I first learned about the cognitive semantic approach to metaphor when collaborating with K. Feyaerts on a contribution to the LAUD-symposium 1997 on "Metaphor and Religion" (Boeve & Feyaerts 1999). As 'metaphor' has become a central theme in recent theological epistemology, it seemed worthwhile to investigate the presuppositions, method and fields of application of cognitive semantics. The basis for my interest will be evident to any theologian: although we are increasingly attentive to the unnameability of God, and, in this regard, problematic the (cognitive) scope and significance of religious language, and of God-talk in particular, as believers we nonetheless continue to talk to and about God, thus attempting to express the kernel of our beliefs. What cognitive semantics has to say about metaphor may be a source to reassess from a theological-epistemological perspective the cognitivity of religious language. In the above-mentioned LAUD-paper, such an interdisciplinary reflection was started. In this essay I hope to continue that effort.

My perspective is neither philological, philosophical, nor exegetical, but (fundamental-)theological. One of the best definitions of Christian theology is captured in the Anselmian adage *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith-seeking understanding. Rooted in their particular faith traditions theologians seek to shed light on the attitude (*fides qua*) and the content (*fides quae*) of faith. From of old, and certainly since the insertion of Christian faith in the Hellenistic context, theologians drew on their historical contexts for new terminology and more adequate thought-patterns to pursue this task. Most often they used, as an exponent of the critical-reflexive consciousness of the time, philosophical vocabularies and schemes. This procedure is
reflected in another classical theological adage: *philosophia ancilla theologiae*, philosophy is the handmaiden of theology. The history of theology shows that, whenever historical contexts – and their respective critical consciousness – shift, theology is urged to recontextualise itself in seeking new linkages with contemporary philosophy, and, since the rise of the sciences, increasingly (but not exclusively) with the cultural and social human sciences as well (Boeve 1996a). It is from this perspective that a fundamental theologian is interested in the method and scope of cognitive semantics, namely, to discern whether its reflexivity could support a recontextualisation of theological epistemology: *linguistica ancilla theologiae*?

1. Religious language and theology in a postmodern context

Recontextualisation is not a theological prerogative but a basic structure of religion as such, and in particular of Christianity (and because of this, also of theology). For religious traditions are not static entities but realities involved in a dynamics of reception and (re)construction. In the dynamic interactive play of, on the one hand, contextual experiences of newness/otherness, and, on the other, traditional interpretation, religious language is recontextualised and begins to shift.

In Christian theology, this dynamic process is driven and legitimised by its religious critical consciousness of *deus semper major* which holds that religious language, on the one hand, bears witness to God but, on the other, is not able to depict or grasp God definitively. This consciousness is especially expressed in the traditions of apophatic theology (asserting that God is in the end done more justice by the negation of the images and concepts used to refer to God, than by their affirmation). Theology which forgets or refuses to take this apophatic consciousness into account results in idolatry.

Nevertheless, bearing witness to God with respect to God’s irreducible otherness, implies a discourse, implies language. There is no apophasis without kataphasis, no negation without affirmation. Moreover, within the apophatic negation of what is kataphatically given, the meaning of what is negated is not erased, but ‘hyperphatically’ transferred in an evocative discourse beyond kataphasis and apophasis, beyond affirmation (or predication) and negation. In other words: although religious language, and in particular God-talk, in no way reaches God in referring to God, it is not arbitrary but rooted in a particular tradition which is ultimately not grounded metaphysically. And precisely because of this traditional background, it can evoke God hyperphatically.1

1 *Hyperphasis* is a neologism, analogical to *hyperphatos*, which is derived from *hyper-phēmi*, meaning ‘above speech, ineffable’ (Liddell & Scott 1968: 1870). (*Hyperphasis* is also, according to Liddell & Scott (1968: 1864, 1869), an alternative for *hyperephynta*: ‘arrogance, arrogant behaviour’). To qualify theological discourse as hyperphasis starts from the awareness of the peculiarity of God-talk: although the theologian apophatically negates what is said of God
It is at this point, from a theological-epistemological perspective, that the question regarding the cognitive scope of religious language arises. In our post-foundational era this cognitivity seems no longer epistemologically bound to correspondence (the logical order mirroring the ontological order), nor merely to coherence (internal cognitivity without any referential structure), but is to be sought in the way in which a religious narrative organises itself, both contentwise and structurally, to express its relation to the unnameable God (cognitivity grasped in an irreparably broken referential structure).

How then, given this apophatic consciousness, does God-talk and, more in general, religious language, say something about God and the reality of religious life? And what sort of cognitivity is implied in this sort of discourse? With regard to these questions, the theory of metaphor in cognitive semantics seems to offer some interesting ideas and thought patterns for a recontextualisation of theological epistemology. First of all, we sketch the main lines of its approach, including its definitions of meaning and truth, and give a short account of the prominent place it gives to metaphor. Afterwards, we formulate in five theses the possible theological fruits of an intensive encounter with cognitive semantics.

in kataphasis, this negation is not an erasure, but rather, so to speak, a crossing-out: words, written on paper, when crossed out, still remain readable, and form, in their being crossed out, a new semantical item, which is not to be reduced to affirmation, or mere negation. Moreover a crossing-out cannot happen without these words, which through the negation function anew to refer to their ungraspable referent. Jean-Luc Marion, e.g., in his refusal to posit God onto-theologically, consequently crosses out the word God – in line with cognitive semantics is implied the concept GOD – to refer to the one who escapes this reference. In this way God-talk is stripped of its potential for affirming predicates of God. Cf. Marion (1982: 72): ‘De Dieu, admettons clairement que nous ne pouvons le penser que sous la figure de l’impensable, mais d’une impensable qui outrepasse aussi bien ce que nous ne pouvons pas penser ce que nous pouvons penser; car ce que je ne puis penser, cela relève encore de ma pensée, et donc me reste pensable. L’impensable, au contraire, pris comme tel, relève de Dieu même, et le caractérise comme l’aura de son advenue, la gloire de son insistance, l’éclat de son retrait.’

2. Cognitivity and metaphor: some perspectives from cognitive semantics

2.1. Cognitivity in cognitive semantics

Cognitive semantics teaches that cognitivity lies in the conceptual framework underlying our approach to reality, and not in a presumed determinate relationship between the logical and the ontological order (as in an objectivist approach). Knowledge does not mirror reality, but is located in the organisation of our approach to reality. Knowledge is a matter of understanding, i.e. of profiling, of categorisation and of imagistic reasoning (projection). Meaning thus is not objectively given but consists in what is meaningful to our lives, according to our (daily) experiences. Conceptual frameworks are experientially grounded in and, at the same time, determine our physical and social interaction with reality. Therefore, truth is not merely a matter of correspondence between a statement and a state of affairs, but mediated by our understanding both of what is said and of what is at stake. Because, however, according to time, place and culture, these conceptual frameworks can differ, truth claims are not as such

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2 For some relevant bibliography on cognitive semantics, see Boeve & Feyaerts (1999). For a short historical overview, see Sweetser (1990: 16ff).
3 I.e. qualifying by bringing to the fore, highlighting, certain characteristics of something, resulting in the fact that others only appear at the background.
4 I.e. structuring by family resemblances. Predicated categories, in this regard, are not properties intrinsically belonging to an object, but interactional properties, ‘that make sense only relative to human functioning’ (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 164).
5 I.e. organising by seeing one thing in terms of another – here starts the cognitive semantic theory of metaphor.
6 See Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 180–181): ‘On the experientialist view, our conceptual system emerges from our constant successful functioning in our physical and cultural environment. Our categories of experience and the dimension out of which they are constructed not only have emerged from our experience but are constantly being tested through ongoing successful functioning by all members of our culture.’
universally valid (nor are they arbitrary or subjectivist) but dependent on the cultural context they rely on.⁷

In general, one could argue that cognitive semantics takes into account a lot of what we have identified in the contemporary critical consciousness (although not to the same degree for each cognitive semanticist). Indeed, in *Metaphors we live by*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980: 181–182), two of the most prominent proponents of cognitive semantics, argue that

there is nothing really new in [their] account of truth. It includes some of the central insights of the phenomenological tradition, such as the rejection of epistemological foundationalism, the stress on the centrality of the body in the structuring of our experience, and the importance of that structure in understanding. [Their] view also accords with some of the key elements of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy: the family-resemblance account of categorisation, the rejection of the picture theory of meaning, the rejection of a building-block theory of meaning, and the emphasis on meaning as relative to context and to one’s own conceptual system.

Concerning the relation between meaning and language, one should distinguish between conceptual structure, semantic structure and linguistic expression. Meaning is, as said, to be identified with the rich conceptual structures which are in the mind of the language user. These conceptual structures cannot be fully caught in any way in the conventional semantic structures (conventional meaning) implied in linguistic expressions. The linguistic expression from my son, *I have the best mum in the whole world*, bears a surplus of meaning, contained in the conceptual structure *MOTHER* he has in his mind, which is not fully evoked in the conventionalised semantic value of the expression (*mother*).⁸ But it is by this conceptual structure that my son copes with reality, i.e. understands it, experiences it and acts in it.

2.2. Metaphor

Of special interest for the formation and functioning of conceptual structures is the cognitive semantic theory of metaphor as imagistic reasoning. Metaphor here is no longer perceived as a linguistic device, as ‘mere language’,⁹ but primarily as an *ever-present conceptual phenomenon* instantiated in linguistic expressions. Metaphor then is defined as the mapping of two concepts belonging to different knowledge domains. As a result of this mapping, one concept (the *target*) is structured (understood) in terms of the other (the *source*). A classic example in this regard is *ARGUMENT IS WAR*: the conceptual patterns involved in understanding the domain of *WAR* are projected onto the domain of *ARGUMENT*.¹⁰ Linguistic expressions instantiating the metaphor are, e.g., to *defend* one’s opinion, to *attack* the position of the *adversary*, to *win* or *lose* an argument. Looking carefully at our daily practices, one has to acknowledge that a major part of our understanding (and thus of our language) is structured metaphorically. Understanding, meaning, and imagistic reasoning here go hand in hand, and have immediate implications for our experiencing, interpreting, and engaging the ‘world’. It is obvious that a structuring of *ARGUMENT* in terms of *WAR* differs considerably from the mapping *ARGUMENT IS DANCE*. A lot of what is commonly considered to be ‘literal’ language, turns out to be instantiations of conventional metaphors: *I’m feeling down*, e.g., instantiates the metaphor *HAPPY/MORE/GOOD IS UP, SAD/LESS/BAD IS DOWN*: positive and negative feelings, attitudes, evaluations often are structured by means of this orientational metaphor (which is physically grounded [when one,  

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⁷ ‘People with very different conceptual systems than our own may understand the world in a very different way than we do. Thus, they may have a very different body of truths than we have and even different criteria for truth and reality’ (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 181).

⁸ The difference between conceptual structure, semantic structure, and linguistic expression is also represented formally. Small capitals indicate conceptual structure (*MOTHER*) while quotes stand for semantic structure (*‘mother*’). Italics (*mum*) represent the linguistic expression as a whole.

⁹ Classically, metaphors are considered a deviant use of a word to ‘produce a change of meaning that is based on similarities between things’ (Johnson 1981: 6).

e.g., pours water into a glass, the water level rises], and culturally accepted).

I add three observations. (1) Many concepts, mostly abstract ones, like TIME, LIFE, LOVE, GOD, are essentially metaphorically structured (A THEORY IS A BUILDING, TIME IS MONEY, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS A PARTNERSHIP, GOD IS FATHER). Because they are semantically non-autonomous, these concepts are metaphorically structured; they are understood through structures coming from other knowledge domains. (2) Moreover, because of their richness and complexity, they are often structured according to more than one domain. LOVE is not only a PARTNERSHIP (he invests in their relationship), but also a PHYSICAL FORCE (there is electricity between them), or a PATIENT (they had a sick relationship), MADNESS (he is crazy about her), MAGIC (she is bewitching), WAR (she won his love; he had many rapid conquests). Each metaphor highlights a particular aspect of our experiences and thought patterns about love. (3) Finally, in a (conventional) metaphor not every single element of the source domain is mapped onto the target. Only structures that are relevant as regards our experiences and interpretations of the reality mediated by the target concept are in use.

It must be emphasised that metaphorical mapping processes are experientially grounded; that they are motivated by the totality of human experience. In other words: semantically non-autonomous domains are ultimately metaphorically structured in terms of domains which are semantically autonomous; i.e. domains which receive their

structure from our concrete engagement with physical and cultural reality (UP/DOWN, THING). They are also culturally grounded: cultural sensibilities not only motivate the mapping process (TIME IS MONEY), but also influence the structuring patterns, figuring as source domains to be mapped on targets to be structured. The metaphor GOD IS FATHER, e.g., stemming from a patriachal context, will be structured differently in a post-patriarchal context.

Such an experiential grounding is a dynamic given, related to former realisations of conventional metaphors in ‘real life’, as in, e.g., social institutions and practises, rituals, narratives and myths.

Experiential bases and realisations of metaphors are two sides of the same coin: they are both correlations in real experience that have the same structure as the correlation in metaphors. The difference is that experiential bases precede, ground, and make sense of conventional metaphorical mappings, whereas realisations follow, and are made sense of, via the conventional metaphors. [Moreover,] one generation’s realisations of a metaphor can become part of the next generation’s experiential basis of that metaphor (Lakoff 1993: 244).

To conclude: such an account ‘of the cognitive activity involved in processing a metaphor’ accentuates ‘the true epistemological [...] significance of metaphor, namely, that it serves as a device for re-organising our perceptual and/or conceptual structures’ (Johnson 1981: 31). Metaphors do possess a cognitive status; they are not cognitively reducible to literal language. The seeing-as of metaphor is no longer a priori inferior to the seeing-that of literal language; in fact, a lot of commonly presumed ‘seeing-that’ implies ‘seeing-as’.

We encounter our world, not passively, but by means of projective acts influenced by our interests, purposes, values, beliefs, and language. Because our world is an imaginative, value-laden construction, metaphors that alter our

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11 Examples from Lakoff & Johnson (1980).
12 Examples from Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 49).
13 TIME IS MONEY does not immediately concern the fact that money is materially presented in coins and notes.
14 See Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 224–225): ‘our conceptual system is structured holistically in terms of experiential gestalts. These gestalts have a structure that is not arbitrary. Instead, the dimensions that characterize the structure of the gestalts emerge naturally from our experience. This is not to deny the possibility that what something means may be based on kinds of experiences that I have had and you have not had and that, therefore, I will not be able to fully and adequately communicate that meaning to you. However, metaphor provides a way of partially communicating unshared experiences, and it is the natural structure of our experience that makes this possible.’
15 See Boeve & Feyraets (1996: 25), with reference to the GREAT CHAIN OF BEING (Lakoff & Turner 1989), and ANGER IS HEAT (Geeraerts & Grondelaers 1995).
16 See Lakoff (1993: 244): a metaphor is realised when ‘something real is structured by conventional metaphor, and thereby made comprehensible, or even natural. [...] Much of what is real in a society or in the experience of an individual is structured and made sense of via conventional metaphor.’
conceptual structures (themselves carried by older metaphors) will also alter the way we experience things (Johnson 1981: 41).

3 Theological epistemology and the cognitive-semantic theory of metaphor

In view of the apophatic consciousness of theology, we formulate in five theses the possible theological fruits of an intensive encounter with cognitive semantics, in particular with its theory of metaphor. In theses one through four, we first sketch the contribution to be expected from cognitive semantics, and then point to the theological questions or discussions this encounter may raise. In the fifth thesis we elaborate further on the conditions of a theological incorporation of features from cognitive semantics into theological epistemology.

3.1. God-talk is in principle metaphorical

The translation of theology's apophatic hermeneutic critical consciousness into the language of cognitive semantics highlights the strictly metaphorical character of God-talk. The concept GOD, like all abstract concepts, is semantically non-autonomous – and this in the most radical way. 'God' does not evoke knowledge patterns of itself, without interference from other domains. Therefore all knowledge about God is constitutively metaphorical.

Of course, for almost all theologians this is not really new. However, the strong affirmation of the metaphoricity of all God-talk nevertheless poses questions to the claim that there would be an analogical mode of talking about God that is qualitatively different from the metaphorical mode of talking about God and possesses its own cognitive status. To predicate of God that 'God is good' or 'God is wise' (the so-called simple perfections), then involves another quality of cognitivity than 'God is a rock'. According to Thomas Aquinas, analogies are distinct in cognitivity because, relying on an ontologically ensured analogia entis, analogy of being, between creation and Creator, these so-called simple perfections (being good, wise, etc.) can be predicated more adequately of God than of creatures (which is not the case for 'rock'). Because all goodness and wisdom come forth from the Creator God, it is more appropriate to call God good and wise, than e.g. human beings, or animals. In the procession of being, the latter never can possess goodness and wisdom in the same degree as the source it proceeds from. Nevertheless, Thomas Aquinas re-affirms that in predicating to God that God is good and wise, our knowledge, grasped from the perspective of creation, in no way reaches God's essence. For, given the ontological difference between Creator and creation, it is only from creation, i.e. our human experiences, that we know what goodness and wisdom are. Nowadays such an ontological foundation of Christian God-talk is problematised, and thus, with it, the special cognitive status of analogy as well. In fact, the analogical mode can be clarified from a cognitive semantic approach of metaphor (or in these particular cases: of metonymy). GOD IS GOOD and GOD IS WISE both are metaphors (or rather metonymic patterns) mapping the conceptuality of the domain of GOODNESS and WISDOM onto the domain of GOD, structuring the experiences and interpretations of, and behaviour in, the relation of the believer to God (and God's creation). (The same is true for GOD IS FATHER, which, in Aquinas' opinion, based on scriptural evidence, is also an analogy, and in fact metaphorically structures the domain of GOD in terms of FATHERHOOD.) More generally, one could argue that, apart from such

17 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, Ia, Q. 13, art. 3, translation from Pegis (1945: 116-117): 'Our knowledge of God is derived from the perfections which flow from Him to creatures; which perfections are in God in a more eminent way than in creatures. Now our intellect apprehends them as they are in creatures, and as it apprehends them thus it signifies them by names. Therefore, as to the names applied to God, there are two things to be considered – viz. the perfections themselves which they signify, such as goodness, life, and the like, and their mode of signification. As regards what is signified by these names, they belong properly to God, and more properly than they belong to creatures, and are applied primarily to Him. But as regards their mode of signification, they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification befits creatures'; as quoted in Boeve & Feyaerts (1999: 158, note 5).
a re-assessment of the category of analogy, the redefinition of cognition positively re-evaluates the traditionally underestimated cognitive role of the metaphorical mode of God-talk (e.g. GOD IS A ROCK).

Moreover, the apophatic presumption, which Thomas Aquinas preserved in the analogical mode - i.e., no God-talk from the perspective of creation is adequate to signify God - is safeguarded and even radicalised in a cognitive-semantic approach. The highlighting of the non-autonomy of GOD criticises all attempts to hold any conception of God to be literal. In this regard, theologically speaking, one even should affirm that each conceptualisation of GOD, should, in one way or another, be accompanied by the consciousness that, in the act of metaphorical mapping, the target (GOD) constantly withdraws:

Our knowledge of God is structured from our experiences and socio-cultural contexts, which it reflects. As such, our established and conventional God-concepts do not mirror a God-out-there to be discovered in God's essence. It is also because of new experiences and changes in socio-cultural contexts that our traditional conceptualisations of God come under pressure and start shifting. God-talk and, more generally, religious tradition, are thus involved in an ongoing process of recontextualisation.

3.2. Tradition criticism: Mechanisms behind processes of 'literalisation'

In light of the aforesaid, it becomes clear that the theoretical framework of cognitive semantics provides theologians with some insight into the mechanism behind the ever-threatening processes of what might now be called as literalisation or objectification of religious metaphors. 'Seeing-as' is then mistakenly considered as 'seeing-that'. Religious imagery becomes descriptive language whose cognitive status is defined in terms of correspondence. In fact, in the course of religious history, Christianity has often been tempted to forget the structural metaphorical mappings underlying religious discourse. In this regard, cognitive semantics points to the experiential grounding of our knowledge system, and shows that in objectification the structure of the source domain of a mapping is taken to be the essential structure of the target domain. Prominent illustrations of this are to be found in the pre-modern ancient and Christian worldview of the Great Chain of Being (starting from God in heaven, and then coming down, via the angels to human beings, animals, plants, inanimate matter). This is a cultural model involving structuring metaphors which permit attributes and behaviours of higher beings to be understood in terms of attributes or essences of lower beings (Lakoff & Turner 1989: 160ff). In connection with this, one could point to the amalgamating of religious imagination and cosmology (e.g., angels being cause of planetary motion), and in this regard, to the spatialisation and temporalisation of Christian eschatology (the doctrine of the last things): in line with GOOD IS UP and EVIL IS DOWN, heaven is situated above us, and hell beneath us.

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that, in spite of the dismissal of the premodern worldview, to a large degree the GREAT CHAIN OF BEING is still metaphorically active 'as a contemporary unconscious cultural model indispensable to our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our language' (Lakoff & Turner 1989: 167) - and in particular religious language: its experiential grounding still

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18 It is in this context, at least for philosophers and theologians, worthwhile to consider the use of 'ontological' by Lakoff. This term in Lakoff, e.g. does not refer to the objective essence of things, but points to a set of structural correspondences in our experiencing of source and target domains in the metaphorical mapping (e.g. Lakoff 1993: 207).

19 The Great Chain of Being is defined as 'a cultural model that concerns kinds of being and their properties and places them on a vertical scale with "higher" beings and properties above "lower" beings and properties. [...] The Great Chain is a scale of forms of being — human, animal, plan, inanimate object — and consequently a scale of properties that characterize forms of being — reason, instinctual behaviour, biological function, physical attributes, and so on' (Lakoff & Turner 1989: 166–167).
enables us to understand – even when one does not objectify – e.g. the creed’s formula regarding Christ’s *descent to hell, resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven*, realising ASLEEP, DEAD IS DOWN and AWAKEN, ALIVE IS UP.

The same processes of objectification, however, are also at work in our so-called speculative or conceptual God-talk. Often theologians tend to forget that even the very fundamental theological doctrines GOD IS PERSON and GOD IS LOVE are metaphorical. One could argue that attempts by some theologians to hold on to the theological doctrine of God’s omnipotence, requiring enormous hermeneutic efforts, must be seen from the perspective of an objectification of a characteristic which is inherent in the LEADERSHIP-metaphors involving authority: GOD IS KING/EMPEROR, GOD IS LORD OF HOSTS, GOD IS JUDGE.

Seemingly, because of traditional conceptions of metaphor, there is a lot of resistance and ambiguity involved in qualifying theological discourse as metaphorical, although precisely here the hermeneutic critical consciousness of religion can operate at full strength.

3.3. Tradition development: the principle of economy

Referring to the principle of economy, cognitive semantics enables theology to clarify how with one and the same vocabulary many different kinds of meaning have been expressed throughout history. In view of the metaphorical mappings implied in religious knowledge, it is indeed relevant to perceive how the source domains were and are situated within a specific context, and how these domains have been affected by changes in the context. Such changes can be due to historical events and internal cultural shifts, but are also provoked by the mere translation of texts, as when concepts in the original language and their translations are not structured in terms of the same source domain. Both the metaphors GOD IS PERSON and GOD IS FATHER, for example, now stand for different conceptual structurings than before personalist philosophy and feminist critique of patriarchy.

A deeper insight in this principle of economy of course raises questions about the presuppositions of continuity and/or discontinuity in tradition development. Is continuity more than a matter of using the same vocabulary? And – regarding our next thesis – is discontinuity to be equated with the introduction of a new vocabulary (or the radical redefinition of existing words and expressions)?

3.4. Tradition development: recontextualisation

But the question of why the Christian tradition shifted can also be answered, at least in part, by a turn to what cognitive semantics says about how traditions develop, i.e., create new vocabulary, new thought patterns, and so on. As said above, a dynamic, contextually embedded interrelation between an established interpretation frame (tradition) and new experiences can be discovered as causes of shifts in religious tradition. This is seemingly paralleled in the cognitive semantic presupposition that metaphors, and thus also changes in metaphors, are motivated (because of their experiential grounding). In this regard, it is worthwhile to re-evaluate Sally McFague’s proposals for new models for God, based on contemporary sensibilities (GOD IS MOTHER, GOD IS LOVER, GOD IS FRIEND).

One major element in the development of tradition, where cognitive semantics can be of theological use is the translation of religious discourse from one natural language to another. A theologically relevant shift in metaphorical understanding of God’s relation to human beings has been investigated by Yri (1998). He showed that God’s activity in the Hebrew Bible was foremost structured in terms of military-political assistance in conflicts and situations of oppression, whereas in the Septuagint this military source domain was replaced by a medical one. GOD IS SAVIOUR then involves mappings from the source domain of PRESERVING IN GOOD CONDITION, PRESERVING OR RESTORING HEALTH, PRESERVING OR RESTORING LIFE. Theologically, this implies a very different understanding of God’s salvific relation to humanity, which becomes more spiritualised, individualised, and even privatised. Salvation is no longer socio-political but a matter of spiritual health; God is no longer primarily
perceived as the leader of the historical-political journey of God’s chosen people but as the doctor healing a patient.

It is against such individualisation, spiritualisation and privatisation of salvation that European political theologies and Latin-American liberation theologies have reacted. With reference to the Old Testament exodus-narratives of liberation they changed the metaphor GOD/JESUS IS SAVIOUR into GOD/JESUS IS LIBERATOR. For contextual reasons (massive poverty caused by structural injustice), political and liberation theologians thus have wished to highlight the socio-political and historical impact of the salvific action of God, and to criticise more exclusively spiritual conceptions of salvation such as spiritual health and eternal life. For the latter seem to have no (practical) consequences for personal and social welfare here and now (SALVATION AS LIFE PRESERVATION AND HEALTH vs. SALVATION AS LIBERATION FROM PRISON, SLAVERY, OPPRESSION, POVERTY). When one looks carefully into the criticism of liberation theology, voiced, among others, by Cardinal Ratzinger, one sees that it focuses on precisely this use of this exodus-motive (thus including the metaphorical shift), by reproaching liberation theologians for forgetting the universalisation and radicalisation of the exodus-event in Christian baptism (Ratzinger 1990).

Finally, we provide one last example to show that especially in the research of tradition, cognitive semantics offers patterns which are of use for theology: by its analysis of metaphorical mappings, it clarifies shifts or discontinuities in theological development. In Lumen gentium, the dogmatic constitution on the Church of the Vatican II Council, the conciliar fathers opted for another ecclesiological metaphor (the Church is the pilgrimage people of God), alongside the more traditional 'the church is the body of Christ', with the intention of understanding the nature of the church in a more human, communal and historical way. The metaphor CHURCH IS THE BODY OF CHRIST (LG 7) lends itself to a static and hierarchical ecclesiology (implying in fact the patterns of GREAT CHAIN OF BEING). CHURCH IS PEOPLE OF GOD (LG 9), on the other hand, stresses the Church’s earthly pilgrimage towards God’s kingdom, and better invokes the dynamics involved in LIFE IS A JOURNEY – or, mutatis mutandis, BEING CHURCH IS A JOURNEY.

3.5. An asymmetrical interdisciplinary approach: 'linguistica ancilla theologiae'

The analysis of religious concepts according to the theory of metaphor held by cognitive semantics cannot accommodate the ultimate goal of theology. The possible use of cognitive semantics in theology must always be theologically motivated, legitimated, and thus determined, or limited. Theology must not be forced into a spectator’s viewpoint on the language or reality of religion, but, explicitly starting from within a particular religious tradition and community, should present a reflexive participant’s view. Theology as fides quaerens intellectum therefore does not content itself with cognitive semantics. For the sake of theology, the latter is merely an instrument at theology’s service, a possible opportunity to re-assess the intellectus of the Christian faith in our contemporary context. Doing so, the striving for cognitivity in theology no longer regards the foundation or legitimation of Christian truth claims, but intends to establish plausibility and insight by revealing the conceptual structures involved in the Christian way of understanding. I will try to illustrate my point with some further reflections and examples.

First of all, although it is aware of its incapacity to grasp God and God’s salvation, theology rooted in the faith of a believing community (thus otherwise than cognitive semantics) remains interested in the objective reality of God and God’s salvation, which it professes. For cognitive semantics, whether God really exists or not, only the (experientially founded but, in the end, still internal) cognitivity involved in religious language and religious conceptuality is of importance. As a concept, GOD does not raise more difficulties than other abstract concepts as TIME, LOVE, IDEA, etc. In this regard, cognitive semantics holds a methodological agnosticism or atheism. Although their traditional truth claims in our postmodern context are highly problematised, theologians, however, will go on posing the ultimate question of

21 See Lakoff & Turner (1989: 211), pointing at the ethical, social, political, and religious consequences of the realisation of the GREAT CHAIN.
truth, and it is only in this perspective that cognitive semantics maybe can come in. This implies that when theologians make use of cognitive semantics, they will consider complementing this approach of cognitivity with what we have called a kind of hyperphatic cognitivity, seeing the cognitivity of religious language grasped in an irreparably broken referential structure.

Secondly, a theological use of cognitive semantics does not remove the need for theological interpretation, but rather enforces it. As a cognitive semanticist, Olaf Jäkel (this volume), investigated the JOURNEY metaphor in a biblical account of a life of faith. LEADING A GOOD LIFE is then MAKING A JOURNEY ON GOD’S WAY (implying e.g. SINNING IS DEVIATING, REPENTING IS RETURNING); LEADING AN IMMORAL LIFE, on the other hand, is WALKING EVIL WAYS. On the basis of scriptural evidence, Jäkel further distinguishes two paths (GOD’S WAY IS A STRAIGHT PATH; EVIL WAYS ARE CROOKED WAYS, FULL OF OBSTACLES), two kinds of travellers, and two ways in which God relates to the travellers (GOD IS THE GUIDE; GOD OBSTRUCTS THE WAYS OF THE WICKED). So far, this analysis confirms, so to speak, the importance of the JOURNEY metaphor in structuring our understanding of LIFE (here in particular, RELIGIOUS LIFE). But Jäkel runs into trouble when analysing the same metaphorical patterns in the New Testament, when the believer’s understanding of JESUS himself is structured with the JOURNEY metaphor, seeing Jesus not only as guide, but also as path, as gate: ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’ (Jn. 14:6). Jäkel (ib: 77) comments that ‘there is a strong sense of dissonance in these examples. [...] Surely the importance of Jesus for the believer is highlighted by these statements. But it may be that the conceptual dissonance is an intended one, the violation of ordinary metaphorical coherence hinting at the metaphysical, and indeed supernatural character of the whole enterprise of the religious life.’ But this, Jäkel rightly concludes, is a question left for the theologian to tackle. As a theologian I doubt whether terms like ‘metaphysical’ or ‘supernatural’ in our times cast more light on the analysed dissonance. However, the dissonance pointed to sheds light in a very particular way on the theological affirmation that the Christian message not only consists of the good news of the kingdom of God to come, as preached by Jesus, but also, after the experience of his resurrection, of Jesus Christ himself, as the mediator of divine salvation. For the specificity of the Christian gospel is precisely the indissoluble relationship of message and messenger.

As a third illustration, one can focus on the inherent, theoretically acknowledged relation between the cognitivity of religious language and religious critical consciousness. Hyperphatic cognitivity, e.g., becomes active, so to speak, when a reverse critical move is effectuated from the religious target to the original source domain of the religious language. When one understands GOD as KING, or as FRIEND, a religiously motivated critical consciousness becomes operative towards the source domains of kingship and friendship. The fact that some name GOD also as MOTHER, not only says something about the shifts in our context, but installs at the same time a religiously motivated critical consciousness vis-à-vis patriarchal societal sensibilities and structures.

4. Conclusion

In this essay we added to the great attention the category of metaphor already receives in linguistics, and in philosophical and theological epistemologies (G. Lakoff, S. McFague, P. Ricoeur, J.M. Soskice, J.P. Van Noppen, et al.). Many of our findings will not surprise most theologians, but are now available within a specific vocabulary and reflexive framework. This enables theology to pose some traditional questions and positions in a new way. For this tentative investigation into the theological relevance of the cognitive semantic theory of metaphor calls for a deeper research, not only regarding its theological usefulness, but as regards specific theological questions as well, such as the status of religious language, the nature of theological truth claims, continuity and discontinuity in tradition development, etc. I hope that this paper at least contributes to a deeper understanding of
the relevance of such an endeavour, not only for linguistic and biblical scholars (who seem to be convinced already), but also for systematic theologians.

References


