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Foreword to *Putting God on the Map*

Robert Masson

Marquette University, robert.masson@marquette.edu

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Foreword

Robert Masson

The chapters in this book graphically illustrate how the cognitive sciences' explorations of neural and conceptual mapping offer theology new tools for charting our fractured religious landscape. Like a handy theological atlas, the book provides "easy-to-read" explanations of the terminology and background for these innovative roadmaps. So, no introduction of that sort is required of me. Nonetheless, I am glad for the opportunity to offer as an initial orientation some reflections on the aptness of the volume's guiding metaphor.¹

Asking where we put God on our conceptual map captures a serious challenge posed by the pluralism and polarization that is reshaping our religious and cultural landscape. It is difficult to get accurate bearings on God, if we do not agree on what count as coordinates. Agreement of that sort is becoming more difficult to find within religions traditions, not to speak of between them. Part of the difficulty has to do with the seemingly huge fissures between different levels and contexts of understanding:

- gaps between the average person's world of understanding and academic theology's;
- disconnects between the type of thinking, argumentation, and presuppositions in theology and the methods of other academic disciplines;
- the chasm which has emerged between the academic and ecclesial settings;
- ruptures between divided churches, opposed schools of thought, and polarized subgroups within churches and schools of thought; and, finally,
- the gulf between the secular imaginary and the ways believers and religious authorities imagine things.

A further aspect of the difficulty has to do with the growing recognition that the pluralism of our religious, philosophical, and cultural perspectives is irreducible, at least as a matter of fact, if not in principle. None of our traditional theological maps accurately cover the whole terrain. Conflict between the maps undermines confidence that any of them truthfully depict the landscape. Fully and accurately charting the diversity of our religious topography calls for new kinds of theological mapping just as advances in medicine have required new ways of imaging and mapping the human body.

Herein lies the special aptness of the mapping metaphor: conceptual mapping is a central notion in contemporary cognitive linguistics that suggests a new way of thinking about religion and theology. As readers will discover in the book, if they did not already know, much of the research in cognitive linguistics upends the conventional notion that literal meaning is foundational. In this research, neural mapping is the fundamental model for thought, reasoning, conceptualization, and imagination. In the early stages in the 1980s and 1990s, cognitive linguists, particularly George Lakoff and a number of collaborators, sought to understand how meanings are mapped from “source domains,” which are more familiar and concrete, to less familiar and more abstract “target domains.”² This research has been extremely effective at clarifying a range of conceptual and grammatical issues that had previously resisted satisfactory theoretical explanation, such as how categorization works or how prepositions work across languages. According to this research, reasoning and concepts are not literal, abstract, and disembodied. Rather our conceptual systems and inferences arise from, use, and are crucially shaped by the perceptual and motor systems of our bodies and the neural systems of our brains. Hence, metaphorical mappings are not secondary and illustrative. Reasoning is guided by metaphorical mappings derived from our embodiment. This metaphorical mapping is a fundamental and pervasive feature of human thought and language. Physical motion, for example, provides the underlying conceptual mapping that guides much of our thinking about time, change, and actions. We conceptualize time as “flying,” as “ahead” of us, as “behind” us, as “stopping,” or as “going on” forever. We “move” through time. Time “passes” us by.

Lakoff and his followers concluded from their research that the imaginative aspects of cognition—metonymy, metaphor, framing, image schemas, and mental images—are crucial and primary, not derivative and secondary. From this perspective, objectivity, precision, and stability in cognition are possible, but literal meaning is not the default position or foundation. It is just the opposite. Words prompt for meaning rather than capture it. Language is an underspecified tip of a giant iceberg of underlying and mostly unconscious cognitive processes of categorization and metaphorical mapping.

Recent research in cognitive linguistics, particularly by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, argues that conceptualization and inference is much more complex than the earlier metaphorical model suggested.³ Conceptualization and inference are hardly ever the result of a single unidirectional mapping between a source domain and a target domain. Rather conceptualization and reasoning typically involve mappings that blend inputs in multiple and complex ways to create larger networks of meaning. Both our everyday and our theoretical worlds of meanings are built up over generations through the cobbling and sculpting of these networks of meanings. Fauconnier and Turner describe the most sophisticated kind of blend as a bi-directional mapping between multiple source frames. Their research makes a compelling case that this capacity for double-scope mapping generated human evolution's "cultural big bang" in art, religion, and technology 30,000 to 60,000 years ago. They contend that double-scope conceptual mapping continues to drive humanity's amazing potential for developing new understandings and new methods of discovery.

Blending theory provides a theoretical framework for explaining the largely unconscious cognitive processes underlying these conceptual mappings and networks of meanings. I leave it to the chapters which follow to describe in more detail how this mapping works and the implications for theology, mindful that *reading* maps and *comprehending their logic* is different than any *talking about* the maps on my part here in the Foreword. By way of anticipation, however, it is important to emphasize that mapping is not a univocal process and that some mapping is tectonic. The technological and medical revolution in imaging the body (x-ray, CT, MRI, PET, etc.) illustrates how there are many ways of mapping that often entail very different logics for their charting and interpretation. Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell's investigations of metaphor and the logic of discovery brought to attention the tectonic character of the kind of conceptual mapping that accounts for creativity in the arts, discovery in science, and the disclosure of revelatory possibilities in religion.⁴

What do Gerhart and Russell mean by tectonic? The most significant developments in science, technology, the arts, and religion emerge as the manifestation of dramatic and revelatory shifts in human conceptualization and inference. Such shifts yield brand-new ways of understanding, not merely new data or knowledge. Consider an example from science. There are significant differences between the discovery of a new planet, a black hole, and the theory of general relativity. In the first case, the discovery of a planet, new data is added to our understanding, but our way of understanding the constituents of the universe is not altered. In the case of black holes, there is a metaphorical mapping and imaginative extension of the category of cosmic

entities to include something in addition to planets and empty space. In this case, it is not just a matter of new data. Here we have added a new category, not just a new constituent of the prior categories. So, we have expanded our knowledge of the constituents of the universe. But a far more fundamental shift in understanding is brought about by Einstein's theoretical "discoveries." His theoretical discoveries 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. Here we are talking about a brand-new way of understanding, rather than new data, or an expansion of knowledge.

God-talk emerges as the manifestation of this sort of dramatic and revelatory shift in human conceptualization and inference. The study of religion and theology has as much to do with clarifying such shifts in understanding as it does with the acquisition of new information. Religion can be understood as living with the disclosure of a particular tectonic understanding and mapping. The scriptures narrate the tectonic understanding and its origins. Doctrine conceptualizes the tectonic understanding as various beliefs. Commandments and other prescribed behaviors spell out the implications of the tectonic understanding for our comportment. Rituals, dance, song, and other arts are symbolic expressions of the tectonic understanding. Catechisms outline the basics or parameters of the tectonic understanding. Theology can be thought of as the effort to make sense of the revelatory understanding in terms of its tectonic and novel mapping, rather than in terms of something else, such as psychology, sociology, history, or philosophy, which is the task of religious studies.

Considerable confusion about God-talk, objections to its validity, and disagreement between faiths and schools of thought can be clarified by more carefully attending to the conceptual mapping of our religious discourse and theological argumentation. It would be quixotic to imagine that the insights and tools of cognitive linguistics by themselves will transform how God is put on the map or resolve the challenges posed by the pluralism and polarization that is reshaping our religious and cultural landscape. But the approach nevertheless has significant potential. Let me give some examples. Earlier I mentioned the gaps between the average person's world of understanding and academic theology's and between the secular imaginary and the ways believers and religious authorities imagine things. A crucial factor in both is an eclipse of tectonic understanding. Instead we have the pervasive notion that understanding is either literal or figurative. This binary choice does not indicate a complete loss of metaphorical, symbolic, and analogical thinking. Rather it conceals the legitimate claims of tectonic understanding by diminishing it as an entirely subjective, relative, and "merely" figurative way of making sense of the world and expressing truth about it. The average person

has little background or patience for traditional metaphysical explanations, such as the doctrine of analogy, or for theological discourses on religious epistemology. Nor is the average person much influenced by the authority or pronouncements of philosophers, theologians, and religious leaders on such matters. Moreover, there are a good number of the latter who also frame theological arguments as true either literally or figuratively without entertaining the possibility of a conceptual mapping that is semantically proper, logically warranted, and factually the case, but neither literal nor figurative in the narrower conventional senses.⁵ The average person, however, does give some credit, whether for good or bad, to the findings of the sciences. George Lakoff and collaborators such as Fauconnier and Turner have shown that it is possible to reach relatively broad audiences with their research. So, it is not unreasonable to hope that theological appropriations of blending theory's insights focused on concrete and familiar illustrations could help address the eclipse of tectonic understanding. The chapters in this book help to move that project forward.

Likewise, conceptual mapping has exceptional potential for clarifying the ruptures between divided churches and opposed schools of thought. 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.⁶ Both have contributed essays to this volume.

Finally, an examination of theology and conceptual mapping can play a significant role in addressing the gap between theology and other academic disciplines. In making this claim I agree in part with Edward Slingerland's argument in *What Science Offers the Humanities*⁷ that conceptual mapping provides objective analytical tools for making sense of religious conceptions and the logic of theological inferences. I also agree that while these tools are exceptionally helpful in clarifying the meaning and inferential logic of religious discourse, these means cannot settle issues about their truth, for which other kinds of argumentation are necessary. I take strong exception, however, to Slingerland's Darwinist rejection of meaningful God-talk. Slingerland fails to credit blending theory's account of how new tectonic understanding emerges in religion as well as in the sciences.⁸ In any case, conceptual mapping provides common ground for significant engagement between theology and the sciences as several chapters in this book also illustrate.

In sum, "putting God on the map" is no simple matter today because there are so many seemingly conflicting theological "maps" and religious "territories" before us. This volume is a wonderfully accessible introduction to some

of the ways blending theory, and cognitive science more generally, can help us to more clearly think about what we are doing when we think about God and religion. In doing so, it will hopefully help foster a better conversation about the God who is charted by this richness of maps.

NOTES

1. My comments anticipate notions that the contributors more fully explain, nuance, illustrate, and document in the chapters that follow and for which I have provided more detailed arguments in my own publications.

2. The chapters which follow will provide citations for key books by Lakoff and colleagues and introductions to their main ideas, as well as references to the overviews provided in John Sanders's book and mine.

3. The key work is Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

4. Mary Gerhart and Allan Melvin Russell, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1984); *New Maps for Old: Explorations in Science and Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

5. For more on this see my "Conceiving God: Literal and Figurative Prompt for a More Tectonic Distinction," *Open Theology* 4, no. 1 (2018).

6. Jakob Karl Rinderknecht, *Mapping the Differentiated Consensus of the Joint Declaration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), and Stephen Shaver, "Metaphors of Eucharistic Presence: A Cognitive Linguistics Approach to an Ecumenical Theology of Bread, Wine, and the Body and Blood of Christ" (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union Berkeley, 2017).

7. Edward Slingerland, *What Science Offers the Humanities*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

8. See my "What a Theological Appropriation of Cognitive Linguistics' Blending Theory Brings to a Scientific Understanding of the Evolution of Religion," in *The Evolution of Religion: How Biology, Psychology, Theology and Culture Interact*, ed. Jay R. Feerman and Lluís Oviedo (Routledge, forthcoming).

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