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Mystery and Logic

The purpose of this paper is to examine the religious philosophy of Bishop I. T. Ramsey, formerly Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion in the University of Oxford, whose voice, during his tenure of the chair and since, has been prominent in the contemporary theological debate, and whose writings have, over a wide area, made a considerable impression. It is true that at first sight his theological outlook may not seem easy to classify. He cannot be seen as a follower either of Karl Barth or of Rudolf Bultmann; thus if, as is sometimes maintained,¹ there is really and in the last resort no third alternative, Ramsey's work would appear to fall in some kind of theological 'no man's land.' On the other hand, it may be possible to discern and indicate significant points of divergence between Bishop Ramsey and one or the other of the main trends in contemporary Protestant theology, with a view to glimpsing the shape of an alternative to them – if perchance there is one.

Thus, where Barth can be credited with bringing to life in the twentieth century many of the ancient creedal and conciliar decisions of Christendom, Ramsey can unrestrainedly poke fun at them and pour scorn on those who think that for information concerning the interior life of the Godhead all that they have to do is to ring up 'Chalcedon 451.' Yet it should be noted that this does not mean that Bishop Ramsey would sit lightly to the traditional creeds and confessions of the Christian church. It is rather, as we shall see, that he considers that in the past they have been wrongly understood – in the material mode, as he himself puts it, rather than in the formal.

So far as Bultmann is concerned, perhaps the most significant respect in which Ramsey diverges from him is that, whereas Bultmann, who, in contrast to Barth, considers any attempt to eliminate philosophy from theology as doomed to failure, and contends instead that the theologian needs the correct philosophy, finds that philosophy in Heidegger's existentialism, Ramsey for his part finds it in a different quarter altogether, in the empiricism which has dominated philosophy in English-speaking countries in recent years, and which in an earlier phase has gone by the name of logical positivism and in a later stage by that of linguistic analysis. Moreover, when Bultmann maintains that existentialism is the right philosophy for theology, it often seems that his reason for thinking so is to be found in the fact that for him existentialist ways of thinking are compatible with and peculiarly congenial to the biblical outlook and that in a sense the Bible seems to impose this philosophy upon theology. It is very doubtful, however, that Bishop Ramsey

1. Cf. T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1962), p. 207.

would ever hold that the Bible imposes the outlook of contemporary empiricism upon our religious thinking – though if he does not find it in the Bible he certainly does find it in the present-day intellectual climate, and he holds that ‘contemporary philosophy lays on us an urgent task and duty, viz. to elucidate the logic of theological assertions.’² ‘I hope to show,’ he says, ‘how the contemporary philosophical interest in language, far from being soul-destroying, can be so developed as to provide a novel inroad into the problems and controversies of theology, illuminating its claims and reforming its apologetic.’³ Indeed, more than once he suggests that unless we follow this line and come to terms with present-day empiricism we shall find that, both as theologians and as preachers, we have lost the battle before we begin; and certainly for his own part he is determined ‘to give full credit to the approach and techniques of contemporary empiricism.’⁴

This is a serious and significant declaration of intent and profession of philosophical allegiance, and it is consequently important to note the characteristic tenets of the succession in which Ramsey deliberately places himself. Of all schools of thought, it is probably true to say that empiricism has been the most persistent philosophical outlook in the modern period and that, since the time of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, it has been almost continuously affirmed in one form or another. In all its forms it has sought to lay a secure foundation in sense-experience, and it has tended to question anything that claimed to transcend this sphere, and to distrust especially the pretensions of rationalism ‘that there are some truths about the world which we can know independently of experience ... , that thought is an independent source of knowledge, and is moreover a more trustworthy source of knowledge than experience.’⁵ It was to this general thesis that the particular form of empiricism known as logical positivism gave a highly clarified and refined articulation and, in so doing, ensured for it, not only a continuing, but a dominating, presence in many philosophical circles both before and after the second world war. Thus the almost definitive expression of the central thesis was provided in Professor A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*, of which the first edition appeared in 1936 and the second in 1946 – a book destined to become, as C. E. M. Joad once said, the philosophical Bible of post-war Oxford.

Like Hume [wrote Ayer in the preface to the earlier edition] I divide all genuine propositions into two classes: those which, in his terminology, concern ‘relations of ideas’, and those which concern ‘matters of fact’. The former class comprises the *a priori* propositions of logic and pure mathematics, and these I allow to be necessary and certain only because they are analytic. That is, I maintain that the reason why these propositions cannot be confuted in experience is that they do not make any assertion about the empirical world, but simply record our determination to use symbols in a certain fashion. Propositions concerning

2. I. T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1957), p. 14.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

4. I. T. Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1960), p. 12.

5. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2d ed. (London: Gollancz, 1946), p. 73.

empirical matters of fact, on the other hand, I hold to be hypotheses, which can be probable but never certain. And in giving an account of the method of their validation I claim also to have explained the nature of truth.⁶

What this meant was that, if Ayer was right, *all* knowledge had its rise in sense experience. The main challenge to this thesis, the main doubt concerning this view, derived from the fact that there *are* the *necessary* truths of logic and mathematics; but this on examination – if Ayer was right – was no genuine threat at all, for these necessary truths of logic and mathematics were not really about the world around us, about matters of fact, but about the ‘way in which we use certain symbols.’⁷ Any alleged threat from other quarters, such as the spheres of morals, religion, and metaphysics, was a much less serious threat, and could be more directly nullified, since moral judgments were for Ayer expressions of emotion and therefore neither true nor false, while the propositions of theology and metaphysics were in even worse case, being really quite meaningless – literally, nonsense – since no possible empirical matter of fact was relevant, one way or the other, to their verification. Apart from the propositions of mathematics and logic, of which an alternative account was thought to be available, empirical verifiability was the indispensable criterion of meaningfulness.

On these terms it is difficult to see how any alliance is possible between empiricism and theology; and indeed it was only a subsequent development that seemed to many to render a reconciliation feasible. This development consisted in the realization that meaningfulness is not confined to the tautologies (on this view) of logic and mathematics or to empirically verifiable statements, whether of common sense or science, or to both. Many statements are neither true nor false and yet are perfectly significant – for example, commands, questions and invitations, predictions, counsels, and expressions of emotion or disposition. So long as the discussion is oriented towards statements which carry a claim to be true, the principle of empirical verifiability seems well fitted to express the main theme of the empiricist thesis; but when the net is cast more widely and account is taken of statements which make no claim to truth, it becomes necessary to recognize that there are many such uses of language which are quite meaningful or legitimate without claiming to grasp and express truth. In expounding the principle of empirical verifiability, Ayer, as we have seen, held that he had explained the nature of truth, and he *assumed* that in doing so he had at the same time dealt exhaustively with the nature of meaning or with the legitimate use of language; and it was thus left to the school of linguistic analysis to argue the case for recognizing that there are many significant and legitimate uses of language which involve no claim to truth and, consequently, no question of validation. It was this amendment and enlargement of the thesis of contemporary empiricism which was hailed by some as granting a reprieve to the language of religion and theology. They felt that, on this more comprehensive view of the legitimate and significant use of language, it was possible to peg out a place

6. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

for religious language amongst the variety of linguistic forms which involved no claim to truth and therefore no method of validation. Thus Professor R. B. Braithwaite, in his essay *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*, suggested that the distinctive characteristic of religious language was its combination of moral language and the language of fiction – that is, of prescriptions which, by the nature of the case, are neither true nor false, and of stories which give imaginative support to the moral policy embodied in these prescriptions but which, again by the nature of the case, are intended to be entertained but not believed.

Empiricism has been such an influential factor in modern philosophy that the question of a possible alliance between it and religious thought was bound to arise. Yet from the outset, it is clear, the investigation of this possibility can be undertaken only under a vast question-mark covering the whole enterprise, since, on the face of it, either religion is scorned by its intended partner as simply nonsensical or else it is confined to those areas where words may be used significantly enough but without any claim to truth (apart from the incidental use of ordinary empirical statements). That is to say, either religion is rejected as an impostor or else it is brought within the fold on the condition that it disowns its own past, in which the claim to announce truth has always been a quite indispensable part of its reality. And it is precisely because Bishop Ramsey declines to sit loosely to the creeds and confessions of Christendom, and so to break with the history of the Christian church, that his religious philosophy may be deemed a test-case, so far as any possible alliance between theology and contemporary empiricism is concerned.

How then does he proceed in this task of immense difficulty, which may indeed turn out to be an impossible one? The first step is taken when he contends that, just as everyday statements about the world around us are secure in their meaning against all questioning because they refer to empirical situations and have thus what Ramsey calls 'empirical anchorage,'⁸ so religious language, if it is to be defended at all, must be seen to refer likewise to empirical situations. Without this supposition, no defence is possible. On the other hand, it is not any and every empirical situation that can provide empirical anchorage for the language of religion, and of necessity Ramsey sets himself the task of indicating what special kind of empirical situation can do so. What he has to say on this score, however, is difficult to assess, not because he says so little but because he says so much, and because it is not always easy to be sure that what he says is available to a consistent empiricist. Basically, perhaps, he wishes to stress that the empirical situation which is characteristically religious is one marked by both discernment and commitment; and this, so far as it goes, is of the first importance, for the fact that he emphasizes discernment as much as commitment indicates clearly that he is not content to rely solely upon the refuge afforded by those non-truth-claiming uses of language to which linguistic analysis has drawn attention.

8. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, p. 18.

On the contrary, he says: 'A total commitment ... without any discernment whatever is bigotry and idolatry; to have the discernment without an appropriate commitment is the worst of all religious vices. It is insincerity and hypocrisy.'⁹ Nonetheless the question remains as to what kind of discernment a consistent empiricist can properly recognize.

For Ramsey, then, characteristically religious situations are empirical situations which involve both discernment and commitment; but since this is a problematical description we must look to other characterizations to bring what is intended more clearly into view, and of these there are many. Religious situations, we are told, are 'not restricted to "observables"';¹⁰ they are 'characteristically personal situations'¹¹ in which 'the penny drops,' 'the ice breaks,' situations which 'come alive';¹² they involve 'encounter' and in them 'our surroundings become familiar' and 'this familiarity develops into a feeling of friendship ... a sense of cosmic kinship';¹³ they are 'perceptual *and more*';¹⁴ they involve a 'sense of the unseen ... a sense of mystery,'¹⁵ and are marked by 'wonder, awe, astonishment';¹⁶ they are 'odd,'¹⁷ 'odd and in part elusive,'¹⁸ having 'empirical peculiarity';¹⁹ they have 'objective depth,'²⁰ and seem to involve an objective element of challenge, a transcendent element,²¹ 'something going beyond the objects,'²² 'beyond what's tasted and seen,'²³ 'transcending the spatio-temporal';²⁴ they are situations of worship²⁵ and they are 'transitory and more, spatio-temporal and more,' because in them we are aware of 'the "unsatisfactoriness" of what is transitory.'²⁶

This is almost an embarrassing and unmanageable succession of descriptions; and yet it is clear that, whereas some of them seem primarily to refer to a subjective response to the situation, others plainly have in view some objective aspect of it. Yet the difficulty remains of saying, in a way consistent with thorough-going empiricism, what this objective aspect is; and as an empiricist Bishop Ramsey is insistent that it cannot consist of further facts and circumstances. 'Religious language,' he is quite clear, 'is no set of labels for a group of hard, objective "facts" glanced at by passive observers.'²⁷ Likewise it is an error to suppose that a phrase like 'absolute values' is 'directly descriptive of some curious feature in an occult realm.'²⁸ Similarly, in the case of words like 'freedom' and 'omnipotence': 'There is no question of anyone having firm and accepted meanings for these words ... There is no

9. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 26f.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

21. Cf. Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality*, pp. 30, 33, 43.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

25. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 58.

27. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, p. 26.

28. Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality*, p. 46.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

question of "freedom" and "omnipotence" having wholly acceptable placings in some world-view.²⁹ Again, when we discuss and argue about the immortality of the soul the argument does not lead 'to a proposition which pictures the facts' and to think that it does is, presumably, to take a quite wrong view 'as to the anchorage of metaphysical words such as "soul" and "immortality."³⁰ And it hardly needs to be added that 'in speaking of the "eternal generation of the Son," we are not talking about what goes on at all times in some sort of heavenly laboratory, or labour-ward.'³¹

In all this Bishop Ramsey is safeguarding his empiricism, but he is apparently aware that in doing so he may be thought to be running the risk of sheer subjectivism. He is confident that he has an adequate answer to this charge, but the answer turns out to be itself a very odd one. It is to the effect that anyone who claims that all 'odd' situations can be reduced to psychological terms is making so vast a claim that the assumption can safely be made that it can never be 'convincingly established.'³² This may be an effective enough reply against unbelievers who consider that the characteristically religious aspect of situations is a subjective one; but it does nothing to allay the anxiety of believers who think that this aspect is not purely subjective but are afraid that Ramsey's account of it, in the context of his empiricism, fails to make this truth unambiguously clear. Certainly, to speak of the oddness of religious situations or even of their objective depth does not put the matter beyond doubt. It is plain enough that Ramsey considers subjectivism here an error, but it is far from plain that he has not fallen into it himself.

Even to describe the allegedly objective aspect as personal, as Ramsey does, may not be to put the matter altogether beyond suspicion. What Ramsey has in mind when he speaks of the penny dropping and of the situation coming alive and acquiring personal depth could well be understood in a way that would quite fairly be described as subjective. For example, I may have spent my best holidays in Ireland, so that for me to be home is to be down to earth and to be in Ireland is to be in heaven. Anything associated with Ireland may then have for me a special interest and a peculiar depth, and I may deem myself to have a special relationship to all Irishmen – and this, it should be noticed, even if in fact I have visited only a few small parts of Ireland. The whole of Ireland and all Irishmen may thus be drawn within what is in a special way *my* world, or *my* life, and certainly Omagh will be much more than just a name on any map. There is a subtle difference between objective situations, which are nothing more, and those which by association are drawn within *my* universe; and into the bargain, just as a largely unvisited Ireland has been brought within my world on the strength of a comparatively small number of visits to a few parts of Ireland, there seems to be no reason why in similar fashion the whole universe should not thus become mine, developing a sense of familiarity, friendliness, and kinship.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 59f.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

31. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, p. 158.

32. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 24ff.

Indeed, if this is a misrepresentation of Ramsey's thought, he nonetheless virtually invites it when he says that 'the same kind of "disclosure" occurs when hills or buildings are named.'³³

There can, however, be little doubt that Ramsey does intend an objective element as the mark or one of the marks of a characteristically religious situation; and yet there remains unremittingly the difficulty of reconciling this intention with a loyalty to contemporary empiricism. Consequently, there is a persistent tension between the various things that Ramsey has to say, and throughout there is a seemingly ineradicable ambiguity. On the one hand, he points to the objective side by using words such as 'disclosure' and 'discernment,' or 'objective depth,' or 'insight' used as a synonym for discernment,³⁴ or even 'truth.'³⁵ On the other hand, he is unable to describe this objective element except in the vaguest terms, such as the phrase 'and more' (in 'perceptual and more,' 'transitory and more,' 'spatio-temporal and more'); and although at one point he does speak of the key words of religion as 'those ultimates of explanation,'³⁶ he almost immediately takes away with his left hand all or almost all (one cannot be certain) that he had given with his right, by adding that they are 'ultimates of explanation' in respect, not of discernment, but of commitment. 'For the religious man,' he says, "'God" is a key word, an irreducible posit, an ultimate of explanation expressive of the kind of *commitment* he professes.'³⁷ But would not 'Ireland' function for me (though not perhaps for you) as just such a key word, the *key* to *my* world, and certainly expressive of something like a commitment, an affection, a loyalty, a goodwill, a genuine patriotism by adoption?

Another aspect of the point I have been making is that, although Ramsey can speak of truth in connection with religion, he seems to hesitate to speak of error. Thus, at one point in *Freedom and Immortality*, he refers to the (at one time) characteristic Hebrew outlook which accepted belief in God but not in immortality, and to the philosopher J. McT. E. McTaggart who would have preferred for his part to put the matter the other way round; and Ramsey's verdict is that 'McTaggart and the Hebrews were thus alike in seeing one half – though in each case a different half – of the whole truth.'³⁸ Similarly, in discussing the rival claims of the theist and the humanist who believes in absolute values, and in coming out in favour of the former, Ramsey does seem to convict the latter of error; but in fact what he does is to try to show that 'God's will' and 'absolute values' are 'alternative descriptions, one of which is contextually more comprehensive than the other'³⁹ – as a friend might well try to orient *my* universe, not towards Ireland, but towards that group of islands once known as the British Isles.

Perhaps even more significant is the treatment which Bishop Ramsey gives

33. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

35. Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality*, p. 79.

36. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, p. 40.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

38. Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality*, p. 79.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

to the theological problem of divine omnipotence and human freedom, about which so much has been written in the past; for his contention is, not that he has solved the problem, but that he has shown it to be no problem, nothing but a pseudo-problem, and this on the ground that 'the kind of situation which justifies man's freedom, justifies at the same time God's omnipotence.'⁴⁰ Consequently, says Ramsey, 'the problem of "man's freedom" and "God's omnipotence" is ... a pseudo-problem which disappears when the appropriate logical placings are given to each phrase.' This, however, is really a very odd claim. Many theologians in the past have been equally convinced that both human freedom and divine omnipotence have been given in the religious situation or justified by it, but, far from thinking that there was, in consequence, no problem, they have held that this *is* the problem. It is the problem of trying to understand their juxtaposition in the religious situation and to see how each is consequently to be understood. And on the face of it there is a great deal to be said for this way of looking at the matter. On the other hand – if Bishop Ramsey is right – there is certainly an objective element in that aspect of the characteristically religious situation which exceeds the perceptual, the spatio-temporal, the observable and the transitory, and accordingly there is such a thing as religious *truth*. Once again, however – if Bishop Ramsey is right – what kind of religious *truth* is this if it never conflicts with any error but simply joins alternative descriptions and complementary and correlative truths in an ever-larger context? Perhaps the objective element in the characteristically religious situation is *wholly* mystery, and religious truth is then truth concerning the mystery; but how can there be *any* truth concerning that which is *absolute* mystery? On the other hand, if there is truth in principle (because the mystery is objective) but never in practice (because the mystery is absolute), is there a wider context still which will comprehend both the Christian and the Islamic religious outlooks and their respective commitments of love and submission? Can we really proceed in this sphere merely by addition – by addition *ad infinitum* – without any thought of compatibility, consistency, and conviction of error?

Bishop Ramsey defends his procedure on the ground that 'there is no question of "freedom" and "omnipotence" having wholly acceptable placings in some world view;⁴¹ and the reader may be reminded of Professor Karl Barth's hostility to world-views, and also of his refusal to offer a solution to the problem of divine omnipotence and human freedom, and his insistence that man's self-determination is in 'utter subordination'⁴² to his determination by the Word of God, to 'the overlapping determination by God which befalls his self-determination.'⁴³ Yet Barth's rejection of world-views must be placed at the other end of the scale from Ramsey's, and for him there is simply no question of an indefinite enlargement of the context in which the key words of religion play their part. On the contrary, he has no hesitation in saying of

40. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

42. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936), p. 228.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

the non-Christian religions that in them 'there are hills and valleys, but no heavens,'⁴⁴ and he is hardly less forthright and unambiguous in his rejection of any natural morality and any natural affirmation of absolute values. It is the sheer concreteness of the event in Jesus Christ (which, Barth would say, creates its own possibility) that prevents Barth from indefinitely enlarging the religious context. It is the general type of the characteristically religious situation (where alone 'religious words' have their indispensable grounding⁴⁵) which prevents Ramsey from doing anything else. Behind this difference, however, there is another even more fundamental. Barth, for his part, believes that religious language grasps the reality of God cognitively, and what prevents him from developing this cognition into something like a world-view is his further belief that the very possibility of this cognition is due entirely to God's grace, and that any human initiative towards its systematic articulation is conceivable only in an onlooker, and is bound to infringe the godness of God the creator. Ramsey, on the other hand, does not really believe that it is one of the purposes of religious language to grasp religious reality cognitively. He may affirm in principle that the characteristically religious side of religious situations is objective, and he may even speak of religious truth; but this is not the core of his position, and it is not here in practice that the tension between Christian faith and contemporary empiricism is overcome. In the last resort it is overcome – if indeed it is overcome at all – in the recognition or the contention that some language has other uses than those which involve a claim to truth, and that basically *religious language is of this kind*.

This is the point of those passages⁴⁶ in which Ramsey insists that religious language is not straightforward, and that it is always a mistake to treat it as if it were. For example, the name by which God is declared to have revealed himself to Moses ('I am that I am') is religious language if anything is; but Ramsey suggests that the long theological tradition which, in St. Augustine and in St. Thomas Aquinas and in the neo-Thomists of the present time, has found in it a straightforward, rational, and indispensable link between the conclusions of natural theology and the God of revelation has laboured under a radical misapprehension. The efforts of all such thinkers 'are all endeavours to get some straightforward assertion from a phrase whose logical structure has a very different tale to tell.'⁴⁷ Inevitably we go astray if we do not realize that religious language is essentially language which is odd. Its grammatical form is no reliable guide to the logical function which it is seeking to perform. Indeed, it is odd in a twofold way, corresponding to the twofold character of characteristically religious situations as involving both discernment and commitment. For one thing, it reveals logical oddness and impropriety in seeking to *evoke* the characteristically religious situation, and then again it is

44. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

45. Cf. Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality*, p. 60.

46. Cf. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, pp. 37ff.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

logically odd in seeking to *commend* the appropriate commitment in this situation. In the former case it is 'object language and more,' whether by outrageous mixture or by peculiar conjunctions of normally descriptive terms, or even by a marked deficiency in descriptive content, as in the case of nicknames 'where the "object" reference is a minimum, and whose characteristic point is to evoke a distinctively personal relationship.'⁴⁸ For instance, the attributes of negative theology are said to be 'primarily evocative of what we have called the odd discernment, that characteristically religious situation which, if evoked, provokes a total commitment.'⁴⁹ On the other hand, on the side of commitment, religious language will reveal oddities in the form of tautologies which are yet significant as 'sponsoring a key word and declaring a commitment.'⁵⁰ 'God is love,' for example, is described as 'a *significant* tautology labelling a commitment'⁵¹ or as 'a significant tautology pleading "Love" (or "God") as a commitment word.'⁵² Indeed, on the side of commitment, there are two distinguishable uses of religious language: that of labelling, expressing, or declaring a commitment,⁵³ and that of commending or pleading a commitment.⁵⁴

So far the argument has reached no more than a first approximation towards the understanding and classification of Bishop Ramsey's position, and what this first approximation amounts to is that, as an adherent of contemporary empiricism, Ramsey must, at least *for the most part*, represent religious language as performing functions which do not involve a claim to truth, and that so far, therefore, his theory is but another instance of the kind of theory favoured by Professor R. B. Braithwaite. Yet this, it is important to note, is only a first approximation to the truth, for the task of *evoking* a certain kind of situation is not so obviously free from a truth-claiming element as is the task of expressing or commending a commitment. The kind of situation in question is what Ramsey calls a characteristically religious situation; but what have all such situations in common, which justifies Ramsey in treating them as of the same kind, as 'similar disclosures'?⁵⁵ It is not just that in them the penny drops or the ice breaks, for many such situations are clearly not religious in themselves. It is not just that they are perceptual and more, partly because the uncanny is not necessarily the religious, but partly because it is almost impossible to give the key phrase a meaning. Presumably Ramsey's 'and more' indicates an addition, a plus sign; and it is easy to make the mistake of translating his characteristically religious situation thus defined into $x + y$. This, however, is an error, for clearly $x +$ does not mean $x + y$. Rather it must be taken as meaning ' $x +$ a little more of x ' (which is in this case excluded), or else it must be treated as an incomplete sign which, until it is completed, is indistinguishable from x . The truth is that Ramsey's theory

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 38f.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

54. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 40, 47.

55. Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality*, p. 47.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

53. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 43, 46, 47.

cannot get off the ground unless the religious terms he uses are given something of their traditional cognitive content, and then Ramsey's empiricism is at once infringed and he is immediately confronted by questions concerning meaning and validation, which within the confines of contemporary empiricism are unanswerable.

This cognitive content may be minimal, it may be inconsistent with empiricism, but it is indispensable. 'God,' says Ramsey, is a commitment word; but it cannot be so to the exclusion of all traditional cognitive content, or else there would be little point in using it and there would be no sense in saying, as Ramsey does say, that a situation can *justify* the phrase 'God's omnipotence.' Thus, even if the theological and systematic development of religious language is not designed to articulate the Christian faith – something like a Christian world-view – but aims at some other goal (one which does not directly involve a claim to truth), the narrow circle of contemporary empiricism has already been breached; and clarity demands that the fact be recognized.

Clearly, however, the rupture with empiricism is on a much vaster scale – indeed, is quite beyond control – if it turns out that the case for regarding the development of theology as designed to achieve some non-cognitive goal cannot be made out; and this case is an important part of Bishop Ramsey's total position. It is his view that religious language is intended to *evoke* a characteristically religious situation and to *express* and *commend* therein a total commitment. It does not seem to matter if in the past this has not been clearly understood – if indeed (as would be the case if Ramsey were right) this has been almost universally and completely misunderstood – and in consequence the church's teaching has been expressed 'misleadingly in the material mode,'⁵⁶ so that 'a logical relationship has taken on a picturesque expression in the material mode.'⁵⁷ The truth is, according to Ramsey, that nonetheless religious language as developed by theology is fundamentally odd in the way in which it brings together what Ramsey calls models (cause or good) and qualifiers (first or infinitely) in unexpected or impossible combinations, and that this oddness derives, not from the ontological superiority of the reality described, but from 'the strange kind of situation'⁵⁸ which it seeks to evoke in relation to which it tries to express and commend a commitment. Thus we are told that the words 'unity,' 'simplicity,' and 'perfection' 'have each a claim to make about the word "God"' and that together these claims amount to this, that '“God” is a key word presiding over the whole of language and suited to a total commitment.'⁵⁹ Similarly the phrase 'infinitely wise' 'claims for "God" a distinctive logical placing, a presidential position over the whole language route.'⁶⁰ Later on we are told that 'the early Christological and Trinitarian controversies are wrongly seen if they are thought

56. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, p. 158.

57. Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality*, pp. 55f.

58. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, p. 49.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

to be concerned with super-scientific discoveries about God ... What the early controversies settled were rather rules for our talking, and what came out of them at the end were new symbols for our use, and in particular the Trinitarian formula.⁶¹

What the Athanasian Creed does in particular is to commend as the Christian key word a new symbol 'God.' It formulates rules for its construction; it gives the symbol an appropriate logical structure. For the most part the Creed is thus purely formal, and needs for its understanding and content the Christian disclosure which, at best, would be otherwise given in that worshipful situation where the Creed naturally occurs.⁶²

This, however, is not only an unusual account of religious language but an exceedingly difficult one, which seems to carry very curious implications, some of which surprisingly mirror, in a this-worldly, down-to-earth medium, several of the oddities of Barthian theology.

1. No doubt religious language does seek to evoke what Ramsey calls a characteristically religious situation; but it is difficult to believe that it can do this in complete divorce from an affirmative function whereby objective truth is declared, however approximately and analogically it may be expressed. Indeed, it is precisely through the affirmation of truth that it seeks to evoke the situation in question; and although the care and anxiety with which the church frequently attempted to define the truth betrayed its conviction that error here might have the most grievous results on the quality of life and destiny, this conviction was in complete harmony with its belief that it was truth that was being defined. 'Saving knowledge' may not be the most congenial phrase to the modern consciousness, but it remains difficult to believe that Jesus can be the way and the life if he is not at the same time the truth.

2. On Ramsey's view the basic religious reality is a discrete series of characteristically religious situations, situations in which the penny has dropped on different occasions; and thus it becomes possible to level against Ramsey precisely the criticism that H. R. Mackintosh once made of Barth⁶³ - that of excessive actualism and a deep-seated hostility to the very idea of a *state* of grace. Indeed Ramsey extends this treatment from religion to morality, denying the state of nature as well as the state of grace, if by human nature we mean a condition of freedom and responsibility. Over a wide area of human action, on Ramsey's account, 'the situation is very impersonal, very "inhuman,"' and if we speak of a man *deciding* on this level we may do so 'as we may speak of the bagatelle ball "deciding" to go in this hole rather than that.'⁶⁴ 'A scientific account of the "decision" in terms of "objects" would be wholly adequate.'⁶⁵ It is only here and there 'when there is a challenge and a claim' that genuine freedom is to be found.⁶⁶ Yet the identity of the self,

61. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 178f.

63. H. R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1937), p. 314.

64. Ramsey, *Freedom and Immortality*, p. 31.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

66. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 38.

reflected in the witness both of conscience and of faith, condemns this as an *excessive* actualism.

3. Curiously, too, just as Barth speaks of dogmatics as a critique of the church's proclamation, Ramsey contends that the creedal and confessional work of the church has aimed, not at describing reality, but at giving us 'rules for our talking.' It has shown us how the word 'God' is to be used, how it is to be logically placed, and in particular it has claimed for this word a presidential position in relation to the whole of language. This suggestion may seem to some like doing a crossword during the sermon, but the very serious question is whether everything that can be expressed in the material mode can be packed into the formal mode, and the latter absolved from the charge of devaluing the currency of religious language. What does it mean to say that the word 'God' occupies a presidential position in relation to the whole of language, that it stands to the whole of language as does the circle to the series of regular polygons?

There seem to be two ineradicable defects in Bishop Ramsey's account of the theological debate and its point. For one thing, Christian faith has always been oriented, not towards a word, but towards a divine reality, God the creator and father of men, and accordingly the relationship of God to man has always been understood as an ontological relationship, as a relationship in life rather than a relationship in logic. Furthermore, the logical placing which Ramsey assigns to the word 'God' appears on examination to be no place at all. Although the circle may be said to preside over the series of regular polygons, nothing can be said to stand logically as president in relation to the whole of language, and the idea of such a logical president is really a logical monstrosity. The circle may be said to bear a relationship of logical transcendence to the 'language route' which consists of the series of regular polygons, but it does so *within* the context of geometrical language as a whole; and it is quite inconceivable that any word should bear this relationship of *logical transcendence* to the *whole* of language.

4. All this has an inevitable repercussion on the doctrine of grace, and, curiously again, both Karl Barth and Bishop Ramsey are to be found teaching a doctrine of necessity here – although in very different forms, for, while in the last resort Barth teaches a divine determinism, Ramsey makes grace a matter of logical necessity. Thus, while Ramsey says that 'whether the light breaks or not is something that we ourselves cannot entirely control,' and that this is all that religious people have meant 'when they have claimed that the "initiative" in any "disclosure" or "revelation" must come from God,'⁶⁷ he also maintains that 'the word "God" may be pictured as the centre of a maze – the spot where we finally arrive if we walk long enough and make the correct logical moves' – and this as 'a matter of logical necessity.'⁶⁸

5. Bishop Ramsey's religious philosophy, as expounded above, is complicated by his small, later book, *Models and Mystery*, published in 1964. One

67. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, p. 79. 68. *Ibid.*, p. 60; cf. p. 87.

of the most significant features of this discussion is that in it attention has moved from mathematical models to scientific ones, and emphasis is laid upon the change involved when the latter are no longer understood as 'scale models' or as 'picturing models' but as 'analogue models' (to use Professor Max Black's terms) or, as Ramsey prefers to say, as 'disclosure models' involving 'structural echoes' rather than 'pictorial replicas.' These scientific models as now understood can, Ramsey contends,⁶⁹ suggest for theology a way between 'picture modelling' and 'compromising descriptions' on the one hand and total silence on the other; but if, in his earlier attempts to retain the objective reference of religious language while denying its descriptive function, he was more successful in the latter direction than in the former, it would seem that now the pendulum has swung to the other side. For to assimilate theological models to scientific rather than mathematical models is clearly to cast theology, not in the formal mode, but in the material, and so, incidentally, to infringe even further the presuppositions of empiricism. Moreover, to describe these theological models as disclosure models rather than analogue models is to beg the question, for, on the analogy with science, they are no better than hunches which have yet to be empirically tested, and the name 'disclosure models' suggests for them a validity which they have not yet earned. Further, even if the main purpose of the argument was always to emphasize 'the limitations and deceptive attractions of descriptive language,'⁷⁰ the substitution of scientific models for mathematical ones, even when the former are recognized as analogue models and not scale models, does not seem to advance this purpose, nor does it appear to support the contention that theology 'may see its *primary* purpose as one of alerting other disciplines to the claims of mystery ...'⁷¹

No doubt those who framed the creeds were often aware of a mystery which later generations who use their words are prone to forget; but even so their primary purpose was not simply to affirm mystery or to use the word 'insight' as basically a correlative to mystery. Ludwig Wittgenstein at one stage was aware of what he called the mystical, but he wisely concluded that 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'⁷² Bishop Ramsey, however, is right in thinking that silence cannot be the lot of the Christian thinker, but he is wrong in supposing that mystery is the ultimate subject of his language. Emil Brunner seems nearer the truth when he argues that, whereas 'that which we can see to be "unfathomable" is an emptiness, not a fullness,' 'we do not fully realize how unknowable, how mysterious God is until we meet Him in His revelation.'⁷³

69. I. T. Ramsey, *Models and Mystery* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 7.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

72. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, 1933), 7.

73. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), p. 118.

Bishop Ramsey has done well to wrestle so valiantly to maintain an alliance between theology and contemporary empiricism; but at the end of the day his religious thought urgently requires a core of disclosure and insight which empiricism will not allow him. Accordingly, religious philosophy must seriously question the presuppositions of empiricism, with a view to articulating what Ramsey emphasizes in spite of his empiricism, the dimension of the personal.