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## 6. Ian T. Ramsey

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## 6. Ian T. Ramsey

### Abstract

In view of the requirement of verifiability that is demanded by certain philosophical schools, there seems little justification for what are conventionally recognized as theological statements. Certainly no one man has yet succeeded, except perhaps to his own satisfaction, in expressing religious notions in such language and in verifying by such a method that universal consent is gained for the validity of his system. If the charm of empirical verification is not invoked, then for some minds there is little reason to say anything. Obviously, given such rigid requirements for securing a sympathetic audience, theological discussion may find itself standing tongue-tied in the wings while logic and empiricism dominate the stage. But faced with the possibility of the eventual demise of theology, an effort is made to translate religious experience into intellectual terms which are acceptable to these critics. [*excerpt*]

### Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Ian Ramsey, Philosophy, Theology

### Disciplines

Philosophy | Religion | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

### Comments

This is a part of [Section XXIII: Theological Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

### More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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One defense of religion has reasserted the utility of specific religious traditions in the preservation of civilization. The defense claims that religion is the inner spiritual side of a culture. Hence to oppose the basic religious conventions is

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\* Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951) I, 100-105. Used with permission.

to place one's mind and person against civilization. Thus religion and its theological superstructure have been rescued from criticism, not by a defense of their intrinsic value or truth, but by relating them to what is more desirable: that marvelous nest for man, civilization. This argument can of course evoke a modicum of assent. But the assent must be feeble because religion and theology implicitly play second and third fiddle; they are in effect tolerated for reasons extraneous to their claim to be the expression of a response to reality beyond the mind.

Perhaps the embarrassment to which theological discussion is now subjected may be mitigated if it is defended not obliquely but directly. What this direct engagement with criticism of theology has attempted to do has been to give legitimate status to the subjective quality of religious experience and its theological statements. A good case in point is to be found in Religious Language (1957), a recent book by Ian T. Ramsey (1915- ), which represents the school of logical analysis. Ramsey is Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion in the University of Oxford.

The search for theological meaning in this book is preceded by an attempt to establish validity for the language of religious discussion. Ramsey claims that traditional utterances are obscure to those who do not first of all realize that such language does not have objective, empirical data as its reference. Rather, religious and theological language is a response to a special situation (discernment-commitment) and hence must be read or heard by those with an analytical bent as "appropriately odd," if it is to be at all intelligible. This means that certain words such as "God" or "person" when used in a religious context will have special meaning beyond their significance on the normal level of language.

Ramsey is arguing that language is only the medium by which reason expresses itself, and at best it is an imperfect medium. Something is lost between the thought and the word. But certain conventional terms may really be used in two ways or on two levels: the scientific and the metaphysical. For example, "life" may refer to the general physical condition of a body or it may be used in a more elusive sense of a vitality shared with the universe. This distinction implies the truth-value of intuition. Hence experiential verification of knowledge and meaning is at least as reasonable as the experimental verification. A mortician may conduct certain specific tests to determine whether or not a person is alive after a severe injury. But a poet may claim that the jungle is alive because he has heard, felt, and seen the forest and its population from within. The first "alive" requires experimental verification; the second, experiential. The language that accompanies the knowledge that is gained experientially will have to be used in a special sense, because the language that expresses such knowledge seemingly has been tamed to do duty only for rigidly empirical knowledge. But such limited use of language is manifestly

absurd. Under such strictures Ramsey argues that any attempt at religious communication would be futile and deceptive. For man lives in the world, not simply on it; all knowledge contains an element of participation. That is, man as subject is related to the world as object in such a way that he will always mean more than he says when he speaks about what he knows.

By way of summary it can be said that language is the primary medium for the expression of ideas. But ideas themselves are not direct apprehensions of objects. Even ideas are abstract and symbolic constructions that are built from some primary situation of relatedness. For theological discussion this relatedness is to be equated with faith. And faith struggles with language that is ill-suited as a vehicle for its fullness, intensity, and elusiveness. Hence the school of theology under discussion here seeks to establish the limits of language used in theological exposition in order to be at all certain in what is said about "meaning."

All of this is to suggest that any analysis of language requires a prior analysis of how man knows anything. Actually, then, the problem of meaning is more obviously stated than solved by such analysis.

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