THEORETICAL LINGUISTICS
AND THE PROBLEMS OF CHRISTOLOGY

1. INTRODUCTION: GOD AND HUMAN LANGUAGE

In the great scene of Exodus 3:14, Moses addressed a seemingly naive question to the voice which spoke to him from the burning bush: "What is your name?". And the answer which he received was at once God's refusal to be held or bound by the limits of human language,[1] and at the same time, God's assertion of the power of human language to speak of him, once those limits are accepted.

1.1 Theology and Reflection on the Phenomenon of Language

The story of Exodus 3:14, like so many others in the Old Testament and the New, is a call to reflect on the mystery of language, and often these stories seem to suggest that when our relationship to God, to the world, and to our own selves, is troubled and opaque, it is then that our reflection on language will be most necessary and most fruitful. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that systematic reflection on language may be our most valuable resource in dealing with problems of theological understanding in a very specific area—that which is marked by the impasses, the blind alleys, of traditional christology. And it is also the purpose of this paper to suggest just a few of the ways in which such reflection can be fruitful for christology.

1.2 The Aspects of Language This Paper Will Deal With

Even a survey of recent linguistic studies which have a bearing on theological language, and especially on christology, would obviously be the work of a book and not an essay.[2] But rather than offering a survey, I would like to do three things which I think are important for systematic christology. First, I would like to indicate those insights which form part of modern reflection on language (whether in works by writers in the field of linguistics, or of rhetorical analysis, or of theology itself) and which are of particular importance for christology. Second: I would like to indicate the impasses of traditional christology, and to suggest that they are, to a great degree, rooted in an inadequate (and usually unarticulated) under-

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[1]It was not, of course, either a simple refusal, or the act of confronting Moses with the impenetrable mystery of the God who is "pure act"—a mystery which, presumably could have served only to mortify his mind. The words "I will be who I will be" or, better, "I will be active on your behalf on my own terms and in ever-new ways," are a statement of both the limits *and* the power of human speech.

[2]One work which has never lost its value is Gerhard Ebeling's *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

standing of language. Third and last: I would like to suggest some ways of dealing with the chronic problems of christological language—problems which date back to the period of the great christological councils from the fourth to the seventh centuries and which have not been resolved to the present day.

2. FIVE INSIGHTS OF MODERN LINGUISTIC STUDY WHICH ARE OF GREAT IMPORTANCE FOR CHRISTOLOGY[3]

2.1 First: Removing a Basic Confusion about "Meaning"

"Meaning" is an intention, a unifying and organizing *act*,[4] and not a hypostatized "thing"[5] or a subsisting Platonic form, lurking somewhere between heaven and earth, and waiting to be discovered (or perhaps *already* discovered in one or another formula of conciliar theology and destined to remain in unchanged perfection through eternity).[6] Meaning is the act of one who speaks; it is the act of one who gives answers to questions which themselves have meaning. The meaning of Jesus is not something which can be distilled from his words and his life and which will then remain immutable throughout the ages. The meaning of Jesus is what Jesus and his words *mean;* but he and his words will have meaning only for those who mean something by the questions which they ask about him. It is precisely this fact—that meaning is an act—which accounts for the fact that both the principle of correlation[7] and existential interpretation[8] are essential to chris-

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[3]Many of the insights which seem rooted in modern linguistic studies can also be found in the works of the early scholastics, so that we may speak of their *rediscovery* today. However, the "linguistic turn" in christology brings something new: a linking of systematic coherence, on the one hand, with an awareness of the historically contingent aspect of every theological system, on the other.

[4]The often quite naive positivism (or behaviorism) of earlier studies, such as C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning*, 8th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946) has yielded to the frank recognition of intentional or mental reality—an important work of rehabilitation for which Noam Chomsky deserves much credit.

[5]See J. Ladrière, "Le Discours Théologique et le Symbole," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 49 (1975) 118.

[6]The point here is not to criticize conciliar formulas as such. In their day, they were not only inevitable but necessary. Problems occur when, in the flush of anti-Modernist zeal (either the original, 1907 version, or that of 1950, or of any of the inevitable later reincarnations of the same mistake), they are accorded the status of eternal truths which transcend time and history. On the question of the necessity and the inevitability of such formulas, see Dwyer, *Son of Man and Son of God: A New Language for Faith* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 95-98.

[7]The terminology is that of Paul Tillich, but the idea has been a constant in serious theological reflection. It is simply the insight that the *substance* of every valid theological assertion is determined by the original proclamation (what Tillich called "the eternal message"), but that its *form* is determined by the language in which the questions, the problems, the needs, and the anxieties of the day are formulated.

[8]As Bultmann understood it, the term is certainly close to the principle of correlation; it means simply that our statements about Jesus Christ are irrelevant unless they address the contemporary predicament of existence, unless they answer the question of how we can achieve human authenticity in the face of the threats posed by contemporary culture and by our perennial "unfaith."

tology. They are essential simply because Jesus is the saving word of God, addressed to those in the human predicament which is always changed and colored by the vicissitudes of history.

2.2 Second: The Role of the Speech Community

Meaning is the unifying and organizing act of a speaker who exercises this function *precisely as a member of a speech community or "language group,"* and meaning will therefore reflect the concerns of this community. As such, meaning is conditioned sociologically, anthropologically, and above all, historically.[9] Because meaning is historically conditioned, it is accessible only to those who are willing to enter into the world of the speech community in question, and, once there, to distinguish what is intended from the imagery used to communicate it.[10] (This emphatically does not imply that the imagery should be discarded or eliminated, although this was the way many people misunderstood Bultmann's program of demythologization.) This is a key insight, because it underlines the historically conditioned character of three kinds of language which are particularly important for theology: scriptural language, speculative language, and conciliar language.[11] Linguistic study has made it evident that under cover of what is apparently only one language, quite different languages may be spoken, and that these languages both reflect and impose different ways of seeing the world, and of thinking about it. And linguistic study should prompt us to see that the questions raised in one of these languages cannot be answered in the words of another. It is this insight which has put an end to naive scriptural realism and which *may be able* to put an end to "naive dogmatic realism"—that is, the notion that faith-knowledge is the purely passive reception of meanings which are already, in every respect, determined (by God in scripture, and by churchmen in magisterial statements), and that such determination in dogmatic formulas is permanently valid.

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[9]For a charming and admirably clear presentation of the role of the interests of the speech community, S. I. Hayakawa's story of the little animal with the many names has never been equalled. See his *Language in Thought and Action* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949) 207-17.

[10]This is precisely what historical-critical method is really about, and this is why the rigorous application of the method implies a program of demythologization. An interesting way of proposing such a program is to distinguish two senses of the word "language." "Language" in the ordinary sense refers to the vocabulary and grammar of one's own or of a foreign tongue. Unless one knows the language in question or enjoys the services of an interpreter, texts written in such a language remain a mystery. "Language" in a broad or metaphorical sense refers to all of the resources of thought and expression which people have at their disposal because of the day and age in which they live, and because of the entire past which is constitutive of that present moment. Unless one can learn the language in this broad sense, texts written in it (even when translated into English) remain incomprehensible.

[11]The historical conditioning of language is a consequence of the fact that words are constantly being applied to new things and situations which change their meaning. Words come to us from the past and they invite us to see similarities between the new and the old; but they are loath to relinquish their past associations, and sometimes the burdens they carry are so great that they distort both thought and the reality with which it claims to deal.

2.3 Third: The Situation and Attitude
of the Speaker Play an Essential Role
in Determining the Meaning of a Statement

These comments on the nature of meaning and on the historicity of language lead to an important insight: the meaning of a given act of speaking is not limited to its propositional content. The meaning of an utterance depends on the *situation* in which language is being used. In this situation, the attitude and intent which the speaker has toward the propositional content of his statements is an essential component of meaning, and there are two consequences of this. First, christological language is meaningless unless it is the conscious expression of the willingness to let God define himself in Jesus Christ. Christology, like all theology, is the continuation and the prolongation of faith itself, and of the word of proclamation which calls for faith. The second consequence flows from the first: the person who calls for faith (as Jesus evidently and obviously does in the New Testament) is *involved* in his summoning word, and is so truly present in the word which he speaks that such a word is an extension and prolongation of his very self.

2.4 Fourth: All Language is Symbolic and Metaphorical

Speech is essentially a symbol-making and symbol-using activity. Speech arose to deal with objects, in a practical way, but, in time, other concerns (ethical, religious, and aesthetic) availed themselves of speech; and at that moment, the nature of speech changed, and words acquired the power to speak of realities which transcend and underlie experience.[12] It is this symbolic character of speech which creates the possibility of theological discourse, and it is in the analysis of this symbolic character of speech that we discover the nature, the possibilities, and the limits of theological discourse. It is this facet of language which makes it possible to talk of the real presence of Jesus in his word.

2.5 Fifth: The Structure of Conceptual Thought
Resembles the Structure of Symbolic Thought

Conceptual thought and symbolic language function in similar ways.[13] Theological concepts point toward an area which is not directly accessible to human experience, and they project onto this area structures which they possess in their area of primary meaning. Like symbols, concepts are dynamic: they are sketches, proposals, "vectors" ("thought on the move in a certain direction"). It is this insight which holds in check the "arrogance" of speculative thought,[14] as well as

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[12]This is something of an oversimplification. I believe that there is a concern for the real *as real,* and an ability to assess and evaluate the real, which is implied in the most pragmatic uses of language and was already present in the most humble origins of human speech.

[13]In this connection, recall the title of the last chapter of Rahner's *Spirit in the Word:* "The possibility of a metaphysics based on the imagination."

[14]That is, its tendency to claim ultimacy for its creations. This theme is a favorite of Paul Tillich, and it appears in all three volumes of his *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963).

its reductionist tendencies.[15] Concepts share in the power of the symbol, but they do not escape entirely from the limitations of the symbol.

3. THE BLIND ALLEYS OF TRADITIONAL CHRISTOLOGY

I believe that these insights which emerge from modern reflection on language can point the way out of the three blind alleys of traditional christology—the blind alley of the divided Jesus, the blind alley of the dehumanized Christ, and the blind alley of the competitive God.

3.1 The "Divided" Jesus

Ever since Chalcedon, traditional christology has had difficulty avoiding the danger of making Jesus into a divine being, who contrived to look quite human, but whose humanity was only a sham and a facade. Chalcedon's formula, "true God and true man," had, in its own frame of reference, the merit of stating the *problem* of christology, but it was mistaken for a solution. And when it was, this formula moved, with an inner necessity of its own, in the direction of a divided Jesus Christ[16]—a strangely unreal being, which joined a divine nature, equipped with its own personal center, to a human nature which had no real autonomy or freedom.[17] And this leads us to the second blind alley of traditional christology.

3.2 The Dehumanized Jesus

The second problem of traditional christology[18] is that of the depersonalized (and therefore dehumanized) Jesus—the Jesus who is a "divine person" and not a human person, and for precisely this reason, *in the only sense in which we can understand the term "human person" today, not a human being.*[19]

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[15]See J.-P. Sonnet, S.J., "Les Langages de la Foi," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 108 (1986) 410, where the author speaks of "conceptual discourse, threatened by absorption in the speculative Logos."

[16]Here we encounter a significant factor in the rise of modern atheism. When Jesus is divided, God (as the New Testament understands the word) becomes inaccessible. If Jesus is stripped of his human reality, then human beings are deprived of the only completely safe approach to the mystery of God. As a result, the faceless God of philosophy will replace the God who is the father of Jesus Christ. We ought to ask if precisely this is not what has been happening since early modern times. Perhaps the "God" who is rejected by the majority of men and women today is not the real God at all, but a powerless substitute, who appears as often as we turn aside from the God who shows his human face in Jesus and turn toward a philosophical construction which is utterly alien to the New Testament. For a brief discussion of this question, see Dwyer, *Son of Man and Son of God,* 144, and the footnote referred to at that point.

[17]The history of attempts to tamper with the Chalcedonian Settlement during the two hundred years that followed the Council, show that the motive was not *solely* that of placating the crypto-monophysites in Alexandria. Under cover of the phrases "true man," and "unmixed . . . ," the old problem of finding something for the humanity of Jesus "to do" lingered on. For some examples of the effects of this on speculative christology, see Dwyer, *Son of Man and Son of God,* 142-54.

[18]Here a brief comment on the term "traditional christology" is called for. The term is

3.3 The "Competing God"

The impasses of traditional christology (and, I suspect, all of the *aporiai*—the great unresolved, and unresolvable, paradoxes—of all theology) are rooted in a view of God and of human beings which sees their relationship as *competitive;* and this is the third, most fundamental problem of traditional christology. Conciliar thought (and the speculative theology dependent on it) asserted divinity and humanity of Jesus, but then assigned all that was weak and vulnerable about him to his human "nature," while assigning his pre-existence, his foreknowledge, and his miraculous power to a divine "nature" which was complete and perfect in eternity before the world began. Such a Jesus necessarily becomes "more divine"[20] if we make him less human, and in a theology driven by the conviction that "the divinity of Christ" is the very substance of Christian faith, Jesus is effectively dehumanized, although few will be aware of this, because verbal orthodoxy is preserved by ritual repetition of the formula "true God and true man."[21]

This tendency of traditional christology to see the relationship of God and man in Jesus in an essentially competitive light was extended, in other parts of theology, to the whole world. There it has led to a peculiar "half-heartedness" in the commitment of the Christian to the world, which will be hard to resolve in practice precisely because the theory on which it is based is a sly way of circumventing the offer and the claim of the real God.[22]

3.4 Where We Experience the Impasses of Traditional Christology

It is obvious that we experience these problems of traditional christology in the domain of speculative thought itself—to put it simply, in so far as they are *impasses*, blind alleys, they originated there and have found there a fertile field in which to flower. But we experience the pain and the frustration of these impasses

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used here to refer to both Chalcedonian christology, from the year of the Council of Chalcedon up to the end of the first third of this century, and "Neo-Chalcedonian" christology which took many different forms from the mid-thirties on. This Neo-Chalcedonian christology expended a great deal of energy in trying to find room for human spontaneity in a Jesus effectively stripped of his humanity *by the translation of Chalcedon's formulas into modern languages whose frames of reference were totally incommensurable with those of the Council.*

[19]Dwyer, *Son of Man and Son of God,* 83-91.

[20]"Divine" but not divine! Most discussions about the divinity of Jesus start with the assumption that we know what it means to be "divine"—an assumption which is irreconcilable with the whole public ministry of Jesus, as we find it in Mark.

[21]The effects of this essentially competitive christology in all areas of dogma and faith have been destructive in the extreme. It is no wonder that Paul's theology of the cross did not survive the transposition of his gospel into the alien key of Greek philosophical speculation. But there are many other examples: human freedom and divine omnipotence have been pitted against each other in ways which either limited God's lordship over the world or made a mockery of the mystery of freedom, and this gave us the great, but theologically unfruitful *tours de force* of Bañez and Molina, in the golden age of Jesuit-Dominican infighting.

[22]See in this connection, Merleau-Ponty's "Faith and Good Faith," in *Sense and Nonsense*, Part III, chapter 12, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 172-81.

throughout our lives as Christians. We experience them as we question our honesty and authenticity in making liturgical and credal statements which use a language which we no longer understand. We experience them in preaching and in personal faith—in the crisis of our dissatisfaction with the dehumanized and depersonalized Jesus, and with our inability to speak of him in words of power. Finally, both as Christians and as theologians, we experience them in the crisis of soteriology: what in the name of heaven (quite literally!) can the man from Galilee possibly have to say to us today as we experience our powerlessness in the face of forces which threaten us with annihilation, but which seem intractable and utterly beyond our control?

4. THE NATURE AND THE CAUSES
OF THE IMPASSES OF TRADITIONAL CHRISTOLOGY

4.1 The Problem of the Sources of Christological Reflection

The impasses, the blind alleys of traditional christology exist principally because the dogmas defined in the early christological councils came to be treated as the primary *sources,* first of christological reflection, and then of preaching and catechetics. In fact, the central methodological problem of all christology after Chalcedon lies precisely in the word ''after''; christology has never really faced this question: What is the claim, in theory and in practice, of Chalcedon and the other councils, on theological discourse, proclamation, and prayer? However, confusion about the sources of faith, and therefore of theological understanding, proclamation, and prayer, is dangerous in the extreme—first and most evidently because it calls into question the absolute primacy of the New Testament as a source of Christian faith and life. But there is another danger, too, related but hidden; it is the danger that conceptual schemata (ways of using and linking abstract concepts into a coherent system) quite imperceptibly become independent of the New Testament. They go their own way, generate their own problems and pseudo-problems, and eventually lead to the notion that faith is the act of assenting to a series of propositions which are derived from conciliar theology and have only the most tenuous relationship to the New Testament.[23]

4.2 The Blind Alleys of Traditional Christology
Are the Consequence of Four Basic Confusions
in Christological Language

Confusion about the status of the christological materials of the tradition has appeared in many forms, all of which have had negative effects on speculative and conciliar christology.

4.2.1 Confusion about the Purpose and Status
of Conciliar Statements

Not only were statements of councils used as primary sources, but they were used in a way which suggested that they transcended time and history, that they were independent of the situations in which they arose and of the conceptual struc-

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[23]The classic evidence of this attitude was the use of scriptural ''proof texts'' in the theses of the dogmatic theology manuals which were used in the seminaries up to the time of the Second Vatican Council.

tures in which they were formulated. This led to a type of speculative christology which occupied a position at two removes from the original proclamation, with the result that the discussion of many terms, such as "kenosis," "incarnation," "hypostatic union," "the consciousness of Christ" has dealt *not* with questions raised by the proclamation, but *with questions raised by the terms themselves.*[24]

Conciliar statements were designed specifically to reject distortions of the faith or outright heresies but they were quickly torn from the polemic context in which they had come into being, the only context in which they would remain intelligible, and they masqueraded as professions of faith, and have continued to do this up to the present day. *They became confused with the proclamation itself, and it was this which led, quite innocently, to their usurping the place of scripture.* Christology was locked into endless discussions about the two-natures-theory, which made it virtually impossible to raise questions about the meaning of Jesus in the real world of the present; and theologians lost sight of the fact that the dogmas of one age cannot remain in dialogue with the problems of another.

4.2.2 The Confusion of the Languages of Symbol and History in Scripture

It is obvious today that much of the miracle tradition of the Gospels must be understood symbolically and not historically, but when these miracles were historicized—that is, when their symbolic character was ignored—the man from Nazareth was miscast, either as the "wonder-worker" or as the "divine man," and therefore misunderstood in terms of models derived either from hellenistic Judaism or from paganism. And this historicizing of symbolic scriptural material continued, in much Catholic theology, until well into the twentieth century. This problem was particularly acute because of the role played by John's Gospel in traditional christology: this most symbolic of Gospels was "interpreted" literally, and the conciliar Jesus Christ owes more to this source than to any other.

4.2.3 Confusion Caused by Inadequate Understanding of the Nature of Predication

Serious problems were created for speculative christology by oversimplified assertions of identity, which spring from confusion about the nature of predication itself—that is, about the meaning of the word "is" in statements such as "Jesus is Lord," "Jesus is Messiah," "Jesus is Son of God." In the New Testament it is the *subject,* Jesus, who gives meaning to each of these predicates: it is Jesus who defines them and purifies them. And it is precisely the religious, faith character of the New Testament's statements about Jesus which is responsible for the fact that the predicates used of him are *sketches* and *proposals* rather than concepts which would actually succeed in holding him. Words from either secular or religious language do not tell us much about him; rather he tells us much about them, when they are used of him. Words and phrases like "Messiah," "King,"

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[24]Many of these terms were involved in a process of "positive feedback" with each other. For some examples, see Dwyer, *Son of Man and Son of God,* 4.71, 137-40, and 147-54.

"Lord," "Son of God" are redefined by what Jesus says and does.[25] Jesus did not claim the title "God"; rather, he redefined the word "God." And it was precisely the use of the word "God" as a predicate to speak of Jesus, implicitly at Nicaea and explicitly at Chalcedon, which led to the loss of the sense of the priority of Jesus, as subject, over any and all of the predicates applied to him, *including the predicate "God."*[26] This "titling" of Jesus has had serious implications for soteriology up to the present day, because it has isolated this branch of christology from the contemporary predicament of existence—the only vantage point from which we can seek salvation and in which it can be given to us.

4.2.4 The Confusion Caused by Uncritical Translations of Dogmatic Formulas into Other Languages

In general, the translations of conciliar statements from Greek or Latin into the modern languages were uncritical, in the sense that they did not take account of the essentially historical character of language, and neglected to note the role of language *as a whole* in determining the meaning of individual words.

In the process of translation, dogmatic formulas acquired meanings which were not intended (or even known) by those who originally framed them, because the terms used in translation often reflect literary, philosophical, and cultural traditions which came into existence over a thousand years after the dogmatic formulas first became normative.[27] This process, in which fundamentally inaccurate translations of dogmatic formulas are accepted as normative, has been a major factor in making the problems of traditional christology so intractable up to the present day.[28]

5. FIRST STEPS IN DEVELOPING A CRITIQUE OF CHRISTOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

For all of the reasons given in the preceding section, it seems clear that we need a theory of theological language, and particularly a theory of the language used in christology. Such a theory has to begin with a critique of the sources and of the way we use them.

5.1 Historical-Critical Method and the Conciliar Documents

The process of developing a critique of speculative language has to begin with a commitment to using the historical-critical approach on theological discourse of the past and on the *conciliar documents* themselves—that is, we have to recognize

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[25]See Sonnet, "Les Langages de la Foi," 409.

[26]The "titling" of Jesus at Nicaea and Chalcedon was a radical departure from New Testament usage, but nobody noticed this, precisely because of the shift in meaning which the word "God" had undergone. See Dwyer, *Son of Man and Son of God,* 87-98.

[27]Recall, in this respect, the meaning of "hypostaseis" which the Cappadocian fathers formulated in the mid fourth century: "tropoi tes hyparxeos"—"ways of being" or "ways of possessing existence"—and reflect, too, on Augustine's reserve in using the Latin word "persona" to express the "threefoldness" of God.

[28]The translation of "hypostasis" into the Latin "persona" and then into the modern "person" (and its equivalents in other languages) was the most dangerous step of all. For an indication of some of the problems, see Dwyer, *Son of Man and Son of God,* 59-66.

the essential *historicity* of all theological language. The conciliar statements and their speculative components make sense only in terms of the world in which they arose. We have come to see that this is true of scripture, but we have been slow to apply the same approach to christology—although it does seem odd to grant conciliar documents an exemption from historical-critical examination, which we (quite rightly!) do not offer to scripture.

5.2 Eliminating the Confusion between Conciliar Statements and Credal-Liturgical Statements

The *technical* character of conciliar statements is masked when they are made into professions of faith and then used in liturgy (as the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon have been). This practice often leads, in the name of *verbal* orthodoxy, to distortions of the faith and to heresies which are present in hidden form: tritheism (an apparent belief in the Trinity which really thinks of three distinct personal consciousnesses in God), and docetism (an apparent belief in the incarnation which really thinks of Jesus as a divine being masquerading in human garb). In this connection, note that the restatement of New Testament language which is *possibly* needed for statements of dogma is not identical with that other kind of restatement which is needed for preaching and for personal faith. Neither is it equipped to serve as a source of speculative christology. Theological discourse draws its substance from the proclamation, and not from previous theological discourse. Primacy belongs to the New Testament, and the primacy of the New Testament is based on the fact that it is a "word of faith"—that is, the expression, immediate or derived, of the first response to the event, Jesus Christ. And it was a response which was an extension and a prolongation of the event to which it responded, *and therefore a part of that event itself.*

6. SYSTEMATIC REFLECTION ON THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE AS THE WAY OF RESOLVING THE CRISIS OF CHRISTOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

6.1 The Many Functions of Language

Language functions in many different ways and it operates on many levels. Some of these levels of language lie near the surface, and could be called "technical-manipulative," either literally or figuratively. This kind of language is used as a means of producing an objectively verifiable effect, and it makes little difference whether the effect is a well-designed dog house or an elegant and coherent philosophical system. Human language probably developed, in hunting or tool-making situations, precisely in order to produce such effects (a successful hunt, a well-crafted tool).

Other levels of language lie a bit deeper, and it is there that we reflect on the values of life and on the conditions of human existence. Much serious reflection in psychology and sociology, as well as in philosophy and theology, occurs at this level of language, and if the reflection is undertaken in a spirit of seriousness and responsibility, it can help us see more clearly and act more truthfully.

But other levels of language are far deeper; so deep that they bring us near to the center of our personal selves. There, language is the medium of personal en-

counter, the bearer of personal presence: the other is addressed as a person, and this word of address is explicitly or implicitly a word of acceptance. Such a word may take the *form* of a statement, a question, or a demand; it can be a request or a prayer; it can be an explicit call to have faith in another, or it can be the statement of such faith. But whatever form it takes, it is understood as an act of acceptance, and it creates a domain of shared existence. The fact that we are confronted, in a given act of speech, with this far deeper kind of language, is sometimes stated openly, but more often it is implicit in some aspect of the speech situation which communicates the engagement of the speaker in what he says. In this way, statements with identical propositional content may exercise very different functions, have very different meanings, and lie at very different depths. And it is at the deepest level of all that we find the christological material of the New Testament.

Frequently it is narrative which is the clarifying context, that is, the context which makes clear that the word in question *is* a personal word of acceptance. In such a narrative the speaker tells "his/her story" or "our story" or (in religious terms) "God's story," and is implicitly saying: "I will trust you with my story and I ask you to trust me with your story; from now on, our stories are linked and our paths are joined." And this is very much the structure of the christological material of the New Testament; narrative envelops the word of acceptance—a point of prime importance for narrative theology. It is in accepting the other's "story" (specifically the story of Jesus) as determinative of my life, my existence (and this is what "faith" means!), that I respond to his word of acceptance. It is because the New Testament addresses us with this kind of word that speculative christology is irreducible to its conceptual content. The New Testament is never simply the source from which dogma can be cumulatively derived by the work of successive theological generations. It is rather the indispensable word of address, which summons us to accept the story of Jesus and of what he did, as *our* story. It is this kind of reflection on the different levels of language which restores scripture to its rightful place of primacy *because it confronts us with the reality of Jesus, personally present in his word.* Reflection on this fact leads us to examine the symbolic character of language.

6.2 Language as the Symbol of the Self

Although all language is symbolic in the trivial sense (words are symbols of the things for which they stand), at its deepest level, language is symbolic in a particular and essential sense: language is the symbol of the speaker, the person. Language exhibits the fundamental structure of the symbol: some visible, tangible, audible thing or action makes present to us something which cannot be seen. In fact, language is symbolic in the deepest sense possible, for it is in our words that we turn to each other with the offer of self, and it is in words that we respond to this offer. Our words have this power because they are extensions and prolongations of our very selves. Like all real symbols,[29] they are share in reality of that which they symbolize, and they are not fully distinct from it.[30]

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[29] For the character of the "real" symbol, Karl Rahner's essay on the nature of the symbol is excellent. See his *Theological Investigations* 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 221-52.

[30] For the fact that the word is not separate from the reality to which it refers, see Ladrière, "Le Discours Théologique et le Symbole," 117.

The fact that the words of human language can be the bearers and mediators of personal presence confronts us with an interesting possibility: that we might, some day, hear words which bring us into the presence of God. However, there is no "divine language," unknown to man, which God alone could speak; language is possible only in a speech community, and we can speak of God's word only when it is, at one and the same time, a word of human speech, *and* a word which transcends the apparent powers of human speech while fulfilling its hidden dynamisms. Such words are events in which God engages himself and they are bearers and carriers of the deepest offer which can be made to the human being. They are the words of unconditional acceptance which empower full attainment of selfhood and freedom in those who hearken to them. We can never assert that God *will* speak such words, but we can ask whether God has spoken, and we can ask what the criteria of such an event might be. The answer can be phrased in many ways, but all would seem to include the notion that, when human language, in an act of self-transcendence, becomes the language of God, it is both the sign and the cause of a freedom and a peace which the world cannot give. And yet, these words have these functions precisely in their worldly character, their tangibility, their "audibility." They are the words of God *in* the words of men, in the words of human language.

These are the words which Jesus speaks, but they are even more: the speaking of such words is his *raison d'être*. His words are an offer of himself and they empower a response. In his words he brings his hearers into the presence of God; and his mystery is that of one who has the power to speak that kind of word. It is in and through Jesus that God enters the world of human speech and that human speech transcends itself to become the word of God. Jesus' word is the sacrament, the effective sign of the presence of God in our world and with us, and theological reflection on the word which he speaks is the key to understanding his mysterious relationship to God.

It is reflection on such a word which transcends the never-quite-bridged gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, because his word goes on after his death *as his word,* as the word of one who lives. The resurrection is accessible to us, not directly as an historical event, but as a *present* event. Faith in the resurrection or better, faith in the resurrected Lord, is based on our present experience of him, mediated through the testimony, the language, of his earliest followers. However, it is the real presence of Jesus in their language which is the most cogent evidence for the unity of Jesus of history and the Christ of faith; we do not depend on ancient witnesses for either certifying or proving the fact of the resurrection, however much we may need them for *interpreting* the meaning of those events.[31]

6.2.1 Reinterpreting the Logos-Christology

This suggests an approach to the Logos terminology of the tradition, from the Johannine prologue on, which would have the following elements: The Logos would be seen, not as a pre-existent second divine person (in the *modern* sense of

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[31]See Albert Schweizer's comment on the role of history in Christian faith, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan 1962) 399.

this latter word), but rather as the essentially revelatory character of God's life, as that aspect of God's life which makes his self-revelation possible. Revelation was no an afterthought: God's commitment to be with us and for us is not distinct from his being in and for himself. God is the one who decided, in eternity, not to be alone, and this eternal decision *is* the Logos-character of the divine existence.

It is this aspect of God's life which finds its perfect expression and embodiment in a human life and in a human person, and which does so *precisely in this humanity and in the integrity of this human personality*. This life and this person are the concrete expression of God's being for the world. They are not the result of the insertion into creation of a pre-existent divine "person." If this is seen clearly, it also marks the end of the "competing God" who is largely the product of Greek philosophical reflection. The real God is far too involved, far too engaged in history, for a theology so deeply indebted to Plato. But precisely because of the involvement of the real God in time and space, he will never be one who is limited or threatened by genuine human autonomy and freedom; rather, he will be present in them and revealed by them.

6.3 The Creative Character of Language

This leads to the third point (which is of profound importance for understanding the act of faith): at its deepest level, our use of words, our act of speaking, is never an event in which a fully determined knower confronts a fully determined object and then proceeds to register its presence. In the act of speech, both the speaker and the world are changed. In the act of speech, the object is welcomed[32] into the human world and ceases to be merely an object. And at the same time, the speaker comes into conscious possession of himself and his world by distinguishing himself from the world—a necessary condition if he is to turn to it with words of welcome. Language is the event in which both the speaker and the world come out of the darkness into the light. For the speaker, it is the expression of intelligence and freedom; for the world, it is the act of participating in the human sphere of presence to self and of self-creativity.[33]

Reflection on this aspect of language will lead us to question the usefulness of the objectifying language of so much christological speculation, and will force us to esteem more highly the language of faith. And what is true of much speculative christology is true of dogmatic formulas as well. The language of the dogmatic formula is not interpersonal but objectifying; its intent is not confessional but polemic (e.g., its frequent association with anathemas!). Reflection on this fact will accomplish two things: it will prevent conciliar formulas from being mistaken for

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[32]This "welcoming" has many different aspects, and we might point to one which is of particular interest for speculative theology: the welcoming of the religious symbol (or of religious symbolic language) into the world of conceptual systematization.

[33]It is important to note that in the text the word "freedom" is being used in its biblical sense: it is not the mechanical unpredictability of the random or pseudo-random number generator, not mere arbitrariness, but rather it is the power to create the self, in virtue of a "vision" of what may come to be—a vision which one possesses only as drive and not yet as object—and which one is called to concretize in the raw material offered by the world and society.

primary sources of speculative christology, and at the same time, it will free us from the hidden danger of "translation dogmas"—formulas which have been translated into new languages, without taking account of hidden changes in meaning induced by new linguistic contexts.[34]

6.4 The Source of the Power of Language

This brings us to the fourth point, in which we note that language has the power to bring both the world and the self into the light, precisely because language is essentially preoccupied with reality, with the real.[35] This claim to objectivity and truth[36] (for that is what preoccupation with the real means), lurks in the most prosaic use of language, and it is this "embedded" claim, which is both the promise of what language can achieve,[37] and the call which summons language to go beyond the prosaic to the poetic, beyond the finite to the threshold of infinity (that is, the place from which the finite is recognized *as finite*), and which finally summons language to cross that threshold, not in virtue of its own immanent powers, but in virtue of a call which it can answer in the act of faith—an act whose earliest formulation is "Jesus is the Messiah" or "Jesus is the Lord" or "Jesus is the word made flesh." These acts of faith are not precisely acts of awarding titles to Jesus; rather, they are acts in which the quest of language to lead us to the fullness of life comes into a successful end, and in which Jesus himself becomes the fulfillment and the critique of our hopes and dreams.

It is because of this relationship of language to the infinite that language can be fulfilled in faith, and that faith is the event in which language itself *fully comes to be*. This is extremely important for christology. It is because of this "hidden infinity" within language that speculative christology is not simply a recasting, a rephrasing, a "rehashing" of the New Testament message, but is rather the creative offer to New Testament language of a "place" in which its intentions can be more evident and can reach fulfillment.

Language, of course, can abdicate its mission and lose its power and become merely "representational," (one part of the world which replicates another part, but is incapable of asking about the world as a whole, about its origin and its destiny). But the language is called to be more than this, and its task is not to produce a replica of part of the world, but rather to be an act of creative engagement of the speaker on behalf of the world, in order to transform it and to be transformed in the process. The language of faith is such an act of creative engagement, and if christology is a prolongation of such language, then it will lead to real understanding, and it will make it possible for us to speak, in words of power, about what God has done in Jesus Christ.

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[34]For more on the problematic of "person," see Dwyer, *Son of Man and Son of God*, 83-91.

[35]This is indicated by the dyadic structure of reference and predication, with its implicit aim of providing new information which is useful because *true*.

[36]This is a claim which is found in a peculiary intense form in religious language; cf. Ladrière, "Le Discours Théologique," 125.

[37]There is a drive, an *élan*, within language itself, which pushes it beyond what its conceptual resources have achieved at any given moment. See Sonnet, "Les Langages de la Foi," 415.

6.5 Is Reflection on the Self-Transcendence of Language
Particularly Appropriate for Christology?

It is, for three reasons. First, as we have noted, faith, in the biblical sense, is not well understood as "intellectual assent to truths divinely revealed. . . . " Faith is *essentially* related to God's self-manifestation in history, and to the word which identifies the event as God's act. It is the willingness to let God manifest himself in the concreteness of the world, and ultimately in the concreteness of a human life—the life of Jesus of Nazareth, *as that life is interpreted in Jesus' word and in the word of his followers about him.* As the response to God's word and call, the language of faith transcends the world, while remaining in it.

Second, because such faith is the act of allowing God to be in the world on his own terms, it makes it possible to see Jesus, in his human concreteness, as the climactic fulfillment of God's insistence on self-definition in history, which is the theme of Ex 3:14. This understanding of faith clarifies the relationship of faith to intelligence: intelligence has a fundamental "premonition" which is actualized in faith, and therefore faith is the fulfillment of intelligence. Because faith is the fulfillment of intelligence, it demands and empowers the same critical response to reality as does intelligence.[38]

Third, the crisis of christology is a crisis of *language,* not simply in the sense that we have not yet developed an adequate terminology to speak of Jesus, but in a far deeper sense. Language (even and especially speculative language) which has lost the sense of its symbolic character, of its power and its capacity for self-transcendence, and has become merely the act in which the world and everything in it (including God) is registered as an objective fact, will be of no use for christological discourse.

6.5.1 The Creative Power of Jesus' Word

In §6.3 and §6.4 we spoke of the creative power of language and of the source of that power. Reflection on this leads us inevitably to ask about the creative, healing, saving power of Jesus' word, and it leads us to ask whether, when we are faced with the typical anxieties of our age, we can really experience Jesus' word as healing and saving. That is, such reflection opens the question of soteriology in a new key, and implicitly suggests that problems in this area may be traced to failures in the way we speak about Jesus and in the way we strive to hearken to his word. Even to outline an answer is obviously beyond the scope of this paper (and, I suspect, beyond the scope of responsible christology today), but we can indicate the direction in which further thought might proceed, by asking two questions: first, what are the specific problems of life today which lead us to seek healing and salvation? And second: is our failure to experience this healing and salvation rooted in the crisis of christological language?

Today we experience the meaninglessness of life in many ways and on many levels. Many of the tasks we face are tiresome and boring; and at times, life seems to be an endless round of unfulfilling work and of equally unfulfilling "recrea-

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[38]It is for precisely this reason that *faith* demands the application of historical-critical method to scripture and to the conciliar documents.

tion.'' We face the threat of global annihilation—a threat which can become real in a number of different ways, either in the relatively swift form of nuclear destruction, or in the gradual annihilation consequent on our destruction of the natural world, the integrity of which is so necessary a condition for human identity. It seems evident that the specter of overpopulation will shadow all of the remaining days of our race on earth, and we seem unable to cope with the fear of the human and ecological disasters which will inevitably follow in its wake. In the face of this experience, will we be able to speak of Jesus Christ as savior? Can reflection on language provide us with a way of speaking of him as savior today?

I believe that the answer to both questions can be found in reflection on the way we use language and on our troubled relation to language. It is not at all strange that this should be the case, because it is in the way we speak and in the content of our speech that we experience and accept our *responsi*bility for the world, our task of being *answer*able to and for the world. Our reflection will raise questions more often than it will give satisfying answers,[39] but I believe that there are five points worth keeping in mind as we try to discern the direction in which our thought should proceed.

First: the world and nature are not brute facts which confront us, and which would be, at the deepest level unconnected with our human destiny. The world calls for a response and we are responsible for it. We are called to be spokes(wo)men for the world.

Second: we are alienated from the world. We are born in this state of alienation, and we ratify this alienation by treating the world solely as an object to be mastered. We do not know the world in the sense of having a deep sympathy and love for it, but we seek only technical-manipulative knowledge, which will enable us to exploit the world for our own questionable purposes. We have separated art from science, and we have separated both from prayer and contemplation. We produce models and replicas of the world inside our heads so that we can deal with it, and this is the surest evidence that we no longer *know* the world in the biblical sense and that we are no longer interested in acquiring such knowledge. For a long time we have been busily alienating the world from God, as surely as did our ancestors in ancient times, when they made the world divine.

Third: there is a cosmic dimension to salvation (something which was perceived by Paul, in his experience of Jesus as the one who freed us from the ''powers'').[40] If Jesus is truly savior, then he heals our alienation from the world and empowers us to be responsible once again for the world. In mythical terms, he overcomes the alienation which is spoken of in the story of creation and the fall; we have been exiled from Eden and alienated from our world, and, unaided, we do not have the power to return.

Fourth: Jesus is savior in so far as he empowers us to speak responsibly about the world, to be responsible for the world both in the way we speak and in the

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[39] Our reflection will do well to avoid hasty answers. There is real danger here of creating another trendy theological parody (''Jesus and Ecology'') reminiscent of some of the M.A. theses of the neo-thomistic period (''St. Thomas and the Boy Scouts'').

[40] This was also seen by the authors of Colossians and Ephesians; these documents relate Jesus Christ both to the beginning (creation) and to the end (fulfillment at the end of time).

content of our speech. Jesus does this by relativizing the destructive powers of the world and thereby giving us the freedom in which we can come to see that our task in respect to the world is to be mediators and not technicians, to be those who love the world and not those who exploit it.

Fifth: Jesus does this by being the one in whom God participates in the brokenness of the world and of human life. In him, God shares in this brokenness, and this is the act and event in which he accepts us, sustains us, supports us, and loves us without bound or limit. Because God, in Jesus, speaks the word of unconditional acceptance, he strikes at the insecurity which poisons our relationship to God, to ourselves, to other human beings, and to the world we share. To the degree to which we hear (hearken to) this word of unconditional acceptance, we will be able to speak a word of greeting and of welcome to the world, and our speech itself will be an act of creative engagement with the world.

6.6 The Language of Speculative Christology

This leads to the question of the role of speculative thought and of theological discourse in theology in general, and in christology in particular—a question so vast in scope that only some suggestions can be made here. The first three points will apply to theology in general, and the fourth will apply particularly to christology.

First: theological discourse is the act of putting intelligence, and the conceptual tools of which intelligence disposes, at the service of faith. It is not the attempt to link two sectors of life which have no intrinsic relationship to each other. Intelligence, and the discourse which is the expression of intelligence, are related to faith. Genuine faith is not the act of mortifying the mind; it is an act of understanding which seeks more of the same, and it finds in such understanding the expression of its own willingness to let God be the one he wants to be.[41] Faith welcomes and needs the conceptual tools which human language has fashioned, precisely because faith lays claim to all of life, and to intelligence in particular. And, of course, faith claims intelligence, not to destroy it but to perfect it.[42]

Second: When speculative language attempts to prolong and continue faith, it does so because the willingness to let God define himself on his own terms raises the question: "How *has* he defined himself?". Speculative theology makes use of concepts and of structured groups of concepts which it has developed to deal with what is deep in human life, with that which is hidden, with conditions which make knowledge and existence itself possible, but which cannot themselves be

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[41]On this whole question, see Johannes Beumer, *Glaubensverständnis*, (Würzburg, 1953). Speculative thought in theology is the acceptance of the challenge to take rational discourse up into the act of faith. When speculative discourse is successful, it is evidence that faith is precisely that to which rational discourse tends, of its own inner dynamism. Speculative thought in theology is the acceptance of the challenge to take rational discourse up into the act of faith.

[42]Conceptual knowledge is not *per se* objectifying and impersonal. A concept is an act of conscious presence to an intelligible structure which one has discovered. Conceptual knowledge in the field of speculative theology makes use of such structures (and "superstructures" or "structured fields") as areas on which to project the symbolic language of proclamation.

encountered objectively *within* experience.[43] In other words, it makes use of a system of thought (concepts and predicates), which has come into existence to deal with that which cannot be encountered objectively; but speculative theology then uses this system of thought to reach an entirely new area of meaning.[44]

Third: speculative language can offer the language of faith and proclamation a new place in which to expand. Its task is to draw new meaning out of the original religious language (the language of proclamation, the scriptural word),[45] and to produce constellations and structures on and in which the original symbolic, religious language can make manifest its hidden meaning and intent. In this way, it can bring to light new virtualities of meaning which were hidden in religious-confessional language. But it can do this only to the degree to which it recognizes the deep analogy between its own way of proceeding and that of symbolic religious language, and only to the degree to which it is willing to engage in a painful but liberating "exodus" from the world of objectifying philosophical discourse.[46] Speculative language does not simply repeat New Testament christology in new words; it is not just a transposition of biblical theology into philosophical terms.[47]

Fourth: when speculative language makes its "offer" to religious language, to the language of faith, it must recognize that the subject of religious language has an energy which empowers it to modify the whole conceptual system and to draw it away from the area with which it was created to deal.[48] The truth of speculative thought consists in its faithfulness to these inner tendencies and virtualities of the language of faith. In every sense, the subject of christology is Jesus, present in the word of proclamation and confession, and it is this Jesus who is the ground and basis, the critique and the norm, of all statements made about him in speculative language.

This energy which the religious symbol possesses (in its original, scriptural form) shows that there is always something there which is not reducible to theological discourse, but which is a fruitful and inexhaustible source of further theological discourse.[49] It is precisely here that the language of faith cautions us not to place too much confidence in the word "is" when it is used in statements about

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[43] An existing system of thought will be of use in christology only to the degree to which it has a premonition, a Vorgriff, a pre-conceptual grasp, of a new and unknown area into which it can move.

[44] Ladrière, "Le Discours Théologique," 134.

[45] Ibid. 121.

[46] This is what Sonnet, "Les Langages de la Foi," 404, refers to as "representational discourse."

[47] Fascinating to speculate on, (but beyond the scope of the present paper) is the possibility that *it is the phenomenon of language itself,* which is the most useful model and the most suggestive symbol with which to approach the transcendence which is proper to the human spirit—that is, to approach its absolute openness to God, and therefore the possibility of being addressed by God within the world.

[48] "Which has a gravitational effect on the meaning and gives it the impetus which it needs to leave the area in which it came to be." (Ladrière, *L'articulation du Sens,* 187.)

[49] This is why the concept must be "adjusted" to the original movement of the religious symbol. See Sonnet, "Les Langages de la Foi," 411.

Jesus and it is here that it allows (the New Testament) Jesus, the subject of the christological statements, to preside over all of the predicates used of him, to correct them, to define them, to make them serviceable.[50]

6.7 The Role Which Reflection on Language
Should Play in Christology: A Summary

First, such reflection gives us the right starting point: the Jesus event itself, as mediated through scripture and in faith. Conciliar statements retain their value as illustrations of how defensive-polemic statements were formulated in terms intelligible to people of another day and age. And precisely because reflection on language reveals the essential historicity of language, reflection on language forestalls the danger of what we have called "translation dogmas"—those pseudo-dogmas which are the almost inevitable result of translating material into alien contexts.

Second, reflection on language authenticates demythologization of the original religious language (not eliminating symbols, but decoding them and embracing them), and "dephilosophization" of the conciliar material (not rejecting that material, but accepting its historically conditioned character, while acknowledging the impropriety of using it as the primary source of speculative thought).

Third, reflection on language clears up the confusion about the nature of predication which has done so much harm in christology. It does this by showing that the "is" statements about Jesus in the New Testament are misunderstood if they are read as titles and by making it clear that they are not definitions which can be applied to Jesus. These statements are rather a call to us to see him as the one who *redefines them in his words and actions*. In terms of the "Jesus is God" problem of all post-Chalcedonian christology, reflection on the nature of predication shows us that "God" is not a title claimed by Jesus or which we are to award to him, but that Jesus is rather the one who redefines "God," who brings us, then and now, into the presence of a God whom we could never invent.

Fourth, reflection on language shows that in two ways language is the event in which the underlying capacity and the deep longing of the world to speak to us of God, to be "God-for-us," is fulfilled (what traditional theology called an "obediential potency"). It was fulfilled in the language used by that human being who was totally transparent to God, who became "God-for-us," and who, in virtue of the resurrection, remains in time and in the world, while having transcended their limitations. Jesus was totally dedicated to the word which he spoke, and the New Testament offers interesting evidence of the fact that his audiences at least occasionally perceived this. Second, the underlying capacity of the world to speak to us of God is also fulfilled in the need and in the power of the human being to be able to say (explicitly or implicitly), "I believe"[51]—that is, to find in that

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[50]In different ways, both Mark and John underline this point: Mark in the "messianic secret" and John in several obviously constructed scenes (chapters 11 and 12 provide good examples) which show the crowds turning away from Jesus as soon as he ceases to fulfill their ideas of how a messianic figure should act.

[51]Ladrière, *L'articulation du Sens*, 255, puts this very accurately: "Faith consists precisely in inserting oneself into the process of salvation; and even more exactly, in identifying one's own activity with this process."

worldly event which is the human reality and human personhood of Jesus Christ, the human face which God has turned toward the world and the perfect embodiment of the Logos. Here, the language of faith is the fulfillment and the perfection of human language.[52]

JOHN C. DWYER
St. Mary's College, Moraga CA

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[52]See Sonnet, ''Les Langages de la Foi,'' 408.