on Religious Language

Controversies about religious language among Muslim scholars have been concentrated on the problem of God's attributes (*ṣifāt*). How can God or His attributes be described in our human language? Muslim theologians can be divided into two groups according to their approach to this problem: those who deny any possibility of speaking about God's attributes using human language, and those who do not consider such speech impossible.

The early supporters of these two views were also the forerunners of the two schools of Reason and Revelation in the history of Islam: the *Qadarites*<sup>458</sup> and

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translated by Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Ridvī into English as *Al-Mizān, An Exegesis of the Qur'ān*, vol. 1-6 (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 1982).

<sup>458</sup> *Qadarite* was used in the early period of Islam for a group of theologians who supported freewill. They rejected that Allāh determines everything and that there is no role for human

*Jabrites*.<sup>459</sup> Prominent among the questions they considered was that of God's attributes – which amounted to a discussion of how to speak about God in human language. In the latter part of the second/eighth century, a group of theologians known as the *Mu'tazilites*, who inherited some of the concerns of the *Qadarites*, appeared in the city of Baṣrah in Southern Iraq. This group subsequently became one of the most significant theological schools of Islam. The *Mu'tazilites* established their rationalist doctrine as the official creed during the reign of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 833). Their theology, however, lost its influence at court during the reign of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 847). The *Mu'tazilites*, nevertheless, survived in attenuated form into the 12th century, and their theology, including their rationalism, was inherited by the *Shīites*. Another group, which came on the scene to respond to the *Mu'tazilites*, was the *Ash'arites*. Their rise was associated with the famous jurist, theologian, and heresiographer Abu al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (873-935),<sup>460</sup> and they

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beings to determine their actions. H. A. R. Gibb, et al., eds. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (New York: E. J. Brill, 1987), s.v. "adariya," by W. Montgomery Watt.

<sup>459</sup>The word "*Jabrite*" is derived from *jabr*, meaning "compulsion." "*Jabrite*" was used in the early period of Islam for a group of theologians who believed in the negation of actions from people, as Allāh's "slaves," and relating their activities to Allāh. In their view, Allāh is the real doer for every deed. H. A. R. Gibb, et al., eds. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "*Jabrite*" by W. Montgomery Watt.

<sup>460</sup>Abu al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī is the founder of the school of orthodox theology which bears his name ... He abandoned the dogmatic theses of the *Mu'tazilite* for those of opponents like

espoused a moderate rationalism. The views of the *Ash‘arites*, *Mu‘tazilites* and other Muslim theologians regarding religious language can be explained by first dividing them into two classes – those who denied that we can speak of God using human speech, and those who allowed that this was possible – and then further dividing the classes into subgroups. The subgroups of the class of those who allowed that such human speech was possible and meaningful are arranged here according to the *degree of literalism*, in order to facilitate comparison with Alston.

*Denying the possibility of understanding and talking of God's attributes using human language*

Those who held this position included the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* (Traditionalists<sup>461</sup>), including the *Ḥanābilah* (the followers of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241 AH)), Dāwūd ibn ‘Alī al-Isfahānī (d. 270 AH), and Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179 AH).<sup>462</sup> The *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* – literally the “people of the *ḥadīth*” – were strict Traditionalists in that they

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Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, whom he professed to follow; but he defended his new beliefs by the type of rational argument which *Mu‘tazilite* employed.” See: H. A. R. Gibb, et al., eds. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. “Al-Ash‘arī, Abu ‘L-Ḥasan,” by W. Montgomery Watt, and “Mu‘tazila,” by D. Gimaret; and Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Conception of Justice* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1982), pp. 39-40.

<sup>461</sup> I will capitalize ‘Traditionalists’ to refer to a particular group of Muslim theologians (*Ahl al-Ḥadīth*) and those who follow their school of thought.

<sup>462</sup> Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987. S.v. “Islamic Concepts,” by Georges C. Anawati.

considered that knowledge (*ilm*) could be obtained only as it was revealed through the revealed Qur'ân and *ḥadīth* or statements of the Prophet. While acknowledging divine attributes, they saw no possibility of understanding them. They refused any sort of comparison between God and His creatures; God's attributes, they said, cannot be comprehended through any kind of analogy with those of creatures. They simply refused to interpret the Qur'ânic passages that talk of God's attributes, such passages as: "You [God], only You, are the Hearer, the Knower" (3:35); and "Allâh is the Seer of what they do" (2:96). The *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* believed that we should take the apparent meanings of these verses and leave their real meanings to God, who knows what He meant in such verses. Regarding God's attributes mentioned in the Qur'ân and other theological questions, they simply pronounced: "*bi-lâ kayf*" – "[assent] without [asking] how." This means that we can describe God by those attributes, but we do not know anything about their quality, nature or their correspondence to human attributes.<sup>463</sup>

### *Possibility of Speaking of God*

The ideas of Muslim theologians who believe in the possibility of our speaking of God can be divided into the following categories:

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<sup>463</sup>Abu al-Faḥ Muḥammad Ibn `Abd Al-Karīm Shahrīstānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa-al-Niḥal*, Trans. into Persian by Muṣṭafā Khāliqād Hashimī, 2 vols, vol. 1 (Tehran: 1979), pp. 118-119, 132-133.



a) Extreme literalism: Another wing of the Traditionalists were the *Mushabbihah* (Likeners)<sup>464</sup> or *Mujassimah* (Corporealists). The *Mushabbihah* did allow the application of analogical language when speaking of God. They accepted similarity between God and human beings to the extent that they literally interpreted the Qur'anic passages that give anthropomorphic representations of God. Thus, for them, God is a material being with bodily organs. Examples of the supporters of this doctrine were Maqâtil ibn Sulaymân (d. 150 AH), Dâwûd al-Khârazmî, and the *Karrâmîyah*, the followers of Abû 'Abd Allâh Muḥammad Ibn Karrâm (d. 255 AH).<sup>465</sup>

Other Muslim theologians refused the *Mushabbihah*'s employment of analogical language in describing the divine attributes. Among them were the *Jahmîyah*, the followers of Jahm ibn Ṣafwân (d. 745). The *Jahmîyah*, opposed the Anthropomorphists, to the extent that they negated even God's life (*ḥayât*), and knowledge (*'ilm*). The *Jahmîyah* argued that, since the attributes we speak of are evident in human beings, they cannot be attributed to God, since God and His creatures cannot share any common feature. Thus for the *Jahmîyah*, it is possible to describe God as Creator (*khâliq*) and as Omnipotent (*qadîr*) only because these

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<sup>464</sup>*Mushabbihah* comes from *tashbîh*, assimilating God to human being; and *Mujassamah* is derived from *jism*, bodily substance. See B. Khurramshâhî, ed., *A Glossary of Islamic Technical Terms* (Mashhad: Âstân Quds Raḍawî, 1991), p.558; and H. A. R. Gibb, et al., eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Tashbîh," by R. Strothmann.

<sup>465</sup>Badaw î, *Maqâlât al-Islâmî yyîn*, vol. 1, pp. 720-721.

qualities are not found in humans. The *Jahmīyah*'s position was characterized by their enemies as '*ta'ṭīl*' - over-negation - since in negating God's attributes in order to avoid anthropomorphism, they reach the point of denying Him any features at all, making Him into something like an impersonal force.<sup>466</sup>

b) Moderate literalism: The *Ash'arites* upheld, moderated, and further developed the Traditionalist view of religious language which had first been formulated by the so-called *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* (Traditionalists). They rejected the *Ḥanabīlī* position of the impossibility of speaking of God's attribute using human language. Instead, somewhat like the *Mushabbihah*, they did talk of God's attributes and literally interpreted the Qur'ānic verses in this regard. Unlike the *Mushabbihah*, however, they asserted that nothing corporeal was meant by the anthropomorphic passages of the Qur'ān. They left the real meaning of such verses to God.<sup>467</sup>

c) Rationalism. Unlike the *Ḥanābilah* and *Ash'arites*, the *Mu'tazilites* and *Shīites* (the *Shīites* having inherited the theology of the vanished *Mu'tazilites*) did not believe that it was absolutely (as the *Ḥanābilah* claimed), or partly (as the *Ash'arites* believed), impossible to understand and talk of God. They did declare that God is an absolute transcendent being, so that He cannot be described as possessing any of the

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<sup>466</sup>Shahristānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa-al-Niḥal*, Trans. into Persian by Muṣṭafā Khāliqḏād Hāshimī, vol. 1, p. 111.

<sup>467</sup>H. A. R. Gibb, et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Ash'arīya" and "Ash'arī, Abu al-Ḥasan," by W. Montgomery Watt.

properties of a body. They rejected the analogical account of God's attributes upheld by the *Mushabbihah* and any anthropomorphic representation of Him. There is, they insisted, no common attribute between God and human beings<sup>468</sup> Thus, by rejecting *tashbih* - assimilating God to human beings - the *Mu'tazilites* stressed *tanzih*, keeping God pure of any similarity to others.<sup>469</sup> At the same time, however, they allowed that God may be spoken of – and has been spoken of in the Qur'ân – metaphorically. More of their view on metaphor will become apparent below.

### 8.3. Tabâtabâ'î's View of God's Speech

As an example of a *Shiite* thinker, I turn here to 'Allâmah (The Most Learned) Ṭabâṭabâ'î. Ṭabâṭabâ'î refutes in detail the thesis of the Traditionalists (*Ḥanâbilah*) regarding the impossibility of understanding God and His attributes. He does not believe, as the Traditionalists did, that God is the only one who knows the interpretation of Qur'ânic passages that talk of Him.<sup>470</sup> Ṭabâṭabâ'î also believes in God's transcendence and His incorporeality, so that he refuses to speak of God on

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<sup>468</sup>See: Abû al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arî, *Maqâlât al-Islâmîyyîn wa-Ikhtilâf al-Muṣallîn*, vol.1, pp. 216-217; Badawî, *Maqâlât al-Islâmîyyîn*, vol. 1, pp. 52, 151.

<sup>469</sup>Aḥmad Maḥmûd Şubhî, *Fî 'Ilm al-Kalâm, al-Mu'tazilah* (Beirut: Dâr al-Nahḍah al-'Arabiyah, 1985), p. 153; and Mircea Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Attributes of God - Islamic Concept," by Georges C. Anawati.

<sup>470</sup>Ṭabâṭabâ'î, *Al-Mizân Fî Tafsîr al-Qur'ân*, vol. 8, p. 157.

analogy with His creation in cases where that would damage these divine qualities (as the extreme Traditionalists – the *Mushabbihah* – did). That is, he does not accept the literal meaning of passages of the Qur’ân that give anthropomorphic representations of God’s attributes. Instead, Ṭabâtabâ’î maintains that one *can* speak of God on the one hand, and on the other hand that some passages of the Qur’an that refer to God’s attributes may be taken literally, while others must be taken metaphorically. His basic position, in other words, is that of the *Mu’tazilite-Shiite* party.

Ṭabâtabâ’î does not offer in any part of his writings a coherent view of language or languages applied to talk of God and other religious assertions. We can, nevertheless, extract his position from parts of his interpretation of the Qur’ân. For this purpose I will look here at his analysis of God’s speech (*kalâm Allâh*), from which I will try to grasp his position of religious language. I will then compare it with Alston’s position.

Ṭabâtabâ’î discusses God’s speech during his interpretation of the Qur’ân in his major work, *Al-Mizân, an Exegesis of the Qur’an*.<sup>471</sup> He raises the issue in relation to a Qur’ânic verse in which God speaks about talking with certain of His prophets. The verse reads as follows “These apostles, we have made some of them to excel others; among them are some to whom Allâh spoke, and some of them he exalted by degree (of rank), and we gave clear evidence to Jesus, son of Virgin Mary, and strengthened

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<sup>471</sup>Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 1982.

him with the holy spirit” (2:253). The key phrase, according to Ṭabâṭabâ’î, is “among them are some to whom Allâh spoke.” In Ṭabâṭabâ’î’s view, this statement indicates that God did speak to some people. It is not an allegorical statement that does not refer to real speech.

Ṭabâṭabâ’î maintains on this basis that God’s speech is an actual performance. God’s talk as a real thing creates the same results created by our talking. Ṭabâṭabâ’î goes on to explain:

In different Qur’ânic verses, God considers ‘speaking’ one of His actions. For example, God says: “and Allâh spoke to Moses [directly] speaking [to him]” (4:163). In another verse, God says: “among them [God’s apostles] are some to whom God spoke” (2:253). God’s manner of speaking with his apostles has been clarified in the following verse: “It is not for any man that Allâh should speak to him except by revelation, or from behind the veil, or by sending a messenger so that he reveals by his permission what he pleases” (42:51). For Ṭabâṭabâ’î, the Qur’ânic statement in this verse, “Allâh should speak to him,” must mean actual speaking; otherwise the qualifying phrase “except by revelation...” would be meaningless. According to this verse, God really speaks, although in an unspecified fashion.<sup>472</sup>

Ṭabâṭabâ’î also refers to the reality of man’s speech, maintaining that what compels human beings to speak is their natural need to live in a society and communicate with other people. In such a situation, human beings are compelled to

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<sup>472</sup>See also Ṭabâṭabâ’î, *Al-Mizân, An Exegesis of the Qur’ân*, vol. 4, p. 133.

find a way to express their thoughts and feelings to other people. Their nature led them to achieve this goal by using their voices, produced in their mouths. Gradually they combined different sounds to produce multiple signs to express their different opinions, and they agreed upon these signs so that communication became possible between them. Human beings urgently need to talk, because it is the only way to convey their thoughts to others and comprehend others' thoughts. That is why the development of language depends on the development of society, which requires more words in order to transfer information.

In Ṭabāṭabā'ī's view, it is certain that God's talk is not produced in the same way as human speech. The material things that play a role in producing voices in humankind, such as the larynx, tongue, teeth, jaw, and lips, cannot be imagined in the case of God's speech, since God is not a material being. Moreover, a major factor prompting human beings to speak is their social needs. People can satisfy their needs only in a society and through co-operation with others. Living in a community and cooperating with others depends in turn on the ability to convey ideas. Speaking and writing are the most common ways human beings convey their feelings and opinions to others. Nevertheless, although God's manner of speech is not the same as our way of producing sound and speech, and although God is self-sufficient (*ghani*) so that He does not need social relations and cooperation with others, still we can say that God really speaks. This is because speech has a particular effect (or we might say, 'function'). The particular effect or function of speech is the conveying of an intelligible message. Since the effect produced is similar in God and humankind,

God's speech can be called 'speech' in the real sense - even though there are other differences between our talk and God's talk. Therefore, it may be said that God speaks to His prophets and apostles, and He does this so that they may understand what He wants to convey to them. We must admit, however, we do not know the real procedure of God's action.<sup>473</sup>

Ṭabāṭabā'ī now elaborates on this idea. He begins by stating that nowadays, technology and civilization have developed and the tools used by human beings have changed. Nonetheless, we can still use, in a real sense, the names of old tools for new tools. For example, the word 'lamp' in the eighth century was used for an earthen receptacle containing oil or fat with a wick. Burning this wick illuminated darkness. The lamp which is used today for illuminating darkness is totally different from the old lamp. Yet the word 'lamp' can be used for both tools in the real sense. The reason is that the basic purpose (or again, as we might say, "function"), illuminating dark space, is the same for both. When this basic purpose is met by a new tool, the original name, 'lamp', is transferred to the new tool *in reality*, not allegorically. There are many other similar instances in which we use the same words for modern inventions as for older tools, always in a real and not an allegorical sense, even though we see real changes in the shapes and techniques of the new items. What is similar in both cases is the basic purpose and effect.

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<sup>473</sup>Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 134-136.

Again, similarly, we can use the word 'speaking' for both God's speech and human speech. The basic purpose of both kinds of speech is the same, even though the ways of producing it are different. The basic purpose of speech is to make others understand something. Of course, human speaking is prompted by a need for cooperation, while God does not require any kind of cooperation with others.<sup>474</sup>

#### 8.4. Appraisal and Comparison Between Alston and Muslim

##### Theologians

As far as the views of Muslim scholars regarding religious language are concerned, the following points can be made:

1) Comparing Alston's view of religious language with that of Muslim theologians, we see both similarities and differences. While they are of two different traditions, they share the following points:

A) Like Alston, Ṭabâṭabâ'î presents a realistic conception of God and His attributes. Alston objects to the epistemic conception of truth and replaces it with his theory of alethic realism. This is the foundation of his realistic approach to God. A similar position is expressed by many Muslim theologians, including Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabâṭabâ'î. As we saw in his view of God's speech, he considers God's talk an actual thing that creates the same result created by our talk. Referring to the

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<sup>474</sup>Ibid., vol. 4, p. 140.



interpretation of the Qur'ânic passage "among them [prophets] are some to whom Allâh spoke," Ṭabâṭabâ'î maintains that this statement indicates that God did speak to some people. It is not an allegorical statement that does not refer to a real talk.

As we mentioned above, Ṭabâṭabâ'î follows the *Mu'tazilites* and most *Shiite* theologians in this position. Note that for these scholars, God is something real, actually involved in the world. Therefore, Alston's realistic conception of God is similar to that of many Muslim thinkers. Although Ṭabâṭabâ'î is not the only Muslim theologian who supports realism, his famous work *The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism*<sup>475</sup> is regarded a landmark in contemporary realism. This book has influenced several Muslim scholars, including Murtaḍa Muṭahharî (1920-1979),<sup>476</sup> and Muḥammad Taqî Mişbah Yazdî (b. 1935), both of whom have

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<sup>475</sup> Ṭabâṭabâ'î, *Uşûl-i Falsafah va-Ravish-i Riâlisim* (The principles of Philosophy and the method of Realism), Pâvaraḳî bi-Qalam-i Murtaḍâ Muṭahharî, 5 vols, Qum: Intishârât-i Şadrâ, 1989.

<sup>476</sup>Murtaḍâ Muṭahharî is an Iranian *Shiite* theologian who was born in 1920 in Farimân about 60 K.M. distant from Mashhad. His main instructor in philosophy was Muḥammad Huşayn Ṭabâṭabâ'î. He was assassinated in 1979. Muṭahharî wrote more than 40 books including, *Fundamentals of Islamic Thought: God, Man, and the Universe*, Trans. from the Persian by R. Campbell, with annotations and an introduction by Ḥamid Algar, Berkeley : Mîzân Press, 1985; *Jurisprudence and its Principles: Fiqh and Uşûl al-Fiqh*, Trans. from the Persian by Muḥammad Salmân Tawḥîdî, Albany, Calif.: Muslim Student Association (Persian Speaking Group), 1983; Muṭahharî's view of realism is found in his detailed commentaries on Ṭabâṭabâ'î, Muḥammad Huşayn, *Uşûl-i Falsafah va-Ravish-i Riâlisim* (The principles of Philosophy and the method of Realism), Pâvaraḳî bi-Qalam-i Murtaḍâ Muṭahharî, 5 volumes, Qum: Intishârât-i Şadrâ, 1989. For

followed and further developed Ṭabâṭabâ'î's philosophical doctrine of realism.<sup>477</sup>

What are the motivations behind the religious realism of these Muslim scholars on the one hand, and Alston on the other? If we place these scholars in their historical and social context, it becomes apparent that the motivation is similar in each case. Both intend to argue with theories in the modern world which, according to them, lead to atheism, or empty religion from its essence. To believe in an objective real God depends on a realistic conception of religious beliefs regarding God's existence.

B) Alston's view of the possibility of talking meaningfully of God is similar to that of Ṭabâṭabâ'î. Alston rejects expressivism – the theory that there is no meaning behind religious expressions. Like Alston, Ṭabâṭabâ'î rejects the idea of the meaninglessness of religious statements and considers it a false method of interpretation.<sup>478</sup> Although Ṭabâṭabâ'î does not mention the term “expressivism”, it

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more details on Muṭahharî's thought, see: Muḥammad Vâ'iz Zâdah Khurâsânî, “Sayrî dar Zindigî-i 'Ilmî va-Inqilâbî-i Shahîd Murtaḍâ Muṭahharî” in *Yâdnâmah-i Ustâd Shahîd Murtaḍâ Muṭahharî* (Tehran: Sâzmân-i Intishârât va-Âmûzish-i Inqilâb-i Islâmî, 1981), pp. 321 and 379.

<sup>477</sup>Miṣbah Yazdî is a contemporary *Shiite* theologian and philosopher. He has written several books and articles mainly concentrated on Islamic and western Philosophy and interpretation of the Qur'ân. He elaborates his idea of realism in his book: *Âmûzish-i Falsafah*, 2 vols. Tihran: Sâzmân-i Tablighât-i Islâmî, 1989.

<sup>478</sup>Ṭabâṭabâ'î, *Al-Mîzân, An Exegesis of the Qur'ân*, vol. 4, p. 133.

seems that his objections were aimed at positivists and empiricists such as Alfred Ayer, David Hume and others, most of whom objected to religious belief.<sup>479</sup>

C) For both Alston and Ṭabâṭabâ'î, while God is an absolutely transcendent and incorporeal being, this does not prevent comprehending Him and His attributes. Ṭabâṭabâ'î refutes in detail the arguments of the Traditionalists (*Ahl al-Ḥadīth*) regarding the impossibility of understanding God and His attributes.<sup>480</sup>

D) Both Alston and Ṭabâṭabâ'î defend a sort of literalism in religious discourse. Both believe that we can use our ordinary language to explain God's attributes. As we saw in Ṭabâṭabâ'î's view of God's speech, he freely uses human language to describe the meaning of God's speech as one of His actions. In this analysis, he attempts to prove that the Qur'anic statements that tell us about God's speech with His prophets are not allegorical statements that do not point to any real talk. In other words, he proposes a literal interpretation of the Qur'anic verses referring to God's speaking with His prophets.

Ṭabâṭabâ'î's insistence on literally understanding the language of the Qur'an implies a view of religious language similar to that of Alston. Both refuse to regard religious statements as consisting merely of symbolic language, as either meaningless or mere expressions of feelings or attitudes. Ṭabâṭabâ'î's view of the

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<sup>479</sup>For more information on the views of positivists and empiricists see the present work, Chapter 2 (Literature review).

<sup>480</sup>Ṭabâṭabâ'î, *Al-Mizân Fî Tafsîr al-Qur'ân*, vol. 8, p. 157.

possibility of using our ordinary language to explain God's attributes has been developed by some *Shiite* scholars such as Muṭahharî. He rejects the ideas of the Traditionalists, including the *Ḥanâbilah*, who argue for the impossibility of talking of God's attributes and refraining from interpretation of the Qur'ânic passages deal with this topic. Then he suggests a functional analysis of religious language that I will discuss later in this chapter.<sup>481</sup>

2) Ṭabâṭabâ'î interprets some Qur'ânic passages literally and some metaphorically. How does he distinguish which passages are 'literal' and which 'metaphorical'? In the opinion of Ṭabâṭabâ'î, we should interpret the Qur'ânic passages according to their literal meaning except where there appears to be a conflict with the definite results of human reason. In such cases, the language of religious discourse is metaphoric and we must change the literal meaning. Among such Qur'ânic verses are those that represent an anthropomorphic representation of God, such as "The hand of Allâh is above their hand" (48:10),<sup>482</sup> and "The Lord shall come with angels, rank on rank" (89:22). The problem in these verses is connected with the problem of God's attributes and anthropomorphism – one of the great issues

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<sup>481</sup>For Muṭahhari's view, see the present work, p. 216 and his commentaries on Ṭabâṭabâ'î, *Uṣûl-i Falsafah va-Ravish-i Riâlîsm*, vol. 5, pp. 11-20, 165-180.

<sup>482</sup> The complete verse is: "Those who swear allegiance unto thee (Muḥammad), swear allegiance only unto Allâh. The hand of Allâh is above their hand. Therefore, whosoever breaketh his oath, breaketh it only to his soul's hurt; whosoever keepeth his covenant with Allâh, on him will He bestow immense reward."

of Muslim theology, in which the *Mu'tazilite* and therefore *Shiites* fall very clearly on the anti-anthropomorphic side. Ṭabâṭabâ'î suggests metaphoric meanings for both verses.<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>483</sup>Ṭabâṭabâ'î, *al-Mizân fî Tafsîr Al-Qur'ân*, vol. 3, p. 49; and Ṭabâṭabâ'î, *Al-Mizân, An Exegesis of the Qur'ân*, vol. 4, pp. 134-136. The details of Ṭabâṭabâ'î's view of the interpretation of these verses are as follows: According to Ṭabâṭabâ'î, the phrase "The hand of Allâh is above their hand" cannot be interpreted in its literal meaning, because God does not have any hand. God is not a human being with physical hands. Consequently, one must alter the apparent meaning of this phrase. In Ṭabâṭabâ'î's view, "the hand of God" means "the hand of Muḥammad." Ṭabâṭabâ'î supports this understanding of the phrase view by referring to the following points:

a) This verse speaks about swearing allegiance which was used to be done through a kind of shaking hand and touching someone's hand.

b) We can understand from some Qur'anic verses that Muḥammad's action has been considered God's action, for instance, in the same verse, which includes the phrase "the hand of God," Qur'an says: "Those who swear allegiance unto thee (Muḥammad), swear allegiance only unto Allâh." Or in another Qur'anic verse God says: "Whoso obeyeth the messenger obeyeth Allâh." (4:80) Therefore, it is not wrong if we interpret God's hand, which cannot be interpreted according to its literal meaning, as Muḥammad's hand or shaking his hands as swearing allegiance to him.

Taking this point into consideration, the phrase "The hand of Allâh is above their hand," means that the hand of Muḥammad is above your hand and this refers to the priority of Muḥammad on other Muslims. (Ṭabâṭabâ'î, *al-Mizân fî Tafsîr Al-Qur'ân*, vol. 18, pp. 274-5).

Thus, even though Ṭabâṭabâ'î supports the literal interpretation of some Qur'anic passages, he does not apply this method for all of the Qur'ân. Therefore, unlike Alston who focuses on the rejection of metaphor for speaking of God, Ṭabâṭabâ'î who discusses the interpretation of Scripture, does not reject all metaphorical language in religion; rather, he proposes a metaphorical interpretation of some Qur'anic passages.

3) Alston proposes a functionalist account of God's attributes. Likewise, we can see a kind of functionalism in the views of Muslim theologians, including Ṭabâṭabâ'î, Muṭahharî, Mullâ Şadrâ<sup>484</sup> and the *Mu'tazilites*. After pointing to

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Regarding the phrase "And the Lord shall come." (89:22) Ṭabâṭabâ'î believes that we cannot interpret this Qur'anic phrase, which explains the Day of Resurrection, according to its literal meaning, because it is not rational that God comes somewhere. He is not like a human being to go somewhere; rather he is everywhere. Thus, the phrase "And the Lord shall come" refers to the appearance of God's power on the Day of Resurrection. (Ibid., vol. 20, p. 283).

<sup>484</sup>Şadr al-Dîn al-Shîrâzî known as Mullâ Şadrâ (d. 1641) is a leading Iranian *Shiite* philosopher whose works has had great importance for *Shiite* philosophy and modern *Shiite* thought. He has written, among several books, *al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'âlîyah* (Transcendent Wisdom) 9 vols. (Bayrut: Dâr Ihyâ' al-Turath al-'Arabî, 1981). The second edition of this book published with some of the Traditional commentaries under the editorship of Ṭabâṭabâ'î. This is a major source for both Mullâ Şadrâ's philosophical doctrines and the history of Islamic philosophy. See: Sayyid Ḥusayn Naşr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1982), p. 173.

Alston's view of functionalism, I will refer to the idea of Muslim scholars regarding God's speech to show how they employ functionalism to propose their literal understanding of God's speech.

In the opinion of Alston, there is a basic point in functionalism which helps us to find common concepts applicable to both human beings and God. He maintains that the analysis given in functionalism for any particular kind of psychological state is based on the function of that state, regardless of its intrinsic character. Consequently, it allows us to posit the same psychological state for very different entities such as human beings, animals, computers, and even perhaps angels. If we find a function of human beings and God in regard to their knowledge, will, intention, and so on that is similar, we are able to apply the same words to refer to these features in both beings.<sup>485</sup> Although, unlike Alston, Muslim thinkers do not construct a detailed theory of functionalism – and they do not speak of “Functionalism” as such – still, the core of Alston's position is found in their analysis of God's speech. We can find functional analysis in the views of *Mu'tazilites*, as well as some *Shiites*, including Mullâ Şadrâ, Muṭahharî, and Ṭabâṭabâ'î. I will now turn to the elaboration of these positions.

Elaborating on God's speech, Mullâ Şadrâ (d. 1641) maintains that the reality of speech is to convey an idea to the other party. Nevertheless, those things that are

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<sup>485</sup>Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, p. 265; and Alston, “Functionalism and Theological Language,” p. 222.

used to produce speech, such as the passage of air through the larynx, mouth, lips, and so on, are not essential to its reality. What is basic for speech, according to Mullâ Şadrâ, is the intended meaning; one can speak and convey one's idea to others even by moving one's hand to call someone to one's side.<sup>486</sup> Mullâ Şadrâ in this analysis of God's speech proposes a functional definition applicable to both God and human beings. 'To convey an idea to others' is the function of speech. Having proposed this definition of 'speech,' we can use this word literally for both God and human beings.

Like Mullâ Şadrâ, the *Mu'tazilites* in their debate with the *Ash'arites* suggested a functional definition of God's Speech. The *Ash'arites* do not consider speech to be the spoken word. Spoken words are, according to them, only a manifestation of 'speech.' Real speech consists of meaning in the mind of the speaker. Consequently the *Ash'arites* maintain that God's Speech, which is His Thought, is nothing other than His Knowledge. Rejecting the idea of the *Ash'arites*, the *Mu'tazilites* believe that what the *Ash'arites* call 'speech found in the person' is not speech in the real sense, but rather knowledge. What we have in mind while speaking is not speech, but knowledge which we express through speech. Calling it speech is a misuse of the word. The *Mu'tazilites* define 'speech' in the ordinary sense. For them, 'speech' refers to spoken words that are used to convey meaning to the hearer.<sup>487</sup>

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<sup>486</sup>Mullâ Şadrâ, *al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'âlîyah*, vol. 7, pp. 1-10.

<sup>487</sup>Ibid., p. 149-150. The roots of debate between *Ash'arites* and *Mu'tazilites* regarding the meaning of speech are their dispute regarding the eternity of God's speech. By considering



In this debate between the *Ash'arites* and the *Mu'tazilites*, the latter emphasize a functional analysis of speech which allows us to draw an analogy between human speech as we know it and God's speech, thus permitting us in turn to regard God's speech as understandable in our terms and verify its real efficacy in this world.

Muṭahharî also proposes a functional analysis of God's attributes. In his opinion, we can use our concepts to talk literally of God's attributes. Muṭahharî begins by distinguishing between concepts and their referents. The real referent of concepts such as 'power,' 'knowledge,' and 'will,' when speaking of God's attributes is the difference between God and human beings, not the concepts, such as 'power,' 'knowledge,' themselves. These concepts can be used for many different referents, including God and human beings. When we apply these concepts to God, however, they refer to unlimited and infinite characteristics; while when we apply them to human beings, they refer to limited characteristics. For instance, God has unlimited knowledge, while human knowledge is limited. Muṭahharî also suggests the possibility of applying our concepts to God by abstracting them from their bodily implications. For example, human 'speech' conveys meaning to another party, and it is produced by using material things such as the tongue, teeth and so on. To use

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speech what is in the mind of the speaker, *Ash'arites* attempt to prove the eternity of God's Speech. For them God's Speech, which is His thoughts, are nothing except His knowledge. Therefore, God's Speech, which they call it '*al-kalâm al-nafsî*', is eternal, as His Knowledge. *Mu'tazilites*, however, stress that God's Speech, which is the spoken words, is created. Ibid., p. 149.

‘speech’ for God, we should abstract the word from these material implications and consider it only as ‘conveying a meaning to another party.’<sup>488</sup>

Ṭabâṭabâ’î’s analysis of God’s speech also depends on functionalism. Like Alston, Ṭabâṭabâ’î recognizes the difference between the attributes of God and the attributes of human beings, but attempts at the same time to use ordinary language to explain God’s attributes. In the case of God’s speech, Ṭabâṭabâ’î first stresses that God’s speech is not produced in the same way as human speech. Material factors which play role in producing voices in mankind, such as the larynx, tongue, teeth, jaw, and lips, cannot be imagined in the case of God’s speech, since God is not a material being. He also points to God’s self-sufficiency (*ghinâ’*) from any natural and social need to talk.

Ṭabâṭabâ’î now gives his definition of God’s speech. He compares the word ‘speech’ with the word ‘lamp,’ which is used today for illuminating darkness. What is called ‘lamp’ today is totally different from the old lamp. The word ‘lamp,’ nevertheless, can be used for both tools in the real meaning. The reason is that the basic purpose, illuminating dark space, is the same for both. Similarly, we can use the word ‘speaking’ for both God’s speech and human speech. The basic purpose or the particular effect of both kinds of speech is the same, even though the ways of producing it are different. The basic purpose of speech is to make others understand

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<sup>488</sup>Muṭahharî, *Usûl-i Falsafah va-Ravish-I Riâlisim*, vol. 5, pp. 165-180.

something.<sup>489</sup> What Ṭabâṭabâ'î calls 'basic purpose' or 'particular effect' is very close to what Alston calls 'function.' To 'make others to conceive something' or 'convey an idea to others' is the 'function' or 'particular effect' of speech.

4) Although the *Mu'tazilites* and *Shīites* do not call their position partial literalism, Alston's rationale for calling his position "partial" is also found in their systems. Alston's argument begins with God's transcendence and absolutely perfect being. Because of our temporality and limited powers and God's unlimited perfection, no one can claim that our ordinary language can exactly explain God's attributes.<sup>490</sup> The *Mu'tazilites* and *Shīites* make the same argument.

5) Although Alston's partial literalism is somewhat similar to that of the *Mu'tazilites* and *Shīites*, the motivations of their positions seem to be different. The two main factors that compel Muslim scholars to elaborate their view of religious language in different directions are: the Qur'ānic passages addressing God's attributes; and the issue of reason<sup>491</sup> and revelation.<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>489</sup>Ṭabâṭabâ'î, *Al-Mīzân, An Exegesis of the Qur'ân*, vol. 4, p. 140.

<sup>490</sup>Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, p. 271 For more detail of Alston's reason for calling his position partial literalism, see this thesis, pp. 276-277

<sup>491</sup>Reason, intellect, or intelligence (Arabic: 'aql) used in a wide variety of senses, including vague meaning with complex and sometimes obscure connections one with another. What is meant, however, here is its theological meaning in an Islamic context. From this point of view, reason is a source of knowledge in antithesis with Tradition (*naql*). In other words, it is natural

The Qur'anic passages that talk of God can be divided into four categories:

a) Passages stressing God's transcendence and being beyond human comprehension and description, such as:

"Glory be to your Lord, the Lord of Honor, above what they describe" (37:180).

"Glory to the Lord of the heaven and the earth, the Lord of Power, from what they describe" (43:82).

"Vision comprehends Him not, and He comprehends (all) vision" (6:103).

b) Verses stating that there is no similarity between God and other beings, for instance, "Like Him there is nothing" (42:11).

c) Passages apparently representing God in anthropomorphic terms, such as:

"Surely those who swear allegiance to you do but swear allegiance to Allâh, the hand of Allâh is above their hands" (48:10).

"And your Lord comes and (also) the angels in ranks" (89:22).

tool to understand what is right and wrong. See *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Akl," by F. Raḥman.

<sup>492</sup>The notion of revelation (Arabic: *waḥy*), which originated from God's sending down his revealed law to human beings, is a basic concept in many religions. In Islam particularly it is a divine communication from God to people by means of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632) who received revelation through dreams, visions and auditions. Revelation is different from *ilhām*, which denotes the inspiration of artists, saints and others. Furthermore, it is distinguished from *tanzīl*, which indicates the object of revelation, and from *inzāl*, which is sending down the law from God to people. See: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Waḥy," by A. J. Wensinck.

d) Verses describing God and His attributes, along with verses encouraging believers to reflect concerning God. Examples of the former are:

“Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth declares the glory of Allāh, the King, the Holy, the Mighty, the Wise” (62:1).

“Vision comprehends Him not, and He comprehends [all] vision; and He is the Knower of subtleties, the Aware” (6:103).

Examples of the latter are:

“Most surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day, and the ships that run in the sea with that which profits the people, and the water that Allāh send down from the cloud, then gives light with it to the earth after its death and spreads in it all [kinds of] animals...there are signs for the people who ponder” (2:64).

“Allāh thus make clear to you His signs that you may ponder” (2:242).

The *Ash‘arites* and *Hanbalites* stress the first and second categories. This is because the thoroughly Traditionalist *Hanbalites* (followed by other extreme Traditionalists) along with the more moderately Traditionalist *Ash‘arites*, emphasize the predominant role of revelation on the one hand, and the insufficiency of reason on the other. All these assert that human beings should refer to revelation and not to reason in order to comprehend Islamic beliefs (including God’s attributes), to

understand the multivalent (*mutashâbih*) verses of the Qur'ân,<sup>493</sup> and to arbitrate in cases of contradiction between revelation and reason. The *Hanbalites*, Ash'arites, and others strove to prove the insufficiency of reason in theological discussion.<sup>494</sup> Accordingly, they restricted themselves to what is in the Qur'ân regarding God's attributes; they accepted the anthropomorphic verses without attempting to interpret the apparent meaning of such passages. Among the various Qur'ânic verses mentioned above, they stressed the first and second categories, and from these they deduced the impossibility of comprehending God in any way through human intellect.

The *Mu'tazilite* and *Shiites*, in contrast, stressed the predominant role of reason in human affairs. There was, to be sure, a range of views among the *Mu'tazilites* concerning the efficacy of reason (just as there is a range of views among *Shiites* today). Some *Mu'tazilite* thinkers such as Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir (d. 828), head of the group in Baghdad, and Abû 'Alâ al-Jubbâ'î (d. 933) emphasized the role of reason, while others admitted that the results of reason are sometimes not valid. All *Mu'tazilites*, however, accepted that man could acquire knowledge of God's

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<sup>493</sup>'Mutashâbih' is used for the verses that do not have a clear meaning, so they have the potentiality for various interpretations. The opposite word is '*muḥkam*,' which is used for verses that they have a clear meaning. Ṭabâṭabâ'î, *Al-Mizân*, Persian translation, vol. 3, pp. 33-34.

<sup>494</sup>See for example, 'Abd al-Raḥmân Badawî, *Maqâlâlât al-Islâmîyyîn, al-Mu'tazilah wa-al-Ashâ'irah*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dâr al-'Ilm lil- Malâ'yîn, 1971), p. 499; and Montgomery W.

attributes (a position which the *Ḥanbalites* and other Traditionalists vigorously condemned). Abû al-Hudhayl al-‘Allâf (d. 841) conceded that man should refer to revelation in matters where reason is in doubt; but that nevertheless, if there were any contradiction between judgment made in accordance with reason and judgment made in accordance with revelation, the latter should be interpreted in a manner which conforms to reason. Consequently, the *Mu‘tazilites*, as well as many *Shiites* (including Ṭabâṭabâ’î and Muṭahharî), do not accept the literal meaning of Qur’ânic passages which present God in anthropomorphic terms – since, according to the dictates of reason, God for them is an incorporeal being which cannot have bodily organs. The *Mu‘tazilites* and *Shiites* thus suggested metaphoric meanings for such verses.<sup>495</sup> Referring again to the four categories of verses enumerated above, they accepted the first two categories, but did not conclude from them the impossibility of understanding God and His attributes. Instead, they supported their views by stressing the fourth category.<sup>496</sup>

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Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London: Luzac and Company Ltd., 1948), p. 137.

<sup>495</sup>Aḥmad Maḥmûd Şubḥî, *Fî ‘Ilm al-Kalâm, al-Mu‘tazilah*, Beirut: Dâr al-Nahḍah al-‘Arabiyah, 1985), p. 153; and Mircea Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Attributes of God - Islamic Concept,” by Georges C. Anawati.

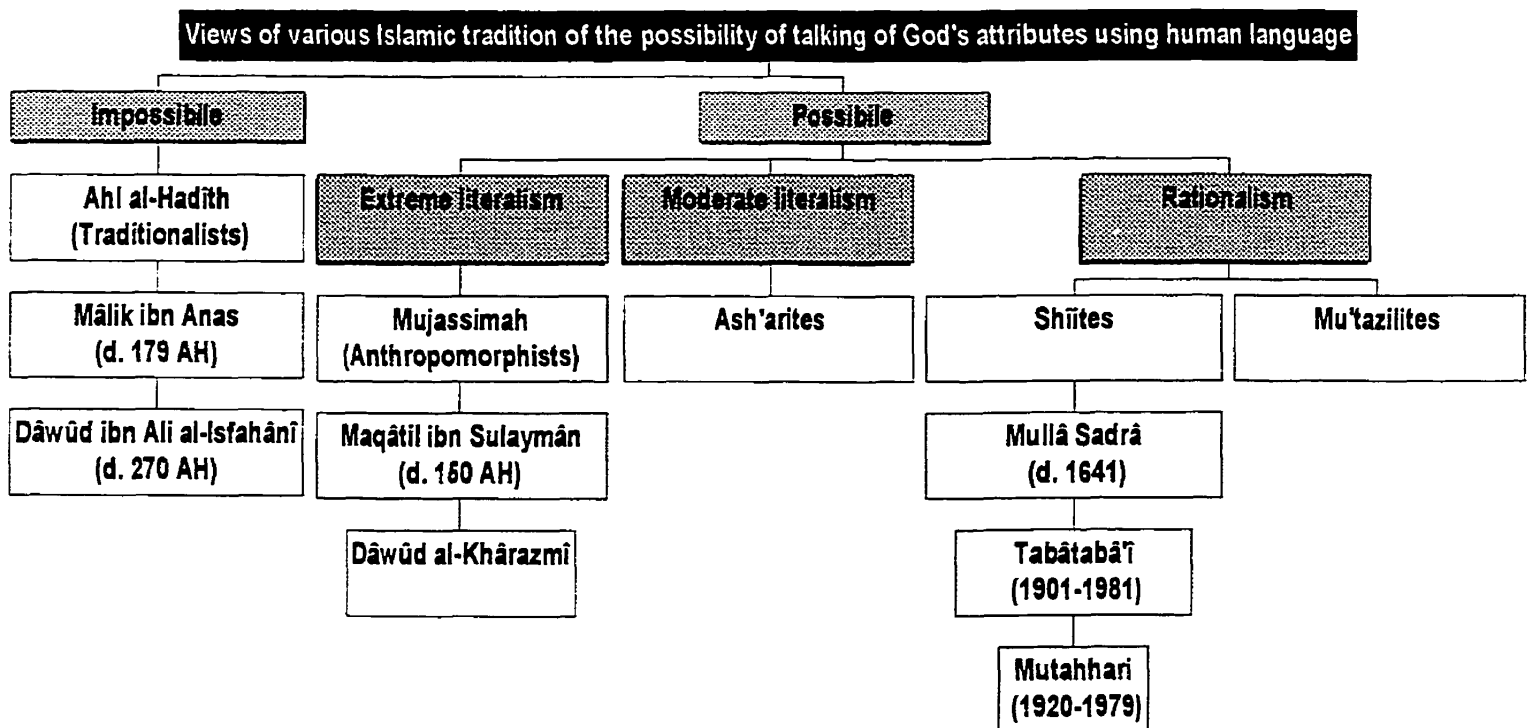
<sup>496</sup>For Ṭabâṭabâ’î’s view, see his *Al-Mizân Fî Tafsîr al-Qur’ân*, vol. 8, p. 157; and for Muṭahharî’s view, see his commentaries on: Ṭabâṭabâ’î, *Uşûl-i Falsafah va-Ravish-i Riâlistm*, vol. 5, pp. 165-180.

Among the above two motivations for the views of Muslim scholars of religious language, scripture and rationalism, the second motives seems to be common between Alston, the *Mu'tazilites*, and some *Shīites* such as Ṭabāṭabā'ī. This common factor can be one of bases for commonality between their positions.



## 8.5. Summary Comments

Chart 3



In this chapter I briefly reviewed the thought of Muslim theologians, including the *Ḥanbalites*, *Mu'tazilites*, *Ash'arites*, and several *Shīites*, that is Mullā Ṣadrā, Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Muṣṭahharī, and Miṣbah, regarding religious language. (See chart 3) I then

compared their views with Alston's doctrine. The comparison suggested several similarities between these currents in Christianity and Islam concerning religious language.

Like Alston, Ṭabāṭabā'ī, in company with the *Mu'tazilites* and most *Shiite* theologians, presents a realistic conception of God and His attributes. Comparing Ṭabāṭabā'ī with other *Shiite* scholars who propose the doctrine of realism, his position has been one of the most influential. Alston's view of the possibility of talking meaningfully of God is similar to that of Ṭabāṭabā'ī. For both, while God is an absolutely transcendent and incorporeal being, this does not prevent comprehending Him and His attributes. Both defend a sort of literalism in religious discourse. Nevertheless, unlike Alston, Ṭabāṭabā'ī does not reject metaphorical language in religion; in fact, he proposes that Qur'ānic passages that are in conflict with the definite results of reason be interpreted metaphorically. This approach is in accord with the rationalist worldview of the *Shiites*.

Ṭabāṭabā'ī does not, however, clarify the exact meaning of reason, a word with various ambiguous and complicated meanings – both in philosophy and theology in general, and in the *Shiite* tradition in particular. Moreover, he does not spell out the extent to which human reason can reach any definite result. For instance, although we may find in several cases common understandings among all human beings, the results of reason can be different in multiple societies and in different conditions.

Alston's functional analysis regarding God's attributes is similar to the position of Muslim scholars, since the core of Alston's position is found in their analysis of God's speech, although they do not call it functionalism.

Even though the *Mu'tazilites* and *Shiites* do not call their position partial literalism, Alston's reason for calling his position partial is found in the *Mu'tazilites'* and *Shiites'* views. Nevertheless, the roots of the Muslim theologians' views of religious language, which spring from different sorts of Qur'anic passages regarding God's attributes and the various positions of Muslim scholars regarding revelation and reason, seem to be different from that of Alston.

The main motive of the discussion on religious language for Muslim scholars prior to Ṭabâṭabâ'î has been the way of understanding various Qur'anic passages regarding God's attributes – the different positions being founded either on accepting or rejecting rationalist worldview. For Ṭabâṭabâ'î, however, there is one more motivation, mainly the social context. On the one hand, Ṭabâṭabâ'î is very aware of the problem underlying the classical view of religious language, that is the problem of anthropomorphism. Thus he draws on the thought of the *Mu'tazilites*, as well as *Shiites* such as Mullâ Şadrâ, developing it along rationalist lines. Ṭabâṭabâ'î's argument also, however, has a social dimension, as he intends to critique the positivism and materialism which were powerful currents in Iran and the Muslim world at his time. Thus Ṭabâṭabâ'î's intention is also, in opposition to these trends, to reject the meaninglessness of religious statements.

What are the basic reasons for the similarity between Alston and Ṭabâṭabâ'î? Do they have the same motivation? It seems that one reason for this similarity between Alston and certain representatives of the Islamic tradition is that they both are rationalists working within a monotheistic tradition with, to some extent, common ideas regarding God's existence - His incorporeality, transcendence and so on. Both try to avoid anthropomorphism. Ṭabâṭabâ'î's anti-anthropomorphic tendency is evident in his emphasis on interpreting the literal meaning of Qur'ânic passages that suggest an anthropomorphic representation of God. Alston's anti-anthropomorphic tendency emerges in his insistence on partial, rather than absolute literalism. Both thinkers reject the positivist and naturalist view of religion, which implies the meaninglessness of religious utterances. Both attempt to defend the concept of an objective, real God whom it is possible to speak about using human language. Thus certain basic assumptions shared by these two thinkers from different traditions lead naturally to the same position. (See chart 4 below.)

While Alston and Ṭabâṭabâ'î do share certain assumptions, face similar problems, and arrive at similar results, Ṭabâṭabâ'î's literalism, however, is much more theologically disciplined. He is more concerned with Scripture than Alston. Therefore, while Ṭabâṭabâ'î's motives are both the classical theology and the current social context, Alston's main concern is the general modern intellectual context. (See chart 5 below.)

Muslim scholars have not paid enough attention to all aspects of religious language. Their main concern has been various types of verses regarding God's

attributes in the Qur'ân. Even someone like Ṭabâṭabâ'î, who talks of changing the literal meaning of some verses, does not elaborate on the non-literal interpretation of religious beliefs. He does not give us a clear and comprehensive picture of the role of symbolic language of religion. Moreover, he does not offer a complete distinction between the cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of religious assertions. These points are missing in the views of Muslim scholars. I will present more of my view of religious language in the concluding chapter.

Chart 4.

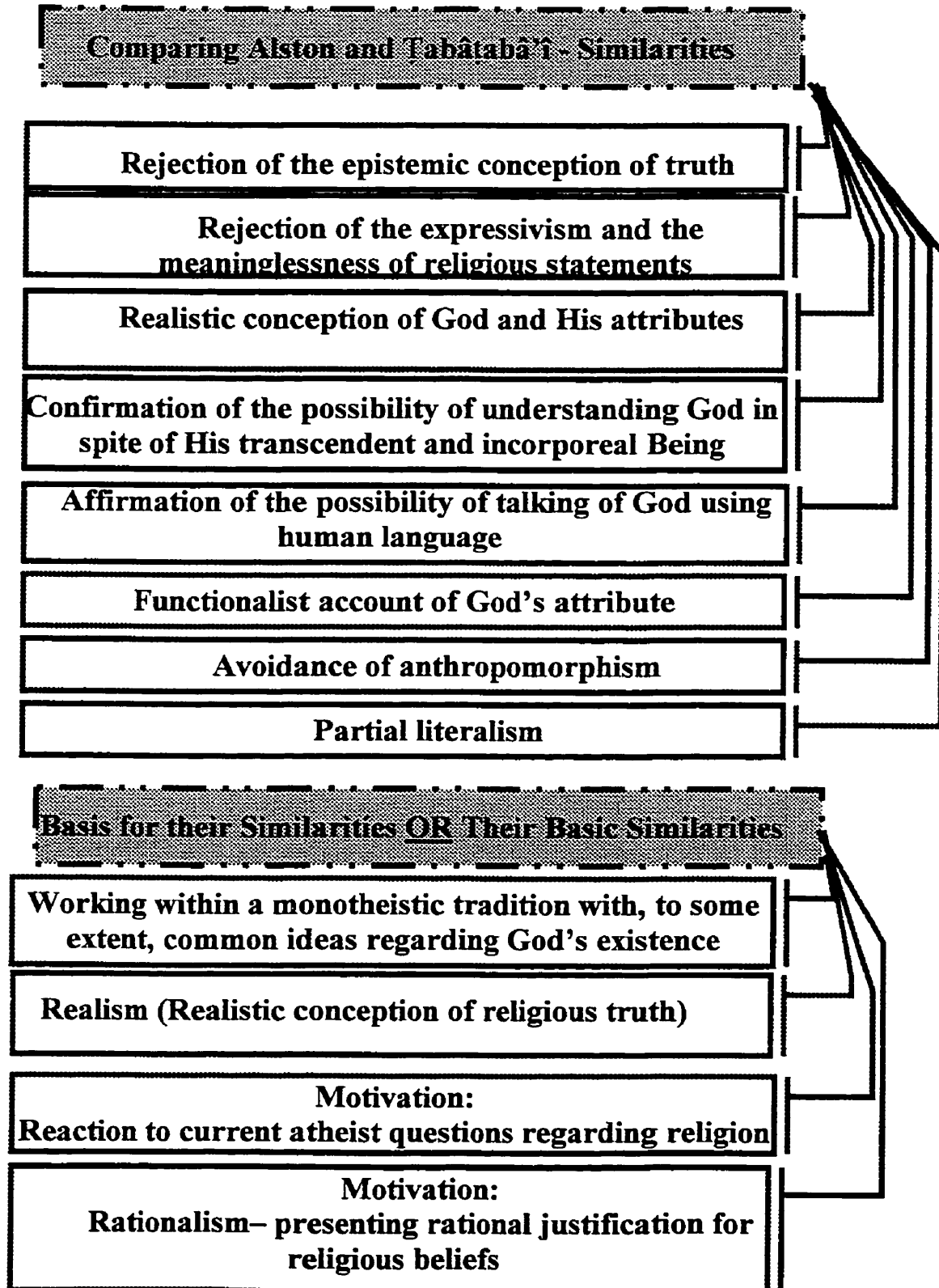
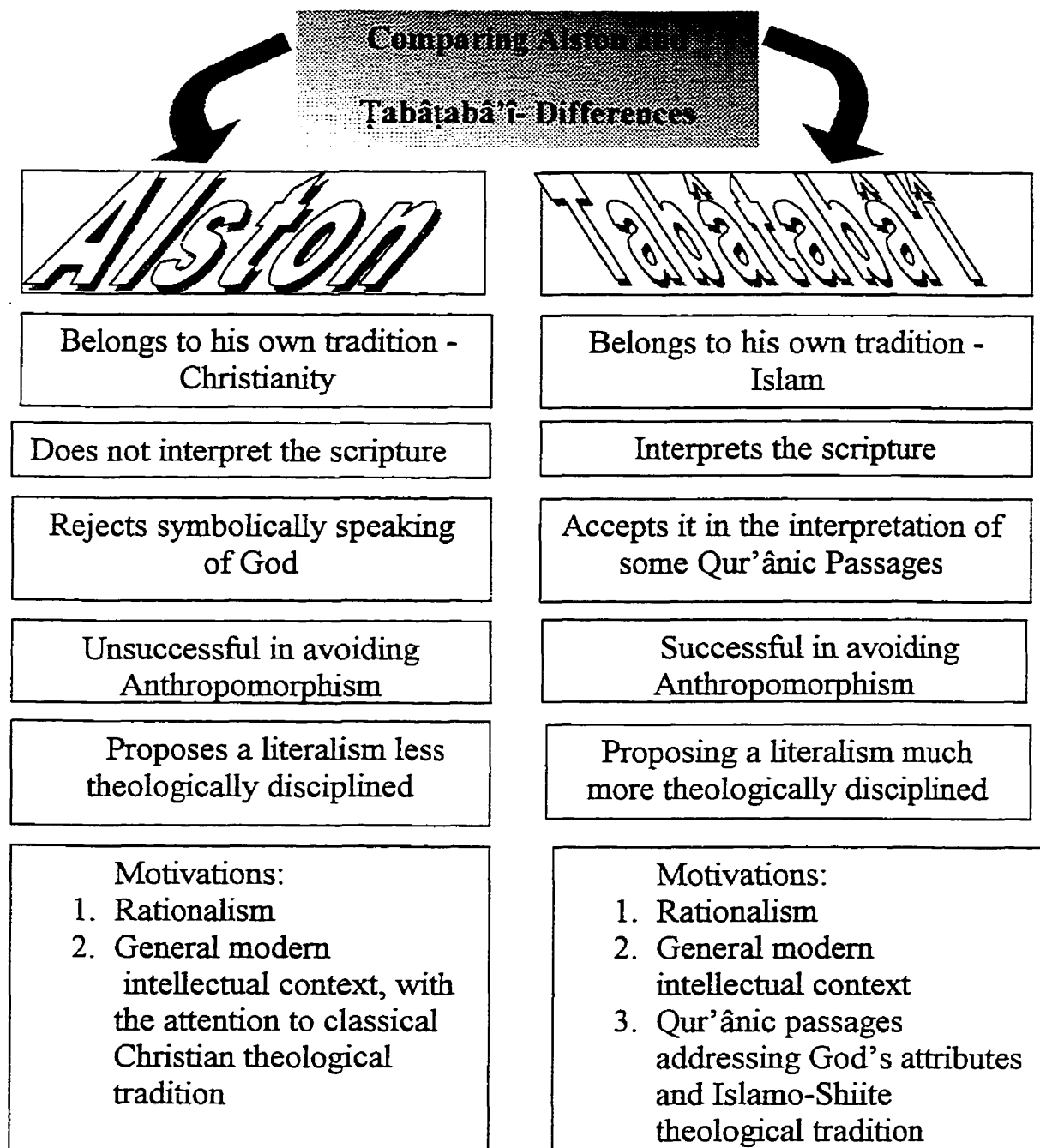


Chart 5.



## Part Four

### Chapter 9: Examination and Conclusion

#### Introduction

As discussed at the outset, the main philosophical questions regarding religious language - the center of the argument of the present thesis - are as follows:

A. What are the characteristics of religious discourse? Is there a language peculiar to religion? Or is there one and the same language for various disciplines, including religion, philosophy, history, and science?

B. If the language of religion is meaningful, how should we interpret religious statements? Should we understand them symbolically, analogically, literally, or in some other way?

I have devoted relatively little attention in this thesis to the question of the possible meaninglessness of religious statements. This is because most contemporary theories on religious language presuppose that religious teachings are in some sense meaningful.

This chapter consists of three parts. The first and second parts deal with the first question, while the third part elaborates the second question. In this chapter I will



examine Alston's answers to each of these questions - answers that have already been outlined in previous chapters - and offer my own answers to them.

## 9.1 Distinctive Features of Religious Language-game

Alston emphasizes the distinct features of the Christian language-game. Religious language, in his view, has a language peculiar to itself. He suggests three characteristics of this distinct language-game: the ontological, ideological, and epistemological. He then applies them in Christian discourse.

### Appraisal

While I agree with Alston regarding the possibility of distinguishing between different language-games, I see several problems with his view. In some cases, these problems necessitate modifications of his views, while others require the construction of a whole other theory. These points can be elaborated as follows:

#### *9.1.1*

Alston distinguishes three features of the distinct language-game of religion: ontological, ideological, and epistemological. He does not, however, refer to a basic relation existing between ontological and conceptual distinction. They are so correlated that the former is a basis for the latter. When we can ontologically distinguish between human persons and physical objects by their different categorical characteristics, we should have different conceptual schemes for referring to each of these two groups of entities. For where there is a relation between an object that is being indicated through a concept and the concept that indicates the image of that

particular object, it is necessary that they be compatible. When several things that are being indicated by the concepts are from the same categorical entity - for instance, physical objects - the concepts that reflect those things should also be from the same category. Thus, of the three distinctive features (ontological, conceptual, and epistemological) that Alston refers to, ontological and conceptual characteristics are not two parallel characteristics. Rather, the former is the main characteristic and the latter is its subsequent result. Alston refers to this necessary relation neither in his discussion of different characteristics of a distinct language-game nor in his application of these characteristics to Christian discourse.

### **9.1.2**

Alston's view of distinctive features of a language-game does not include all possible characteristics that may separate multiple language-games. Apart from what Alston mentions, I can add the following distinctive features:

a) Method of research: We can distinguish between language-games when the methods of research are different among them. For example, the language-game in philosophy seems to be different from experimental sciences, since the method of verification that is used in natural sciences is different from the method of verification in human sciences.

b) Criteria for justification: Each language-game has its own standard for justification. Alston himself avers that we cannot accept the idea of philosophers such as Plato, Descartes and Locke who used to think about finding general principles of assessment for various kinds of beliefs. Each religious belief, perceptual datum, and

mathematical idea has its own principle for assessment. Principles such as “being founded on a sufficient ground” as the only way to justify various beliefs are vague and not very useful.<sup>497</sup> Although Alston believes in the necessity of multiple criteria for different language-games, he has not specified any criteria for distinguishing between language-games. I wish to argue, however, that we should consider the criteria for justification as one such a criterion.

### 9.1.3

Alston’s idea regarding the epistemological distinction of religious language-games seems to be ambiguous. In Alston’s view, one of the features that can separate a language-game from others is its epistemological characteristic. What is necessary for the epistemic autonomy of a language-game “is that there be an established practice of immediate applications of terms on the basis of experience.”<sup>498</sup> We can distinguish this feature in the Christian language-game. A believer learns to see good and evil events together as God’s blessings sent to people to test them and provide appropriate conditions for their moral development. This case and the like include something that can be called ‘mediated immediacy.’ In all these cases we learn to see X as Y. In other words, what we once recognized as a particular situation involving X, we view as involving Y also.<sup>499</sup> This formulation, however, is ambiguous. The

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<sup>497</sup>Alston, “Taking the Curse Off Language-games,” p. 35.

<sup>498</sup>Alston, “The Christian Language-game,” p. 142.

<sup>499</sup>Ibid., P. 143.

ambiguity is that while on the one hand, Alston maintains that “these are all cases of coming to see X as Y,” in his explanation of this sentence he also says: “That is, we already had learned to recognize the situation as involving an X, now we learn to take it as a Y also.”<sup>500</sup> The first sentence indicates that the ‘mediated immediacy’ in Christian discourse leads to changing the perspective of X to a Y. It implies that a learner, through the practice of immediacy, will not see X as X any more; rather he or she will see it as a Y. The second sentence, however, implies that the learner after the practice of immediacy will see X as both X and Y. Having recognized this ambiguity, I would argue that it is the second statement that holds true. It is true to say that in looking at X as X, believers also learn to look at it as Y. For example, when a believer learns to see her sickness as God’s test of her belief, she continues to perceive the sickness in its ordinary and immediate aspect as well.

#### **9.1.4**

There is ambiguity in Alston’s application of the method of extending physical object vocabulary to Christian discourse. According to him, although the procedure used to acquire ordinary words may be applied to acquisition of Christian discourse, there is nevertheless, both a similarity and a difference between Christian and physical object concepts. The similarity is that acquisition in both cases occurs “in the

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<sup>500</sup>Ibid., P. 143.

course of learning to react appropriately to the distinctive entities of that language-game.”<sup>501</sup> Alston then maintains that,

In both cases we will think of the concepts being acquired in the course of learning to react appropriately to the distinctive entities of that language-game; we cannot have the basic distinctive concepts of that sphere of discourse without knowing how to use them in the guidance of conduct.<sup>502</sup>

In other words, there is a role for practice in determining the meaning of what is said within a particular language-game. Alston appreciates Wittgenstein and his followers who have brought up and developed this point.<sup>503</sup> Applying this idea to learning Christian belief, he remarks that we can acquire the meaning of God’s being ‘Merciful’ by learning to consider our being and the existence of the world as a gift of God and learning the necessity to thank God for His graciousness to us.<sup>504</sup> Participation in Christian life plays a basic role in comprehension of Christian concepts such as forgiveness, sin, sanctification, redemption and so on.<sup>505</sup> “Without experiencing and living out the work of the Spirit, one lacks a full sense of what is meant by the indwelling activity of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>506</sup>

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<sup>501</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>502</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>503</sup>Alston, “Taking the Curse Off Language-games,” p. 37.

<sup>504</sup>Alston, “The Christian Language-game,” p. 142.

<sup>505</sup>Alston, “Taking the Curse Off Language-games,” p. 37.

<sup>506</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

The ambiguity I referred to in Alston's view is as follows: Speaking of the similarity between Christian discourse and physical-object concepts, Alston says: "We can't have the basic distinctive concepts of that sphere of discourse without knowing how to use them in the guidance of conduct."<sup>507</sup> The pronoun 'them' in the second sentence refers to 'the basic distinctive concepts of that sphere of discourse.' If we refer to this antecedent by (A) the sentence would apparently mean: "we can not have (A) without knowing how to use (A) in the guidance of conduct." The question I raise here is: how can anyone use a word in the guidance of conduct without having any previous knowledge of that word? If Alston means to make learning Christian discourse dependent on using that discourse in conduct, this is problematic, since - it seems to me- using Christian discourse in conduct depends on prior knowledge of it. If use does not depend on previous knowledge, why do only some people, i.e. believers by and large, try to use religious concepts in their conduct? We may roughly compare religious rules with the rules of driving a car. If a driver does not know the meaning of 'red' and 'stop,' how can he or she apply the rule 'Stop, when the light is red' in his or her driving?

If, however, Alston here wants to emphasize Wittgenstein's view regarding the role of use in *grasping* the meanings of words, his view may be accepted. For Wittgenstein, the meaning of any word is its use in the language.

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<sup>507</sup>Alston, "The Christian Language-game," p. 142.

Alston's position may also be accepted if he means that a deep and full knowledge of religious concepts can be achieved through their use in conduct. In other words, practice can play a significant role in realizing religious belief. This statement, however, should be qualified by saying that it does not mean that we cannot acquire knowledge of religious concepts before we apply them. Alston certainly agrees with this qualification, as he says elsewhere that those who are outside a religious language-game "can have some grasp of the religious affirmations. And they can have some idea of the form of life involved without participating in it themselves."<sup>508</sup>

#### **9.1.5**

Alston refers to one of the differences between the conceptual framework of physical and theological concepts as follows: "The physical object conceptual framework can be the first one learned, whereas, whatever the logical possibilities, the theological framework is learned on the basis of prior abilities to talk about [the] human person and physical world."<sup>509</sup> If, I would argue, Alston in this statement means that in learning physical object concepts we do not need to base our learning on anything else, while we do need to base our learning of theological concepts on some previous learning, this point seems problematic. It is correct that theological discourse depends on our prior comprehending of the physical world, and not vice

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<sup>508</sup>Alston, "Taking the Curse Off Language-games," p. 38.

<sup>509</sup>Alston, "The Christian Language-game," p. 142.

versa. This does not, however, imply that learning the physical world does not depend on any prior knowledge. In speaking about the physical world, we already presuppose that there are real things which exist in the world - a presupposition which is itself philosophically controversial.

## 9.2 Common Bases of Religious and Other Language-games

While Alston believes that there are distinctive features for each language-game, and that we can accordingly separate religious language-games from other games, this distinction between multiple language-games does not, in his view, prevent there being a common cognition of truth shared by all language-games. In other words, on the one hand, Alston believes in the context-dependency of the ways that determine the truth (standards of justification). He maintains that “what is said by assertions in different language-games will be importantly different, because we will be referring and generalizing over different ranges of entities, and applying different concepts to them. (And hence what is required to be justified in an assertion will be correspondingly different.)”<sup>510</sup> On the other hand, he also emphasizes the universality of the concept of truth for all language-games. Alston’s argument regarding the commonality between various language-games may be supported by the following:

### **9.2.1**

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<sup>510</sup>Crosson, *The Autonomy of religious belief*, p. 138.



It is possible for someone who is outside a particular religious language-game to understand to some extent religious statements and concepts expressed through it. This possibility indicates that grasping religious concepts is not limited to the members of its own language-game.

### 9.2.2

When there is a concept of truth that we can use in various language-games, “the way is opened for assertions validated in one language-game to contradict assertions validated in another. Where it happens, it is clear that at least one of the games is off the mark, and the task of evaluating language-games takes on a special urgency.”<sup>511</sup> Alston allows that truth is to be examined according to neutral criteria such as consistency, sufficiency or weakness of clarification.

### 9.2.3

Alston’s objection to the epistemic conception of truth and his replacement of it with his theory of alethic realism is the basic foundation of his position of a concept of truth applicable in all language-games, including religious statements. This doctrine of truth distinguishes him from D. Z. Phillips, P. Winch, Wittgenstein, and several other thinkers. According to this theory, the truth of a proposition depends only on the content of the proposition, that is on what it says.<sup>512</sup> Alston’s particular

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<sup>511</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>512</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

sense of alethic realism is a conjunction of three claims regarding assumed statements, S's, in a particular body of discourse, D:

- a). S's are genuine factual statements.
- b). S's are true or false in the realistic sense of those terms.
- c). The facts that make true S's 'true' hold and are what they are independently of human cognition.<sup>513</sup>

### Appraisal

I agree with the first two reasons Alston gives regarding the possibility of finding common concepts of truth. Nevertheless, as far as his third reason, namely the three theses of alethic realism, is concerned, it seems to the present author that the following observations can be made:

#### **9.2.3.1**

Alston's various statements regarding the principles necessary for a realistic conception of truth seems to be disharmonious. In order to clarify this opinion, I will first refer to three different articles, published at different times, in which he discusses the issue. I will then point out what seems to be a contradiction in his argument.

- a) Alston discerns three separate principles for his realistic approach to truth. He regards all these principles to be necessary for his view, so that denying any one would lead to irrationalism.

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<sup>513</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

b) Elsewhere, Alston attempts to reject any epistemic conception of truth. He calls his critical view of the epistemic approach a 'realistic' conception of truth. He spells out his particular view of truth, explaining that:

The most basic conceptual feature of truth (truth of anything propositional like statements or beliefs) is embodied in the schema: IT IS TRUE THAT P IFF P. Whatever I believe, and whatever it takes to confirm or disconfirm it, its truth value, in its alethic realism version, is a matter of whether what the belief is about is as it is believed to be. My belief that Caesar crossed the Rubicon is true if Caesar did cross the Rubicon.<sup>514</sup>

That is, my belief that God created the world is true if God did create it. Alston regards this point as a necessary and sufficient condition for the truth of this statement. He calls this kind of approach to truth the 'realistic' conception of truth. In his view, it is obvious that when the word 'true' is used in our ordinary language for multiple kinds of statements with propositional content, this embodies a realist concept of truth.<sup>515</sup>

c) In another article, referring to his main difference with Phillips regarding the idea of truth, Alston says:

I am an unreconstructed realist who is committed to the view that truth is independent of epistemic consideration, of what is recognized in one or another language-game as constituting justification, rationality, or acceptability. What it takes

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<sup>514</sup>Tessin, et al., *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, p. 22.

<sup>515</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

to make a proposition true is uniquely determined by the content of the proposition, what it 'says.' If what we are saying is that snow is white, to coin a phrase, then what it takes to make the proposition true is simply that snow be white.<sup>516</sup>

Of these three articles published by Alston, in the first (1995) he emphasizes three necessary principles for his realistic approach to truth. The necessity of all three becomes more evident when he excludes several theories of truth from being realistic, due to their denial of the first and third principle. This reveals the importance of the two principles in his thought. We also notice, however, that in the second and the third article (1995 & 1981), his conception of truth does not depend on the three principles.

In the second article (1995), in which he tries to explain the fundamental characteristics of his doctrine, he clarifies his 'realistic conception of truth' by referring solely to what he calls elsewhere the second principle. He does not mention other principles here. In the second text, he gives us the schema for his "most basic conceptual feature of truth." What he refers to here is exactly the same schema he mentions elsewhere in his thesis 2.<sup>517</sup> As he proceeds to clarify the most basic feature of his theory without referring to his first and third principles, the discussion implies that these are not necessary principles for his conception of truth.

We notice two points from Alston's third article (1981):

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<sup>516</sup>Crosson, *The Autonomy of religious belief*, p. 138.

<sup>517</sup>Alston, "Realism and Christian Faith," p. 38.

First, it indicates that his realistic view of truth has one principle: “What it takes to make a proposition true is uniquely determined by the content of the proposition, what it ‘says.’” This is the central point of what he considers elsewhere as thesis 2 of his three theses, in which he says: “S’s are true or false in a realistic sense of these terms. A statement is true in the realistic sense if what it is about is as the statement says it to be.”<sup>518</sup>

Second, Alston’s saying “truth is independent of epistemic consideration” included in this passage is the same point to which he refers elsewhere as thesis 3. According to this thesis, “For any such true statement that p, the fact that p (the fact that renders the statement true) obtains and is what it is independently of our attempts to cognize it.”<sup>519</sup> However, Alston in his passage here does not regard ‘independence of human cognition’ as a separate principle for his realistic conception of truth. Instead, he apparently considers it a clear consequence of this point: “What it takes to make a proposition true is uniquely determined by the content of the proposition, what it ‘says.’” –that to which he refers elsewhere<sup>520</sup> as thesis 2 of alethic realism. In other words - I may argue - when someone says that the only criterion for the truth of a proposition is “the content of the proposition, what it says,” the implication is that truth is independent of epistemic consideration. As an example, we can look at these

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<sup>518</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>519</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>520</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

two sentences: 'there is solely one person in this room' and 'there is no one else in this room.' The former obviously implies the latter. After we are informed of the former, the latter does not give us any new idea except repetition or emphasis on the former. Taking this point into consideration, we can criticize Alston's argument regarding Hick's Kantianism, when Alston says that this idea leads to the denial of thesis 3 only. My critique is that if theses 2 and 3 were so connected, the denial of thesis 3 would lead to the denial of thesis 2. Thus, Alston should say that Hick's Kantianism leads to the denial of both thesis 2 and 3.

#### 9.2.3.2

It seems that the main point for the realistic conception of truth is thesis 2. Thesis 3 is an obvious consequence of thesis 2, as I explained above. Thesis 1 is also a necessary presupposition for thesis 2, as it is implied by Alston's own position. Since, as I spelled out earlier, Alston holds that the principles of alethic realism are 'nested', so that denying any one leads to the denial of the following and acceptance of any one leads to the acceptance of the previous claim,<sup>521</sup> the acceptance of thesis 2 here necessarily implies the acceptance of thesis 1.

#### 9.2.3.3

Alston's theory regarding the principles of alethic realism is not only the basic foundation for his view of the concept of truth applicable in all language-games. It has other implications for his position as well, some of which are as follows:

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<sup>521</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

a) The main difference between Alston's realism and Tillich's position is traceable to Alston's second and third principles of alethic realism, which are denied in Tillich's expressivism.

b) Alston's alethic realism should be his main reason for rejecting expressivism. Nonetheless, he does not mention it as a reason in this regard. As I have already pointed out, expressivism leads to the denial of all three theses of this alethic realism.<sup>522</sup>

c) Alston's alethic realism provides the basic foundation of his realistic conception of God and His attributes. Alston's realism is similar to the position of several Muslim theologians, including Ṭabāṭabā'î, as well as that of the *Ash'arites*, *Mu'tazilites* and most *Shiite* theologians. For all of these, God as an incorporeal, transcendent, and perfect being is a real object actually involved in this world.

### 9.3 The Language of Religion

The second part of the thesis asks: if religious language is meaningful, should we not specify what meaning it has? Alston's writings indicate that he defends partial literalism, in contrast to the dominant theories regarding religious discourse. On the one hand, he rejects symbolism and with it the position of Tillich, an important symbolist. On the other hand, he proposes two different ways of proving the possibility of speaking almost literally about God using our common language. One

method has to do with irreducible metaphor in theology; the other emerges from Alston's functionalism. It seems to the present author, however, that there are several problems with Alston's criticism of Tillich and his proofs for partial literalism. Religion, I may argue, does not have a single language. Rather, it includes varieties of languages. Moreover, as far as Tillich's symbolism and Alston's partial literalism are concerned, it seems to the present author that we can accept both views. What I propose regarding the former, nonetheless, is somewhat different from Tillich's version. My view of the latter also depends neither on Alston's irreducibility thesis (which is problematic), nor on his version of functionalism. Instead, I wish to argue for functionalism, although in a manner somewhat different from Alston. I will elaborate my view of the language of religion in three sections:

1. Religious symbolism
2. Irreducibility thesis
3. Functionalism

There are also important aspects of religious language that are missing in Alston's view, to which I will refer in my final remarks.

### 9.3.1 Religious Symbolism

I can elucidate my view of the symbolic language of religion and of the positions of Alston and Tillich with regard to symbolic language as follows:

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<sup>522</sup>See for more details, the present thesis, Chapter 4, Alston's Perspective on Truth and Religion.



1. Alston attempts to reject symbolism - namely Tillich's position - with regard to religious language. This is because for Alston, symbolism is rooted in belief in the transcendence of God and His 'wholly otherness.' This idea leads to "an impossibility of saying anything true about God while using terms literally."<sup>523</sup> It seems that Alston's main reason for rejecting Tillich's symbolism is his realistic conception of truth. His project is to suggest various ways of proving the possibility of literally talking of God. Accordingly, he replaces symbolism with partial literalism.

2. In order to recognize whether religious language is symbolic or not, we need to know the nature of symbols in general. Then we must determine the specific meaning of symbols in religion. If we do not have a clear definition of the term, the argument may be based on ambiguous terminology, which leads to confusion.

3. Symbol has a general meaning, including every word and letter out of which written words are made. The dictionary definition of symbol includes the following:

a) Something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance; especially a visible sign of something invisible (the lion is a symbol of courage)

b) A written character or mark used to represent something; a letter, figure, or sign conventionally standing for some object, process, and so on, e.g. the figures denoting the planets, signs of the zodiac, and so on in astronomy; the letters and other characters denoting elements, and so on in chemistry, quantities, operations, and so

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<sup>523</sup>Alston, *Divine Nature and Human language*, p. 17.

on in mathematics, the faces of a crystal in crystallography.<sup>524</sup>

On the basis of this definition, we can reject Tillich's view of the meaning of symbol. In his opinion, it is wrong to use this term for signs (including mathematical and logical signs), symptoms, similes, metaphors, and so on. These are not deserving of being called symbols. Symbols which deserve the name are 'representative symbols.'<sup>525</sup>

I wish to argue, however, that we cannot determine whether a particular word deserves to be used in a particular sense or not. Whether something may rightly or wrongly be called symbol depends on its usage in the language, its meaning in the dictionary, and the particular context. What we can do is to select a meaning of a word which itself possesses multiple meanings.

Thomas Fawcett is another figure who has addressed the general use of symbol. He discusses the history of the term. Referring to the use of 'symbol' and its popular usage in its general meaning, which includes sign, he maintains that "Until recently [,] this was the usage also in academic circles, and a nineteenth century book on

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<sup>524</sup>*Webster Dictionary Computer File: On compact disk* (1999). Macquarrie in his discussion of religious symbols also refers to this general usage of the term, not applicable to symbols in religious context. See: John Macquarrie, *God Talk*, p. 193.

<sup>525</sup>Tillich, "The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols," p. 3 and Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 53.

Christian symbolism would almost certainly turn out to be a delineation of the signs, figures [and] monuments to be found in a Christian culture.”<sup>526</sup>

Thus, not only can symbol be accurately used in a general sense in non-religious contexts, as we saw in the dictionary; but we can also find it used in a general sense in a religious context. In Fawcett’s view, while the general use of the term is still available, “the renewed interest in the nature of religious language both in philosophy and psychology has led to the necessity to distinguish sign from symbol.”<sup>527</sup>

4. Symbol also has a specific meaning different from sign. As we discussed earlier, Tillich suggests four features by which symbol may be distinguished from sign.<sup>528</sup> Unlike Tillich, Alston does not offer a clear definition of symbol. He likely presupposes the accuracy of what he calls a traditional scheme of symbols. In such a perspective, ‘x being a symbol of y’ means that x can elicit behavior and feelings which are suitable to y and that “the person for whom x is a symbol of y could, on demand, identify y as the symbolizandum.”<sup>529</sup> This feature of symbol implies that

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<sup>526</sup>Thomas Fawcett, *The Symbolic Language of Religion* (Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1971), p. 26.

<sup>527</sup>Ibid., p. 27. For more details, see F. W. Dillistone ed., *Myth and Symbols*, SPCK, 1966; and E. Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief*, Fontana Books, 1962; F. W. Dillistone, *Christianity and Symbolism*, Collins, 1955.

<sup>528</sup>Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, pp. 54-58; and Tillich, “The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols,” pp. 4-5.

<sup>529</sup>Alston, “Tillich’s Conception of Religious Symbols,” p. 18.

there is a relation between x (as a symbol) and y (as what it symbolizes). X has so strong a relation to y that it tends to provoke the same feelings that are suitable to y. Tillich does not directly mention this feature as pertaining to symbol. I may argue, however, that we can consider it as a result of the above characteristic that Tillich attributes to symbols, namely participation in the meaning and power of what is being symbolized.

In the opinion of the present author, however, both Alston's traditional conception of symbol and four of the five characteristics Tillich suggests for it are so general that they may include non-symbolic words.

As far as Tillich's first feature of symbol, namely pointing to something that is not their direct meaning, is concerned, it seems that although it exclude signs, it nevertheless overlaps with metaphor, that is with words that stand for something else beyond their direct meanings.

Tillich's second characteristic of symbol, participation of symbols in the meaning and power of that to which they point, is congruent with Alston's suggested features of symbol. It seems to the present author, however, that none of these versions seems accurate - neither Tillich's view of the participation of symbol in the reality, meaning and power of that which is symbolized, nor Alston's view, which is itself apparently a result of Tillich's suggested characteristics. Non-symbolic words may also acquire strong relations, even if not as strong as in symbols, to their meanings in the process of usage, so that they also share in the reality and power of those meanings and produce attitudes appropriate to that to which the word points. We can take the word

'thief' as an example. For someone who is in his or her apartment and who is informed that a thief is coming to his or her place, the word 'thief' certainly does participate in the meaning and power of that to which it points. The word 'thief', at least in some cases, tends to provoke feelings and attitudes appropriate to the real thief. Another example is the word 'love.' When a mother tells her daughter that she loves her, the word 'love' tends to stimulate feelings appropriate to love. The association of words with that to which they point gradually transfers the power of the latter to the former. This point is more obvious in cases of words that deal with our attitudes, feelings and emotions such as love, danger, and fear. Moreover, signs are not limited to ordinary words that point to their meaning. The power of sign is also clear in some ideograms or ideographs. I agree with Fawcett's idea that sign can also acquire power. He gives as an example a triangle, which may replace the word 'Trinity', or the circle of eternity, which is a universal sign. In both cases, they participate to some extent in the meaning and power of the realities to which they refer.<sup>530</sup>

Tillich's third distinguishing feature between symbol and sign - the impossibility of the replacement of symbolic words - is also so general that it may include non-symbolic words. Since the meanings of words depend on their usage and their association with particular meanings, we cannot arbitrarily replace them with other

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<sup>530</sup>Fawcett, *The Symbolic Language of Religion*, p. 1 & 27.

words. Although the impossibility of such a substitution is more evident in the case of symbols than of signs, this statement does also hold for the latter.

While I do not agree with Tillich's view, I nevertheless do not think that Alston's criticism of Tillich here is accurate. Alston maintains that Tillich has confused symbols and symbolic language, and that it is this confusion that leads him to the mistaken conclusion that it is impossible to replace a symbol with another symbol. According to Alston, while it is true that interchange of symbols is not possible, we can indeed replace a symbolic word with any other word.<sup>531</sup> It seems to the present author that this criticism of Alston signals his own confusion between sign and symbol. When Tillich emphasizes the impossibility of replacing a symbol with another symbol, he has not confused symbols with symbolic language. Rather, his emphasis is on the impossibility of interchange between symbolic words - not interchange between symbols. Speaking of symbolic words in liturgical or poetic language, Tillich maintains that

Words have a power through centuries, or more than centuries. They have connotations in situations in which they appear so that they cannot be replaced. They have become not only signs pointing to a meaning which is defined, but also symbols standing for a reality in the power of which they participate.<sup>532</sup>

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<sup>531</sup>Tillich, "Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God," in *The Christian Scholars*, vol. 38, p. 191; and Alston, "Tillich's Conception of Religious Symbols," p. 16.

<sup>532</sup>Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 56.

Two points emerge from this passage. First, Tillich is concerned with symbolic words and the impossibility of replacing them. Second, the reason for the first point is a particular characteristic of symbols, namely their participation in the power and reality of that to which they point. If we admit such a feature for symbols, we cannot arbitrarily exchange one symbolic word for another. Not every word shares in this feature. Moreover, as I spelled out above, even non-symbolic words cannot be replaced with other words.

Tillich's fifth characteristic of symbols, namely their creative and destructive effect on both individuals and social groups, also does not exclude non-symbolic words and objects. It is not only symbolic language that positively or negatively affects human beings. Other figures of speech such as metaphor and analogy can have the same effect. Effective books and written texts use multiple figures of speech in their works, the combination of which can be more effective than using symbols alone.

Tillich's fourth feature of symbol (opening up dimensions of reality that cannot be opened in any other way) seems to be accurate. It does, however, seem to be in conflict with Alston's position. Alston adds a necessary condition for using a word in a symbolic way. The condition is the possibility of expressing it in non-symbolic form. For instance, a shepherd can be used as a symbol of God if we are able to use this meaning in non-symbolic terms.<sup>533</sup> According to Tillich's fourth characteristic,

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<sup>533</sup>Ibid., P. 17.

however, a symbol “opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us. All arts create symbols for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way.”<sup>534</sup> If Alston means that a necessary condition for using a word in a symbolic way is that the same meaning can be exactly expressed in non-symbolic terms, I agree with Tillich and not with Alston. It seems to the present author that this is not a necessary condition for using symbolic language. If the same meaning we convey to others using symbolic language can also be expressed exactly in non-symbolic terms, then we may ask: what necessitates the use of symbolic language? For one of the reasons for using symbolic language in the first place is that there is a particular sense or variety of meanings that can only be communicated through this way of talking.

Thus far we may conclude that Alston’s suggested characteristics of symbols and the characteristics suggested by Tillich (with the exception of the fourth) seem to be general, and that they cannot properly distinguish symbols from signs and metaphors. Although Tillich’s second and third features are more powerful and more obvious in symbols, they do not help us in developing a precise definition. Consequently, we cannot apply these features to finding out about religious symbols. For one thing, they can have various levels, from lower to higher degrees. For another, Tillich does not suggest any particular criteria for these levels.

Only Tillich’s fourth characteristic is helpful for comprehending symbols in religious and non-religious contexts. It seems to the present author, however, that the

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<sup>534</sup>Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 42.



concept is still ambiguous. Tillich does not offer a clear picture of what he means by a reality opened up solely by symbols. He calls this level “the depth dimension of reality itself.”<sup>535</sup> According to Tillich, this is a basic level, which is the ground of every other depth. “Religious symbols,” he says, “open up the experience of the dimension of this depth in the human soul.”<sup>536</sup> He does not elaborate on “the dimension of this depth in the human soul” to which, supposedly, we are only connected through religious symbols. This idea should have been completed and further developed. It seems to the present author that referring to the views of Thomas Fawcett, J. Daniélou, and W. Montgomery Watt may complete Tillich’s view regarding the fourth characteristic of religious symbols. Here I turn to clarify this point.

Even though Fawcett does not name Tillich, the characteristic he proposes for symbol seems to be close to Tillich’s view. In the opinion of Fawcett, symbols lead to understanding what is not immediately known; “Symbols do not denote things which are already understood.”<sup>537</sup> Rather, they go beyond the borders of knowledge “to grasp the reality of things, the real nature of life, the stuff of existence itself.”<sup>538</sup> They pass the frontiers of observable and empirical objectivity to meaning and value “to

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<sup>535</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>536</sup>Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 59.

<sup>537</sup>Fawcett, *The Symbolic Language of Religion*, p. 30.

<sup>538</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

grasp a subjective appropriation of the transcendent.”<sup>539</sup> For Fawcett, such a characteristic of symbol is obviously present in religion. For it is the chief purpose of religion to pass through appearance to reality, and “the language of religion has always found it necessary to make use of the language of appearance in order to speak of that reality.”<sup>540</sup>

J. Daniélou makes the same point when he says: “The real significance of symbols ...[is] to afford us access through the visible world into a higher transcendent plane of being.”<sup>541</sup>

We can take from Watt a point complementary to Tillich’s fourth feature of symbol. Let us look first at Watt’s division of symbols. For Watt, symbolic language can be used to convey any complex meaning difficult to recognize in its literal form. He divides symbols into three categories: conventional, usual pattern, and elemental symbols.

Conventional symbols are “those where there is no resemblance between the symbol and the thing symbolized, but only a relationship based on convention.”<sup>542</sup> A shape such as a cross, the Star of David, or a crescent, a representation of a wheel

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<sup>539</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>540</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>541</sup>Jean Daniélou, *The Lord of History, Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History* (London: Longmans Green, 1958), p. 135.

<sup>542</sup>W. Montgomery Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today A Contribution to Dialogue* (London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 25.

chair on a “handicapped” parking space, and a flag are examples of this sort of symbol. The first symbolizes a religion or religious community, the next symbolizes disabled persons or some facility for them, and the last symbolizes a country.<sup>543</sup>

Usual pattern symbols are those in which there are some resemblance between symbols and what are being symbolized. Usual pattern symbols help us to grasp complex patterns of abstract conceptions.<sup>544</sup> As an example of a usual pattern symbol, Watt refers to the word ‘bulb’, of the electric variety. The word was originally used for the bulb in the garden. Then it was applied to the electric bulb because of the resemblance of that device to the object originally denoted by “bulb.”<sup>545</sup> Other examples of this kind are mostly terms used in intellectual arguments, such as: ‘the *influence* of Darwin’, ‘the existentialist *movement* in philosophy’, and ‘political *revolution*.’ According to Watt, we are habitually unconscious of the symbolic feature of the commoner terms.<sup>546</sup> When we talk of political *revolution* in France or in any other country, we do not think of a wheel revolving. The symbolic terms in these cases “are used to indicate patterns which are really found in material, and the only doubt about them is due to the possibility that there may be alternative patterns in the

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<sup>543</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>544</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>545</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>546</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

same material and that these alternative patterns may be more appropriate for our purposes.”<sup>547</sup>

Like usual pattern symbols, elemental symbols resemble what is being symbolized. But they also refer to “complex patterns in those aspects of our experience in which there is present something of our relationship to the ultimate conditions of our experience.”<sup>548</sup> We can differentiate between usual pattern and elemental symbols in other ways as well. In the case of the former, there is a clear awareness of the thing symbolized. The latter, on the other hand, refers to something that we do not completely comprehend.<sup>549</sup> The chief examples of elemental symbols are religious concepts and beliefs. Watt refers to R. N. Bellah’s definition of religion, which points to its symbolic character. For Bellah, religion is “a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence.”<sup>550</sup> Therefore, religious symbols connect human beings to the higher divine existence on which their lives are dependent. Nonetheless, they are also “involved in relating him to himself and in symbolizing his own [personality].”<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>547</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>548</sup>Ibid., pp. 24,27.

<sup>549</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>550</sup>Ronald Robertson ed., *Sociology of Religion: Selected Readings* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 263, 267.

<sup>551</sup>Ibid., p.. 268.

What Tillich refers to as the 'depth dimension' of reality in the human soul to which we are connected by religious symbols seems also to be discussed by Fawcett, Daniélou, and Watt. According to these thinkers, it is through religious symbols that we can point to a higher transcendent level – or, as Watt maintains, the higher transcendent existence on which human life is dependent. For Fawcett, Daniélou, and Watt, this level is beyond the borders of observable objectivity.

While I accept this feature of symbols, which appears to be advanced by all these scholars, it seems that it is rooted in another characteristic of symbol to which only Watt refers. This feature, which seems to me essential, is the complexity involved in symbols. In the light of the previous arguments, particularly Watt's view, I can say that symbol in its specific meaning is a word, abstract notion, idea, object or aspect of an object used to represent something beyond its ordinary denotation, which is invariably complicated and not easily or completely grasped. Symbolic language is an appropriate tool for conveying perplexed issues. That its reference is complicated may be due to subjectivity, abstractness, non-empiricalness, material non-measurability, having various levels of understanding, dealing with a divine or transcendent level of being, and so on. Symbol is distinguished from sign by the fact of its representing something beyond its direct meaning. Symbol is different from metaphor, since symbol can also include non-linguistic objects such as a national flag,

which metaphor cannot.<sup>552</sup> The difference between symbol and analogy, as John Macquarrie accurately maintains, is that analogies “are almost self-interpreting, whereas symbols frequently require much explanation of background before we begin to see where they are pointing.”<sup>553</sup> What Macquarrie addresses here as a distinguishing characteristic of symbol is also a result of its outstanding feature, namely complexity of meaning.

Whether we judge the language of religion symbolic or not depends on our definition of symbols. Based on the previous accepted features of symbols, symbolic language is an appropriate tool for communicating many religious teachings. The reason we employ symbolic language in religion is that it includes beliefs about higher levels of existence, non-material objects, complicated notions and ideas, exoteric and esoteric teachings, and other statements in need of interpretation.

One of the reasons religious texts have always had various and sometimes conflicting interpretations is that they present complicated notions. The notion of God and His attributes are but two of the vexed questions of monotheism. We cannot easily grasp God’s Essence and Attributes in their meaning. Thus, the words that are used in a religious text to talk of God should be taken symbolically. This cognition

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<sup>552</sup>Janet Martin Soskice has also made this point of difference between symbol and metaphor. See his, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 55.

<sup>553</sup>Macquarrie, *God-Talk*, p. 196.

has various degrees. It starts at a lower level, which can be grasped by ordinary people, and then proceeds to higher levels, which are more difficult to understand.

Other religious teachings also may have different levels of comprehension. As far as Islamic teachings are concerned, for example, their teachings and beliefs have two aspects, outward and inward. The language that expresses the former is always ordinary language which avoids metaphorical symbols. The latter, however, I may argue, is symbolically expressed. The outward teachings symbolically represent the inward aspects. Outward aspects might be understood without interpretation. Inward aspects, however, cannot be easily discovered. This is the place of *ta'wil* (allegorical interpretation). All Muslim interpreters, however, do not use *ta'wil*. Rather, this method of interpretation is employed in varying degrees by the mystics (Şûfis), philosophers, and *Shiites* – while most non-Şûfî Traditionalist Sunnites, who are still today in the majority, would not favor this method.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>554</sup>For more details on 'ta'wil' in Islam see: Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mizān*, vol. 3, p. 47-50 and vol. 1, pp. 3-10; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, "Shī'ah," in *Maktab-i Tashayyu'*, Qum: Dār al-'Ilm, vol. 2, April, 1960, pp. 52-5, Muṭahharī, *Dah Guftār* (Tihiran: Şadrā': 1990), pp. 95-100, Muṭahharī, *Āshnāyî bâ Qur'ân* (Tihiran: Şadrā'), pp. 25-30; Ibn Rushd, *Faṣl al-Maqâl fîmâ Bayn al-Ḥikmah wa-al-Sharī'ah min al-Ittiṣâl*, Edited by 'Abd al-Karîm al-Marrâq (Tunis: al-Manshûrât lil- Intâj wa-al-Tawzi', 1991), p. 52-66; Ibn Qutaybah, 'Abd Allâh ibn Muslim (828-889?), *Ta'wil Mushkil al-Qur'ân*, I'dâd wa-Dirâsât 'Umar Muḥammad Sa'îd 'Abd al-'Azîz, *Isḥrâf wa-Murâjî'ât 'Abd al-Şabûr Shahin*, Cairo: Markaz al-Ahrâm lil-Tarjamah wa-al-Nashr, 1989; Maghrâwî, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Raḥman, *Al-Mufasssîrûn Bayna al-Ta'wil wa-al-Ithbât fî Âyât al-Şifât*, two volumes, Riyad: Dâr Al-Ṭayyibah,

As Watt accurately maintains, here it should be understood that the use of symbolic language does not imply that there is no reality beyond the word. We can talk of a real object in various ways, including symbolically. The word electric bulb is a symbolic word and refers to a real object, even though it originally denoted the botanical bulb.<sup>555</sup>

### 9.3.2 Irreducibility thesis

Alston proves the possibility of speaking almost literally of God using our common language in two ways: elaborating irreducible metaphors in theology, and through a functionalist account of religious language. As far as Alston's view of irreducible metaphor is concerned, it seems to the present author that the argument is not convincing, since it suffers from the following problems:

1. Alston attempts to prove that even a metaphor with a specific propositional content can be expressed in literal terms. Taking as an example the sentence 'God is P', if the speaker wants to attribute property A to God, Alston says that "So long as it is possible for members of the linguistic community to form a concept of P, it will be possible for P to become the meaning of a predicate term in the language."<sup>556</sup> Alston gives as his reason for this claim that "so long as I can form the concept of P, it will

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1985; Abû Zayd, Naşr Hâmid, *Falsafah Al-Ta'wîl: Dirasah fî Ta'wîl al-Qur'ân 'Inda Muhyî al-Dîn ibn 'Arabî* (Bayrut: Dâr al-Tanwîr; Dâr al-Wahdah, 1983.

<sup>555</sup>Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, p. 28.

<sup>556</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.



be possible for me to associate an element of the language with P in such a way as to use that element to attribute P to something”<sup>557</sup> Alston’s view here seems to be ambiguous. Using P in a sentence as an attribute for a human being is different from using P as an attribute for God. That members of a linguistic community can form the concept of P in the former case does not imply that they can do so for the latter. Alston says: “How could that be impossible for me to do, so long as I have ‘cognitive access’ to P?”<sup>558</sup> Here he supposes that we realize P to be an attribute for God. This is really the crux of his argument. He does not, however, fully support it. How can he presuppose that we have cognitive access to God’s attributes, while this is itself the main problem in our talking of God?

2. Supposing that the speaker wants to attribute ‘knowledge’ to God by saying, ‘God has knowledge.’ In order to formulate such a sentence, he should have the concept of ‘knowledge’ in mind. Having this concept in mind does not, however, imply that the speaker has the right to attribute it to God and that his sentence will be right and meaningful. Even if what he has in mind is not simple ‘knowledge’ but the ‘the knowledge of God,’ this does not imply that his sentence is true. Perhaps he does not have a correct comprehension of God and he thinks that he can attribute human knowledge to God.

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<sup>557</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>558</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

### 9.3.3 Functionalism

Another way in which Alston tries to prove his partial literalism is through a functionalist account of religious concepts. Alston's functional model describes preliminary psychological stages that lead to the performance of an action - or, as he calls it, 'overt behavior.' Here I wish to argue that this method is applicable neither to divine action nor to human behavior. The critique may be elaborated as follows:

#### *9.3.3.1*

Alston in his model suggests that a pro-attitude toward G represents a state such that if combined with knowledge that the best way to achieve G is through performing A, that will lead to a tendency to do A. He subsequently defines 'tendency' as a state that leads to performing A, if there is no obstacle in the way.<sup>559</sup> The problem, however, is that on the one hand, Alston's suggested sequence of pro-attitude, knowledge, and tendency indicates that these are three different steps. They are evidently not the same, even if they are connected with each other. On the other hand, Alston's definition of pro-attitude *includes* 'tendency.' Alston holds that "The category of pro-attitude stretches over a wide variety of conative factors - wants, desires, aversions, longings, yearnings, attitudes of various sorts, scruples, commitments, and so on."<sup>560</sup> This passage indicates that 'pro-attitude toward A', includes in its meaning 'tendency toward A.' Thus, when Alston in his model

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<sup>559</sup>Alston, "Divine and Human Action," p. 268.

<sup>560</sup>Ibid., p. 263.

suggests that a conjunction of pro-attitude and knowledge gives rise to a 'tendency', what he is really stating is that the conjunction of tendency and knowledge gives rise to tendency. His model suffers from vicious circularity. If pro-attitude, knowledge, and tendency are three different steps in a sequence, as Alston holds, he cannot then define the first step in a way that includes the third step.

#### 9.3.3.2

Alston's concept of pro-attitude seems inaccurate. On the one hand, he employs 'attitude' as a general term for both pro and con-attitudes. Nonetheless, on the other, for him the category of pro-attitude also includes various kinds of attitudes. The first point is correct; the second seems problematic. Pro-attitude cannot be stretched to cover various types of attitudes, including con-attitude.

#### 9.3.3.3

In the opinion of Alston, the combination of attitude and knowledge leads to tendency, not necessarily to the performance of action. There might be competing tendencies. Therefore, in order to mediate between tendency and action, he recognizes another factor, which he calls 'executive intention.' The problem, however, in my opinion is that he cannot insert 'executive intention' in his model, since he explicitly considers 'executive intention' a kind of tendency, the strongest type. Having inserted tendency, which is for him a general term covering any kind of tendency, there should be no need to then introduce 'executive intention,' itself

defined as a kind of tendency. In other words, the mediating factor that Alston suggests between tendency and action is itself a kind of tendency.

The reason Alston brings up 'executive intention' is apparently that the combination of attitude and knowledge does not suffice for action. If this is indeed his motive for introducing a mediating factor between tendency and action, that factor should actually lead to action. Yet by 'executive intention' Alston does not mean something which immediately leads to performing the action. For him, the result of executive intention is action except when there is a hindrance that intervenes.<sup>561</sup>

#### 9.3.3.4

At one point, Alston considers executive intention to be a bridge between tendency and behavior.<sup>562</sup> But in another part of his argument, he regards 'action plan' as the same bridge.<sup>563</sup> Why does Alston call the bridge both 'executive intention' and 'action plan'? If there are two bridges, what is their relation? Alston does not tackle this question and does not give any convincing reason for speaking of two different bridges.

#### 9.3.3.5

According to Alston, the sequence of pro-attitude, knowledge, tendency, executive intention, and finally overt behavior is applicable to both divine and human

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<sup>561</sup>Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>562</sup>Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>563</sup>Ibid., p. 270.

action. He accepts that the conjunction of pro-attitude and knowledge in God will generate tendency in Him. This tendency, however, will not issue in action except through the mediation of executive intention. Alston's definition of executive intention is 'the strongest tendencies among various competing tendencies.'<sup>564</sup> I believe, however, that even if we accept Alston's model for human beings, it cannot be applied to God. This point can be clarified as follows:

a) It is difficult to accept these psychological processes for God's action. The existence of such psychological stages in human beings does not mean their existence in God. Moreover, Alston does not offer sufficient proof for such a position. How can we say that God initially has a tendency to do something that His tendency then becomes stronger and stronger, and then finally it leads to an action? If we are able to distinguish such psychological stages in human behavior this is because we as human beings can analyze these stages in the process of our own actions. We may also generalize our analysis to other people's actions. But we cannot apply such an analysis to God, who is an incorporeal being.

b) Alston believes that his model can be applied to both human and divine behavior. His model for God's action, however, is in conflict with God's absolute power, for two reasons:

1. In defining tendency in the first part of his model, Alston holds that "a tendency to do A is a state that, in the absence of sufficient interference or blockage,

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<sup>564</sup>Ibid., pp. 269-70.

will issue in doing A.”<sup>565</sup> This definition of tendency, I think, cannot be applied to God, for it implies the possibility of obstacles in the way of God’s action. Consequently, such an analysis is in conflict with God’s absolute power.

2. In the second part of his model Alston states that the combination of tendency and executive intention, which is the strongest tendency, will generate action unless the external world prevents it. In the opinion of the present author this idea implies that God has different conflicting tendencies, all of which cannot be achieved. Thus, among various tendencies, the strongest one will issue in action. It is a fact, however, that the root of conflict between *our* various tendencies and the reason we cannot meet all our desires is our limited power. For instance, suppose that I like to see my friend at a specific time, and at the same time there is a conference in another city, which I would like to attend. In this situation I have to choose one, since I cannot meet both desires. I would choose the one toward which I have a stronger tendency. But God, since He has absolute power, does not have to forgo any of His desires to choose another.

c) Alston uses functionalism to identify concepts common between God and human beings regarding M-concepts only. This is apparently because the main concern of functionalism is to propose the meaning of psychological words (M-concepts), not action-concepts. Accordingly, he presents functional definitions of ‘will’ and ‘knowledge,’ both of which are M-concepts. He does not, however, tell us

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<sup>565</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

whether we can apply functionalism to God's action-concepts or not. From this I conclude that his definition of functionalism and concentration on using this method for M-concepts mean that he is not in favor of using it for action-concepts. Therefore, his model allows us to speak, at most, of only one aspect of God.

#### 9.3.3.6

As discussed above, Alston's version of functionalism seems inaccurate. I can, however, suggest another version that can be applied to talking of God. This version of functionalism can be illustrated as follows:

A) Two different kinds of functionalism have been proposed: a functionalism that analyzes the meaning of psychological words; and a functionalism that seeks the nature of psychological modes regardless of the meaning of such terms in our ordinary language.<sup>566</sup> Like Alston, my concern here is the former theory, since we are dealing with the meanings of words and the possibility of using them in talking of God.

B) The basic concept of functionalism which can be used for the analysis of psychological terms is that each mental concept "is a concept of a certain functional role in the operation of the psyche."<sup>567</sup> The main emphasis is on explaining an M-

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<sup>566</sup>Alston, "Functionalism and Theological Language," p. 223; and Alston, "Divine and Human Action," p. 265.

<sup>567</sup>Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language*, p. 49.

predicate by referring to its functional character.<sup>568</sup> The functional explanation of a state can be given according to its relation only to 'its output', or to 'its input, output and other mental states.'<sup>569</sup>

C) Although the main concern of functionalism is to propose the meaning of psychological words (M-concept), the core of the theory can be generalized to other words like action-concepts, concepts regarding material objects, and so on. As it is possible to define M-concepts according to their functions, the same method can be used to define other words. Alston, however, presupposes the possibility of giving functional definition to other concepts. Alston maintains that "M-concepts... are functional in essentially the same way as the concept of mousetrap. A mousetrap, by definition, is a device for catching mice."<sup>570</sup> In the opinion of Alston, the concept of 'loudspeaker' can be understood by regarding it as something that converts electronic signals to sound. The definition is neutral as to the structure of the instrument that produces the action. It is for this reason that we can devise a more advanced mousetrap or loudspeaker with the same name.<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>568</sup>Steuer and McClendon, eds., *Is God God?*, pp. 157-58; and Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action*, p. 265.

<sup>569</sup>Block, "Are Absent Qualia Impossible?," in *Philosophical Review*, 89 (1980), pp. 257-274.

<sup>570</sup>Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language*, p. 50.

<sup>571</sup>As Alston accurately maintains, he is indebted for such analogies to Jerry Fodor, *Psychological Explanation* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 15-16.



Therefore, anything that has an output function can be defined according to its performance. Occasionally a name is even given to an object according to its function, as we saw in the case of 'mousetrap' and 'loudspeaker.' In this way, if we have a functional definition of B, and we see this function in John's behavior, then we can truly say that John produced the B action. Hence, unlike Alston, we can apply functionalism to all of God's attributes, including both M-concepts and A-concepts.

D) Alston examines the inner processes of human psychology and then applies these processes to God. His proofs are necessarily complicated. I think, however, that instead of focusing on the causal factors of human psychological states and the sequence of these states, we can simply concentrate on their outputs, giving them functional definitions. This is the same method dictionaries follow in defining words. Thus, following the dictionary, 'will' can be functionally defined as a "state by which one deliberately chooses or decides upon a course of action." 'Power' is "the ability or capacity to act or perform effectively." 'Creation' is "to cause to exist something, to produce it."<sup>572</sup> If someone believes that God can deliberately choose to do something, he or she is able to attribute 'will' to God. If he or she believes that God has functions that are appropriate for 'power' and 'creation', he or she is able to attribute 'will' or 'power' to God. As functionalism implies, "we are not committing ourselves on the physical (or spiritual) structure or composition of whatever is

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<sup>572</sup>*American Heritage Dictionary Computer File: On diskette (1995).*

performing this function; our concept is neutral as to that.”<sup>573</sup> Thus, if there are functional definitions for words like ‘will’, ‘power’, ‘knowledge’, ‘forgiveness’, ‘love’ and so on, they can be predicated of any subject who produces these functions, regardless of the structure and nature of the subject.

E) The function of a particular subject can be at various levels. This variation does not, however, prevent us applying one and the same functional definition to any number of subjects that produce this performance at any level. In other words, a functional definition is not only neutral as to the composition and structure of that which performs the function; it is also neutral as to the possible levels of the function itself. This idea can be spelled out as follows:

a) We can divide words into two groups: words the function of whose referent is in numerous degrees or at many levels, and words the function of whose referent is not capable of having many degrees. Words like ‘mousetrap’, ‘light’, and ‘heat’ are examples of the former. Catching a mouse is the function of a mousetrap, but ‘mousetrap’ may refer to various tools at different levels, from a very old fashioned trap to a very advanced method, including both traps that kill and ‘humane’ traps designed for release into the wild. A clearer example is ‘illumination.’ The function of light, which is illumination, occurs at very many levels. There are millions of degrees of illumination in the world. Light can be produced by a small candle or by the sun. All these represent various levels of function for the word ‘light.’ Other

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<sup>573</sup>Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language*, p. 49.

examples of words with many degrees of the same function are glove, hat, door, and window.

b) Evidently, a word of the first kind refers to its real referent in any degree of its function. For instance, the word 'mousetrap' can be correctly used for all the different devices that catch mouse regardless of the level of their functioning. The word 'light' can be used for the illumination produced by a small candle or by the sun. The words 'heat' and 'weight', likewise, can be used both for a low degree of function (the heat of a candle or the weight of a pencil) and for a very high degree (for the heat of the sun, or the weight of the whole world.) Whether we use 'light' for the illumination of a candle or of the sun, in both cases we are speaking about the real referent, 'light,' and not an imaginary referent. The quality of the illumination of the sun or weight of the whole world is beyond the knowledge or ability of some people. When people in the medieval period used the word 'light' for both the sun and a candle, they did not have knowledge of the real sun. Does this, however, mean that they were referring to an imaginary sun? Evidently not. Another example of this sort of word is 'existence.' The meaning of the word 'exist' has various degrees according to its function. It includes the existence of a small piece of wood and the existence of a distant star about which we know very little. Can we say that the function of 'existence' is at the same level in both cases? It seems not. Nevertheless, when we say 'that star exists,' we still speak about the real referent of this word. It is not necessarily required that we possess much information about it.

c) Concepts that we use in our talk of God such as existence, power, knowledge, will, and forgiveness are among those words the functions of which have very many levels. In the same way that we can use the word 'light' for illumination in various degrees, so we can use the words 'power', 'knowledge', and so on for both God and human beings – even though God's functions are at a much higher degree than ours. Therefore, in this version of functionalism, we can use our language and concepts to refer to the real God, even though comprehending His quality is beyond our ability. For instance, when we say that God has knowledge we are speaking of the real referent of God's knowledge, even though we do not know its quality. The same thing can be said for God's existence. When we say 'God exists,' we are talking of the real referent of the word 'exist,' even if we cannot conceive or express the exact difference between our existence and God's existence.

Thus, since it is possible to talk of God using our language, I do not agree with Gordon Kaufman's view of God. He distinguishes between the real and the available referent of God. In his view, we do not have any access to comprehend or experience the real referent of God. Consequently, there is no way to use our language and concepts to speak of the real God. It seems that the main reason for his position is that the real God is beyond our understanding and experience; thus when we speak about God we are in fact speaking of an available, rather than real, referent.<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>574</sup>Kaufman, *God the Problem*, p. 85.

As far as Kaufman's view is concerned, the following question can be raised: Supposing that we have no access to the real referent of God, what precisely is inaccessible? His existence or His attributes? If one of them, so we cannot say that we have no access to the real referent of God, since we presuppose that we have access to His existence or His attributes. If both, it seems meaningless to say that we speak of the available referent of God, since its real referent may not exist at all, since we could not be sure of any basis for such an available referent. We can conclude from Kaufman's writings that he believes in the latter. For him, no one can comprehend either God's existence or His attributes. Speaking of the real referent of God, Kaufman says: "Any supposed knowledge of God always remains unverifiable and controversial and may be completely mistaken."<sup>575</sup> Speaking of the world and its creation, he holds that "we can perceive it [the world] and live in it as created by God and ordered to his purposes, though we may not be able to prove either that this is in fact true of the world or that God does himself exist."<sup>576</sup>

### 9.3.3.7

It seems to the present author that neither partial literalism nor symbolism may be applied exclusively to talking of God. It is not necessary that one exclude the other, as Alston and Tillich claim.

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<sup>575</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>576</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

As far as partial literalism is concerned, since functionalism, as I have explained above, allows us to correctly use common concepts to describe both God and human beings, it can serve as a basis for partial literalism. This kind of definition of God's attributes, however, gives us only the first level of comprehending Him. There are two reasons for calling the literalism partial. First, the functional definition of any subject does not give us clear knowledge of the nature of the subject. It only allows us to use words to define or describe a subject according to its functions, regardless of the nature of the subject. Thus when we use functional concepts for God we are not sure that we have understood the nature of God. Secondly, since God, according to the monotheistic religions is an absolutely perfect and transcendent being whose existence and attributes are infinite, while we have limited power and knowledge (although all this is expressed differently in different traditions) our concepts cannot literally be used for Him.<sup>577</sup>

Of the above two reasons, Alston points only to the latter as a reason for calling his theory of religious language partial literalism. In addition to Alston - I wish to argue - the idea of some Muslim thinkers, namely the *Mu'tazilites* and *Shiites*, also can be called partial literalism. Although they do not call their position partial literalism, Alston's reason for calling his position partial is also found in their views. While they believe in the possibility of speaking of God in our ordinary language, because of the second reason cited above, they also stress that we cannot exactly

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<sup>577</sup>Alston, "Divine and Human Action," p. 271

comprehend God's attributes. Therefore, we can say that the views of the above Muslim theologians are somewhat similar to Alston's defense of partial literalism.

Thus I conclude that functionalism can help us to talk of God at the lowest level of cognition. Other degrees, however, should be symbolically expressed, because to go beyond this lowest level of comprehending Him involves complicated concepts with various levels of comprehension.

## 9.4 Final Remarks

### 9.4.1 Distinct Features of Religious Language-Game

Alston emphasizes the distinct features of the Christian language-game. He suggests three characteristics of a distinct language-game: ontological, ideological, and epistemological. He then applies them in Christian discourse. While I agree with Alston regarding the possibility of a distinction between different language-games, I think his idea regarding the epistemological distinction of religious language-game is ambiguous. Moreover, he does not refer to a basic relation existing between ontological and conceptual distinctions. They are correlated in such a way that the former is a basis for the latter. Thus, among three distinctive features (ontological, conceptual, and epistemological) that Alston illustrates, ontological and conceptual characteristics are not two parallel characteristics. Rather, the former is the main characteristic and the latter its subsequent result. Finally, Alston's view of distinctive features of a language-game does not include all possible characteristics that may separate multiple language-games. Apart from what Alston mentions, I can add the method of research and the criteria for justification as two other distinctive features of a language-game.

While Alston believes that there are distinctive features for each language-game, and that we can accordingly separate religious language-games from other games, this distinction between multiple language-games does not, in his view, prevent there



being a common cognition of truth shared by all language-games. As Alston accurately maintains, it is possible for someone who is outside a particular religious language-game to understand to some extent religious statements and concepts expressed through it. This possibility indicates that grasping religious concepts is not limited to the members of its own language-game. Moreover, when there is a concept of truth that we can use in various language-games, “the way is opened for assertions validated in one language-game to contradict assertions validated in another.”<sup>578</sup> Alston allows that truth is to be examined according to neutral criteria such as consistency, sufficiency or weakness of clarification.

Alston’s objection to the epistemic conception of truth and replacing it with his theory of alethic realism is the basic foundation of his position of a concept of truth applicable in all language-games, including religious statements. This doctrine of truth distinguishes him from Phillips and Winch, Wittgenstein, and several other thinkers. I think, however, that Alston’s various statements regarding the principles necessary for a realistic conception of truth are disharmonious. In one of his articles, he emphasizes three necessary equivalent principles for his theory<sup>579</sup>, but according to two other articles, his theory does not depend on three principles.<sup>580</sup> Moreover, it seems that the main point for the realistic conception of truth is thesis 2. Thesis 3 is

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<sup>578</sup> Ibid., p. 148

<sup>579</sup> Alston, “Realism and Christian Faith,” p. 39

<sup>580</sup> See: Tessin, et al., *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, p. 22; and Crosson, *The Autonomy of religious belief*, p. 138. For more details see the present work, pp. 241-245.

an obvious consequence of thesis 2, and thesis 1 is also a necessary presupposition for thesis 2, as it is an implication of Alston's own position. Therefore, these theses cannot be equivalent.

#### 9.4.2 Symbolic Language of Religion

If religious language is meaningful, we should specify what kind of meaning it has. Can we say that the language of religion is symbolic? In order to give an answer to this question, we need to know the nature of symbols in general. Then we must determine the specific meaning of symbols in religion. I believe that symbol has a general meaning, including every word and letter out of which written words are made. Therefore, unlike Tillich, but similar to Thomas Fawcett, I propose to use 'symbol' for signs (including mathematical and logical signs), symptoms, metaphors, and so on. Not only can symbol be accurately used in a general sense in non-religious contexts; we can also find it used in a general sense in a religious context.

Symbol also has a specific meaning, which is different from sign. As far as the views of Alston and Tillich regarding this specific meaning are concerned, it seems to the present author, however, that since Alston's suggested characteristics of symbols and the characteristics suggested by Tillich (with the exception of the fourth) seem to be general, they cannot properly distinguish symbols from signs and metaphors.

Only Tillich's fourth characteristic (opening up dimensions of reality which cannot be opened in any other way) is helpful for comprehending symbols in religious and non-religious contexts. It seems to the present author, however, that the concept is still ambiguous. Tillich does not give us a clear picture of what he means

by a reality opened up solely by symbols, calling it only “the depth dimension of reality itself.”<sup>581</sup>

It seems to the present author that referring to the views of Thomas Fawcett, J. Daniélou, and W. Montgomery Watt may complete Tillich’s view regarding the fourth characteristic of religious symbols. What Tillich refers to as the ‘depth dimension’ of reality in the human soul to which we are connected by religious symbols seems to be similar to the characteristics these three figures propose for symbols (even though they do not name Tillich). In the opinion of Fawcett, Daniélou, and Watt, it is through religious symbols that we can point to what is not immediately known, to a higher transcendent level - or as Watt maintains, the higher transcendent existence on which human life ultimately depends. For all three, this level is beyond the borders of observable objectivity.

While I accept Tillich’s fourth feature of symbol, which appears also to be admitted by Fawcett, Daniel, and Watt, it seems that it is rooted in another characteristic of symbol, to which only Watt refers. This feature, which seems to me essential, is the complexity involved in symbols. In light of the previous arguments, I can say that symbol in its specific meaning is a word, abstract notion, idea, object or aspect of an object used to represent something beyond its ordinary denotation, which is invariably complicated and not easily or completely grasped.

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<sup>581</sup> Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 42

Religion language is symbolic inasmuch as it covers ideas about perplexed notions regarding God and his Attributes, non-material objects, and exoteric and esoteric teachings.

### 9.4.3 Partial Literalism

Alston both rejects symbolism, and attempts to prove partial literalism through elaborating irreducible metaphors in theology, and proposing a functionalist account of religious concepts. The second is more important for Alston, and he consequently pays more attention to it. In the view of the present author, however (as I already stated)<sup>582</sup> Alston's functionalism is applicable neither to divine action nor to human behavior. His view implies that psychological processes are involved in God's action, which is in conflict with His absolute power. While I do not accept Alston's version of functionalism, I can, however, suggest another version, which can be applied to talking of God. The basic idea of functionalism, which can be used for the analysis of psychological terms, is that each mental concept "is a concept of a certain functional role in the operation of the psyche." In this version of functionalism, unlike Alston, instead of focusing on the causal factors of human psychological states and the sequence of these states, I concentrate on their outputs, giving them functional definitions. Moreover, it seems that functional definition is not only neutral as to the composition and structure of that which performs this function; it is also neutral as to the possible levels of the function itself.

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<sup>582</sup> See the present work, Chapter 9.3.3

As I discussed above, it seems to the present author that neither partial literalism nor symbolism may be applied exclusively to talking of God. Rather, it is not necessary that one exclude the other as Alston and Tillich claim.

#### 9.4.4. Missing Aspects of Religious Language in Alston's Arguments

Alston's perspective on religious language also seems to be incomplete. There are several aspects of religious discourse he has not discussed. I can spell out my view in this regard as follows:

1. First, we should take into account Wittgenstein's observation that there is a multiplicity of language-games. In his later work, *Philosophical Investigation*, Wittgenstein emphasizes the varied usage of words. I think, we cannot limit religious language to one particular category. Religious language includes varieties of languages. Alston's partial literalism and Tillich's symbolism each represents only a part of religious language. There are other aspects of this language to which they have not referred, such as myth, metaphor, analogy, assimilation and so on. A religious text is more effective if it includes various forms of speech. Each figure of speech has its own power when used in a particular circumstance. It is the mixture of various methods of speech that attracts readers' attention.

2. Religions may change the ordinary meanings of words and give them new, specific meanings. These are conventional words (called in Arabic *ḥaqiqah shar'iyah*, literally "legal essence or reality").<sup>583</sup> For instance, 'prayer' has a regular meaning,

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<sup>583</sup>The synonyms that I give here onward are in Arabic.

which is “an expression of thoughts, hopes, or needs directed to a deity.”<sup>584</sup> It has also a specific, religio-legal meaning in Islam, which is “a special formula of words and actions used in praying.” The Arabic designation for the former is ‘*du‘ā*,’ and for the latter, ‘*ṣalāt*.’ Likewise, words such as ‘fasting’ (*ṣawm*),<sup>585</sup> ‘alms’ (*zakāt*),<sup>586</sup> and so on each has a general and a specific meaning – which in Islam invariably means a legal meaning. Note here how the specific meaning also excludes, in the immediate context, other meanings. When used literally in legal texts in their conventional meanings, the terms just introduced cannot be used metaphorically or symbolically. This is because the first condition for metaphor and symbol is that they point to something beyond themselves. When these words, however, are used in a legal context they do not always point beyond their conventional meanings.

3. Religious discourse can also be divided into descriptive and evaluative statements. The former are those “consisting solely or principally of description; concerned with or signifying observable things or qualities or what is the case rather than what ought to be or might or must be; not expressing feelings or valuations;

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<sup>584</sup>*American Heritage Dictionary Computer File: On diskette (1995).*

<sup>585</sup>“Fasting” generally means to abstain from eating all or certain foods. Its specific meaning in religious context is different from one religion to another. While in religious context fasting includes abstaining from eating, extra conditions added to the general meaning of the word.

<sup>586</sup>“Alms” generally means money or goods given to the poor in charity. In a religious context, it has particular conditions.

relating to this type of meaning or interest.”<sup>587</sup> The latter are those “tending to concern or suggest rules or standards, as opposed to purely descriptive. An evaluative statement implies a value judgment on the part of the person making it.”<sup>588</sup> Descriptive language is distinctly different from evaluative language.

Descriptive statements are divided into the following categories:

**Philosophical statements:** In religious, theological or philosophical texts we may find descriptions of God’s existence, His attributes and actions, of what is going to happen in the other world, of religious principles, and of different aspects of human beings. These are philosophical statements.

**Historical statements:** These include two types of information: historical data and biographical narratives. This historical information pertaining to religion may be expounded in religious texts such as the Bible or the Qur’ân, or in non-religious historical books written by non-believers. Both kinds of data may include stories of prophets, their followers and their enemies, stories of different nations in the past, and so on.

**Scientific statements:** These include any discourse in a religious text that gives experimental description of the natural world, nature, earth, sky, animals, human body, and so on.

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<sup>587</sup>James A. H. Hurray, et al. eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), vol. 4, pp. 512-513.

<sup>588</sup>Flew, *A Dictionary of philosophy* (London: Pan Books, 1979), p. 115.

Evaluative statements include any kind of moral commandments and exhortation in religious books.

4) That a statement is descriptive does not imply that a word in the statement is meant literally. A descriptive assertion can be expressed literally, symbolically or any other way. 'Descriptiveness' merely means the quality of describing facts. The fact of being descriptive does not impose a particular method of description.

5) Other kinds of religious statements are jurisprudential laws, praise, prayer, thanks, petitions, confession, introspective descriptions of religious experience, predictions, dramatic narratives, admonition, and so on

6) Apart from acknowledging the variety of language in religious texts, we should also recognize that their language, to use an expression coined by Robert Evans<sup>589</sup> and John Macquarrie,<sup>590</sup> is 'multidimensional.' I can elaborate this point as follows:

A. Descriptive statements in religion are not as purely descriptive as those found in other descriptive discourse, since they have the following characteristics:

a) The main religious texts, such as the Qur'ân and the Bible, are considered to be sacred. They may include statements that describe sacred realities like God, Heaven, Hell, and so on. They even include descriptions of subjects not inherently

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<sup>589</sup>Robert Allen Evans, *Intelligible and Responsible Talk of God* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), pp. 66-86.

<sup>590</sup>Macquarrie, "The logic of Religious and Theological Language," p. 169.



religious, such as the natural world. To put it another way, believers do not view their sacred texts in the same neutral way they do ordinary books dealing with science, history and so on. Believers usually look respectfully at their religious texts – even though the expressions of respect are different in various monotheistic religions.

b) Ordinary descriptive statements are conceptual statements associated with objective, empirical thinking, whereas such statements in religious texts are associated with both conceptual and emotional aspects. A statement that describes God's actions and attributes, the Day of Resurrection and Heaven and Hell, relates to the whole personality of the reader, not only to her or his cognitive aspect. Statements like 'God exists', "He has the absolute power," and "He created Heaven and Hell" are not like sentences that describe the exact distance of the moon, the sun, or a particular star from us. For a believer, the first kind of statements is associated with emotion and feeling. Descriptive statements are introduced into sacred text to evoke a sense of God's presence in the reader. The main purpose of religious texts, at least in monotheistic religions, is to construct a relation between God and human beings. Taking the Qur'ân as an example of a sacred text, we see that the text itself asserts that the reading of each verse increases a believer's faith. As the Qur'ân says: "They only are the [true] believers whose hearts feel fear when Allâh is mentioned, and when the revelations of Allâh are recited unto them they increase their faith" (8:2). This verse implies that a proper reading of each verse, including the many descriptions in the Qur'ân of the natural world, should affect a reader's faith. And these statements that stir faith are not, of course, purely descriptive. Islamic sources

recommend frequent reading of the Qur'ân, particularly in the month of Ramaḍân (the month of fasting).<sup>591</sup> This prescription for repeated recitation indicates that it is not pure cognition that is expected of the Qur'ân. The cognitive aspect of the text can be grasped after one or a few readings. Evidently, the purpose of frequent and repeated reading is to direct the reader to the non-cognitive aspects of those passages. We can take the specific prayer called *ṣalât*, which includes descriptive statements, as another example. Every Muslim is obliged to perform the prayer five times a day. There are, in addition, certain recommended and supererogatory prayers. Some believers pray each day both the obligatory and supererogatory prayers, delightedly repeating the same descriptive statements in each performance. They really enjoy prayer. Can we say that descriptive sentences in such prayers performed in such a manner are purely descriptive?

c) Religious descriptive discourse can be subject to both recognition and critical thinking on the one hand, and to belief and conviction on the other. Other descriptive sentences such as historical or scientific discourses, however, have exclusively the former character.

B. Among Muslims, according to many mystics, philosophers and the *Shiites*, some religious teachings employ a combination of both partial literalism and

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<sup>591</sup>See Muḥammad Bâqir Majlisî, *Biḥâr al-Anwâr*, 110 Vols., Vol. 93 (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Wafâ', 1983), p. 386; and Muḥammad Muḥammadî Riy Shahrî, *Mizân al-Ḥikmah*, 10 vols., vol. 8 (Qum: Markaz-i Intishârât-i Daftar-i Tabliġhât-i Ḥawzah-yi Ilmîyah, 1992), p. 81

symbolism. For instance, conventional words such as ‘prayer’ and ‘fasting’ in Islam may have two different meanings, one exoteric (*zâhiri*), and the other esoteric (*bâṭini*). In the first they are kinds of discourse, used literally, while in the second they are used symbolically. The reason for such symbolic language, as clarified above,<sup>592</sup> is that the meanings to which the language points is complex and has various levels. Thus, the same word can have two meanings in a religious text, one literal, and one symbolic. Moreover, as we discussed above, both partial literalism and symbolism are used in our talk of God, the former as we first apprehend Him and the latter for other, higher levels of comprehension.

7) To say that religious statements are not purely descriptive does not imply that we should ignore the cognitive dimension of descriptive assertions in religion. I agree with Macquarrie’s assertion that no one can disregard the cognitive aspect of religion.<sup>593</sup> If religious language does not refer to any objective reality –if it is, in fact, merely a product of human subjectivity- then religious belief would be baseless. Moreover, the lack of reference to an objective reality is not compatible with the understanding of believers in monotheistic religions. The efficacy of religion for them depends on belief in some kind of reality behind religious belief. If believers try to obey God, this is because they are certain that God exists and that He is an absolutely perfect Being. In other words, there is a close relation between the cognitive and non-

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<sup>592</sup>See the discussion of religious symbolism in Chapter 9.3.1

<sup>593</sup>Macquarrie, “The logic of Religious and Theological Language,” pp. 175-176.

cognitive aspects of religious belief. The former is a basis for the latter. As Tilley maintains, “Some cognitive beliefs do indeed preclude some convictions, e.g., the discovery of a body proved to be Jesus’ would certainly shake the faith of most Christians.”<sup>594</sup>

Taking into consideration the close relation between the descriptive and emotional aspects of religious statements, it seems to the present author that scholars of religion or religious language habitually overemphasize one aspect at the expense of the other. Non-cognitivists such as Spinoza, Richard Bevan Braithwaite, Richard M. Hare, Paul M. Van Buren, David Tracy and Gordon Kaufman<sup>595</sup> do not see any factual information and any real reference for talk of God, asserting that such talk is meaningful only since it can serve some purpose. On the other side, a cognitivist such as Zuurdeeg, while accepting both aspects of religion, overemphasizes ‘is-language’ and does not pay proper attention to the descriptive aspect. Moreover, in the case of Zuurdeeg, I do not find his explanation of ‘employ language’ convincing. The difference between is-language and use-language is not clear in his theory.<sup>596</sup>

This brings us back to the main common point between Alston and Ṭabâṭabâ’î. The major similarity between them is realism which is a basis for their cognitivism. Realism is a very essential assumption for both scholars. They both present a realistic

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<sup>594</sup>Tilley, *Talking of God*, p. 54.

<sup>595</sup>The ideas of these thinkers are reviewed in the present work, Chapter 2: Literature Review.

<sup>596</sup>Willem F. Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, p. 59.

conception of God and His attributes. Both insist on the cognitive aspect of religion. For them, to believe in an objective, real God depends on a realistic conception of religious belief. Consequently, both refuse to regard religious statements as either meaningless or mere expressions of feelings or attitudes.

By comparing Alston and Ṭabâṭabâ'î, we may realize that if different scholars have various positions regarding religious language, that is rooted, to some extent, in their different philosophical presuppositions. While Kaufman, Tracy, Hick and Alston are Christian theologians, Alston's view of religious language is closer to Ṭabâṭabâ'î, a Muslim theologian, than to those Christian theologians. The reason is that Alston and Ṭabâṭabâ'î, unlike Kaufman, Tracy and Hick, defend a realistic conception of God's existence. Although there are also other similarities between Alston and Ṭabâṭabâ'î – such as rationalism and monotheism, and thus, to some extent, common ideas regarding God's existence, incorporality, transcendence and so on - their shared realism seems to be the main basis for their similar view of religious language.

The major difference between Alston and Ṭabâṭabâ'î is that Ṭabâṭabâ'î's literalism is much more theologically disciplined. He is more concerned with adhering to the Qur'ân than Alston is with adhering to the Bible. Ṭabâṭabâ'î's discussion springs from and depends on both the classical tradition of Islamo-Shiite theology and concern with the current social context, while Alston's main concern is the social context and current debates in Western philosophy. Both are determined to oppose views in the modern world which, they feel, lead to emptying religion from its

essence or atheism; but Ṭabāṭabā'ī is disciplined in this endeavor by the dictates of strict monotheism.

A comparison of Alston and Ṭabāṭabā'ī, in the view of this author, suggests that Alston's preoccupation with the struggle against skepticism and atheism has pushed him – apparently unawares – toward neglect of certain theological imperatives. It is precisely this preoccupation that prompts Alston to suggest a functional account of religious language. Alston's aim is to propose an acceptable way of speaking of God *in the current intellectual context* (rather than, for instance, in terms of the Christian scriptures). Alston's brand of functionalism, however, as I have already argued, is not – due to certain theological problems<sup>597</sup> – applicable to divine action. Alston apparently has been obliged to enter the debate on his opponents' terms. This results in his formulating a theory with essential problems when viewed in terms of his own tradition.

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<sup>597</sup> For more details, see Chapter 9.3.3

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