The telephone on the pastor’s desk rang. A voice on the other end of the line informed him that the daughter of one of his elders had been struck and killed as she stepped out from between two parked cars. She had just registered for her first day of classes at the State University. The car was driven by a fellow student. As the pastor hung up the phone, a series of thoughts flashed through his mind: Only child. Adopted after a long wait. Parents devoted to Carol. Devastating tragedy for parents. What can I say to Fred and Alice? How can I talk about God at a time like this? As the pastor fumbled for his car keys and started the trip toward the parents’ home, an overwhelming sense of nausea drove all thoughts but one from his mind: “How can I say anything meaningful about God’s grace and love to my friends?”

Arriving at the house with some anxiety, the pastor was met by Alice, only to be told that Fred had already left. “Left for where?” was the surprised response. She replied, “He has gone to the campus to find the boy who was driving the car that killed Carol. Fred wants to tell him that it’s all right. We forgive him. We didn’t want the boy to torture himself. God’s grace will take care of him and us”.

One meaning of God’s grace was demonstrated. Suddenly the pastor understood and embraced Alice. Her response had allowed the pastor to be free and joyous in the midst of tragedy. The event obviously had a similar effect on Alice. The pastor felt the urge to dance and sing and praise the Lord whose presence he had just encountered. These words had provided not only illumination and insight about the meaning of God’s grace and its presence in an unexpected situation, but the words also transformed him, changed him. They altered his relationship to Fred and Alice and eventually his relationship to other persons in his church and community. This moment of communication gave the pastor a new perspective on himself and on his God.

In this experience talk about God had been intelligible and responsible. The words resulted in understanding and insight. Perhaps more important, the conversation was a catalyst for change, the words did something; they influenced not only how one reflected about himself and his world, but how he responded to persons and situations he encountered. The story affected not only the pastor but others with whom he shared the story.
Most of us who share in a religious tradition can point to experiences similar to this, where language has come alive and made us aware of God's reality and His presence. However, we also know a number of instances in which talk about God is neither intelligible nor responsible. Not only does it fail to enlighten and transform, but it blocks understanding and snarls relations with others. It can be so frustrating as to lead people to reject the possibility of talking about God at all. Such language is meaningless and irrelevant.

The simple question is, Why? What accounts for the fact that sometimes talk about God comes alive, and other times it is stillborn? Are there any clues in the nature of language and experience which could begin to account for this capacity or power of language?

Research is undertaken and manuscripts published for any number of reasons. In each specific case the motives are probably mixed. It is important to be clear about some of the personal reasons which led me to this research and the publication of this work. As a parish pastor, campus minister and teacher, I have been plagued by the question of why and how talk about God functions. I am also frustrated by the inability of myself and those around me to give an answer to this question. The purpose of this study is not simply to satisfy my intellectual curiosity, to develop a theory of the nature of language that could provide a more satisfying account of why language functions as it does. I am also seeking avenues and models which would enable one to speak more coherently and significantly about God. How does one write and speak and share with others in concrete terms so that experiences which constitute the very foundation of one's humanity are disclosed, lit up, and exposed? The detailed and sometimes plodding nature of the manuscript belies the person and the passion that stand behind it. It is important therefore to read this preface, in which I try to explain in an informal style the reasons for this work and precisely what it claims to do.

The personal reasons for publication involve the attempt to share with the reader the directions in which this research has led me, the guidelines it has established for my own work and ministry. This research has persuaded me to focus attention on symbol, myth, and story as the keys to interpreting one's encounter with God. The present investigation required me to concentrate on the question of what it means to be human, to reflect on those thoughts and actions that characterize who I am. In two works published prior to this, but written as a consequence of this research, I argued that it is neither principles nor rationale which primarily determine man's reflection and action. Rather, it is symbols or
myths about himself, his world, and his God that determine who one shall be. In recent course offerings I have examined the philosophical foundations and cultural implications of myths and symbols, especially those which shape my own life and the lives of my students. Also preaching has become for me revelatory story telling in which the task is to point to illuminating and transforming symbols which demand disclosure and interpretation. One is drawn to a kind of imagery by which it is possible to interpret our human experience and discover again the unexpected and undeserved presence of God in every component of our daily lives. This kind of theologizing, interpretation and proclamation is based on certain forms of ontology and epistemology. The present work attempts to expose those philosophical presuppositions which undergird my understanding of the nature of language.

The professional reason for publication is the hope that this research may be suggestive for others in the field. Perhaps a dialogue will ensue where the author may learn by the criticisms, corrections, and creative additions of others. The major thesis of the manuscript is that the conceptual and symbolic functions of language should be regarded as being on a continuum rather than in distinct or separate realms. The work constitutes a move toward a dimensional theory of language which is offered here as the tentative and experimental design of a clearing house for language.

As an exploration of the dimensional theory of language, the work makes some contributions which merit consideration. This investigation provides an interpretation of the symbolic dimension of language which is operative in every major universe of discourse. It also makes a contribution to the contemporary discussion of symbolism by providing a definition and discussion of symbol as a particular linguistic form with special linguistic functions. A preliminary sketch of this theory of language supplies a feasible rationale for symbols having an identifiable impact on persons and communities, namely, that symbols can be illuminating and transforming. The manuscript focuses particular attention on theological symbolism and demonstrates how a proper appreciation of its power can account for theological language coming alive, enlightening us, and redirecting us.

This theory of language demands that we take seriously the mysterious quality of language and confirms a "high evaluation" in which language is precious because it is in fact the key to God's self-disclosure. We need to understand language, particularly in its symbolic mode, as that which allows and accounts for revelation. I am calling for a new appreciation
of symbolism, particularly in light of the way in which it has been disparaged in analytic studies during the past decade. For many, language is merely a convenient and arbitrary means of communication within a particular group of people and does not merit special attention. If in fact it does constitute the non-concealment of God to man, we must face the charge that we have been using language too casually and superficially. We have failed to see its power and potential for both illuminating and transforming our human existence. It is in language that Being discloses itself in and to man. Man is characterized therefore by his openness to Being, and it is his encounter with Being that liberates man for his full potential.

This study argues that language cannot be properly understood, particularly theological language, without referring to both the symbolic and conceptual functions of language and seeing them in a dialectical relationship to one another. A dimensional theory of language also demands a coherent understanding of the dimensions of thought or reason, the appropriate forms of knowledge, and the means of confirmation of these respective dimensions. The applicability of this understanding of language to several different universes of discourse provides the foundation for an authentic interdisciplinary dialogue. This is opened up in a preliminary way in regard to natural science and joins in the present discussion of the relationship between science and theology.

Furthermore, the present study interprets the distinctive contribution to an understanding of the nature of language and particularly the theory of symbolism made by Wilbur M. Urban. He has been an important resource for theologians such as Paul Tillich and John Macquarrie, and the importance of his contribution to an understanding of theological language and symbolism has often been slighted or ignored. (There has been some revival of interest in Urban’s contribution in the very competent study by Warren A. Shibles, entitled Analysis of Metaphor in the Light of W.M. Urban’s Theories. Dr. Shibles’ study is an analysis of the contribution of Urban to the theory of metaphor, whereas my work proceeds to examine the implications of Urban’s thought for theological language in particular). I also give considerable attention to the philosophical reflection of the later Heidegger, especially insofar as his ontology provides a foundation for a dimensional theory of language. Finally, the theology of Paul Tillich is utilized as an illustration for theological symbolism. However, this study attempts to provide an adequate foundation for Tillich’s use of symbol and calls for necessary additions and revision in Tillich’s understanding of the nature of lan-
guage. This revised understanding, I maintain, is a prerequisite for symbols having the capacity Tillich claims for them. In general the critical examination of sources serves to expose the contributions of those who have been substantively affected by the idealist tradition in philosophy. This investigation therefore, contributes to the renewed appreciation of some of the insights of those influenced by idealism, particularly in regard to language, and attempts to call the attention of those laboring in the field to a reconsideration of this resource. The theory of language sketched here does not attempt to draw a detailed map of the entire terrain. What it does do is to point down what I feel is the right road and invite others to explore this route.

A work such as this, which has been in progress for a number of years, receives criticisms at various stages. I am grateful for those critiques; a number of revisions have emerged as a result. However, it is also prudent to attempt to forestall some criticism by being clear about the primary aims and limitations of this work.

As my primary goal was to develop a dimensional theory of language, I have not attempted to argue in detail with other contemporary positions on the philosophy of language. This was not thought necessary for two reasons. First, other authors have engaged in this dialogue in recent publications. For example, in reference to theological language, there is the work of Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God Language*. On the basis of what he describes as a modern secular mood Gilkey engages in a wide-ranging debate with those who seek to base intelligible language about God on speculative metaphysics, linguistic analysis of ecclesiastical discourse, phenomenological analysis of religious experience, or revelationist theology. Gerry H. Gill, in his work, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, focuses on the epistemological issues particularly in reference to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin. The contributions of anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss to the understanding of language and particularly the role of myth and symbol is critically interpreted by G.S. Kirk in his recent work *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. Finally, a substantive study of the existential and experiential basis of talk about God, employing the notion of God as agent, has been completed by Gordon D. Kaufman. *God the Problem* investigates the uses or significance of talk about God so that such language could be considered meaningful and important. My work does not attempt to duplicate or regurgitate this critical analysis on the nature of language nor does it attempt to answer shortcomings of these positions. However,
I hope this study will affirm my awareness and appreciation of the insights concerning language provided by the positions represented in these debates, which have significantly affected my own understanding of language.

Second, I have not argued extensively with current works on language because I wish to focus on the development of a dimensional theory of language in relation to particular formative figures. Such focus poses limiting boundaries, but this concentration is a self-conscious decision. The research is frequently dependent on the insights of Wilbur Urban and Martin Heidegger. Extensive documentation from these sources seemed imperative, but these authors are not intended to function as "authorities". This documentation may give the manuscript a rather "clogged" effect, like a pipe which does not draw smoothly because it is so tightly packed, and, as a Scotsman might note, often with someone else's tobacco. However, in the end this often produces a richer and more satisfying smoke. Despite the difficulty of the draw, I want to clearly indicate the contributions of Urban and Heidegger to this dimensional study of language. However, I have also sought to declare explicitly the points in which I differ from these germinal influences so that the distinctive component in the mixture becomes apparent.

Various stages of revision have not successfully concealed the fact that this is basically a doctoral dissertation (presented to the faculty of Union Theological Seminary, New York). Consequently, the style suffers somewhat from the origin of the manuscript. However, the declared qualification of this work is that it merits publication; therefore I take the decision of my examining committee seriously. If the reading goes slowly, do not slight Chapter IV. The core of the thesis is here. The summary portions of each chapter indicate this core and the consequences which emerge from it. Let me conclude these cryptic suggestions to the reader by noting that a diagram of the schematic proposal, which provides a graphic image of the theory, is presented at the end of Chapter V.

The emphasis on the development of the theory has resulted in fewer concrete examples in this specific work than I find ordinarily desirable. This deficiency has been remedied in more recent publications. My introductory essay in *The Future of Philosophical Theology* attempts to place the theory in a particular cultural setting and to demonstrate its influence and potential. In *Belief and the Counter Culture* I attempted to sketch quite concretely the determining symbols for an emerging culture. However this later work, directed toward the general reader, lacked the explication of the epistemological and ontological foundations
for an understanding of language as set forth here. It is my hope that these works with different audiences in mind balance one another to present a coherent, integrated theory.

Finally, two transitions within my own thought should be indicated. I do not see these as falling in the category of limitations, except insofar as the full impact of these transitions is not sufficiently reflected within the body of this work. The first is a broadening of the philosophical foundation on which I think this dimensional theory of language can be justifiably based. The impression may be given, particularly in Chapter II, of a rather fervent and devoted if not exclusive commitment to the ontological position of the later Heidegger. I do not wish to deny my enthusiasm for the ontological insights emerging from a fundamentally idealist component in Heidegger’s thought. However, I do want to repudiate the inference that there is an exclusive claim, that this philosophical position is the only one in the contemporary philosophical scene which is either credible or competent to provide working presuppositions for a dimensional structure of language. My growing appreciation of the sensitivity and wisdom of the later Wittgenstein and a renewed appreciation for process philosophy, particularly as represented in Whitehead’s work on symbolism, is present although this is not clearly indicated in the manuscript. My primary concern is that language be understood as having the capacity for access to Being. Heidegger’s work presents one philosophical perspective which supports such a conclusion. However, it is clearly not the only philosophical position capable of providing this support.

The second point of transition is a fuller appreciation of the significance of the non-verbal context in which communication occurs. In the present manuscript emphasis is on the crucial role of language in knowing, communication, and confirmation. Testing this theory of language to see whether it is a viable account of how language functions, how it causes things to happen, I have become aware of the strategic nature of extra-linguistic factors and become appreciative of the role of physical objects, bodily activity, and human emotions in the process of genuine communication. The importance of the non-verbal context for language is suggested in this study, but not sufficiently accentuated.

Talk about God is multi-dimensional and therefore is often extremely difficult to understand. This is particularly true in the context of a theological seminary where every qualification and nuance seems so important. Genuinely illuminating and transforming communication is not only a mystery, but somewhat of a miracle. As ironic as it may be, this
seems particularly true in communication between teacher and student. It is in gratitude for such encounters that this work is dedicated to four men who are both teachers and friends: Tom F. Driver, Paul L. Lehmann, John Macquarrie, and Daniel Day Williams. With each man I had the opportunity of being a colleague both in learning and teaching as I served in the positions of student and teaching assistant at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

The debt registered here is not a consequence of agreement, but rather emerged precisely out of the constructive, stimulating confrontation represented in their different theological positions and personal styles. I have argued in this work that dialogue is an essential component in intelligible and responsible talk about God. The lived experience with these friends confirms that judgment. Their existential struggle to find more satisfactory ways to talk about God manifested itself in a dialectic that forced me to find my own way. The theory presented here is not representative of any one of their positions, nor would they likely give unqualified support to my conclusions. Yet, that image of a critical continuum is a paradigm not only of the nature of language but of good teaching. However, the debts do not all fall in the category of assets. Some liabilities were also part of this encounter called “graduate education”. In fact it has sometimes been suggested that it takes at least a couple of years for one to overcome the disabilities of a graduate education and become a good teacher. At least some of the pedantic and scholastic plodding of this work may be laid, directly or indirectly, at their doorstep as well. But it is my personal appreciation and affection for these partners is dialogue which leads me to take the privilege of public confirmation of my gratitude to them.

This stimulating encounter with men, manuscripts and models over a four-year period was made possible by the United Presbyterian Church, USA, through their Presbyterian Graduate Fellowship program which allowed me to pursue with intensity alternative solutions to the problem of theological language that had surfaced in the midst of a pastoral ministry in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It is a love for and commitment to the healing ministry of a community of believers which motivated this research and for them I hope it will provide some insight. The Fund for Theological Education granted a Rockefeller Doctoral Fellowship in Religion which made it possible to carry on a fruitful dialogue about this topic not only in the United States but in Germany and Switzerland as well. Many people have been involved by choice and chance in a supportive or critical response to the ideas in this manuscript which often contributed
to modification or revision. Some of these people may prefer not to be mentioned; nevertheless, let me cite in addition to those to whom the book is dedicated, three who have been particularly significant: J.A. Martin, Gordon D. Kaufman, and a special friend and colleague at McCormick, Thomas D. Parker. The bulk of the typing was done speedily and cheerfully by Gladys M. Burkhart. A smaller but equally joyful contribution in typing and manuscript preparation was made by Caryl Estéves and Mary Lee Reed.

There is no conceivable way to adequately thank my wife and children for their contribution to this project. However, it seems inhumane and insensitive not to make a stab at it. Not only did Alice forbear my absence in body and mind, as a result of my affair with this paper mistress, but she abetted the liaison by editing, typing and proofreading. Far more significant, but indescribable, is their undaunted support and love for me. This perhaps contributed more than anything else to my personal wrestling with the question of responsible and intelligible talk about God. This is precisely because they mediated and shared with me God’s gracious presence to and for us. So Alice, Judith and Mellinda join me in a farewell embrace of Dulcinea.

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