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Introduction

One might wonder what difference it makes whether we think of divine transcendence as God "above" us or as God "ahead of" us. It matters because we use these simple words to construct deep theological meaning. In this case, they are distinctive metaphors that lead us to very different ways of thinking about God's relationship to us. Those who think of God as above us tend to conclude that our language never "reaches" up to God, and so, God is fundamentally unknowable. However, if one thinks of God as ahead of us on a path, then, though we may never "catch up" to God, we know something about the direction we should go in and how to live our lives because we know something about God's leading.

One of the great worries of many religious thinkers today is that humans will fall into the trap of "making God in our image." It is often said that we must not use human categories and concepts to understand God. However, this book shows that we have no other choice than to use the mental tools available to us to think about God. Our human conceptual structures are all we have to understand anything, including God. The real debate is not whether we should use

human categories and concepts to understand God, but which ones we deem appropriate for God.

Plato and Christians such as Gregory of Nyssa have discussed which ideas are fitting to ascribe to God and which ones are not. Historically, Christians have affirmed different views about the nature of God, divine providence, sin, salvation, atonement, what is moral, and the nature of truth—just to name a few disagreements. Cognitive linguistics sheds light on why Christians sometimes reach widely divergent positions on important topics. One of the broader goals of this book is to introduce more readers to the exciting benefits of using cognitive linguistics. This field of study has already been applied to topics such as morality, mathematics, and music. The past decade has seen an increasing number of biblical scholars applying this approach to the Bible, resulting in some impressive work. However, hardly any studies of theological topics using cognitive linguistics have appeared. This book aims to change this situation by showing the value of cognitive linguistics for a broad array of topics in Christian thought. Though a number of ideas in cognitive linguistics are not novel, the integrated package of theories that connects to discoveries in cognitive science and provides principled ways of understanding conceptual structures (such as metaphoric reasoning) reorients how religious people understand the nature of meaning. Cognitive linguistics is a game changer for the way religious believers construct theological meaning.

Over many decades, a tremendous amount of research has occurred regarding how human minds make sense of our world and communicate this meaning. Cognitive science has investigated how the human mind works in interaction with our environment and some of this research examines meaning construction via language. Cognitive linguistics integrates what is known about the mind with how humans use language. For cognitive linguistics, meaning is something that takes place between minds. When we read biblical texts, for instance, this involves an encounter between ancient and modern human minds. Understanding language entails comprehension of how both writer

and reader are thinking, and the thoughts of both are shaped by human embodiment and cultural communities because human thinking is deeply dependent upon both the particular types of bodies humans have and the specific cultural communities we inhabit.

The stance taken in this book is that there is no human conceptual structure that is specifically designed for thinking about religious matters. There is no divine mental tool kit in our minds. Rather, the ordinary cognitive apparatus we use to reason about and understand mundane topics such as containers or family life is also used to understand religious topics such as God and salvation. This book examines how we use our everyday conceptual structures to think about God and religion. For example, we read that the ancient Hebrews were told to "give ear to the instructions of God" (Exod 15:26) and we have no trouble comprehending its figurative meaning. We do not pause to reflect that *ear* is used metonymically here to stand for the most salient part of the body used in the process of receiving communication. Metonymy is a common human mental structure that helps expedite meaning—in this case, by using a salient term to trigger meaning and appropriate responses. Much of the meaning here is left unsaid, yet those who possess the appropriate mental frames easily understand what is left unstated. We often construct meaning effortlessly despite the fact that complex mental operations are going on behind the scenes.

Let's look at a non-religious example. "We never open our presents until the morning." How did you, the reader, know what this statement means? The typical Western reader has no problem understanding that the sentence means that a particular family opens Christmas presents on Christmas morning rather than on Christmas Eve. But how did you know the sentence is about this when it says nothing about a family or about Christmas? The answer is that the words prompt some possible meanings and the human mind constructs the meaning which seems most appropriate. The meaning was selected from very sparse words and grammar by cognitive processes, which go largely unnoticed. This illustrates the important idea that language is the tip of an enormous

cognitive iceberg. Just as most of an iceberg is unseen under the water, so also, many of the mental operations that construct meaning go unnoticed by us, and these operations go way beyond the visible words and grammar. Cognitive linguistics seeks to identify and understand these largely unseen processes.

The title of the book includes two ideas fundamental to cognitive linguistics: embodiment and culture. Humans are embodied beings and the particular kind of body we have, with our specific sensory and motor systems, constrains our cognitive abilities. What we are able to perceive and conceive is deeply shaped by the kinds of bodies we have. Basic human notions such as up and down (verticality) and front/back depend upon the kinds of bodies we have and the particular ways we are able to interact with our environment. The implications of embodied conceptual structures are wide-ranging and this book considers many of them in regard to Christian beliefs and practices.

The other key idea from the title is that culture plays an important role in the construction of meaning. Though human embodiment constrains what we can think, cultures develop a plethora of variations within these restrictions. For example, vision is normal for humans and most languages apply vision to think about knowing (e.g., *I see what you mean*). Yet, there are cultures and languages that use smell instead of vision to conceptualize knowing (e.g., *I smell what you mean*). This book shows how Christians in different cultures sometimes read the Bible quite differently. For example, when contemporary audiences read in Genesis that "God created the heavens and the earth," we understand the word *earth* to mean a planet in a solar system. However, ancient Jews did not know that they were on a planet. We read the same text, but in this case, the meanings we create are not identical to those of ancient readers.

Metaphor plays a huge role in the book since metaphors and other types of figurative language are prominent in both the Bible and Christian discourse. This book emphasizes the cognitive nature of metaphor to construct meaning and truth (they are not simply rhetorical). Christian communities use metaphors to reason about

topics such as God and salvation. Just a few of the metaphors that biblical writers use for God are: father, mother, king, husband, friend, shepherd, rock, and she bear. Each of these metaphors has inferences that tell us about features of God and how God relates to us. Christians have developed various approaches to spirituality—in part, due to the dominance of particular metaphors in their community. A number of medieval mystics, for example, thought of God in terms of a spouse or as a mother and these metaphors yield important ways of living the Christian life, compared to thinking of God as a shepherd. The same is true for the topic of salvation. A few of the metaphors Christians use to understand salvation are ransom from slavery, adoption into God's household, citizenship in God's kingdom, healing, and the path of life. Each of these metaphors has different inferences about what the Christian life is about, which lead to various understandings of doctrines and spiritual practices.

Hence, metaphors matter; they are not simply rhetorically superfluous notions. For instance, in one of Jesus's parables he conceives of salvation as finding a lost coin. This metaphor brings out an important part of our experience of salvation but it says nothing about other aspects of salvation such as following God. For that, we need other metaphors. Paying attention to the metaphors and their entailments helps us understand why particular Christian communities take the stances they do.

Some Christian theologians and philosophers believe that metaphor should be avoided when doing serious theology. For some, the reason why is the claim that we should read the Bible "literally." Others suggest metaphors have to be "translated" into literal language in order to get to the truth of the text. This book provides both justification for using figurative language to think about theological topics, along with principles that guide the use of conceptual structures, such as metaphor and metonymy.

One of the reasons some scholars reject the use of metaphor is that they believe it does not yield timeless truths. The emphasis in cognitive linguistics on embodiment and culture leads to the conclusion that the

quest for timeless and culture-free truth is a dead end for humans. We need to be more circumspect in our knowledge claims. In contemporary theology and philosophy, it is common to hear that we need to exercise epistemic humility (modesty in our claims to know something is true). We can make truth claims, but we need to be aware of our finitude. This work examines the nature of our human-embodied mental tool kits and how they function in cultural contexts to provide reasons for epistemic humility.

One aim of the book is to show that from a cognitive linguistic approach, Christians should expect significant disagreement on theological and moral topics. Numerous examples disclose how humans share some general concepts, but these ideas receive tremendous cultural variation. Hopefully, awareness of the fact that on many topics, there is more than one legitimate way to construe a topic will help Christians see the need for greater civility in public discourse. This does not, however, imply that anything goes. This book is opposed to absolute relativism. There is truth and correct belief, but we typically cannot demonstrate the truth of our convictions in such a way that convinces everyone. This means that genuine dialogue and a willingness to listen to others is necessary.

Some key ideas discussed in the book include:

- Language is the tip of a gigantic cognitive iceberg.
- Human embodiment plays a crucial role in our cognitive processes, including our thinking about God and the Christian life.
- Reasoning about religious topics uses the same conceptual tools we use to think about non-religious topics.
- We use figurative language, particularly metaphors, in order to understand most of our really important religious ideas.
- There is usually more than one legitimate way to think about topics such as salvation and God. But there are constraints—it is not that anything goes.

- Cognitive linguistics notions of prototypes and exemplars are important for Christian moral and spiritual reasoning.
- God as an agent (person) is the default conceptualization for humans.
- Americans commonly think of God as either an authoritarian or nurturing parent and these two models lead to vastly different doctrinal and moral stances.
- Conceptual differences between cultures can lead Christian communities to give different meanings to biblical texts.
- Christians can legitimately expect widespread agreement on some general teachings, and then, cultural variation on most topics.
- Though there is tremendous cultural variation in concepts, there are some panhuman concepts shared by all normal humans.
- Christians have principled ways to revise or even reject biblical teachings.
- Christians should exercise humility in knowledge claims concerning a wide variety of topics.

A few words about the nature and construction of the book are in order. It is addressed to both the academy, and also, to the church. Though some sections are more technical than others, the writing attempts to be accessible to the broader Christian community outside the halls of academia. Next, this book is not intended as the final word on the subject, but the beginning of a conversation and a call for further investigation. When more people appropriate cognitive linguistics, there will be advances, updates, and corrections to what is written here. Though Part 1 provides an introduction to the basics of cognitive linguistics, readers are free to begin with those chapters of interest to them. If readers require more background to understand a section, they can read the more detailed explanations in chapters two and three. Next, sometimes the same topic is discussed in multiple chapters instead of in a single chapter, so cross-references are

provided to direct the reader to other places in the book where the subject is addressed. Finally, the book engages a wide array of conversation partners from fields such as biblical studies, theology, cognitive science, sociology, psychology, cross-cultural studies, and philosophy (both analytic and Continental approaches). What scholars in these fields say about the theological topics discussed in this book sometimes resonates nicely with a cognitive linguistic analysis and it is fruitful to bring them into dialogue. Cognitive linguistics is an extremely useful tool, but not the only one.

Chapter Summaries

Part 1 presents the basic features of cognitive linguistics used in this book. Chapter two begins with the importance of human embodiment for cognition and the creation of meaning. It argues that the meaning we create is dependent upon the kinds of perceptual and motor capacities available to us, given the particular types of bodies humans have. Meaning, for humans, is thus "anthropogenic" in that it depends upon our embodied cognitive capacities. The idea that meaning is contextual and that language typically underspecifies meaning is explained in order to get at a key idea in cognitive linguistics: language is the tip of a gigantic cognitive iceberg. These core commitments have led to the identification of specific mental tools, which are discussed in the rest of this chapter and the next. How humans form mental categories is discussed in light of prototype theory, which shows that humans typically categorize based on an exemplar/prototype that forms the center of a category, with members who are more like the prototype closer to the center and those less like the prototype further from the center. Finally, the role of frames and idealized cognitive models that trigger scenarios, settings, and gestalts for meaning construction is discussed.

Chapter three examines some of the conceptual tools used by all humans, such as image schemas (e.g., in/out, balance, containment, and front/back), which serve as basic building blocks for understanding. Three other prominent mental tools are metaphors,

metonymies, and blending. The key claim is that humans use these conceptual structures to think about and understand our ordinary as well as religious experiences. The chapter shows that much of our everyday ways of thinking about important topics in life are figurative rather than literal.

Parts 2 and 3 apply the ideas discussed in Part 1 to various theological topics. The chapters can be read in any order. Part 2 looks at truth, meaning, and morality in light of human embodiment and culture. Chapter four first examines the range of meanings of truth in both the Bible and Western thought to show that the concept of truth is polyvalent. Alongside the dominant Western understanding of truth as an object one can hold, Christians are encouraged to recover from the tradition the construal of truth as *walking in the truth* (a way of life). Next, the importance of human-embodied reasoning is used to argue that truth, for humans, is always species-specific. The way humans understand their world is not necessarily the way other species understand it. The implications of this for objective or "God's-eye" truth are explored. Finally, the debate about whether or not there are panhuman (universal for humans) concepts or whether all concepts differ across languages (linguistic relativism) is addressed. Cognitive linguists have identified a small number of concepts that all humans use and for which there are no known exceptions in any language. Significant research has been done on how various languages around the world construe time, so this topic is given special attention in order to show that some concepts are panhuman and not culturally relative.

Chapter five begins by contrasting a cognitive linguistics approach in which language prompts for the construction of meaning with views that claim that meaning is fully in the text. Next, the contentious literal versus metaphorical debate is examined to show that even those who claim we should not use metaphor for reasoning unwittingly use conceptual metaphors to reason about meaning. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways in which various Christian communities from Augustine to the present day interpret and deal with biblical passages they find intellectually or morally objectionable.

Christians have always debated which biblical texts they accept, which ones they revise, and which ones they reject. In other words, all Christian communities "pick-and-choose" the biblical teachings they affirm. They do so in principled ways, but Christian communities do not always use the same principles.

Chapter six explores moral reasoning in light of cognitive linguistics. First, the importance of embodiment on moral understanding is discussed. This is followed by an examination of key conceptual metaphors used for moral reasoning in the Bible as well as in American society. Recent work in sociology of religion is used to elucidate America's two main understandings of God as parent. The two ways of conceptualizing parenting lead to different values and priorities which operate in American religious and political discourse. Prototypes and radial categories are then used to explore topics such as what constitutes a lie and whether it can be legitimate to lie. Also, the importance of moral exemplars (instead of simply moral rules) for Christian moral development is discussed in light of recent work in cognitive science and philosophy. This is followed by an examination of the importance of cultural frames in moral discourse. The purpose here is not to argue for particular positions on moral issues, but to give insights into how legitimate differences on moral issues can arise. This helps make sense of the widespread agreement among Christians regarding some general moral concepts while explaining the significant differences in moral thinking among Christians throughout history.

Part 3 explores Christian reasoning about doctrines, how the Bible is understood, and how God is conceived. Chapter seven uses cognitive linguistics to explore a number of Christian doctrines. It begins with a discussion of the plethora of metaphors for sin and salvation in the Christian tradition. Each metaphor has its own logical structure with different inferences. No single metaphor captures all the ways we can legitimately think about sin and salvation. The same is true for the topics of divine judgment and hell. Understanding the frames and metaphors used provides insight into Christian debates about divine

punishment. The last section argues that prototype theory with its radial categories is a more fruitful way to approach the definition of Christianity than the dominant approach, which seeks necessary and sufficient conditions. It allows us to recognize the actual diversity within the Christian tradition while acknowledging central features.

Chapter eight begins by showing that biblical authors used the same cognitive processes that contemporary humans do, such as image schemas and frames Examination of how cultural frames shape the way people read the Bible is emphasized. The chapter concludes with a focus on how the concepts of anger and distress are understood in the Hebrew Bible and how the meaning of these concepts can differ between cultures.

Chapter nine argues that just as human reasoning about dogs, nations, and morality is anthropogenic (based on human embodied cognition), so is our reasoning about God. Human thinking about God makes great use of image schemas and metaphors. This is shown to be true even of those who disparage using human language to understand God. Also, different ways of understanding the nature of divine transcendence are discussed. It is argued that though some of our language about God is literal, most is metaphorical, and all is anthropogenic. The final section of the chapter integrates some of the work in cognitive science of religion with cognitive linguistics to argue that construing God as an agent is the default human conception.

Ultimately, this book seeks to advance discussions about how Christians read and use the Bible, reason about specific doctrines and moral issues, conceive God, and pursue truth. Cognitive linguistics offers significant, and sometimes, life-changing ways of thinking about Christian theology and it is hoped that this work will serve as a primer to engender conversations about this approach in both the church and the academy.