A PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION WITHOUT METAPHYSICS

I. Philosophy as analysis of religious language

A. Philosophical analysis begins with an attempt to eliminate metaphysics from philosophy and from religion.

1. The 20th century in influenced by Kant in this anti-metaphysical program.

2. But these later thinkers do not wish to reduce religion to its ground in practical reason, as did Kant.

B. Logical positivism of the Vienna Circle sought to the meaning of propositions, particularly philosophical propositions.

1. Philosophical puzzles disappear when we analyze what we mean when we frame them.

2. In this sense, philosophy is “therapeutic”, and does not involve any metaphysical reference. The issue is how language serves to lead us into puzzles and can be analyzed to lead us back out of them.

3. Moral philosophy as well is “meta-ethical” in that it clarifies the conditions of moral discourse but does not tell us what is right and wrong.

4. Religious propositions are not “verifiable” in the sense that they refer to anything we can experience. Therefore, they are nonsense.

5. Logical positivists asserted the “verification principle” as the prime criterion of meaning for any statement, whether in the sciences or in other disciplines. Physical experience is the only criterion that must be satisfied.

C. R.M. Hare and R.B.Braithwaite try to give religious utterances a meaning by reducing them to prescriptions about what we should do or as expressing our basic attitudes (emotivism).

1. Anthony Flew picks up Karl Popper’s “falsifiability principle” to argue that religious propositions are not falsifiable; hence, we have no right to believe them (as we have no right to
engage in a pseudo-science that is not based on theories that can be falsified.

2. Braithwaite supposed that, if religious utterances are not meaningful by being verifiable or falsifiable, they can be reduced to expressions of attitude to life and the world.

a. Religious language is a declaration of an intention to act in a certain way, i.e., an “agapeistic” way.

b. Christians doctrines are not to be taken literally but are stories that help us to live agapeistically.

c. While Christian stories and doctrines may be false in a literal sense, they still have meaning as moral decisions to live in a certain way.

d. An atheist is one who chooses to live a life that is not agapeistic.

3. Hare agrees that religious propositions are meaningless in a metaphysical sense (like saying “blick”).

a. But they do entail a decision to live a certain way, a way that can be justified over other ways.

b. Religious commitment might make us believe certain facts, but these are ordinary facts and are “religious” in that our lives are organized around them (as “Jesus was a real person” or fundamental beliefs that make it possible even to distinguish between fact and fiction.

4. Norman Malcolm believes that we cannot separate fact from its affective aspect and that beliefs always involve degrees of commitment. Thus, our affective commitments are already beliefs, even metaphysical ones, and the language that expresses them is meaningful.

II. Ludwig Wittgenstein

A. He is the most influential philosopher of language of the 20th century.

B. The end of the “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus” introduced the idea a realm of language that could not be spoken but that could be “shown”: “Whereof one cannot speak he must remain silent”.
C. The Divine (the Mystical) cannot be spoken of in terms of facts, but we can show this realm through our actions. In his later works, W. gives up speaking about the mystical but says that the meaning of our religious utterances is the practices that accompany them.

1. He never supposed that “the mystical” was an external, objective sort of experience that revealed things that people did not ordinarily know.

2. We have no access to the Divine except through our life and language. Indeed, we do not even have access to our minds apart from language.

3. These reflections do not constitute and are not developed by W. into a philosophy of religion.

D. W. introduces the notion of “language-games”, which are often misunderstood to mean that religious utterances might constitute a language-game. But he has a different idea in mind when he speaks of these games: telling stories, exchanging information, etc., are language games.

E. Counting against a religious language-game for W. is that one level of devoutness will produce utterances that make no sense on a lower level.

F. All the philosopher can do is describe how people use religious utterances. He leaves everything as it is and does not prescribe how people ought to speak in religious matters.

G. In respect to religion, W.:

1. Holds that there is no proof of God’s existence; we simply mean that we marvel at the universe when we say that God created it.

2. We never believe in God because of proofs; only believers try find an intellectual foundation for their belief.

3. How we become believers (“experience can force the concept God on us”) is not clear in W.’s thought. And he wants to avoid conflating religious language with matters of fact.

4. We cannot get a view of language from outside the various contexts of language. Thus, he has to give up the notion that we can “show” the divine when we cannot utter it. We can
say nothing about the divine and we cannot show it. Thus, philosophy cannot usher us into the realm of a validated religious language. Only faith can do that.

III. Post-Wittgensteinian philosophy

A. Some philosophers would like to simply proceed on the basis of Christian faith, since no arguments have been advanced that would make such a stand impossible.

B. D.Z. Phillips answers to this move by Wittgensteinian fundamentalism: Do not go beyond what language allows!

C. Roger Trigg, however, asserts that this dictum of Phillips depends upon the assumption of a “God’s-eye view” of all language-games, which itself goes beyond the limits of language.

D. But Phillips wants to see the realm of religious language as far too complex to make clear sense of religious beliefs. The level of commitment in what we say gives a character that can vary infinitelhy and intermingle with other language-games.

E. People like Searle want to press the point that we make the mistake of speaking a priori when we say that there is no possibility of mediating an experience of God through language. Such a claim has to be validated.

F. Can we avoid a reference to reality in our language? When we speak of God, can we avoid metaphysical reference? To say that we can is to assert that language cannot speak of God. But this is an a priori idea that remains unvalidated in experience and that rises above language to look at language as a whole. And it should be impossible to do this by W.’s standards.