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Ian Ramsey's Model of Religious Language
A Qualified Appreciation

JAMES WM. MCCLENDON, JR. AND JAMES M. SMITH

THE investigation of the language of religion, though it has played an intermittent background music to the substantive theological work of the last quarter-century, has never been fully accepted by theologians, or overcome the suspicion that it was an interloper in religious studies, and a dangerous one at that. In part this suspicion may be attributed to the mistaken but widespread belief that the last analytical word had been spoken with verificationism; thus as recently as 1967 Malcolm Diamond published an article in a respected journal of religion which implied that on philosophy's terms verificationism had settled the issue of the possibility of meaningful talk about God, and settled it negatively. Those who share this belief with Diamond—and many theologians have done so—might well regard studies in religious language as a cul-de-sac, ending theological investigations before they could begin. As a consequence, verificationism in religious thought has defeated itself, not its "theological victim."

But the distrust of linguistic analysis has a more profound cause than the misreading of the role of verificationism in modern analytical philosophy. This cause, we believe, is the lack of an adequate general theory of religious language which will account for the truth in the verification theory while showing its limits, and will integrate most of the modern insights into religious language as well. Such a general theory would have to establish itself in connection with, or in contradistinction from, general theories of language put forward at the


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present day (e.g., by the successors of J. L. Austin and the students of Noam Chomsky¹). Thus it would show the relations between religious speech and other sorts of everyday speech, exposing not only the elements in religious language which warrant its being called religious, but also those which warrant its being called language—its continuities with other everyday talk as well as its differentia. For example, most investigators have remarked that religious language is in some sense self-involving; it is not so widely believed that this aspect is necessarily connected with a representative or referential aspect. Both these putative aspects, however, must be considered in attending to the general or theoretical question, whether or how (any) religious language can be validated or justified—for the decline of verificationism, far from settling this question, raised it anew in the most urgent way.

In our judgment, the work on religious language by the late Ian T. Ramsey (1915-1972) has come closer than any other so far developed to fulfilling these goals. Many believe that Ramsey, formerly Nolloth Professor of Philosophy of Religion at the University of Oxford, and from 1966 until his untimely death in 1972 Anglican Bishop of Durham, England, made a definitive contribution to religious thought on the broader scale as well. However that may be, his work on religious language was certainly central to his total program, and in the present article we will examine only his contributions to this topic, assessing the degree to which they fulfill the goals laid down above. His published work in this field is extensive.² However, much of this work was of an occasional nature, and Ramsey never drew together in any single place his mature systematic thought on this and related topics. For present purposes, however, we can discern three central and recurrent theses of Ramsey's work. (1) First there is his claim that religious language grows from "religious situations," otherwise described as situations of "cosmic disclosure," in which a "characteristic discernment" occurs and a "characteristic commitment" is made. Since this is intended to account for the origin of religious language, in this discussion we will call it the generative thesis. (2) Second, there is Ramsey's claim that religious language consists of "models" whose function is to instruct the hearer to proceed imaginatively in a particular way until (it may be) a disclosure occurs for him.


Since this is intended to show how the language of religion functions in relation to the disclosures, we will call it the functional thesis. (3) Third, there is his claim concerning the testing of religious utterances: they are to be tested for their "empirical fit" to the religious situations from which they are said to rise and to which they are said to lead, and (governed by the principle that we live in one world, so that religious experience must be experience of just one Universe) they are to be tested for their coherence and comprehensiveness vis-à-vis other utterances in the stockpile of theological discourse. Since this is intended to show the adequacy and appropriateness of a given religious utterance, we will call it the justificatory thesis. It is apparent that these three theses concerning the genesis, function, and justification of religious language are related to each other; they are also related to other Ramseyan doctrines concerning the unity of God, the analogy between "God" and "I," the nature of perception, etc., but the three we have named comprise an integral theory of religious language, and we concentrate on them.

I

We begin with Ramsey's generative thesis. There are certain situations, he holds, which are characteristically religious. These are situations in which a certain sort of "disclosure" or "discernment" occurs, and a certain sort of "commitment" is made or realized. Not all disclosures, however, are religious. Disclosure situations in general are those in which someone involved in the situation not only perceives the empirical data which constitute the situation, but goes beyond these to realize something in the situation not described, or not adequately described, in terms of the empirical data alone. All disclosure situations are empirical, but in all disclosure situations something is disclosed which is not restricted to "observables." Ramsey was endlessly resourceful in providing new and often entertaining examples of ordinary, or non-religious, disclosure situations. Indeed, on one view, these ranged over such a wide variety of logical types that it is difficult to say exactly what it is that they have in common.

One frequently recurring Ramseyan disclosure situation is the gestalt pattern, in which a bundle of data are seen first as mere bundle, and then as a recognizable image — e.g., a poster, first discerned only as colors, lines, dots, intensities, is then seen to form a portrait or a landscape. Another example frequently employed is from mathematics: a regular polygon of given radius and n sides is to be changed by increasing the number of sides; as the number increases without limit, the notion of an n-sided polygon gives rise to the notion of a circle, which

can (thus) be defined as a regular polygon of an infinite number of sides. In both the gestalt example and the mathematical example, there is a sense in which the intended notion (portrait, circle) is fully presented by the constituent elements, but in another sense, the former is "more" than the latter. This appearance of 'more' is a necessary feature of disclosures.

Another sort of Ramseyan situation yielding a discernment is one in which persons stand in a formal or institutional relation to one another, whereupon, because of some occurrence or other, these persons are then "disclosed" to one another in a more human or personal way. Examples are a courtroom scene in which the prisoner stands before the judge to be sentenced, only to be recognized as the judge's boyhood friend, or a formal academic tea at which some embarrassing or "revealing" event — someone spills punch on the dean's wife; someone bends over and a garment seam rips wide open; all the lights unexpectedly go out — causes the situation to lose its frigid formality as, in the shared predicament, persons become human for one another. At a certain point, "the ice breaks, the penny drops, the light dawns," and discernment of persons as persons occurs. These latter examples seem to depend upon the widely shared capacity to view ourselves and others at a variety of levels of immediacy and self-involvement. They provide a bridge to what is for Ramsey the sort of ordinary disclosure which provides the nearest analogy to religious disclosures, namely the disclosure of "I": "Can we not all recall a primitive stage," he wrote,

where we talk of ourselves in terms of proper names such as 'Neeny', where these are wholly restricted to our public behaviour. Even at this stage we are of course aware of ourselves. My point is that at this stage we have no language to fit. We use of ourselves a word 'Neeny' which others can use in precisely the same kind of way. But when we later use 'I' significantly of ourselves, it is because we recognize it as being used as an indicator word by others for themselves, relating to their public behaviour and more, and we recognize that we ourselves want to talk precisely of that, of 'Neeny' and more, and so of 'I'. . . . So we become aware of ourselves as we become aware of an environment transcending observables.

Ramsey clearly associated the awareness of the self as more than observables, signaled by the use of "I," with moral situations, and the latter are frequently to be described as religious situations also. In moral situations, the element of commitment, already present in some degree in the previous examples of disclosure, comes into its own. In the mathematical examples, there was implied a commitment to visual concepts and mathematical axioms which made the respective disclosures possible. The personal disclosure examples involved some degree of commitment to the persons involved in the situations. But in moral

9 Ian T. Ramsey, Religious Language, p. 69.
10 Ibid., pp. 19ff.
situations, a total commitment, of far wider scope than the personal examples and of far greater demand than the mathematical or visual ones, is required. "Duty" is for many a "key-word" in moral situations, and its characteristic demand is total and unyielding. Yet the disclosure of duty, like the disclosure of geometrical figures, of friends, and of self, arises from and is grounded in empirical situations. "Duty" is the "more" of an empirical situation.

Disclosures involving persons and disclosures involving morality bring us to the threshold of religious disclosures. These are disclosures concerning the entire cosmos which evoke from those who experience them total commitment. Ramsey held that "belief in God arises when there occurs a disclosure of such a range and extent that it might be called 'cosmic'"; the examples he gave (ranging across religions and cultures) can best be considered after we have introduced the second Ramseyan thesis, concerning the function of religious language.

In singling out disclosures, relating the several sorts to one another, and calling attention to this feature of religion, Ramsey performed a valuable service, we believe, to the religious community in which he shared. We are far less certain how to evaluate the claim that religion or religious situations are to be essentially characterized by the occurrence of disclosures, or to appraise the (generative) thesis which holds that all religious language arises from, reflects, or is used to evoke such disclosures. While there is a trivial sense in which all this is true enough, the sense in which experience and discovery (which together might be called "disclosure" or "discernment") appear in every human enterprise, we cannot understand Ramsey in this sense. Rather he made the exact claim that a certain kind of disclosure (which he called "total") distinguishes religion and generates religious language. Now, how are we to know whether this is true of the Sikhs and the Siwash, or (to take Ramsey's favorite examples) of the Nuer and the many kinds of Christians? Can "disclosure" even account for the many strands of religion which appear in biblical history? For Saul among the prophets? and for the religion of the author of Ecclesiastes? and for the shrine at Beth-el? and for the ecstasies of the first-century Corinthians? Is Ramsey's generative thesis an insight into the nature of all religion, or does it constitute a stipulative recommendation for the understanding of religion, a recommendation from a highly sophisticated Parson Thwackum? The fact that we cannot an-

18 Ibid., Religious Language, p. 42.
14 Though moral disclosures, according to Ramsey, may take a religious form, not all do, nor are all religious disclosures moral disclosures. The relation between the two is an important and delicate problem for Ramsey's philosophy. See his "Moral Judgments and God's Commands."
16 Ibid., pp. 167-68.
17 Parson Thwackum told Mr. Square the philosopher, "When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England." Henry Fielding, The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling, London: Collins, 1955 (first ed. 1749), p. 107.
swer this question, and that, as far as we can tell, Ramsey has not done so.\textsuperscript{18} epitomizes one of our difficulties with the generative thesis. Another difficulty can be made more clear after we have explained Ramsey's functional thesis, to which we now turn.

II

In \textit{Models and Mystery}, Ramsey said that the problem of being articulate about the mysterious, though characteristic of religion, is also characteristic of science.\textsuperscript{19} While what is discerned in religion is ultimately a mystery, so is what is discerned in science. In both cases, a strain is put upon language to speak of what cannot be expressed in straightforward, ordinary ways. And in both cases, there is recourse to "models" in order to manage the linguistic difficulty. Ramsey refers to Max Black, who distinguishes two kinds of models used by scientists: scale models (\textit{e.g.}, the Bohr atom) and analog models (\textit{e.g.}, the formulas of chemistry).\textsuperscript{20} Now the former, says Ramsey, are of no value in religion. The analog model, however, which Ramsey renames a "disclosure model," is the characteristic mode of religious language.\textsuperscript{21} God may be said to be a strong tower, a father, a shepherd, and a king; in this way each of these expresses a particular discernment-commitment. Now it is important that such models be recognized not only as indicators, but also as imperfect (or "odd") indicators. The model must therefore indicate in what way God is towerlike, or shepherdlike, or fatherlike, and also in what way he is not. To meet this need, says Ramsey, we must employ "qualifiers." These function as instructions to the imagination, saying in effect: start with that model, but modify it, develop it in \textit{this} direction. Moreover, Ramsey argues, the use of such qualifiers as "eternal," "infinite," "ultimate," "transcendent," constantly remind us that no development we make will be wholly adequate; none will remove the mystery. Therefore we badly misunderstand the "instruction" if we take it to be equivalent to an ordinary term in the language. "Almighty Father," when spoken of God, is not just in series with "father," "strong father," "stronger father," "stronger-yet father." The God characterized as "Almighty Father" is not a member of that series, not even the most powerful member. "Almighty Father" is rather the instruction to expand the qualification of "fatherhood" until a discernment occurs to which an appropriate commitment can be attached. At that point, when

\textsuperscript{21} Has not, save by amassing analyses of various religious texts, from Bible, Church Fathers, other religious traditions, \textit{etc.} If successful, however, these illustrations at best make the thesis a plausible one. On the other hand, we have argued (in \textit{Religious Convictions}, a forthcoming book) that "religion" represents a family of meanings and that definitions of the 'essence of religion,' missing this fact, are bound to fail.


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 7
the light dawns, the qualified model has done its characteristic work. Similarly, the Nuer assertion that "The twin is a bird" leads to the discernment that in respect of God or Spirit, twins and birds (as well as cucumbers and oxen) have a like symbolic function. Once again, language provides a model, in this case apparently a paradoxical one, to provoke a discernment.

Ramsey's functional thesis is that it is such qualified models which are the stuff of religious talk, these and not, say, first-person avowals or straightforward descriptions or moral commands. It follows that all religious language has a hidden imperative, or at least hortatory, character, implicitly instructing the listener to proceed down the lines of reflection suggested by the model employed until a characteristic disclosure occurs. How then would Ramsey handle such a traditional utterance as the biblical "God led Israel across the Red Sea"? Clearly such an utterance must provide a model which has been qualified to the point of evoking a disclosure, on Ramsey's view.

What disclosure might this be? Let us return to the age when Israelites told one another of the events of their coming to the new land. We can imagine a number of stories being told about the journey: "Our ancestors drifted into this part of the world." But that might seem false; so inadequate as to be a contradiction of the truth. "Our tribal leaders led our ancestors here," may be the next account. But that may seem still inadequate. So the next story is tried: "The prophet Moses led our ancestors here." That comes closer. Moses was a sacral figure, a man of divine power. The story, then, has more of the meaning which it needs to have; it is less inadequate. But some would feel it inadequate still, it may be, and would say "El led our forefathers to this land." Is it the case that now the light will dawn; that the significance of the story about entering the new land will be disclosed to the speaker and hearers? If so, the story has done its work. A straightforward "story" is told, but in telling is changed by the use of "odd" terms: "the prophet Moses"; "El" (which we translate "God"). It is crucial to the success of such language that it not be taken in straightforward ways; crucial, e.g., that if the question is then asked, "But who is El?" there be no straightforward answer, as there would be if the question had been "But who is Aaron?" Rather the answer will call for further suitably odd language, further "stories," further models suitably qualified, until, it may be, a disclosure occurs for the listeners.

Note well Ramsey's insistence that the stories may not work. There is no one story in the chain of disclosure-stories which guarantees success; if the hearer doesn't get it the only recourse left to the speaker is to tell other stories, until, if at all, such a disclosure-point is reached for the listener. If however this seems to make religious language too subjective, we can remember that Wittgenstein made some similar remarks about 'getting' ostensive definitions.

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22. Ian T. Ramsey, Religious Language, Ch. II.
and Lewis Carroll some very clever ones about 'getting' logical inferences. But if there is no flat guarantee that a given person will follow a logical inference or understand an ostensive definition, we may not be too disturbed that on Ramsey's view religious language provides no flat guarantee that the hearer will experience discernment in connection with a given disclosure-story, either. Religious language runs the risk of failure, but perhaps no more than does all language.

This brings us into position to say a little more about the generative thesis. What is the relation between disclosure and commitment in religion and in religious language? Ramsey's understanding of the matter is that these properly arise together; one who enjoys a religious disclosure will properly have a religious commitment as well. The commitment without the discernment is bigotry and idolatry; the discernment without the commitment is insincerity and hypocrisy. But Ramsey also thinks that the nature of religious language is to function by presenting models which, when suitably qualified, express and evoke the religious disclosure. Presumably, then, the same models express and evoke religious commitment, as well. How this occurs, however, is hard to say. If I know that my mother has been kind to me, I know that gratitude to her is in order. "Kindness" and "gratitude" are related logically. I can learn (and teach) both what counts as maternal kindness and what counts as filial gratitude: her care for me in childhood, for example, and my care for her in her old age. But how is it with the 'discernment' connected with the model-utterance which says that God is infinitely kind? This does not, on Ramsey's account, entail the claim that God has done or will do any particular kind act, or series of kind acts. What, then, is the appropriate commitment for such a discernment? Is there anything in a (Ramseyan) disclosure which could itself answer that question?

The difficulty is that the elusive nature of the models seems to break down the ordinary connections between disclosed quality (e.g., kindness) and evoked commitment (e.g., gratitude), and we are not sure where to find new connections. Ramsey tells us that religious language will treat kindness, or any other term, not as an ordinary term doing ordinary work in the ordinary way, but only as a "disclosure-model," to be qualified until the desired disclosure occurs. But when that happens, will the new "kindness" any longer be connected to the old "gratitude," or even to some new "gratitude"? The answer, which must come

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28 When philosophers of language speak of a connection's being part of the meaning of a word, the sort of paradigm they often have in mind is found in the word "murder." If someone says that murder is wrong, we may be reminded by that saying; we cannot (if we know English) be informed by it. For that murder is wrong is what we mean by "murder"; to call a killing murder is to judge it wrong. (Nor does it count against this that murder may sometimes be justifiable—so may 'doing wrong' sometimes be justifiable.) Similarly, (everyday) kindness has built into its meaning that it deserves (everyday) gratitude. (As before, the exceptions are only apparent ones.)
from Ramsey's theory of models and their functioning, seems to be that we cannot say that it will not be so connected, but we cannot say that it will, either, and therein lies the trouble.

If commitment without appropriate discernment is bigotry, won't any total commitment to such an elusive disclosure as that of the kindness of God be bigoted per definitionem? And on the other hand, won't the absence of such commitment be prudence and never hypocrisy? To avoid these consequences what is needed is some logical — not merely psychological — account of the linguistic relation between the two, in this case, between disclosure and commitment. Ramsey's theory cries out for such a connection, but does not provide it. We remark that such an account need not eliminate 'mystery,' nor reduce the objects of religion to the objects of the dinner table or the hardware store, but it must include a clearer statement than we have here of the logical grammar of religious utterance.

Turning again to the functional thesis, we must ask why it is that all the language of religion must consist of analog or disclosure models? Assuming for the moment the general linguistic adequacy of both kinds of models, why may not religious language consist of picture models as well? Ramsey is severe in his strictures against Karl Barth for thinking that there are "supposed facts which the words [of theology] picture," holding that this leads Barth to an intolerable dualism, to two worlds of facts. But, neglecting the question whether this 'two-worlds' ontology is what Barth intends, surely some religious speaker might indeed believe in, and meaningfully talk about, another world of facts than the everyday world. At least Ramsey gives no linguistic, as opposed to theological, reason to deny this possibility. Indeed, it seems that every religious speaker sometimes speaks in straightforward ways and is at these times liable in his religious talk to be straightforwardly mistaken, just as those who speak of facts are liable to be mistaken. Ramsey himself acknowledges that besides the qualified models (whose role we do not deny), there are in religious speech certain keywords, such as "God," or "Spirit," which are the "irreducible posits" of the system. If these, why not still other non-models, or at least non-analog-models, in religious speech? The functional thesis requires adjustment at least at this point; religious talk cannot consist of models and qualifiers alone.

III

This brings us to the question how, in Ramsey's theory, religious language is to be judged not merely possible, but appropriate, and hence to the justificatory thesis. Ramsey has been hastily criticized by some for neglecting or even denying the descriptive or representative role of religious language. However, we have

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30 Ibid., Religious Language, p. 45.
just seen that this criticism cannot stick. Unlike R. B. Braithwaite, and far more clearly than W. F. Zuurdeeg, Ramsey has attended to the descriptive and referential role of religious talk, even while making it clear that the 'facts' religion is interested in are a different sort of facts than empirical ones. On the other hand, Ramsey firmly rejects the possibility that religious language can be verified in the way in which, as he sees it, assertions deduced from generalizations in empirical science can be verified. Such verifiable deductions theology "cannot and must not provide." The reason Ramsey gives for this is theological: if verifications were possible, then God would be a manipulable object like the objects of scientific study; "God would have become a scientific concept."

How, then, are we to decide what religious talk is preferable? A given case always begins for Ramsey by noting a particular cosmic disclosure. Since cosmic disclosures are not available on demand, this may seem daunting, but on Ramsey's view they are certainly frequent enough to yield the phenomena of religious talk. If a given disclosure is articulated at all, it will be paired with a given model. The model is now to be compared with all other available models. We can be confident, Ramsey holds, that all these models aim at one object, since in cosmic disclosures we confront just one Universe, which in each disclosure is apprehended as a whole. Thus we "develop discourse from each model only with a constant eye on other models . . . ." It is even more important that the model shall fit the empirical circumstances which give rise to it—thus model-talk about the 'love' of God must fit the empirical human circumstances which led to this talk.

It is not easy to nail down Ramsey's notion of 'empirical fit'.

The theological model works more like the fitting of a boot or a shoe than like the 'yes' or 'no' of a roll call. In other words, we have a particular doctrine which like a preferred or selected shoe, starts by appearing to meet our empirical needs. But on closer fitting to the phenomena the shoe may pinch. When tested against future slush and rain it may be proven to be not altogether watertight or it may be comfortable—yet it must not be too comfortable. In this way, the test of a shoe is measured by its ability to match a wide range of phenomena, by its overall success in meeting a variety of needs. Here is what I might call the method of empirical fit . . . ."


The fitting of a boot suggests a high degree of personal taste; on the other hand 'empirical fit' is also like the fit between a detective's new-found clue and the theory on which he is operating at the moment: \(^{38}\) this clue fits the theory that the archdeacon not the curate was the murderer; that one does not.

In any case, if the language the religious speaker "builds out" from models which display 'empirical fit' is based upon as many models as possible (but how is this determined?), if it is as "consistent, comprehensive, coherent, and simple" as can be, then, in Ramsey's view, it will conform "closer and closer to the language which a believer uses about God." \(^{39}\) In other words, the language of Christian believers in God does possess 'empirical fit,' is consistent, comprehensive, etc., and is therefore justifiable, or very nearly so.

Clearly, this thesis of Ramsey's is theistic, and specifically Christian. As it stands, then, it does not meet the broader, more abstract demand for a theory of how, in general, religious talk (or convictional talk in general) may be justified. If, however, we generalized Ramsey's justificatory thesis to cover atheistic and non-Christian religious talk, would it prove serviceable? The trouble is that we cannot be sure how such an extrapolation should go in order to fulfill Ramsey's intentions. Certainly his work contains, as we have seen, numerous hints for the broadest-ranging account of religious language, and for its justification. Particularly attractive is the suggestion that, besides (somehow) fitting the facts, appropriate religious talk will be "consistent, comprehensive, coherent, and simple." Regrettably, however, these hints are not worked out in such a form as to fulfill the goals mentioned at the beginning of this article. We want, as Ramsey might have put it, a map of the entire terrain of religious utterance.

IV

Summing up our examination of the portion of Ramsey's work we have surveyed, we find the generative thesis interesting but unproved, the functional thesis stimulating but incomplete, and the justificatory thesis cast in a form which does not meet the broader need for a general theory of justification. Nevertheless, Ramsey comes nearer, in two ways, to meeting the standards of an adequate general theory of religious language than any other recent worker in the field, for he takes seriously the referential-representative intentions of religious speakers, and he comes nearer to showing the correlation between religious and other kinds of everyday speech. We think he fails to show how the 'factual' component of religious talk is necessarily attached to its self-involving aspects, and we think he fails to explicate the single most important element which makes religious utterance seem odd or strange to non-religious listeners (and vice versa)—its convictional basis. He fails, that is, to reckon with the way in which communities of believers, whether the Irish Republican Army, or the participants in a congress of physical


chemists, or the worshippers of God in Christ, each share a special set of profoundly held assumptions and beliefs which make them the persons they are, control the shape and meaning of what they say, and thus define the problem of the justification of their language and their beliefs.

Ramsey enthusiasts might hope that his admirable insights and his considerable industry could be salvaged to perform this task as well. They might hope that on the bases laid down by the generative, functional, and justificatory theses, a general theory of language encompassing convictional pluralism could be erected. While we take a less sanguine view, we do expect that these Ramseyan theses may form a part of a general theory laid down on rather different lines. However, it has not been our intention to make these lines clear here.