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2. Meaning as a Problem in Contemporary Religious Thought

Abstract

To judge from the public voice and countenance of religion in America at least, there is a preoccupation in religion with happiness at the expense of meaning. But between the two poles of happiness and meaning there is considerable distance. This chapter accepts the problem of meaning as more urgent than the problem of happiness. For over against the hopeful prescriptions for the integration of the personality and of social life through religion there stands the experience of disintegration of the structure of past confidence. Desperately, theologians wrestle with ancient symbols to wrest from them new significance or reference, or attempt to revivify their lost meaning and powers of evocation. In these critical times theological thought attempts to referee the contest between the lost soul and the powerful chaos of world history. In an intellectual landscape scarred by war, diplomatic failure, economic uncertainty, and a wide variety of psychic traumata, theologians probe the private egos, society, and even language itself to reestablish meaning. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Religion, Religious Thought

Disciplines

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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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2. Meaning as a Problem in Contemporary Religious Thought

To judge from the public voice and countenance of religion in America at least, there is a preoccupation in religion with happiness at the expense of meaning. But between the two poles of happiness and meaning there is considerable distance. This chapter accepts the problem of meaning as more urgent than the problem of happiness. For over against the hopeful prescriptions for the integration of the personality and of social life through religion there stands the experience of disintegration of the structure of past confidence. Desperately, theologians wrestle with ancient symbols to wrest from them new significance or reference, or attempt to revivify their lost meaning and powers of evocation. In these critical times theological thought attempts to referee the contest between the lost soul and the powerful chaos of world history. In an intellectual landscape scarred by war, diplomatic failure, economic uncertainty, and a wide variety of psychic traumata, theologians probe the private egos, society, and even language itself to re-establish meaning.

The consideration of meaning as a problem may at first seem to be an effort to make intentional confusion for human thought. Figuratively it may seem as though the dog of the mind is chasing its own tail. And if it occasionally makes a successful grab, it stops short to stand embarrassed at its own frivolity. For eventually this special pursuit will result in a most baffling question: What is the meaning of meaning? To minds already distraught by mushroom clouds and cold wars, this must appear as the reduction of human intellectual effort to ultimate fruitlessness. Man has become preoccupied, so it seems, with the last logical question, one to which there can be no satisfactory answer. After all, such a question must be answered in the same kinds of words and phrases and out of the same mental structures that pose it in the first place. Hence, this is the question, so it seems, which will remain as a question forever, although what men now require are answers. The philosopher has stopped to examine his ideas and methods, indeed to dissect them; and runs the risk that he will not be able to put his instruments (words, ideas, data) back together again. Hence philosophy itself may seem to be not only in court, but already in a hopeless prison. The guards blocking escape have these questions for weapons: What trustworthy purpose for life can you claim? What do your statements signify? What is the nature of truth? This is to say again that the question of meaning now occupies the forefront of intellectual activity.

This question of meaning challenges not only philosophy in general but theology in particular, and theology has taken the challenge. The problem of meaning, however, does not mark a novel effort for theology. In Augustine's historic inquiry into the nature of the Trinity one finds, in effect, an example of

early concern for the problem of meaning in one of its forms. Though Augustine here as elsewhere finally becomes rhetorical about the mystery, he does try to show the analogical character of the doctrine: The unitary mind that knows, wills, and remembers is analogous to God who creates, sustains, and redeems, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But since the beginning of modern science in the seventeenth century, a severe restatement of the problem of meaning has been in the making. Actually, however, the foreshadowing of the conflict between science and religion can be noted as early as the sixth century of Greek thought. The horrendous symbol of modern science, the mushroom cloud, must wait 2500 years for its first show. Yet an eminent physicist, Erwin Schrödinger, claims that science has thought about the world in the Greek way. Learning from this "Greek way" science once offered two hypotheses for its kind of inquiry: first, that nature is intelligible, that it can be understood; and second, that the observer can be removed from the aspect of nature that is being examined. This second hypothesis is of first importance for this essay.

When the scientist following, for example, Aristotle makes his inquiry into the empirical world, he treats nature as an object. To be concerned with an objectified field of observation is simply to be concerned with something other than the salvation of the soul or one's relationship with God or the mystery of creation. These last concerns cannot allow the subject to be removed without destroying their peculiar status. Religious faith forces the person back into the picture. If in science there is no room for this kind of subjective concern, then there is a conflict between science and religion. One way to attempt solution of the conflict is through the problem of meaning. For, as we shall explain later, this is the problem of the relationship between he who knows and what is known.

But even the first basic hypothesis of science (that nature is intelligible) offers a fundamental challenge to theological statements. For the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is a mystery in the same way and for the same reasons that anything holy is a mystery. He speaks out of the burning bush to Moses and with little subtlety thrusts visions and compulsive speeches upon the prophets. The New Testament revels in paradoxes, the luxuriant flower of mystery: The Word becomes flesh and the Son of God dies that man might have life. These are not claims that rest upon the scrutability of nature. In fact, they seem to have little to do with nature at all. They are rather claims about history, which is in effect the drama of the interaction of men. Certainly any attempt to record this drama with objective clarity is difficult. In the nature of the case the field of inquiry itself is marked by many traps, obscurities, and lacunae. It may be possible to suggest that history is more of a mystery than nature, that history is not intelligible as an object. This is not to argue finally that history may not either have or be given meaning. In fact, this is how religious

scriptures deal with real or imaginary events. But by so doing, nothing of the mystery of God is eliminated. It seems then that theological thought must assert itself against the rigidity of empirical inquiry. For it cannot likely discover any method of analysis or kind of statement that will illuminate completely the mystery of the divine reality. Theology must always claim a residuum of human experience that does not submit completely to the Greek way of thinking.

So even theology has taken up the problem of meaning. The consequences could well be devastating when the question is asked: What means God? For it appears that when answers are ventured, they too will be subjected to the relentless power of the continuous question of meaning. The future then may honor, not faith, but a dramatic and frustrated skepticism. Indeed one contemporary theologian-philosopher, Paul Tillich, has recast Luther's famous Biblical phrase to the effect that we are justified by doubt and not by faith as conventionally understood. Still theology has been obliged to accept the challenge of this question of meaning. The dilemma is deep. Theology has, however, with various degrees of caution accepted philosophy's lead.

But before the separate responses are illustrated and reviewed, we had best sharpen the problem itself. In what sense can meaning be a problem for contemporary theology?

The old claim that religion gives meaning to life implied quite simply that with faith in God the Father life somehow seemed worthwhile. The rational disposition that we have to deal with today will not easily accept such subjective sentiments. The problem of meaning does not begin or end with such feeble ejaculations. But what, then, is the character of the theological concern for meaning?

Perhaps the problem can be stated thus for theology: To ask the question of meaning is to ask about the relationship between the knower and the known. The following illustration may help. In the book of worship of a large Protestant denomination is this sentence in the communion ritual: "We have to do here not with signs merely, but with the reality that these signs represent." The reference is to the bread and wine. In Roman Catholic ritual there is neither place nor reason for such self-conscious reservation about the elements. They do not remain symbols at all; they become the realities of body and blood. But in the Protestant recitation the bread remains the representation of flesh and the wine the representation of blood. Here the mind shifts into an analytic gear. The direct dramatic quality of the ritual succumbs to an implicitly rational analysis not only of the act itself but also of the actors, the worshipping believers. For a secret question hovers behind the innocent ritual. What do the bread and wine mean? The implication is that they are not what they are offered as. The elements are not body and blood in a literal sense; they represent body and blood. And we see the subtle separation of symbol from that which is symbolized. In our

previous terms, the knower (the worshipper) and the known (the bread and wine) are separated by the intervention of a covert objectivity. Hence the question: What does the communion mean to the worshipper? It is no longer a simple and direct act of identification with the God-man who dies carrying the sin of the world in his own person. But to say what it is not does not say what it does mean. In what precise relationship does the knower stand to the known?

Theological inquiry does not pose the problem of meaning in the same way that semantics poses the problem. For in this relatively new branch of logic there is no explicit reference to the users of the symbols under study and hence meaning remains an objective matter. But the theological solutions to the problem of meaning will always have peculiar personal or existential bias. That is, the whole intellectual effort begins, though it does not necessarily end, with the subject, with the one in whom religious experience and knowledge occurs.

In the following pages are illustrations of six different theological ways of dealing with the problem of meaning thus conceived. The first two, Kierkegaard and Barth, try to show that the relationship between God and man is controlled from God's side. For Kierkegaard, meaning can be affirmed if a man first knows himself to be confronted by God in Christ. But this element of subjectivity is played down in Barth. For him significance and truth are radically given into life by God. Martin Buber proposes that meaning is discovered in those momentary relationships in which the armor of familiarity is penetrated and the soul is stirred to new sensibility and response. These are three existentialist approaches to the problem of meaning. For these men a certain attitude is necessary if purpose, truth, or significance is to be confirmed in human experience.

The contemporary school of analytical philosophy has made excursions into theology. A discussion of religious language provides an interesting illustration of this recent effort to wed a new philosophy with an historic theology. Ian Ramsey tries to establish what theological statements and words in fact mean, that is, what they signify. Striding over all the territory of theological and philosophical thought, Paul Tillich attempts with inclusive argument to show that all man's concerns are ultimately related to his status as a religious being. The problem of meaning for Tillich evokes simultaneously the questions of purpose, truth, and significance. Last in the series is Charles Hartshorne. He provides meaning for all the data of human experience by organizing them into a coherent, inclusive whole.

Excitement and anguish, adventure and doubt seem to be new virtues for men of religion who demand and seek for meaning.