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# Conceiving God: Literal and Figurative Prompt for a More Tectonic Distinction

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## Cognitive Linguistics and Theology

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# Conceiving God: Literal and Figurative Prompt for a More Tectonic Distinction

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**Abstract:** John Sanders' *Theology in the Flesh*, the first comprehensive overview of the toolkit that contemporary cognitive linguistics offers for theological appropriation, despite its remarkable success, gives rather minimal attention to blending theory, one of the discipline's most formidable tools. This paper draws on blending theory to offer an alternative to Sanders' chapter on conceiving God. Central to the proposal is claim that God-talk, like many of the advances in science, technology, and art, entails a kind of tectonic understanding and conceptual mapping that is neither literal nor figurative.

**Keywords:** God, cognitive linguistics, blending theory, metaphor

John Sanders' *Theology in the Flesh* is the first comprehensive overview of the toolkit that contemporary cognitive linguistics offers for theological appropriation.<sup>1</sup> His introduction, at once, wonderfully accessible and substantive, provides a much-needed primer for both theologians and the general reader. The first section of the book provides an overview of the field. The discipline, as he explains, does not embrace a single tightknit theory but rather is a broader school of shared commitments, themes, and analytical approaches. Those shared elements are based on the study of cognition's grounding in the specific sensory and motor systems of human embodiment. Sanders sums up the commonality in the notion that meaning is "anthropogenic." That is to say, meaning depends upon people's embodied cognitive capacities and cultural interactions, and hence meaning also is dynamic. Words prompt for meaning rather than capture it, because language is an underspecified tip of a giant iceberg of underlying and mostly unconscious cognitive processes of categorization and conceptual mapping. The categorizations and mappings are guided by factors such as metaphor, metonymy, framing, image schemas, idealized cognitive models, and conceptual blends. The last of these factors, conceptual blending, gets rather minimal attention in both Sanders' synopsis of the discipline in Part I, and his analysis of a variety of theological applications in the remainder of the book. This is a limitation, even though I heartily applaud his book's contribution to the church and academy as a significant achievement.

"Conceiving God," Chapter 9 of *Theology in the Flesh*, seeks to explain why it makes sense to think of God as an agent and to defend this conception against the charge that it is "grossly anthropomorphic."<sup>2</sup> The chapter does so by appealing to cognitive linguistics' insights about prototypical categorization and metaphorical mapping. I will compare that approach to explaining how God is conceived with an approach

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical scholars have been using some of these tools for more than a decade and in 2008 Edward Slingerland made a case for their use in religious studies in *What Science Offers the Humanities*, but cognitive linguistics has not gotten much attention from theologians, aside from a few articles in journals and anthologies, and Masson, *Without Metaphor, No Saving God: Theology After Cognitive Linguistics*. My book, while suggesting broader theological and ecumenical implications, is a more constructive and speculative appropriation of one trajectory, and I focus, by and large, on issues arising from a Roman Catholic context.

<sup>2</sup> Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, 243.

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that draws on the additional tools of blending theory to demonstrate that the distinctions typically made between the literal and figurative prompt for a more tectonic distinction. I will briefly outline Sanders' construal. Then I will sketch my approach that more explicitly draws on blending theory and argue for its advantages in dealing with issues that Sanders addresses. I will argue that God-talk is both anthropogenic and tectonic. There is much in common between Sanders' approach and what I propose, but I believe there are compelling reasons for making and emphasizing an explicit distinction between literal, figurative, and tectonic conceptual blends.

Blending theory is a further manifestation of what Sanders designates the anthropogenic character of God-talk. But blending theory offers a more complex and nuanced construal of such anthropogenic thinking. The notion of conceptual blends is dependent and consistent with the earlier work in cognitive linguistics on metaphorical mapping and categorization. Fauconnier and Turner have made a persuasive case, however, that blending theory's more differentiated and comprehensive account of conceptual mapping significantly advances the discipline's ability to explain both the origin of language, and the amazing open-ended horizon of human understanding and imagination among other issues.<sup>3</sup>

My argument is that the value for the church and theology of this particular hypothesis in cognitive linguistics' toolkit warrants special emphasis. That is because blending theory can provide tools for making sense of what can be called the tectonic character of religious thinking. What do I mean by tectonic? God-talk emerges as the manifestation of dramatic and revelatory shifts in human conceptualization and inference. When momentous enough, such shifts yield not only new mapping and categories, that is to say, yield new knowledge or data. Some shifts yield new ways of mapping and categorization altogether, that is to say, yield brand new ways of understanding.<sup>4</sup> A scientific example would be the difference between, on the one hand, finding a new planet, star, or solar system (adding to the constituents of these categories, i.e., new data) or the discovery of black holes (which entails a metaphorical mapping and imaginative extension of the category of cosmic entities, i.e., new knowledge), and on the other hand, the more fundamental shifts in understanding brought about by Einstein that made it possible to think about the cosmos in altogether new ways and consequently opened up, for the first time, conceptual space in which the idea of black holes was conceivable at all (i.e., a brand new way of understanding).

I propose that a particular kind of conceptual blend is a vehicle for such fundamental shifts in human conceptualization and new understanding. Significant problems in religious thought and theological inference can be clarified, by distinguishing such blends and their emergent meanings from other ways of mapping things conceptually. I use the term "tectonic" to designate both this distinctive way of mapping and the emergent meanings which are its effect.

Unfortunately, conspicuous instances of the tectonic stretching of thought and language in religion, such as talk of God as a supernatural agent, the focus of Sanders' ninth chapter, are what so many people today, including believers, find problematic and grossly anthropomorphic. Blending theory can demonstrate that the fundamental cognitive and linguistic processes entailed in the open-ended reach of faith understanding are the same as the processes for other significant and unexpected advances in human understanding. Blending theory can provide tools for making sense of such religious thinking and theological reasoning. The use of blending theory's tools cannot prove such shifts in thinking true or false—whether in the sciences or theology. But it is my contention that blending theory is a necessary prerequisite for making sense of such shifts that create the possibility for new understanding and new kinds of inferences. Hence blending theory can provide an invaluable key for understanding what God-talk means, and how what is said about God purports to be true.

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<sup>3</sup> Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*. See also Slingerland, *What Science Offers the Humanities*, 151-218.

<sup>4</sup> I have drawn this distinction from the work of Gerhart and Russell in *The Metaphoric Process* and *New Maps for Old*. For a fuller discussion see *Without Metaphor, No Saving God*, 59-66.

## 1 Sanders on God-talk

I agree with Sanders' key premise that to conceive and talk about God we must use the same cognitive abilities that we use to think about anything else. The obvious difficulty is that the concept of God is abstract in the sense that we cannot interact with God as we ordinarily relate with other entities or persons.<sup>5</sup> Hence some people think that because of this difference we must take an apophatic way that emphasizes God's transcendence and eschews any hint of anthropomorphism or idolatry. Sanders argues, however, that we have no option but to use anthropogenic language. The apophatic way does not avoid using human concepts, since its "basic framework" still presupposes a metaphorical mapping that "construes space and time as a container in which all creatures exist and God is *outside* or *beyond* the container."<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the claim that God is 'above all being' uses the verticality schema commonly applied to ideas such as authority and that which has greater importance.<sup>7</sup> Notions of transcendence also presuppose underlying spatial mappings that prompt for the difference between Creator and creature by metaphorically thinking of God as beyond, over, above, or across. Sanders observes that Colin Gunton advocates avoiding such spatial metaphors by following Barth's dynamic construal of divine transcendence "as something God 'is and does'," but this strategy does not eliminate metaphorical mapping. Rather, it "exchanges the spatial metaphors of containers for personal metaphors of liberating and caring for others."<sup>8</sup> Nor does Sanders think that understanding God in terms of the concept of being gets around these difficulties. Whether one conceives of God as a being, beyond being, Being Itself, or the Ground of Being, from a cognitive linguistics perspective, one is still using the metaphor CATEGORIES ARE CONTAINERS. Being is the container. The logic of the metaphor entails that "God is either inside, outside, or coterminous with the container."<sup>9</sup> This makes God more accessible but still uses "a common mental tool drawn from our embodied experience to understand God."<sup>10</sup> Finally, Sanders notes that even Derrida's and Caputo's critiques of Christianity as idolatry cannot escape the constraints of embodied cognition. Derrida and Caputo also use "human concepts such as forces, events, and containers ("trapped in being") to think about God. They employ such anthropogenic ideas in order to make their understanding of God a little more accessible and familiar. If they did not, then their concept of God would be vacuous."<sup>11</sup> Sanders concludes that if idolatry is defined as "using any human concepts for God," then Caputo himself is guilty.<sup>12</sup>

So, Sanders does not think it is at all problematic to insist on the anthropogenic character of God-talk. It is the only option. He notes that "Aquinas seemed to get at this when he said we only know God via our creaturely capacities."<sup>13</sup> Most crucial for believers is that the Scriptures make robust use of figurative expressions. There is no loss in such use, Sanders argues. Quite the contrary, cognitive linguistics has demonstrated that metaphorical mapping is the foundation for much of our capacity for conceptualizing our world, making inferences about it, and determining what is true and false. By comparison, the discipline has shown, literal language is skeletal and limited. Sanders concludes, consequently, that "the only real debate is which anthropogenic concepts we believe appropriate to attribute to God."<sup>14</sup> His answer is that the "most plausible option" is that God "is an agent with supernatural abilities of awareness and power and who cares about human affairs."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he argues that this conception entails that "God is actually

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<sup>5</sup> Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, 265.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 253

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

an agent.”<sup>16</sup> This is not just a figurative way of speaking. Sanders emphasizes that his argument “does not prove that divine agency is the correct understanding.”<sup>17</sup> He acknowledges the possibility of other options, but nevertheless contends that affirming that God is an agent is more consistent with historic religious traditions and with the natural way humans think about God.

## 2 Framing the question as the most salient God concept

The problem that I have with Sanders’ analysis is the explicit claim that “the only real debate is which anthropogenic concepts we believe appropriate to attribute to God,” and the implicit claim that the affirmation of divine agency is literal rather than metaphorical. I do not contest that language about God is anthropogenic. I will argue, however, that the issue of conceiving God is as much—if not more—about *how* our anthropogenic concepts such as agency are attributed to God, as it is about *which* concepts are attributed to God. To put this in cognitive linguistic terms, Sanders frames the central question about conceiving God as one about the categorization and mapping of the concept of God, where a tectonic approach argues that the question should be framed as one about the *kind* of mapping entailed in God-talk.<sup>18</sup> In the end I find the Sander’s ultimate resolution of “the real” debate incomplete and unsatisfying because the question has been framed in a way that avoids crucial issues about God-talk and that fails to take advantage of other relevant insights from cognitive linguistics.

Sanders’ approach to framing the debate about God-talk entails four crucial notions drawn from his reading of cognitive linguistics: 1) the distinction between literal and figurative mapping, 2) the prototypical and graded character of categorization, 3) the observation that whether a concept is literal or figurative, more apt or less apt, hinges on what is taken as the prototypical instance of the concept, and 4) the premise that the anthropogenic nature of God-talk requires a shared frame for God and creatures. His resolution draws on a further distinction in cognitive linguistics between basic, superordinate, and subordinate level categorization, and on several theses from the cognitive science of religion. Each of these notions requires some discussion.

### 2.1 Literal and figurative

First, Sanders follows “cognitive linguists Dancygier and Sweetser who define “literal” meaning as ‘a meaning which is not dependent on a figurative extension from another meaning’.”<sup>19</sup> It is necessary to clarify the meaning of “literal” in cognitive linguistics, because the discipline’s thesis that meanings are generated and mediated through the brain’s sensory and motor systems undermines the conventional notion that literal concepts are definite, discrete, and fixed mental representations that mirror objective reality. One example Sanders uses to illustrate how “literal” is understood in cognitive linguistics is “Susan is a good shepherd.” If Susan actually raises sheep and is good at it, then it is literal to say that she is a good shepherd. If, however, she is a pastor, then the meaning of shepherd is being figuratively mapped to her

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>18</sup> Put in terms of blending theory, for those who are already familiar with its scheme and anticipating terminology that will be explained later in the article, I argue that the issues of conceiving God is not as much about whether we attribute agency to God, but whether the mapping entailed in attributing agency to God is simplex (literal), mirror, single-scope, or double-scope, and whether some double-scope blends prompt for meanings which require an additional and more nuanced distinction than provided conventionally in binary contrasts between the literal and the metaphorical, or the literal and the figurative. I am arguing that the key issue in conceiving God as agent is recognition that this conception in some receptions entails a tectonic prompt for new understanding. The qualification “in some receptions” is necessary because the prompt can be rejected or missed leading to either literal or metaphorical interpretation—both of which one can find among Christians. The point of my argument here is to indicate the possibility of a third tectonic interpretation and to contend that such a tectonic reading makes better sense of how to conceive God and is more consistent with the Christian tradition.

<sup>19</sup> Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, 264.

pastoring. On this analysis, according to Sanders, it is figurative to say that “God is the shepherd of Israel,” since the people are not sheep. And it is figurative to say that God is father, because Orthodox Jews and Christians “do not believe God actually impregnates a goddess in order to have a child.”<sup>20</sup>

Anticipating the rejoinder that one could argue that the term God is abstract while “Susan” names an embodied individual with whom we can interact in ordinary ways—at least in principle, Sanders argues that language about abstract concepts does not have to be figurative either. “The idea *society* is abstract, but we can say that a society has numerous individuals and the meaning of this does not depend on a figurative extension from another meaning.”<sup>21</sup> By contrast, it would be metaphorical to say that “our society is struggling to do the right thing,” because saying this maps the difficulties people encounter onto an abstraction that is not a person.<sup>22</sup> But Sanders claims that such metaphorical mapping is not entailed in saying that God loves or that God is a person, if one presumes, as many believers do, that God is actually an agent.

At this point, it appears that Sanders’ argument is circular: his conclusion that there is no metaphorical mapping entailed in thinking of God as an agent presupposes the premise that God is an agent. Why? Sanders acknowledges that there are believers and theologians who do not think this premise should be taken for granted. He considers Lieven Boeve, for example, who argues that the “theological doctrines GOD IS PERSON and GOD IS LOVE are metaphorical’.”<sup>23</sup> According to Boeve such statements are metaphorically mapping personhood or agency to God. Sanders agrees that speaking of God “as” a person or “as” loving is anthropogenic. That is to say, this language is species specific. But he is not willing to grant that this means such language is metaphorical. Alluding briefly to the example of color, he asserts that the statement that God is an agent is comparable to the statement that the sky is blue. Both are literal, not figurative or anthropomorphic in the narrow sense, even though our access to both color and God are thoroughly anthropogenic.

Here Sanders is drawing, in part, on cognitive linguists who have shown that color is not an actual property of objects. Rather it is a function of four interrelated factors: 1) the reflective properties of objects and the wave-lengths of reflected light, 2) the lighting conditions of what is seen, 3) the three kinds of color cones in the retina which absorb light of long, medium, and short wave-lengths, and 4) the neural circuitry connected to the cones of the retina and the brain’s response to variations in the wavelengths filtered by the cones. The four primary colors (red, green, blue, and yellow) and the other basic colors such as orange correspond to different levels of activation in the retina’s three color cones. But one cannot simply identify color with the wavelengths. Light as such has no color. Any of the colors can be produced by different combinations of the three wavelengths. For the same reason there is not a one-to-one correspondence between an object’s reflectance and the color we perceive. Different reflectances can be perceived as the same color. And some things that we perceive as blue, such as the sky, do not even have a surface reflectance. “The sky is blue because the atmosphere transmits only a certain range of wavelengths of incoming light from the sun, and of the wavelengths it does transmit, it scatters some more than others.... Thus, the sky is blue for a very different reason than a painting of the sky is blue. What we perceive as blue does not characterize a single ‘thing’ in the world, neither ‘blueness’ nor wavelength reflectance.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, lighting conditions affect what colors we see. That effect is particularly interesting, since in some situations, such as viewing fluorescent minerals with ultraviolet illumination, lighting conditions can drastically alter what colors are perceived, while in other situations we perceive the same constant color in a specific object, for example the red of an apple, despite changes in wavelength that result from illumination by fluorescent bulbs, direct sunlight, or the indirect light of a cloudy day or late afternoon. The neural circuitry of the brain compensates for the differences in illumination. This explanation supplies the background for Sanders’ claim that:

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 264-65.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>23</sup> Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, 264, quoting Boeve, “Linguistica Ancilla Theologiae,” 28.

<sup>24</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 24.

when we say “The color of the sky is blue,” we attribute to the sky what our visual processes allow us to see. That is, from a human perspective, the sky is blue, but that is not a metaphorical concept. Similarly, we can say that from a human perspective, God is a person and God is love, but these are not conceptual metaphors for most theists because they believe God is actually an agent.<sup>25</sup>

But this response, while reinforcing the notion that both examples are anthropogenic, which I readily grant, does not settle the question of whether language about God as agent is literal or metaphorical. The argument is helpful and persuasive for justifying a literal rather than metaphorical mapping only if one also assumes agency and the attributes of agency are somehow available apart from our experience and knowledge of embodied human agents. To the extent that there are meaningful distinctions, which there must be, between a supernatural and transcendent “agent” to whom we do not have access in any ordinary way, such as God, and a physically embodied human agent, mapping the properties of God’s transcendent agency to humanly embodied agency is inherently and unavoidably a metaphorical mapping. It is a mapping of the source domain of human physically embodied reality to the necessarily different target domain of supernatural and transcendent reality. Aspects such as embodiment can be excluded from the mapping, but the mapping on the face of it is nevertheless metaphorical rather than literal. Moreover, as Sanders acknowledges in his discussion of figures such as Boeve and other apophatic theologians, there are other ways to conceive God than as a literal agent. If one assumes that God is be-ing itself or a mystery beyond-beings-and-being, then attributing agency or agent-like properties to God is clearly a metaphorical mapping, rather than literal. Sanders’ appeal to the example of color illustrates how all human talk, including talk about God, is anthropogenic, with which I agree. But this argument does not establish that talk about God as agent is conceptualized through a literal rather than metaphorical mapping. The difficulty is that the question of whether or not it is true and proper to say that God is an agent, which I agree it is, is distinct from the question of how God is conceptualized. Sanders does not identify or analyze any cognitive process that helps explain *how* believers can understand agency (a human and embodied reality) as literally and not metaphorically attributed to God, who is neither human nor embodied.

## 2.2 Categorization

I suspect that this circularity is not felt as an issue from Sanders’ perspective, however, because of a second key insight of cognitive linguistics, namely, that categorization is prototypical. The classical and common-sense view imagines categories as containers. The class of blue things, for example, is supposed to contain all things matching that description. Given this conventional assumption, it should be possible for any concept to define necessary and sufficient conditions that clearly indicate what the category contains and what it does not contain. But research has shown that we actually categorize things for the most part by means of prototypes. So, for example, although a bachelor is an unmarried male, most people would not think of the Pope as a bachelor, because in American culture, the prototype of a bachelor is an unmarried male in his twenties. And although tomatoes fit the technical definition of a fruit, most people think of them as vegetables. Research shows that people actually categorize by prototypes, that is to say, by mental concepts “of exemplars that best represent instances of a category rather than by means of the necessary conditions of the classical theory.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, research has shown that categories are graded, radiate from a central prototype, and often have fuzzy edges.

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<sup>25</sup> Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, 265.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

### 2.3 Prototype as a criterion of literality

These three further aspects of prototypical categorization supply a third aspect to the way Sanders frames the question of conceiving God. If God is a concept like others, then it is not univocal. There can be a range of different conceptions with graded and even fuzzy boundaries that radiate from a central prototype. Whether a concept is literal or figurative, more apt or less apt, will then hinge according to Sanders on what is taken as the prototypical instance of the concept. In Sanders' account, if one takes the conception of God as an agent as prototypical, then speaking of God as a person or as one who loves is literal, since personhood and actions like love are part of the frame that specifies agency. Of course, this would not require that all language about God's agency is literal. For example, one still could distinguish speaking metaphorically about God having the whole world in his hands from contexts where God literally acts as an agent. Sanders maintains that speaking of God's agency is not metaphorical so long as one "takes" the concept of "God as an agent" as prototype. By contrast, if the prototypical instantiation of God is Tillich's Ground of Being or Boeve's Postmodern and apophatic conception, then, according to Sanders, speaking of God as loving or as a person will be figurative rather than literal.

While I think this line of argument explains why Sanders thinks it makes sense to describe God as literally an agent, it seems to me that the reasoning is circular. The argument that God as agent is prototypical, and consequently literal, assumes that the agency frame can be conceptualized without any metaphorical mapping to human embodied agency. Everything else Sanders has said about the anthropogenic character of our thinking supports the conclusion that the source for our conceptions of agency is our own embodied human experience. Even if one grants, as I do, that agency is prototypical for God and that God is truly spoken of as an agent, this does not establish that the conceptual mapping of agency to God is literal rather than metaphorical. Mapping agency to God requires an extension of meaning from the human embodied domain to the divine domain.

### 2.4 A shared frame for God and creatures

We have already discussed a bit the final notion underlying the way Sanders frames the question about conceiving God: the anthropogenic character of all human thinking. When he applies this insight to the conception of God, he presumes that it means that God and creatures share the same frame.<sup>27</sup> He takes this to entail not only that knowledge arises from our "embodied mental tools as we interact with realities"<sup>28</sup> but that this also "entail[s] that God has some characteristics in common with creatures."<sup>29</sup> He reasons that "If God has nothing in common with anything in creation, then our cognitive tools are useless and we can have no understanding of God."<sup>30</sup>

These clarifications explain why Sanders frames the question the way he does. He conceives "God" as a prototypical and graded concept. There are a range of possibilities, for example, God as agent, as Being Itself, as beyond being, etc. The problem of conceiving God entails determining which of these concepts is the most prototypical, or most appropriate and fitting. He takes the anthropogenic character of God-talk to mean that all God-concepts, even the most apophatic, require that God has some characteristics in common with creatures. This is what he means in saying that God and humanity share the same frame. Whether one thinks God as an agent, Being Itself, or beyond Being, the concept is a "human" one.<sup>31</sup> I take him to mean by this, that no concept of God gives us a God's-eye-view, which somehow transcends the species-specific character of human thinking. Sanders seeks to avoid the criticism that speaking of God as an agent is entirely figurative and anthropomorphic by arguing that what counts as literal or metamorphic is determined

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 266.



by which concept is taken to be the most prototypical. If the conception of God as an actual agent is the prototypical instance of the concept, then it is literal. Sanders' argument implies that this undercuts the objection that speaking of God as an agent is metaphorical or any more anthropomorphic than alternative conceptions of God. In Sanders' view, this literal language about God as agent is complemented and filled out by robustly metaphorical conceptions of God as we see in the Scriptures. Which of these metaphors are appropriate for God and how much emphasis they are given are questions for further discernment within religious communities. Sanders holds that "different religious communities will manifest variation here and the views of communities can change over time as the cultural understandings of the source and target domains change."<sup>32</sup>

### 3 The salience of God as agent

Given this way of framing the question of conceiving God as a debate about which anthropogenic concepts are most appropriate to attribute to God, Sanders makes his case for conceiving God as an agent. In part the aptness has to do with the distinction cognitive linguistics makes between basic, superordinate, and subordinate categories. A chair is an example of a basic level category. It is an instance of furniture (superordinate). Queen Anne specifies a kind of chair (subordinate). Research shows that basic level categories have different cognitive properties than lower or higher categories. Basic categories are the first to develop in childhood and are the most natural form of categorization throughout life. This has to do with the way people interact with things in their embodied experience. Basic level categories are "human-sized." They are a function of people's interaction with their environment. We have no problem, for example, creating a mental image of a chair. Quite the opposite is the case, however, if we try to form a mental image as such of the higher category of furniture. Typically, basic categories can be grasped holistically as a single gestalt. This is the level at which people most easily name things. We can form images of them with ease. They are a function of our physical interaction with the world. Categories at this level are easy to use and remember. Sanders argues that the concept of God as agent is a basic level category, or at least much closer to basic level categories than the concepts of God as Being Itself or beyond being. Hence, he concludes that the concept of God as agent is more apt.

Sanders finds further evidence for the aptness of conceiving God as an agent in the research of the cognitive science of religion. The psychologist, Justin Barrett, for example, argues that "conceiving God as an agent is the default mode for human cognitive development."<sup>33</sup> Sanders cautions that research in the field does not prove that God is an agent. It "only shows that thinking of God as agent is natural and the default position for humans."<sup>34</sup> He endorses Barrett's explanation of the advantages of conceiving God as an agent over alternate God concepts.

First of all, it resonates much better with our cognitive processes since it arises out of our normal cognitive development. Second, it provides richer conceptual entailments because it draws upon interpersonal relations. Third, it resounds better with the typical worship and devotional lives of religious believers. Fourth, because God as agent is much more likely to be used by communities in religious rituals, it is far more readily transmitted to future generations.<sup>35</sup>

Since conceiving God as agent also resonates so well with Scripture and the Christian tradition, and with the conceptions in other historical religions, Sanders concludes that it is the most prototypical way to conceive of God.

It is important to note, however, that Barrett's positive take on God and religious belief is at odds with the much more reserved, if not skeptical, thrust in most of the literature in the cognitive science of religion.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See Masson, *Without Metaphor, No Saving God*, 165-88.

Although the research argues that the notion of God as agent is the default and natural assumption for most people, many of the researches also contend that the notion of God is an evolutionary epiphenomenon and by-product. The discipline postulates that there were evolutionary survival advantages for mental tools detecting conscious agency in one's environment. All the better if the Agency Detecting Device (ADD) was hypersensitive. In humanity's distant past, this mental tool's bias to see agency reduced the risk of unexpected encounters with predators and helped predict the behavior of one's prey when the tables were turned. According to the cognitive science of religion, these tools persist as part of our conceptual processing. Todd Tremlin observes that such reactions are rapid, effortless and instinctive. Without realizing it, we constantly scan our environment for agency in daily life.

In addition to instantaneously identifying the people and creatures that cross our paths, we are also prone to make up agents based on minimal input from any of our senses. We sense things in the night, glance anxiously at shadows, and start at the sound of rustling leaves. Note that neither shadows nor rustling leaves are the source of our anxious or jumpy reaction; rather, shadows and sounds are merely signs of agents that might be lurking behind them. Similarly, if you reach for the light switch in a strange room and your hand instead brushes a fur coat hanging on a nearby hook, it's a safe bet you'll quickly pull away. Despite characterizing ourselves as something more than bundles of instincts, the human brain is still governed by many incorrigible responses like those produced by ADD.<sup>37</sup>

The literature argues that this predisposition to recognize the presence and activities of other "agents" around us is complemented by other mental mechanisms that automatically and unconsciously ascribe consciousness to these agent-like things and try to interpret "their" intentions based on instinctive beliefs about internal mental states such as feelings, desires, motivations, and expectations. In effect, these cognitive devices generate and apply an intuitive theory of mind and draw inferences about the perceived mental dispositions of other human, animal, inanimate, hidden, supernatural, or other made-up agents.

It is sobering that while Sanders concludes that the cognitive science of religion shows that it is natural to think of God as an agent, proponents of the new atheism appropriate the same research as evidence that belief in divine agency has entirely natural explanations, which prove that there is no actual referent for the term "God." But here I call attention to these postulates in the cognitive science of religion not to deny that God is actual or is an agent, but to underscore the *kind* of conceptual mapping involved. Agency detection and the related mental tools map human behavior, consciousness, intentions, and internal mental states such as feelings, desires, motivations, and expectations to interactions with other people and objects in our environment. Except in the case of other human beings, this mapping reveals itself as thoroughly metaphorical: it maps attributes of human agency to targets—the gods and God among them—that are not human agents. This does not bolster Sanders' argument that conceiving God as an agent is literal. To the contrary, the research in the cognitive science of religion challenges believers to explain *how* anthropogenic concepts of God can have an actual referent that is not entirely an anthropomorphic and metaphorical projection of human attributes, as Feuerbach and countless atheists since have argued.

Sanders' conclusion is accurate as far as it goes, but because of the way that it is framed, it begs the question. This framing lets us ignore the more fundamental issue: *how* can anthropogenic concepts, which are a function of people's interactions in and with the world, speak of God who is professed to be in some genuinely meaningful way not of this world. Other than the appeal to "belief," this framing can provide no conceptual or epistemic distinction between God-talk and *entirely* figurative, and consequently fictitious, talk about unicorns, fairies, Santa Claus, or any other creation of the human imagination. It is, of course, true that ultimately the difference has to do with a person's and community's "beliefs" about God. But in Sanders' explanation the appeal to belief comes too quickly and without adequate theoretical differentiation. It is necessary to explain conceptually, linguistically, and epistemically how anthropogenic meanings can be legitimately stretched to speak of God. And it is necessary to show that there are principled ways in which belief warrants its mapping as actual rather than entirely figurative.

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<sup>37</sup> Tremlin, *Minds and Gods*, 77.

## 4 Reframing the question in the light of blending theory

This is the point where blending theory's more differentiated account of conceptual mapping provides resources for reframing and answering the questions raised in Sanders' chapter about conceiving God. Blending theory also emphasizes that language prompts for the construction of meaning; conceptual mapping does not represent meaning directly. But in blending theory, conceptual mapping is not binary: either literal, in which concepts are mapped to each other without any figurative extension of meaning (e.g., "Sally is a pastor"), or metaphorical, in which a source meaning is figuratively mapped to a target meaning (e.g., "Sally is a good shepherd"). Rather, blending theory envisions a broader range for conceptual mapping.<sup>38</sup> Conceptualization and reasoning typically involve the integration of many mental spaces and mappings within elaborate networks of meanings. Conceptual integration theory proposes an explanation of the processes and principles involved in these complex networks. Fauconnier and Turner distinguish four basic structures in blends. The most important of these for our discussion are called "double-scope blends" (or "networks"). To appreciate the range of possible networks and the specific characteristics that distinguish double-scope blends, it will be helpful to briefly outline the different ways each of the four prompts for meaning.

### 4.1 Simplex blends

Most of what we think of as literal corresponds to what Fauconnier and Turner name "simplex blends." Imagine two input spaces, one consisting of individual persons and another of professional roles. The sentence "Sally is a pastor" blends these two spaces without altering the meaning of either the individual or the role. We can think of more complex variations. "My graduate student Sally is the interim pastor at All Saints Episcopal" blends inputs from a number of conceptual spaces: a student frame (i.e., undergraduate, graduate, past, current), a frame including possible individuals, another frame of professional roles, a frame for the status of the role (i.e., interim, permanent, current, former, etc.), and a frame for various institutions where this role could take place. Henceforth, if you have understood me, I can refer to the pastor's accomplishments and you will know that I am talking about my current graduate student Sally who is an Episcopal priest serving at All Saints. I don't have to keep repeating that information. And note that I can assume that you also will surmise that Sally is an ordained Episcopal priest, even though I have not explicitly told you so. Much of the language that we think of as "literal" involves this sort of blending and compression. This is so automatic and unconscious that we do not even notice it. We divide the world up into human sized entities so that we can conceptualize them and make manageable inferences. We decompress these human sized compressions when more fine-tuned explanation and reasoning is required. Such blends enable the compression of very complex networks of meaning.

A significant portion of figurative language exemplifies the blends Fauconnier and Turner call "mirror" and "single-scope." At this point it will help to introduce the sort of illustrations used in blending theory to describe the conceptual mapping for specific networks. The basic diagram (figure 1) for all the blends includes four spaces represented by circles.<sup>39</sup> The two circles on either side designate the input spaces. The generic space at the top of the diagram indicates what the two inputs have in common. The circle on the bottom indicates the blend. The solid lines indicate cross-space mappings between the inputs. The dotted lines indicate connections between the inputs and either the generic or blended spaces. While static and in no way literally picturing the dynamic neural co-activations and bindings of actual conceptual integration in our brains, the diagrams are nevertheless helpful as visualizations.

<sup>38</sup> According to Fauconnier and Turner's analysis in *The Way We Think*, "literal" and "metaphorical" are two points ("simplex" and "single-scope") along a broader range of conceptual mappings. Their position problematizes the conventional distinction between literal and figurative as a binary choice, in favor of a continuum of different sorts of cross space mappings that can be thought of as including both literal and metaphorical mappings. This analysis suggests the need, as I will argue in the remainder of this paper, for a further distinction that identifies conceptual mappings, prototypically double-scope mappings, that open up new understanding in ways that literal and metaphorical mappings ordinarily do not. Hence this "tectonic" way of mapping and conceptualizing should be differentiated from literal and metaphorical mapping.

<sup>39</sup> Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 46.

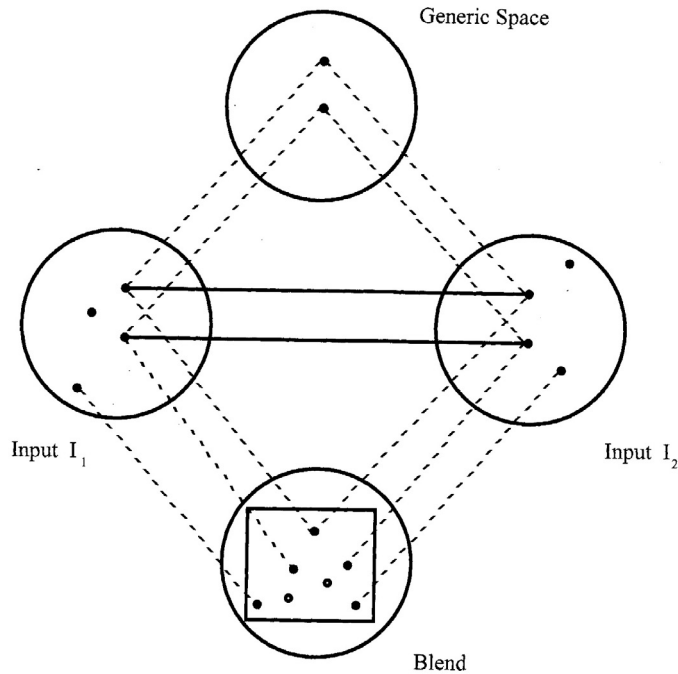


Figure 1. Basic Diagram

## 4.2 Mirror blends

To explain mirror networks Fauconnier and Turner imagine a contemporary philosopher who tells us,

I claim that reason is a self-developing capacity. Kant disagrees with me on this point. He says it's innate, but I answer that's begging the question, to which he counters in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, that only innate ideas have power. But I say to that, what about neuronal group selection?<sup>40</sup>

One could take this as a straightforward logical argument on the philosopher's part. One might not even notice the complicated cross-space mapping that is entailed (figure 2).<sup>41</sup> Kant and the professor lived centuries apart, in different countries, and speak different languages. Kant could not have been aware of the professor's existence, let alone engage in debate with him, especially about a concept like neuronal group selection about which Kant would have known nothing. The professor's argument blends two inputs that mirror each other. On the one hand, we have the record of Kant's philosophical reflections, and on the other, the professor musing to himself about philosophical issues that in some respects correspond to Kant's considerations and in other respects envision a different modern context. This is called a "mirror network" because the organizing frame of the two input spaces is the same. In this case the organizing frame is a philosopher musing on a problem. The clashes in this mirror network, for example between German and English, are at more specific levels below the organizing frame. At the organizing level the two input spaces are equivalent. The generic space which they share is also equivalent. In the blend, however, new possibilities emerge. The blend enables us to introduce the elaborate frame of two philosophers debating about a common problem. Such a debate literally never took place and never could. But we have no problem imagining such a possibility or entertaining it in the course of a rigorous philosophical argument. Recall that Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* is largely framed by such debates with authorities from the past.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 59-62.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 62.

“Running the blend,” compresses time, space, cause-affect, change, and intentionality. In the blend, Kant and the philosopher are in the same space, at the same time, addressing one another, and adjusting their arguments to respond to each other’s questions. In the blend, the philosopher can pose a question which stumps Kant. Likewise, in the *Summa*, Aristotle and Augustine are put into dialogue with each other and with Aquinas’s “contemporary” resolution.

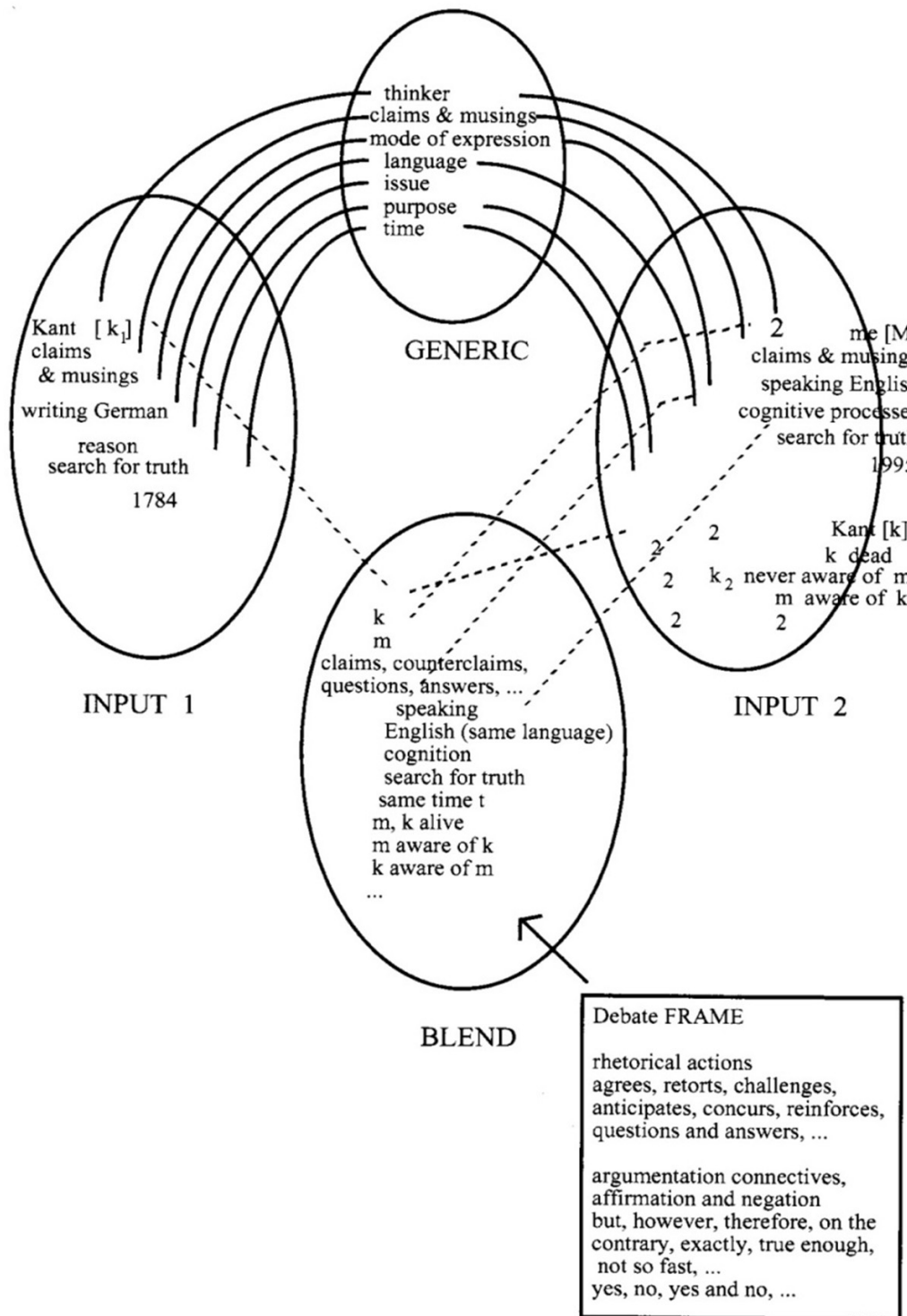


Figure 2. DEBATE WITH KANT Blend

### 4.3 Single-scope blends

Single-scope networks differ from mirror networks because the structure of the blend derives from one of the input spaces. One of the inputs gives the overall organizational structure of the network and is the primary source of inferences. These are strongly asymmetrical. The framing input is a source of inferences and compressions. Much of what we commonly call metaphors, analogies, and models are variations of single-scope blends. Single-scope blends highlight certain properties common to the two input spaces, such as, similarities, parallels, or proportions, even though the two input spaces are themselves literally quite different. Sanders has given us a number of examples, both obvious candidates, such as, *GOD IS THE SHEPHERD OF ISRAEL*, and less obvious, such as *GOD IS BEING ITSELF* or *GOD IS BEYOND BEING*. One can interpret these blends as activations of the single-scope metaphorical mapping *CATEGORIES ARE CONTAINERS*. Being is seen as a container with which God is either coterminous or outside. It is important to note that blends of this sort can lead to new insights, inferences, and increase understanding of the target domain. This is often the kind of blend entailed in the physical sciences' use of analogies and models. But recall my earlier mention of the distinction between mappings which yield new knowledge and data, and mappings, such as the theories of relativity or evolution that open up new ways, otherwise unavailable, of understanding and making inferences.

### 4.4 Double-scope networks

Double-scope networks are distinct from the previous three kinds of blends because the mapping is bidirectional. But more importantly, double-scope blends can be sources of new understanding such as the theory of relativity. Fauconnier and Turner hypothesize that double-scope networks are the cognitive power most distinctive of human beings, the capacity that explains the development of language in our evolution, and the cognitive process at the heart of religion, art, science, and technology. In double-scope networks both inputs contribute to the blend. Commonly there are sharp clashes between the two input spaces that prompt for new, often unanticipated, meanings. Double-scope networks frequently result in highly creative blends. For example, although we don't usually think of it this way, the mathematics we use today has evolved through the centuries and enables achievements not possible with the number systems available in earlier ages. Complex numbers are in effect a double-scope network with inputs from two-dimensional space and from real/imaginary numbers. Structure is projected from both inputs. From two-dimensional space, angles, rotations and coordinates are projected. From numbers, multiplication, addition, and square roots are projected. The blend that emerges is something new and unique: numbers with angles and multiplication involving rotation. With this new and emergent dimension in mathematics, new ways of calculation and new knowledge becomes available. What we are able to conceptualize and infer in mathematics was dramatically reconfigured. Fauconnier and Turner note that it took roughly three centuries for mathematicians to accept these developments.<sup>42</sup> Other examples of double-scope integration include the Newtonian synthesis that the *LAWS OF HEAVEN ARE THE SAME AS THE LAWS OF EARTH*, the Thompson/Joule discovery that *HEAT IS MOTION*, and Einstein's discovery that *LIGHT IS PARTICULATE AS WELL AS UNDULATORY*.<sup>43</sup>

### 4.5 JESUS IS THE MESSIAH

*JESUS IS THE MESSIAH* is a prototypical religious example of a double-scope blend. This blend is at the heart of the Christian conception of God. Despite its appearances, the proclamation by his earliest disciples that

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 25, 134, 270-74.

<sup>43</sup> These examples are discussed by Gerhart and Russell, but in terms of their own theory of metaphoric process rather than blending theory in *New Maps for Old*, 26-27, 53-54.

Jesus is the Messiah could not have been literal in the way Sanders understands the term. In other words, the affirmation could not have been a simplex blend that merely identified the historical figure Jesus with the category “Messiah.” If Jesus was the Messiah, then he was no ordinary carpenter’s son, and he was much more than an itinerant preacher, deserted by his followers, and crucified. Moreover, “Messiah” at the time did not name a single category. It was associated with a multiplicity of expectations, some of which were mutually exclusive, ranging from an otherworldly figure, who descends from the heavens, to a royal and “this worldly” descendent of David. Given the conventional meanings of Messiah, applying the term to Jesus after his crucifixion would not have made literal sense to the first disciples’ addressees. But it is also clear that when his disciples regrouped and proclaimed Jesus the Messiah, they were not speaking figuratively. This was not a mirror or single-scope metaphorical blend. His followers were not saying that Jesus is “like” a Messiah or proposing that people should think of him “as if” he were a Messiah. The disciples were not merely mapping some attributes of the Messiah to Jesus, nor simply mapping in the other direction attributes of Jesus to the Messiah. It is evident that they intended their claim to be taken quite literally: *Jesus is the Messiah*.

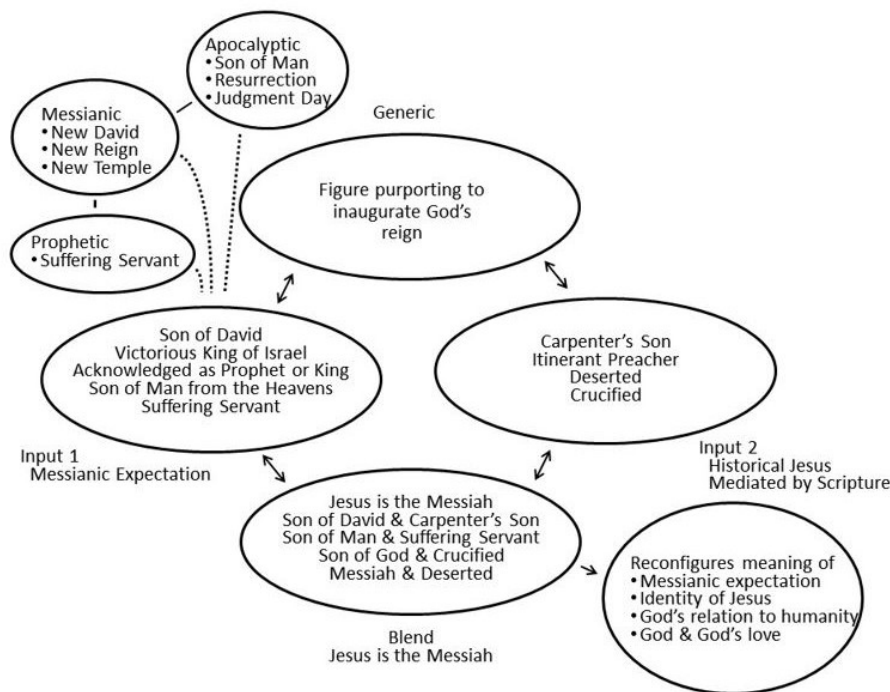


Figure 3. JESUS IS MESSIAH Blend

But the claim can be taken “literally,” or at least “properly,” to use a less misleading term, if the affirmation is understood as a double-scope blend that prompts for a tectonic alteration of the conventional meanings of Messiah, of Jesus’ identity, and of God’s relation to Israel. This is not a literal mapping of one category to another. Nor is it a metaphorical mapping of attributes from a source domain to a target domain. The mapping works in both directions at once and prompts for a tectonic alteration in how one understands the concepts within the blend. Jesus’s life becomes the prototype for understanding the Messianic expectation, while at the same time the Messianic expectation discloses Jesus’ true identity. Further, the blend prompts for the revision of the original inputs. The disclosure of a new frame of understanding in which Jesus is the Messiah, radically extends the conventional meaning of the category of Messiah and establishes the crucified carpenter’s son from Nazareth as prototype against which all other conceptions are measured.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> I am indebted to Stephan Shaver’s “Metaphors of Eucharistic Presence,” 203-10 for this insight about how the blend changes the Messiah prototype. I have reservations, however, about key aspects of the implications he draws from this insight for the blend itself and for tectonic blends more generally.

Moreover, the advent of God's kingdom in this unanticipated Messianic savior reveals a new understanding of God and of God's relation to humanity. So, the blend prompts for a tectonically altered understanding of Jesus, Messiah, God, humanity and the whole network of meanings and frames associated with these terms. The blend prompts for an understanding that otherwise would be unavailable, and it makes possible new inferences that otherwise could not have been envisioned. It bears emphasis that the disciples' blend reconfigures resources within the conventional understanding of Palestinian Judaism and stretches them to create a dramatically new way of understanding their world and reality—a new understanding disclosed by their encounter with Jesus.

The double-scope blend JESUS IS THE MESSIAH is neither *literal* or *metaphorical* in the conventional senses of those terms nor in the specialized senses given in cognitive linguistics. Although there are extended senses in which either literal or figurative could be used to describe the blend, doing so is descriptively inadequate and unhelpfully misleading. As we have seen, running the blend prompts for the emergence of new understanding in the blend itself and of both inputs as well. In the blended space, an equivalence is forced between asymmetric inputs. So the blend creates a conceptual space in which it is semantically proper, logically warranted, and factually the case to say that Jesus *is* the Messiah. In this conceptual space, one could legitimately say that Jesus is “literally” the Messiah, with the caveat that “literally” is being used here in a very restricted and potentially misleading way. And this sense is potentially misleading precisely because one also could say that in the blend, the meaning of Messiah is stretched in ways that, with appropriate caveats, legitimately could be described as figurative. Moreover, the blend prompts for a reconfiguration of the inputs. That reconfiguration not only extends the concept of Messiah to include a figure like Jesus; it also establishes him as the prototype. But it is crucial to note that the re-conception of the categorization is brought about by the blend; the blend does not arise because of changes in categorization. Consequently, from one perspective, the blend is neither literal nor figurative. The blend is not literal, in one sense of that term, because the blend radically reconfigures and re-maps the conventional understandings of Jesus and the whole world of understandings associated with messianic expectation. The blend is not figurative, in the usual sense of that term, because it creates a conceptual space in which it is semantically proper, logically warranted, and factually the case to say that Jesus *is* the Messiah. But from another perspective, the blend is literal and figurative all the way down: that is to say, it is both literal and figurative in the sense that the blend prompts for a new understanding of what is *actual* (one meaning of literal) by *altering* and *extending* conventional frames and networks of meaning (one meaning of figurative); and the blend is both literal and figurative *all the way down* because the blend itself creates the emergent conceptual space for this new, actual, altered and extended meaning that would not be available otherwise.

## 5 A distinct frame for God and creatures

The same sort of tectonic blending is entailed in conceiving the relationship between God and creatures. Recall that Sanders concludes that the anthropogenic character of human thought means that God and creatures share the same frame. He takes this to entail not only that knowledge arises from our “embodied mental tools as we interact with realities”<sup>45</sup> but that this also “entail[s] that God has some characteristics in common with creatures.”<sup>46</sup> He argues that “if God has nothing in common with anything in creation, then our cognitive tools are useless and we can have no understanding of God.”<sup>47</sup> This reasoning underestimates the reach and plasticity of human understanding. Our ability to think about God's transcendence does not have to be compromised so completely because of the anthropogenic character of human thought. The subtle use of double-scope blends gives human thought the capacity to grasp at God without getting God within its grasp. It is possible to put God in a humanly accessible frame without requiring that there are

<sup>45</sup> Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, 262.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



some straightforwardly specifiable characteristics in common between God and humanity.

St. Thomas’s treatment of God’s simplicity offers an illustration of how this is possible.<sup>48</sup> Aquinas asks whether God can be located semantically the way other realities can? Is God a body? Is God composed of matter and form? of substance and accidents? Is there any way in which God is composite or enters into compositeness with other things? As David Burrell has pointed out “in one article after another, Aquinas monitors each possible way to get hold of something: locating an object in space and time or saying anything about it.”<sup>49</sup> The upshot, Burrell claims, is that for Aquinas “God escapes our grasp on every count.”<sup>50</sup> In the case of every other reality (whether physical, mental, real, or imaginary), one can locate the thing and speak about it as a composite of matter and form, accidents and substance, potency and act, genus and species, or form and *esse*. God does not fit into any of these categories. God is beyond this sort of description. But Aquinas anticipated and shared cognitive linguistics’ conviction that human thinking is inherently anthropogenic: the categories he listed were the only tools available in his world for talking about anything at all, God included. If we follow Burrell’s urging and watch how Aquinas uses language when he affirms “God is simple,” it becomes evident that Aquinas is articulating a double-scope blend to prompt for an understanding that reaches beyond the categories available in his world of thought. The blend (figure 4) does not describe a feature or characteristic of God that we can directly grasp or comprehend. It does not enable us to fit God into the categories used to speak of every other reality. For Aquinas attributing “simplicity” to God does not designate a description, like hardness, height or color. Even though the term “simplicity” is a substantive and thus sounds like a quality or description of God, Aquinas uses the term as shorthand for denying that any substantives, at least as we know them, can apply to God except in this very indirect way. Both input spaces presume the metaphor PREDICATION IS A FORM OF CONTAINMENT but the effect of predicating “simplicity” in the blend is to use a substantive in a way that denies substantives can apply to God.

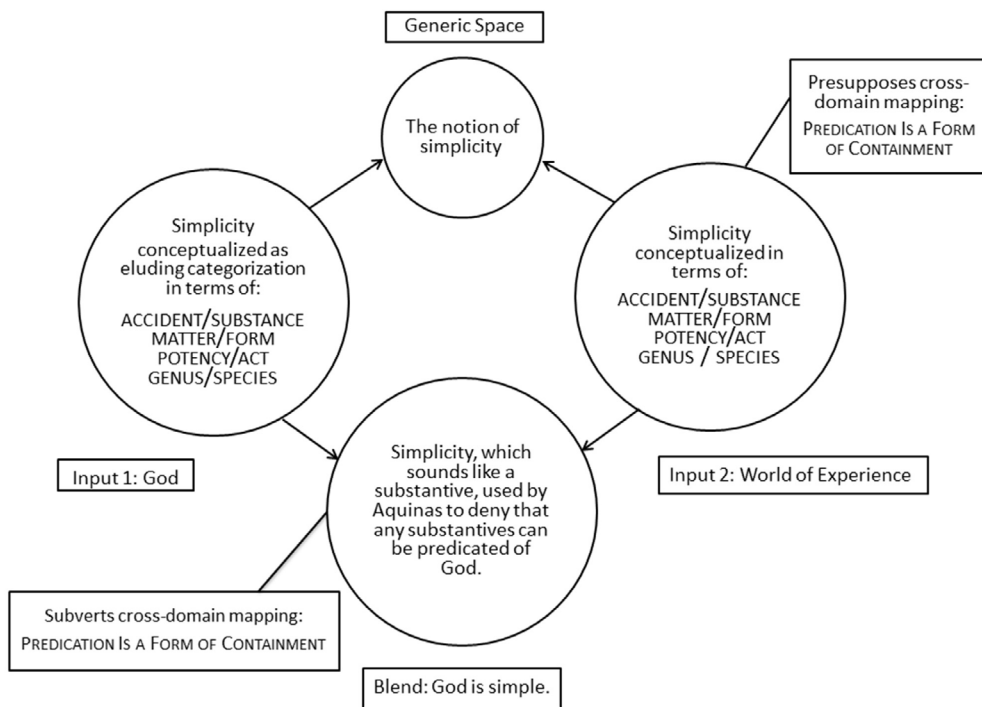


Figure 4. Cognitive mapping of Aquinas’s blend: GOD IS SIMPLE

<sup>48</sup> I am drawing on David Burrell account of Aquinas’s thinking in *Aquinas: God and Action*, though Burrell does not make the connection with cognitive linguists’ blending theory.

<sup>49</sup> Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action*, 18-19.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

So, the “simplicity” that Aquinas attributes to God, although related to “simplicity” as it is known in this world, is at the same time nothing like “simplicity” as we know it and experience it. To grasp the meaning and assess the truth of the claim that God is simple, one has to understand the new logic and way of conceptualizing things inherent in the new meanings for which “simplicity” in the blend prompts. Moreover, this blend, like the JESUS IS THE MESSIAH blend also prompts for a change of meanings in the broader fields of meanings (the two input spaces). Since the blend entails that it is entirely proper to affirm that God is simple; for Aquinas, God becomes the prototype of simplicity. He holds that simplicity and all other perfections are attributed to creatures only imperfectly.

This way of speaking of God has content, even though the content is apophatically elusive. This way of speaking is thoroughly anthropogenic. But the blend is not metaphorical despite its reliance on the metaphor PREDICATION IS A FORM OF CONTAINMENT. Still, it would be very misleading to say that God is literally simple or that divine simplicity is something like human simplicity. To the contrary, Aquinas’s careful demarcation of how God’s simplicity differs from creaturely simplicity is the conceptual prompt for the revelatory understanding that the blend aims to disclose. So, Aquinas shows that he grasps, at least implicitly, the inadequacy of metaphorical mappings based on the CONTAINER schema for conceptualizing God or making inferences about God. The way we conceive God is anthropogenic but differs from the way we conceive other realities. Aquinas is not arguing that God is beyond the usual means of categorization because he has been misled by the way our minds are structured.

There is no question that some readers might react to this argument with the response of some analytical philosophers that Aquinas makes a naïve category error here; that his metaphysics is language gone on a holiday. Rather, Aquinas is taking advantage of the way our minds are structured and stretching grammar to conceive God in a way that is consistent with the Christian tradition’s complex networks of meaning embodied in narrative, worship, doctrine, and historical experiences of wonder, suffering, and grace. While such skeptical readers would be inclined to suspect that Aquinas has been fooled by language and a metaphysical muddle, I am arguing that it is just as plausible that Aquinas, and the significant tradition he represents, is using language in a novel and tectonic way to prompt for new understanding that skeptical readers either refuse to accept or “do not get” (the way one can hear and understand the words of a joke, but not “get it”). Prompting for new meaning in no way guarantees that the prompt will be grasped, understood, or accepted.

The same sort of tectonic blend is entailed in Aquinas’s affirmation that in God essence and *esse* are identical. Although Aquinas’s blend presupposes the metaphor CATEGORIES ARE CONTAINERS, the blend itself is tectonic because it subverts the metaphor in a way which prompts for new understanding. The act of assertion (affirming that something exists) is logically different from predication (affirming that something has this or that quality). When we say that something is, that it exists, we are not describing any particular feature of the reality. In affirming that God’s essence is “to be,” Aquinas is not giving us a description of God in the ordinary sense of things, because “to be” is not a thing or predicate in the ordinary sense. Saying that God’s nature is “to be” does not give us a definition or grasp of God’s nature. What “to be” signifies cannot be grasped directly in a concept. Nevertheless, the grammatical analogy between asserting things “to be” and affirming predicates of things, enables Aquinas to stretch predication and to *generate* a “substantive” for God.<sup>51</sup> But the blend does not reify God. It does not conceptualize God as some “thing” or substance that we can reach through normal modes of predication.

In employing this structural analogy, Aquinas’s blend (figure 5) does not reduce an existential assertion to a predicative one. Rather, he extends language—he forces an equivalence between the logic of asserting and the logic of predicating—to display and speak of what is beyond language’s grasp. Aquinas is not speaking metaphorically when he says God’s essence is Being Itself. Again, we could put this misleadingly and say that Aquinas means this literally. It is more helpful, however, to stick close to his Latin, *proprie*, and say that for Aquinas this affirmation is properly predicated of God. The blend is a proper predication because of the way it effects a tectonic change in our fields of meanings. The blend between the language of assertion and predication prompts for a new way of conceptualizing God and making inferences about God.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 34-50.

As is the case often with conceptual blends, the tectonic force of the mapping is not necessarily conscious. It is likely that Aquinas was not himself conscious of the complex cognitive processes motivating his conceptions and inferences.

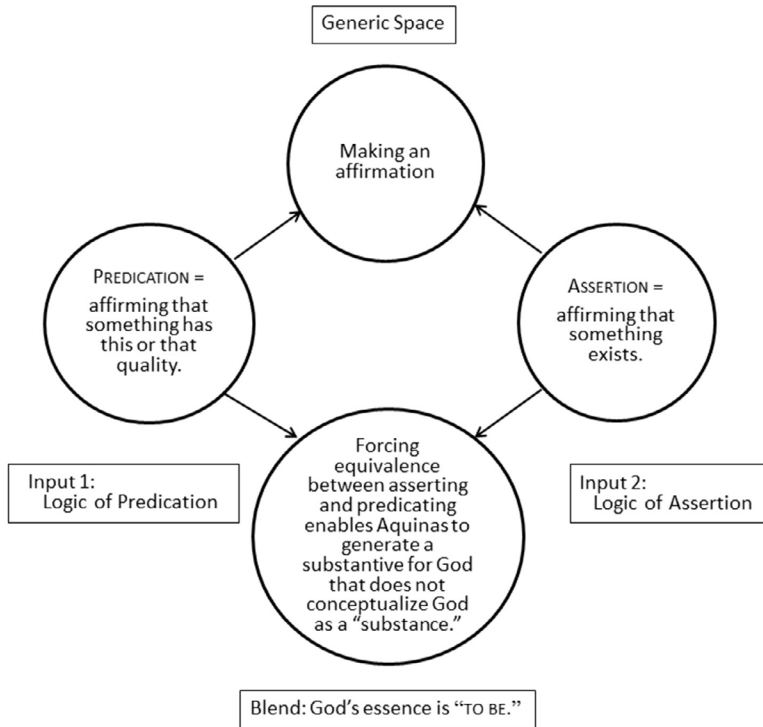


Figure 5. Cognitive mapping of Aquinas's blend: GOD'S ESSENCE IS "TO BE."

## 6 The need for distinguishing between the literal, figurative and tectonic

The most salient feature of the double-scope blends JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, GOD IS SIMPLE, and GOD'S ESSENCE IS "TO BE", and similar ones, is not whether they are *literal* or *figurative*. The most salient feature is *how* these blends *prompt for new understanding*. This is what Fauconnier and Turner find so crucial about the human capacity for double-scope conceptual blends: the capacity gives human understanding an extraordinary open-ended equipotentiality to create and manipulate new conceptual networks. Languages, cultures, the sciences, and religions have been built up over generations through the cobbling and sculpting of such integration networks. These are never built entirely from scratch and on the fly. Nor are they ever entirely pre-existing conventional structures. It is always a mix of both. Cultures build networks over long periods of time and these are transmitted over generations. Each generation builds on previous integrations that have become conventional and each adds new novel mappings and compressions. Fauconnier and Turner argue that "for any situation, real or imaginary, there is always a way to use language to express thoughts about that situation."<sup>52</sup> This is what distinguishes the acquisition of new data, or even new ideas, within an existing network of meanings, from the emergence of new understanding. This is what distinguishes human cognition and language from the abilities observed in chimpanzees like Kanzi who can acquire a limited vocabulary but who do not have the higher-level capacity for conceptual blending that can compress and decompress elaborate networks of meaning which are so much more capacious than a chimp's univocal vocabulary and within which new understandings can develop so equipotentially. The

<sup>52</sup> Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 179.

chimpanzee could never develop or manage a univocal vocabulary large enough to match the child's capacity and efficiency with multi-scope blends. The computing demands on such a univocal vocabulary would be astounding. Because of this capacity, a child's use of words looks entirely different from Kanzi's. As Fauconnier and Turner put it, "there is apparently no limit to the child's rapid acquisition of new words and to their very wide application, and the child is constantly using words of everything and everybody she encounters."<sup>53</sup> The capacity for multi-scope blending enables the child's understanding, imagination, and own intellectual capacity to grow exponentially within the conceptual networks of his or her culture. Tectonic blends of this sort:

- prompt for significant changes in a larger network of meanings,
- are rooted in prior, conventional inputs but genuinely transcend them,
- result in the creation of new knowledge and understanding that otherwise would be unthinkable,
- create the possibility for inferences that otherwise would be inconceivable,
- make assertions that are semantically proper, logically warranted, and factually the case, and
- require thick contextual interpretation because the new meanings and inferential possibilities are a function of each blend's construction; the blends cannot be read as straightforwardly either literal or metaphorical.

I have called this kind of conceptual mapping "tectonic" to draw attention to the way it creates new understanding, and to distinguish this tectonic mapping from the literal and metaphorical. Obviously, this is not a feature of all double-scope blends. Most double-scope blends do not have a dramatic tectonic effect. It is also evident that the degree to which a tectonic blend alters the related network of meanings can vary considerably both in substance and significance. Since conceptual networks can combine blends of various sorts in complex and elaborate ways, it is possible also for tectonic blends to have literal and metaphorical aspects as well. Finally, it seems likely that elaborate multi-scope blends could be tectonic without the mapping necessarily being double-scope. I have argued elsewhere that this sort of tectonic multi-scope mapping is implicit in the historical transition in the Scriptures from the metaphor SIN IS A BURDEN to the metaphor SIN IS A DEBT which Gary Anderson has traced.<sup>54</sup>

## 7 Conclusion

Multi-scope blends like JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, GOD IS SIMPLE, and GOD'S ESSENCE IS "TO BE" are prototypical of a tectonic way of conceptualizing and making inferences that is distinct from literal and figurative understanding. Hence my reservations about Sanders' suggestion that "the only real debate is which anthropogenic concepts we believe appropriate to attribute to God" and his way of arguing for the aptness of the conception of God as agent. I do not dispute that descriptively "God" is a prototypical graded concept with a broad range of meanings. Nor do I disagree at all that for Christianity, among many other faiths, the concept of God as an agent is privileged and proper. It is misleading at best, however, to say that in Christian understanding the concept is literal. God is *properly* described as an agent but only in a *revelatory new and extended understanding* of agency. The conception of divine agency in Christian understanding is part of complex, tectonic networks of multi-scope conceptual blends that have developed over centuries in the Scriptures, worship and theological reflection. An orthodox Christian conception of God's agency is very different from the ancient philosophical notions of a highest being or demigod, from the naïve anthropomorphic conceptions of God that are the target of the new atheists and other contemporary skeptics, or from the mistaken notion, among some Christians, scientists, and public figures, of God as the first and greatest agent in the chain of causalities studied by the various sciences.

One of the crucial insights of blending theory, at least as it has been advanced by Fauconnier and Turner, is the recognition that the emergence, analysis, and interpretation of conceptual mapping is considerably

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Masson, *Without Metaphor, No Saving God*, 86-89, 108-109.

more complex than early work in cognitive linguistics indicated. Sorting out such complex multi-scope networks and mapping them is no easy matter. That is why I have not attempted in this article to diagram how in Christian understanding human embodied agency is mapped to God's transcendent, super-natural, agency. The network of blends is far too complex and subtle for such a simple visual representation. One can schematically isolate suggestive illustrations of tectonic conceptual mapping such as the three examples I have given. But a schematic analysis of that sort can hardly do justice to the complexity and history of the scope entailed in the Christian understanding of divine agency. Rather, I suggest that dogmatic and systematic theologies are various maps that attempt to capture the complex networks of meanings that constitute the Christian tradition in both its richness and also its undeniable diversity. Robert Sokolowski in *The God of Faith & Reason*, for example, has made a particularly helpful contribution to understanding the ways in which the affirmation of Jesus's true divinity and true humanity brought about a fundamental shift in understanding that significantly distinguished the Christian conception of God as agent from earlier pagan and philosophical conceptions of God as the highest being in the world.<sup>55</sup> Sokolowski's extended analysis displays how this unique distinction generates, what from the perspective of blending theory, is a new logical and conceptual space for thinking and reasoning about God and about humanity's relationship to God. In effect, sorting out the implications of the central Christian blend JESUS IS DIVINE AND HUMAN forced the tradition, according to Sokolowski, to recognize that if God could become human in the ways Christians believe, *then God's way of existing and being an agent needed to be understood in a very different way than common sense dictates*. For this reason Sokolowski argues that the distinction between God and creatures is not like any distinction between creatures themselves. It is my contention that tectonic blending theory provides the vehicle for making this distinction and working out its implications. The doctrinal controversies of the first five centuries were effectively the community's effort to run this blend, that is to say, to work out from the prompts in the cascading network of multi-scope blends generated by belief in Jesus's humanity and divinity which blends (i.e., beliefs, doctrines, practices, etc.) made acceptable sense to the community's reception of Scriptures, worship experience, communal life, and theological reflection, and which did not make sense.

So, I do not dispute that God is properly thought of as an agent. If one is giving a theoretically satisfactory account, however, it is crucial to understand that "agency" is being used in Christian theology's appropriation of Scripture in a way that is tectonic, rather than literal or metaphorical.

The fact that Christians' unreflective language and thought usually lack such nuance and think of God in more naïve ways is beside the point. In most dimensions of our lives, it is simpler and more efficient to operate with fairly naïve common-sense understandings of things. Likewise, theoretical physicists also naïvely negotiate their day-to-day physical interaction with naïve common-sense, understandings that belie much of what they know to be the case theoretically. We can appropriate, use, and even create very sophisticated multi-scope conceptual blends without being conscious that we are doing so. Using such blends is not the same as providing a satisfactory theoretical explanation of them.

As Sanders correctly observes, considerable diversity has emerged within the Christian community in this process of sorting out their beliefs. If I am correct that the beliefs are manifestations of very complex multi-scope conceptual integration networks, then the "real debate" is not about which literal and metaphorical concepts to attribute to God. The real question is to determine *how* the various tectonic concepts prompt for new understanding, and *how* the various emerging understandings interrelate. Sanders envisions a choice between viewing God as an agent, as Being Itself, or as an apophatic mystery beyond being. Following Aquinas who affirmed that God is an agent, that God's essence is be-ing, and that God is grasped only analogically and with a great degree of apophaticism, I see these conceptions as inter-related, complementary, tectonic blends that are part of the larger network of meanings that constitute the Christian tradition as a whole. A tectonic approach seeks to clarify the new understandings which have emerged with each new blend within the Christian tradition, to clarify how these meanings qualify each other, and to determine if and where these blends give rise to genuine disagreements and contradictions that cannot be reconciled. Obviously, it is not my purpose to attempt an outline of this mapping of the

<sup>55</sup> For further discussion of Sokolowski's approach see Masson, *Without Metaphor, No Saving God*, 142-43, 240-45.

Christian conception(s) of God, but only to make the case for this different way of *framing* the question about conceiving God.

Progress in ecumenical and inter-faith discussion has been stymied because discussions about the meanings of literal and metaphorical claims and counterclaims has not probed the underlying tectonic shifts in understanding that is more often at the root of many of the conflicting claims and counterclaims. Blending theory can provide crucial tools for clarifying the theological confusion and misunderstanding caused by such tectonic differences in understanding, which are largely unconscious and unrecognized. Two groundbreaking examples of this potential have been demonstrated in Jakob Rinderknecht's analysis of "differentiated consensus" in the 1999 "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," and Stephen Shaver's dissertation on the neuralgic ecumenical issue of Eucharistic presence.<sup>56</sup>

Likewise, the emergence of the "secular imaginary," which Charles Taylor has described in *A Secular Age*, and which makes the notion of God as an agent seem grossly anthropomorphic to more and more in our culture, including believers, is partly the result of the pervasive notion that understanding is either literal or figurative. That binary choice does not do justice to what cognitive linguistics tells us about the complex multi-scope blending entailed in human understanding. Catholic thinkers, such as David Tracy, have sought for some time now to address the inadequacy of the binary choice between the literal and figurative by calling attention to the analogical imagination. There are some difficulties, however, with labeling the alternatives as literal, figurative, and analogical, as opposed to literal, figurative, and tectonic. The advantage of tectonic is that it calls attention to the prompting for the emergence of new understanding that significantly changes a conceptual network's frame of meanings. "Tectonic" aptly names what distinguishes this sort of conceptual mapping, from mappings that are literal and metaphorical. "Double-scope mapping" or "multi-scope mapping" are not viable alternatives for this purpose because double-scope and multi-scope mappings are not necessarily tectonic. They are also highly technical terms. The term "analogical" is not particularly helpful because it is too closely associated with Thomist metaphysics and with the now conventional contrast, which in this context is not helpful, between a Catholic analogical imagination and Protestant dialectical imagination. A good case can be made that both Catholic and Protestant imaginations are equally tectonic in the ways I have described. Analogy can have a less restrictive meaning. The cognitive scientist and the psychologist, Douglas Hofstadter and Emmanuel Sander, in *Surfaces and Essences* have described analogy as the "fuel and fire of thinking," which complements Fauconnier and Turner's conception of blending. Hofstadter and Sander's work draws on cognitive linguistics too. My concern, however, is that their use of the term "analogy," like the terms "metaphor" or "multi-scope," is on the one hand too broad to name the crucial distinction at issue and on the other hand too specific to the technical terminology within cognitive science.

Whether one adopts the term "tectonic" to name the distinction is not decisive. But there are at least five reasons why the distinction itself is crucial. Distinguishing between the literal, metaphorical/figurative, and tectonic is significant because conceptual mapping is multi-scope, not limited to the literal and figurative, as is so often assumed. Second, the distinction is significant because multi-scope tectonic mapping is every bit as pervasive and important to the way we think as literal and metaphorical mapping are. Third, the distinction is significant because tectonic mapping is a key conceptual process powering the disclosures of new understanding in religion, and also in science, technology and art. These human activities emerge from tectonic understanding, and tectonic understanding propels their further development. Fourth, since a mapping can be both tectonic and proper, it can be distinguished in a principled way from the sort of figurative, and not proper, tectonic mappings entailed in creations of the imagination such as unicorns, fairies, and Santa Claus. Fifth, the distinction is significant, because the ability of tectonic mapping to open up new understanding explains *how* it is possible to conceive God as an actual agent not of this world in anthropogenic concepts.

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<sup>56</sup> Rinderknecht, *Mapping the Differentiated Consensus of the Joint Declaration*; Shaver, "Metaphors of Eucharistic Presence."

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