




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Divine action in the flesh: A cognitive linguistic evaluation of Pannenberg's theology

Jacob Chengwei Feng 

Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, USA
Email: chengweifeng@fuller.edu

(Received 17 July 2024; revised 5 October 2024; accepted 26 October 2024)

Abstract

This paper aims to examine Wolfhart Pannenberg's theology of divine action using the conceptual framework of cognitive linguistics. Central to this exploration is Pannenberg's use of the scientific concept of force field in an analogical/metaphorical way, enabling him to present a trinitarian-pneumatological understanding of divine action through divine omniscience and omnipresence. This paper argues that, despite justified criticisms of Pannenberg's reliance on Faraday's outdated concept of a universal force field, recent developments in cognitive linguistics affirm the legitimacy of Pannenberg's panentheistic metaphorical approach to the theology of divine action while calling for revisions.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics; divine action; metaphor; Spirit; Wolfhart Pannenberg

In his three-volume *Systematic Theology*, Wolfhart Pannenberg offers a robust doctrine of divine action by interweaving theology and science together.¹ Although this doctrine has been extensively studied in recent decades,² few, if any, have examined his theology from the perspective of cognitive science or the science of the mind.³ This paper intends to address that gap. In it I argue that recent advancements in cognitive linguistics affirm the theological value of Pannenberg's creative deployment of field as a metaphor for the Spirit and validate his panentheistic thought while critiquing his opposition to anthropomorphism.

The paper is structured into three main sections. First, it offers an assessment of Pannenberg and his critics with regards to his presentation of the Spirit as a field of force. Second, it scrutinises Pannenberg's creative deployment of field as a metaphor

¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991–1998), 1:384–96, 418–38.

²See e.g. Lou Ann Trost, 'Non-interventionist Divine Action: Robert Russell, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and the Freedom of the (Natural) World', in Ted Peters and Nathan Hallanger (eds), *God's Action in Nature's World* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 205–16.

³For an introduction to cognitive science, see José Luis Bermúdez, *Cognitive Science: An Introduction to the Science of the Mind*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: CUP, 2020).

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

for the Holy Spirit from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory. Third, the paper delves into Pannenberg's panentheistic and anti-anthropomorphic reflections on divine action, drawing from the science of the mind. Third, building upon the aforementioned analysis of Pannenberg's theology of divine action, the paper presents critical implications for a constructive theology of divine action in the flesh.

Reevaluating Pannenberg's thought on 'the Spirit as a field of force'

Cognitive linguistics initially emerged in response to Noam Chomsky's theories, which proposed that the brain possessed inherent, abstract grammatical knowledge and that this language module was separate from our general cognitive abilities.⁴ In contrast, cognitive linguists such as Ronald W. Langacker,⁵ George Lakoff⁶ and Leonard Talmy⁷ argued that language representations develop through use and are acquired via general cognitive abilities.⁸ Cognitive linguistics has the potential to provide insights into religious thought, including how religious believers perceive the world, how human construals of the world take shape and how these construals both differ from each other and share commonalities.⁹ John Sanders views cognitive linguistics as a game changer for how religious believers construct theological meaning.¹⁰ He maintains that the core concepts of cognitive linguistics, embodiment and culture have far-reaching implications for Christian beliefs and practices.¹¹ Sanders also emphasises that by underscoring the cognitive nature of metaphor in constructing meaning and truth (they are not simply rhetorical), metaphors and other types of figurative language play a prominent role in both the Bible and Christian discourse.¹²

Pannenberg's concept of divine action involves 'the self-actualization of God in his relation to creation', which is of interest to cognitive linguistics.¹³ The aspects of Pannenberg's thoughts on divine action that demand a cognitive linguistic analysis are his trinitarian understanding in general and his metaphorical understanding of

⁴See e.g. Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton, 1957); Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965).

⁵Ronald W. Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Theoretical Prerequisites*, 2 vols. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

⁶George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁷Leonard Talmy, *Toward a Cognitive Semantics: Typology and Process in Concept Structuring*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

⁸For a summary of their position, see Clay Beckner et al., 'Language Is a Complex Adaptive System [Position Paper]', *Language Learning* 59/1 (2009), pp. 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2009.00533.x>; quoted in Peter Richardson, Charles M. Mueller and Stephen Pihlaja, *Cognitive Linguistics and Religious Language: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 9.

⁹Richardson, Mueller and Pihlaja, *Cognitive Linguistics and Religious Language*, p. 11. For Justin L. Barrett, cognitive science of religion (CSR) developed largely independently of the much more established area of psychology of religion (PoR). Although sharing many points of overlap with PoR, CSR is different in that it primarily concerns group-level expression as its focal unit of analysis and not individual expression. See Justin L. Barrett, 'Ghostly Relationships: Differentiating Cognitive Science of Religion and Psychology of Religion', in Justin L. Barrett (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Cognitive Science of Religion* (Oxford: OUP, 2022), pp. 4, 6.

¹⁰John Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think about Truth, Morality, and God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), p. 4.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:386.

the Spirit as force field in particular. Well-known is Pannenberg's argument that the biblical notion of 'God as spirit' might have consonance with the current scientific view of life as the function of 'spirit/energy/movement', expressed in the concept of (force) field.¹⁴ Pannenberg states, '*The Spirit is the force field* of God's mighty presence (Ps 139.7)',¹⁵ which is a typical example of a direct metaphor, in which 'metaphor terms' ('Spirit' and 'force field' in this case) 'are tied by a syntagmatic relation, and they are therefore both present in the text'.¹⁶

However, in deploying language in this way, Pannenberg himself may not always recognise that he is proposing an innovative metaphor for the Spirit of God. This can be seen from his efforts to justify this language by reference to modern physics, as illustrated by his claim 'that the biblical statements about the Spirit of God are much closer than the classical idea of God as *nous* to Michael Faraday's idea of a universal force field in relation to which all material, corpuscular constructs are to be regarded as secondary manifestations'.¹⁷

Erwin Morales examines the criticisms of Pannenberg's utilisation of the concept of field by various theologians and physicists, including John Polkinghorne,¹⁸ Stephen M. Barr,¹⁹ Jeffrey S. Wicken²⁰ and Amos Yong,²¹ as well as Pannenberg's responses to some of these criticisms.²² According to Morales, some of these criticisms reflect a misunderstanding of Pannenberg's intentions. At the same time, Morales criticises Pannenberg by stating that '[t]he problem with positing a field of force as the Spirit's empirical correlate is that a field of force is narrowly defined and it is tied to a very specific theory'.²³ However, in all these discussions, both Pannenberg's detractors and Pannenberg himself have overlooked the fact that Pannenberg's deployment of field of force for the Spirit in divine action is a typical example of employing metaphors

¹⁴Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'God as Spirit – and Natural Science', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 36/4 (2001), pp. 783–94.

¹⁵Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:382 (emphasis added).

¹⁶For instance, by comparing a surgeon to a butcher, 'This surgeon is a butcher', a speaker uses both words, 'surgeon' and 'butcher' in their literal meaning, and may indicate the metaphorical comparison between them through linguistic signals like 'is a', or 'is like a'. See Marianna Bolognesi and Ana Horvat Werkmann, *The Metaphor Compass: Directions for Metaphor Research in Language, Cognition, Communication, and Creativity* (New York: Routledge, 2023), p. 11.

¹⁷Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:383. At the same time, Pannenberg clearly understands the disciplinary boundaries between physics and theology, as illustrated by his admission that '[t]he principal differences between the ways of describing reality in physics and in theology prohibit us from offering a direct theological interpretation of the field theories of physics' (Ibid., 2:83).

¹⁸See John Polkinghorne, 'Wolfhart Pannenberg's Engagement with the Natural Sciences', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 34/1 (1999), p. 154; John Polkinghorne, 'Fields and Theology: A Response to Wolfhart Pannenberg', *Zygon* 36/4 (2001), p. 796.

¹⁹Stephen M. Barr, 'Theology after Newton', *First Things* 187 (November 2008), pp. 31–33.

²⁰Jeffrey S. Wicken, 'Theology and Science in the Evolving Cosmos: A Need for Dialogue', *Zygon* 23/1 (2001), p. 52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.1988.tb00617.x>.

²¹Amos Yong, 'Discerning the Spirit(s) in the Natural World: Toward a Typology of "Spirit" in the Theology and Science Conversation', *Theology & Science* 3/3 (2005), p. 320.

²²See e.g. Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Theological Appropriation of Scientific Understandings: Response to Hefner, Wicken, Eaves, and Tipler', *Zygon* 24/2 (1989), p. 257.

²³Erwin Morales, 'Vector Fields as the Empirical Correlate of the Spirit(s): A Meta-Pannenbergian Approach to Pneumatological Pluralism', in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Kristeen Kim and Amos Yong (eds), *Interdisciplinary and Religio-Cultural Discourses on a Spirit-Filled World: Loosing the Spirits* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 227–42.

to illustrate an abstract concept. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen rightly acknowledges the validity of Pannenberg's basic intuition, writing: 'In calling the Spirit of God a field, we are of course using a metaphor or analogy; this metaphor's justification has to be assessed against its general appropriateness, rather than on whether it exactly fits in all aspects of the scientific explanation.'²⁴

Cognitive linguists posit that metaphor is a matter of thinking, not merely a matter of language. That is, human beings deploy metaphors to conceptualise one mental domain in terms of another. Metaphors impose structure on thinking and allow one to *reason about*, not just talk about, one thing in terms of another. Metaphorical concepts are not limited to poetic flights of fancy but are central and essential to our everyday thinking. Metaphors are crucial for humans to articulate and comprehend abstract concepts such as time, causation and states.²⁵ In contemporary metaphor research, the input that provides the framework or structure for the metaphor is referred to as the *source domain*, and the input being examined is the *target domain*.²⁶ In this context, for Pannenberg, the source domain of the metaphor SPIRIT IS FIELD is field of force (according to Michael Faraday's field theory), and the target domain is the Spirit.²⁷

Furthermore, metaphors impose structure on our thinking by highlighting certain aspects of a concept and enabling us to reason about the 'target' using language and concepts from the 'source' domain. As opting for one metaphor may exclude the use of another, the metaphors in a given worldview will both highlight and downplay certain aspects of reality.²⁸ The source domain imposes a structure on the target, which allows one to reason about it in new ways. It may highlight, filter or select certain pre-existing and skeletal aspects of structure, but it can also impose new structure. Whether the composition works as a satisfying metaphor depends on the richness of the domains and the thinker's creativity, not on any pre-existing similarity between the two domains.²⁹ An example suffices here. Joseph Grady gives an example of a metaphor, ACHILLES IS A LION, which is motivated by a perceived resemblance, with both 'courageous person' and 'lion' mapping as specific examples of 'courageous being'. Even in what Grady calls 'resemblance metaphors', certain features are selected for comparison while others are ignored (e.g. the colour of the lion and its tendency to sleep all day are both suppressed).³⁰

²⁴Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, vol. 3 of *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), p. 66.

²⁵George Lakoff, 'The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor', in Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), pp. 208–9; quoted in Mary Therese DesCamp and Eve E. Sweetser, 'Metaphors for God: Why and How Do Our Choices Matter for Humans? The Application of Contemporary Cognitive Linguistics Research to the Debate on God and Metaphor', *Pastoral Psychology* 53/3 (2005), p. 215, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-004-0554-5>.

²⁶DesCamp and Sweetser, 'Metaphors for God', p. 216.

²⁷In cognitive metaphor research, the standardised notation for a cognitive metaphor is "'TARGET DOMAIN'" IS "SOURCE DOMAIN" in small caps.

²⁸Mark Turner, *Death Is the Mother of Beauty* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 19; quoted in DesCamp and Sweetser, 'Metaphors for God', p. 224.

²⁹Joseph Grady, 'A Typology of Motivation for Conceptual Metaphor: Correlation vs. Resemblance', in Raymond W. Gibbs and Gerard J. Steen (eds), *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics: Selected Papers from the 5th International Cognitive Linguistics Conference, Amsterdam, 1997* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999); quoted in DesCamp and Sweetser, 'Metaphors for God', p. 225.

³⁰DesCamp and Sweetser, 'Metaphors for God', p. 225.

In Pannenberg's metaphor, his critics (as well as himself³¹) have overlooked the fact that features such as the physical/material nature of field forces are suppressed. Thus, it is unfair to charge Pannenberg of 'physicalizing theology',³² and to claim that 'Pannenberg continues theology's long tradition of making itself vulnerable to scientific erosion by anchoring itself to physical cosmology'.³³ Equally questionable is Pannenberg's response that 'the modern concepts of fields and energy went a long way to "spiritualize" physics',³⁴ and that 'modern physics should no longer be called materialistic',³⁵ because (in a way similar to Mary Daly's famous claim that '[i]f God is male, then the male is God'³⁶) Pannenberg most likely assumes that if the Spirit of God is field, then the field is the Spirit. In this context, Sallie McFague argued that metaphor is a two-way street: both subjects involved in metaphor are changed when brought into relationship.³⁷ In the opposite camp, Roland Frye sees no reciprocity between the two subjects of a metaphor.³⁸ Eve Sweetser and Mary Therese DesCamp have decidedly refuted such a claim under the lens of metaphor theory.³⁹

Pannenberg's metaphoric deployment of field of force for the Spirit may not be as satisfying as Yong's suggestion of quantum field theory and Morales' proposal of vector fields. Therefore, there is a growing consensus in scholarly circles that Pannenberg's use of Faraday's concept of field as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit requires revision. However, the reason for revision does not lie either in Polkinghorne's assertion that Pannenberg uses an outdated field concept from the nineteenth century,⁴⁰ or Yong's scepticism about Pannenberg's use of field of force being able to withstand new developments in quantum field theory,⁴¹ or Morales' view that Pannenberg relies on a very specific, narrowly defined field theory.⁴² Instead, they bear the burden of showing that their alternative proposals are more satisfactory for understanding the Spirit's role in divine action by resorting to a *theory* in physics.

Despite the criticisms, Pannenberg's contribution to constructive/systematic theology should not be underestimated. By employing the concept field as a metaphor for the Spirit, he introduces into theology something that is 'substantive not figural, a

³¹In further justifying his adopting a scientific theory for theological reflection, Pannenberg resorts to 'empirical demonstration', but not a common feature of metaphor: 'We also see that the reality is the same because the theological (as distinct from the scientific) development of the concept is in a position to find a place in its reflection for the different form of description in physics, for which there can be empirical demonstration, and in this way to confirm the coherence of its own statements about the reality of the world'. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2:83.

³²Wicken, 'Theology and Science', p. 48. Morales agrees; see Morales, 'Vector Fields as the Empirical Correlate', p. 229.

³³Wicken, 'Theology and Science', p. 49.

³⁴Pannenberg, 'Theological Appropriation of Scientific Understandings', p. 258.

³⁵Pannenberg, 'God as Spirit', p. 788.

³⁶Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1973), p. 19.

³⁷Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1982), p. 38.

³⁸Roland M. Frye, 'Language for God and Feminist Language: Problems and Principles', in Alvin F. Kimel (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), p. 20.

³⁹DesCamp and Sweetser, 'Metaphors for God', p. 222.

⁴⁰Polkinghorne, 'Wolfhart Pannenberg's Engagement', pp. 151–8.

⁴¹Yong, 'Discerning the Spirit(s) in the Natural World', p. 320.

⁴²Morales, 'Vector Fields as the Empirical Correlate', p. 230.

matter of thinking rather than a matter of language'.⁴³ Additionally, in doing so, he 'creates' a new metaphor for God, which is a noteworthy achievement, given that new metaphors are not commonly created, and that even the most imaginative writers typically work with inventive variations on recognisable themes.⁴⁴

Having evaluated Pannenberg's vision of 'the Spirit as a field of force' through the lens of cognitive linguistics, the paper now examines Pannenberg's scientifically and biblically informed metaphor of SPIRIT IS FIELD in his theology of divine action.

A cognitive linguistic analysis of Pannenberg's Spirit metaphor

In order to grasp Pannenberg's metaphor of SPIRIT IS FIELD, it is crucial to delve into his theology of divine action. According to Pannenberg, only the three persons of the Trinity are the direct subjects of the divine action, which is first an action of the trinitarian persons, whether in relation to one another or creation.⁴⁵ The thought of God's action links the being of God in himself with his being in the world, the intratrinitarian life of God with the economic Trinity, and the active presence of Father, Son and Spirit with their creatures in the economy of salvation.⁴⁶ Moreover, 'the commonality of action of Father, Son, and Spirit can be only a manifestation of the unity of life and essence by which they are always linked already'.⁴⁷ In other words, the living essence of God as Spirit not only binds the trinitarian persons, but also is manifested in the divine action.

It is in this context of formulating his theology of divine action that Pannenberg speaks of the Spirit as field. Kärkkäinen reminds us that fields in physics should not be identified with divine action, but rather be considered metaphorically or analogically as a way of referring to divine influence.⁴⁸ Resisting the identification helps theology avoid the error Tillich warned us about, namely, adding the divine action to the chain of causal influences produced by science.⁴⁹ Pannenberg himself resists such identification.⁵⁰ In addition, motivated by his desire to make a case for the public relevance and universal validity of Christian theology, Pannenberg formulates his theology by critically appropriating the sciences and laying theological claim to scientific understandings.⁵¹

Pannenberg regards Faraday's concept of a universal force field as a significant idea that aligns more closely with the biblical conception of the Spirit of God than the classical idea of God as *nous*.⁵² Pannenberg utilises four key aspects of Faraday's field theory to make sense of the Spirit as the divine essence of the trinitarian persons in divine action. First, Pannenberg defines field as 'the interpenetrating network of energetic

⁴³DesCamp and Sweetser, 'Metaphors for God', p. 226.

⁴⁴Ibid., Cf. George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁴⁵Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:384.

⁴⁶Ibid., 1:385–6.

⁴⁷Ibid., 1:385.

⁴⁸Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, p. 145–6.

⁴⁹Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:24; quoted in Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 3:146.

⁵⁰Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2:83.

⁵¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 17–8; quoted in Morales, 'Vector Fields as the Empirical Correlate', pp. 227–8.

⁵²Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:383.

forces which are woven into relational terms'.⁵³ Just as energy, which is field in nature, is always the physical manifestation of a spiritual reality, as claimed by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (who inspired Pannenberg to discover the new empirical correlate of the Spirit in his phenomenology⁵⁴), the divine Spirit as the essence of the Trinity acts as 'the power and fire of love glowing through the divine persons, uniting them and radiating from them as the light of the glory of God'.⁵⁵ In addition, just as independently standing energy is described as a field over against bodies, the divine persons are individual aspects of the dynamic field of the eternal Godhead.⁵⁶ They are concretions of the divine reality as Spirit. This means that they do not exist for themselves but in ecstatic relation to the overarching field of deity, which manifests itself in each of them and their interrelations.⁵⁷

Second, just as field permeates the entire cosmos across space and time, the Spirit is regarded by Pannenberg as a 'presence of meaning'⁵⁸ and expresses divine presence which no one can escape.⁵⁹ The specific form of the existence of God as Father, Son and Spirit is identical to the unlimited field of God's nonthematic presence in the world: '[I]n the undefined mystery which fills all things and transcends all things and embraces all things, the Father is close to these things through his Son and in the power of his Spirit'.⁶⁰ In addition, the coming of God's lordship permeates the message and work of Jesus, which allows Pannenberg to combine New Testament eschatology and the understanding of God's eternity with the help of Plotinus' analysis of time. Against Augustine's antithesis between eternity and time, Pannenberg argues that in the future of the divine rule in which the life of creation will be renewed for participation in the eternity of God, eternity comes together with time: 'It is the place of eternity itself in time, the place of God in his relation to the world, the starting point of his action in the irruption of his future for his creatures, the source of the mighty workings of his Spirit'.⁶¹

Third, field phenomena are no longer viewed as bodily entities but as independent of matter and defined only by their relations to space or space-time. This frees theologians from the burden of patristic theology in interpreting the Johannine statement 'God is Spirit' (John 4:24) in terms of the Platonic (and Aristotelian) view of deity as *nous* and the Stoic doctrine of *pneuma* as a corporeal reality. Instead, the Spirit as the divine essence of the trinitarian persons is impersonal in that it stands over against the Father and the Son in different ways – different because the Spirit proceeds from the Father and is received by the Son even if also imparted (or sent) by him – in the form of the personal Spirit.⁶² Pannenberg's statement may seem circular and self-contradictory exactly because he differentiates the impersonal Spirit and the personal Spirit. Such a distinction, for Pannenberg, originates from (1) his interpretation that 'the Spirit'

⁵³Carol Rausch Albright, 'Introduction to Part Four', in Carol Rausch Albright and Joel Haugen (eds), *Beginning with the End: God, Science, and Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1997), p. 251.

⁵⁴Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Spirit and Energy: The Phenomenology of Teilhard de Chardin', in *Beginning with the End*, pp. 82–3.

⁵⁵Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:428.

⁵⁶Pannenberg, 'Spirit and Energy', p. 83.

⁵⁷Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:483.

⁵⁸Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, p. 520.

⁵⁹Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:75, 379, 82.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 1:359.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 1:408–9.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 1:382–4.

(John 4:24) refers not to the personal, divine Spirit, but to ‘the divine essence that is common to all three persons’, who ‘are simply manifestations and forms – eternal forms – of the one divine essence’; and (2) borrowing the concept of dynamic field to make sense of such Spirit who ‘is the force field of their fellowship that is distinct from them both’.⁶³

Fourth, field is considered the uniting factor of all things in the cosmos, including matter, time and space. Similarly, according to Pannenberg, the divine life of the Spirit unites the three persons as proceeding from the Father, received by the Son and common to both.⁶⁴

In this section, I have identified four aspects of Faraday’s field theory, which Pannenberg utilises to explain the Spirit as the divine essence of the trinitarian persons in divine action. Then, the metaphor SPIRIT IS FIELD was presented in the form of conceptual blending. Next, the paper analyses Pannenberg’s pantheistic and anti-anthropomorphic thoughts in the light of cognitive linguistics.

A cognitive linguistic analysis of Pannenberg’s pantheistic and anti-anthropomorphic ideas

A robust doctrine of God–world relationship is indispensable to any theology of divine action. Pannenberg is no exception, which is why he devoted at least two sections in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology* to the topics of God’s spirituality, knowledge and will (§6.4), and to the concept of divine action and the structure of the doctrine of the divine attributes (§6.5).

These pages suggest that although Pannenberg denies being a pantheist, traces of pantheism be found in his work.⁶⁵ John W. Cooper argues that Pannenberg is a pantheist because the German theologian affirms Hegel’s idea of God as the ‘true infinite’ that includes the finite.⁶⁶ However, Roger Olson contends that Cooper does not fully realise or do justice to Pannenberg’s clear affirmation that God’s deity is not in any way incomplete or dependent on the word *for him*; only *for us* is it true that God does not yet exist. Moreover, Cooper’s overly broad use of the term would classify as a pantheist anyone with the view that says the world is ‘in’ God. Olson concedes that Pannenberg is a pantheist in the sense of Gregersen’s ‘qualified (Christian)

⁶³Ibid., 1:383.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 45; quoted in Roger E. Olson, ‘A Postconservative Evangelical Response to Pantheism’, *Evangelical Quarterly* 85/4 (2013), p. 335, <https://doi.org/10.1163/27725472-08504003>, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/27725472-08504003>. The term ‘pantheism’, as is routinely noted, was coined in the beginning of the nineteenth century by Karl C. H. Krause, a contemporary of Hegel, another idealist philosopher. When parsed, the term comes from *pan* (all) + *en* (in) + *theos* (God); i.e. ‘all in God’. See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, vol. 2 of *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), p. 238. A massive, richly documented analysis is provided by Michael W. Brierley, ‘Naming a Quiet Revolution: The Pantheistic Turn in Modern Theology’, in Philip Clayton and Arthur Robert Peacocke (eds), *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Pantheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 1–15. Another useful and constructive entry from the same compendium is Niels Henrik Gregersen, ‘Three Varieties of Pantheism,’ in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, pp. 19–35.

⁶⁶John W. Cooper, *Pantheism – The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 237–58; cf. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:399–400.

panentheism',⁶⁷ which entails that first, while the world cannot exist without God, God could exist without a world, and second, that it is by divine grace that the world code-termines God (so that temporal events may influence God and creatures – including all that is redeemed – share the life of God).⁶⁸ At the same time, Olson maintains that Pannenberg is not a pantheist in the Hartshorne–Reese sense; namely, a belief that '[t]o be himself [God] does not need *this* universe, but only *a* universe, and only contingently does he even contain this particular actual universe. The mere essence of God contains no universe. We are truly “outside” the divine essence, though inside God'.⁶⁹

In his five-volume *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, Kärkkäinen presents a contemporary doctrine of God under the nomenclature 'classical panentheism', which is based on a two-part argument. First, he argues that classical theism had a more or less justified development in its intellectual context, and many criticisms against it are unwarranted. Even though certain aspects of classical theism require revision, it is not grounds for outright dismissal and unfair criticism of the tradition. Second, Kärkkäinen highlights the presence of panentheism in the Christian tradition since its inception. On the one hand, that long tradition needs to be sympathetically and critically evaluated and built upon. On the other, it needs to be 'modernized' by adapting to the context of current intellectual, cultural, religious and scientific impulses to provide the most coherent 'radical middle' that upholds the dynamic of God's transcendence and immanence.⁷⁰

In his theological construction, Kärkkäinen drinks from the well of Pannenberg by digging into his rich panentheistic resources. First, Kärkkäinen aligns with Pannenberg in affirming that creation is unnecessary, in contrast to Moltmann, despite the fact that Moltmann contributes significantly to the panentheistic turn in contemporary theology.⁷¹ For Pannenberg, God does not 'need' the world; creation is not necessary to the Deity because inner-trinitarian relations can be understood as actions; because he created the world out of his absolute freedom, the loving God cannot not be related to creation.⁷² Second, the dynamic narrative of God identified by Pannenberg helps Kärkkäinen in terms of 'push[ing] constructive theology to envision God in personal, dynamic, elusive, and emerging terms' rather than attempting an abstract, formal presentation of God.⁷³ Third, relationality, which has been adopted as the standard in contemporary systematic theology evidenced by Pannenberg and Moltmann alike, has replaced substance ontology, even if it is not a new phenomenon in Christian theology.⁷⁴ Fourth, aided by Pannenberg's concept of the actual infinite, Kärkkäinen's discussion of God's attributes utilises the category of infinity as a major

⁶⁷ Olson, 'A Postconservative Evangelical Response', p. 336.

⁶⁸ Gregersen, 'Three Varieties of Panentheism', p. 23.

⁶⁹ Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, 2nd edn (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 22. Cf. Olson, 'A Postconservative Evangelical Response', p. 336.

⁷⁰ Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, pp. 227–8.

⁷¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 138.; Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2:1. See also Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, 2:239.

⁷² Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2:1; quoted in Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, 2:239.

⁷³ Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, p. 244.

⁷⁴ See e.g. John C. Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Trinity and An Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010). See also Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, p. 245–46.

conceptual tool, as it ‘best expresses the unlimited majesty and immensity of the divine essence and being.’⁷⁵

Pannenberg’s well of pantheistic resources represents what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson describe as ‘an embodied spirituality’, which ‘requires an aesthetic attitude to the world that is central to self-nurturance, to the nurturance of others, and to the nurturance of the world itself.’⁷⁶ Embodied spirituality also entails acknowledging that nature is not inanimate and less than human, but rather animated and more than human. For cognitive linguists, pantheism as a theological concept represents ‘an emphatic connection with the more than human world’ among many religious traditions, including Christian and Jewish mystical traditions. Marcus Borg, for whom pantheism ‘as a way of thinking about God affirms both the transcendence of God and the immanence of God.... God is more than everything (and thus transcendent), yet everything is in God (hence God is immanent)’, exemplifies the former.⁷⁷ In Jewish tradition the Kabbalah views God in a similar way: ‘Do not say, “This is a stone and not God.” God forbid! Rather all existence is God, and the stone is a thing pervaded by divinity.’⁷⁸ The concept of ‘an embodied spirituality’, as defined by cognitive linguists, helps affirm the validity of Kallistos Ware’s bold statement: ‘There are ... good grounds for asserting that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all fundamentally “pantheist,” if by “pantheism” is meant the belief that god, while *above* the world, is at the same time *within* the world, everywhere present as the heart of its heart, the core of its core.’⁷⁹

Based on the preceding analysis, it could be argued that Pannenberg presents himself as a ‘reluctant pantheist’ in his depiction of divine action despite his explicit disavowal. Upon closer inspection, one can also discern his aversion to anthropomorphic concepts. For instance, after commending Hermann Cremer for his little work on the concept of divine action, which is at the heart of the most significant contributions of modern theology to the doctrine of the divine attributes, Pannenberg criticises him for proposing a ‘very anthropomorphic’ idea of God who sets and realises goals.⁸⁰ His aversion to anthropomorphism may originate from Spinoza, Hume, Fichte and Feuerbach’s criticisms of the anthropomorphic character of the idea that God is to be understood as an infinite spiritual essence in the general sense of spiritual essence.⁸¹ As a result, ‘modern theologians prefer to avoid comparison with our own spirituality as beings that are conscious of ourselves and the world’.⁸² More importantly, in his endeavour to divorce the understanding of God as *pneuma* from *nous*, Pannenberg views the identification of

⁷⁵Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, p. 247. For Pannenberg’s discussion of the actual infinite, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), p. 34.

⁷⁶George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), Kindle, loc. 7037.

⁷⁷Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1997), p. 58; quoted in Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, Kindle, loc. 7043.

⁷⁸Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1995), p. 24.

⁷⁹Kallistos Ware, ‘God Immanent yet Transcendent: The Divine Energies according to Saint Gregory Palamas’, in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, pp. 158–9.

⁸⁰Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:370; cf. 367–9. See Hermann Cremer, *Die christliche Lehre von den Eigenschaften Gottes* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1897).

⁸¹Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:370–71. The idea appeared in Cremer, *Die christliche Lehre*, ch. 3.

⁸²Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:371.

the two concepts as producing as 'a much too anthropomorphic view of God'.⁸³ Moreover, 'Scholastic deliberations on the cooperation of intellect and will in God strengthened the anthropomorphic features in understanding God. Thus, the Christian view laid itself open to serious criticism.'⁸⁴

However, Pannenberg's general anti-anthropomorphic stance is untenable from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. Biblical scholar Terence Fretheim notes that some biblical interpreters have sought to excise the attribution of human features to God from biblical texts. He finds this a bit ironic, because the Old Testament uses anthropomorphic metaphors for the divine much more than other ancient Near Eastern texts, and that within the Old Testament itself there 'are no anti-anthropomorphic tendencies to be discerned'.⁸⁵ Driven by the question of just what is meant by 'anthropomorphism', John Sanders contends that there is no consensus about what the term means. Some limit it to the attribution of a physical body to God, whereas others include emotional states, and still others any changing mental states. For Sanders, the 'problem of anthropomorphism' is misplaced, because we have no alternative but to use the only cognitive apparatus available to us to think about God.⁸⁶ 'If anthropomorphism means ascribing any human ideas to God and this is considered illegitimate, then we are consigned to the abyss of agnosticism because even concepts such as infinite, pure act, omnipotence, love, and Being Itself will have to be excluded since they make use of concepts drawn from our embodied experiences'.⁸⁷ The real issue is what we consider dignified or fitting for God to be like (*dignum Deo*).⁸⁸ It seems that, at times, Pannenberg rightly critiques theologians' overly anthropomorphic ideas, which may not be dignified or fitting for God.

Cognitive scientist Todd Tremplin argues, 'Whereas theologians work to place ontological distance between gods and finite beings, our minds cannot avoid using natural ontological categories'.⁸⁹ Humans have to use the cognitive processes we possess to experience and conceptualise God. Our concepts of God, along with our concepts about dogs, governments and love, are necessarily anthropogenic (human-originating), thereby rendering in a broad sense all of our thinking about God is anthropomorphic. There is no conceiving God without the only mental tools we possess. If, however, anthropomorphism is understood more narrowly as thinking of God as a personal agent, then we are not required to anthropomorphise in this sense.⁹⁰ It is precisely in this sense that Pannenberg thinks of the Spirit as force field. This would still be anthropogenic, but not anthropomorphic in a personalist sense.

In this section, I analysed Pannenberg's panentheistic and anti-anthropomorphic thoughts using the tools provided by cognitive linguistics. For a meaningful dialogue between theology and science to be effective, it is necessary to demonstrate how theology can inform science, which I will do next.

⁸³Ibid., 1:374.

⁸⁴Ibid., 1:375.

⁸⁵Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 7; quoted in Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, p. 275n14.

⁸⁶Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, p. 249.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 261.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 249.

⁸⁹Todd Tremplin, *Minds and Gods: The Cognitive Foundations of Religion* (New York: OUP, 2006), p. 120.

⁹⁰Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, pp. 273–74.

Towards a constructive pneumatological theology of divine action

Thus far our findings have confirmed Gregory R. Peterson's observation: 'Cognitive science challenges our complacent theological claims about human nature and the human relation to God. It challenges but need not threaten, and if we listen closely and think deeply, our theological understanding will be the richer for it'.⁹¹ Along this line, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore rightly reminds us:

So even as theology hopes to learn a great deal from the sciences, it brings an age-old stance of caution and wisdom about the wider social, political, and religious context in which science occurs, a context science often brackets or ignores to do its work well. Modern science has sparked incredible advances capable of reshaping human grasp of the divine. It has also supported as fact absurdly oppressive claims, such as brain size as a determinant of mental capacity, thereby confusing fact with cultural prejudice and religious norm.⁹²

It is precisely in the area of divine action in terms of the origin, sustenance and consummation of the universe that theologians should 'be aware of [sciences'] limitations and prepared to offer fresh theological perspectives and a corrective when scientists are tempted to assume too quickly that they have resolved life's unanswerable questions'.⁹³

The field of cognitive science is limited in its ability to explain the experience of Christian conversion, as there is no observable change in brain structure before and after conversion. However, there is a noticeable shift in cognition towards God. It is observed that 'cognitive science threatens [religion] by relegating God to brain activity'.⁹⁴ In this respect, Pannenberg's concept of the Spirit as field is beneficial by subjecting the human brain to 'the unlimited field of God's nonthematic presence in his creation'.⁹⁵

A constructive theology of divine action that informs and is informed by cognitive science can be developed by resorting to Pannenberg's theological anthropology. First, drawing from Darwinian evolution (a founding pillar of cognitive science), Pannenberg advocates that 'modern anthropology no longer follows Christian tradition in defining the uniqueness of humanity explicitly in terms of God; rather, it defines this uniqueness through reflection on the place of humanity in nature and especially through a comparison of human existence with that of the higher animals'.⁹⁶

Second, Pannenberg's concept of the Spirit as field is instrumental to his view of the *imago Dei*, which resides in the human being's unique Spirit-driven quality of being open to the world through freedom, imagination and reason.⁹⁷ Human openness to

⁹¹Gregory R. Peterson, 'Cognitive Science: What One Needs to Know', *Zygon* 32/4 (1997), p. 627, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0591-2385.00115>.

⁹²Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, 'Cognitive Neuroscience and the Question of Theological Method', *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 20/2 (2010), p. 85, <https://doi.org/10.1179/jpt.2010.20.2.004>.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 65.

⁹⁵Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:359.

⁹⁶Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, p. 27; cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Human Life: Creation versus Evolution?', in Niels Henrik Gregersen (ed.), *The Historicity of Nature: Essays on Science and Theology* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008), p. 88.

⁹⁷For Pannenberg, the connection between the image of God and the human openness can be summarised as follows: if Herder's linking of the theologoumenon about God's image with the anthropological data which thinkers of his time liked to sum up in the concept of 'openness to the world' can be objectively justified, then the biblical linking of the image of God and human rule over the earth would have something

the world (*Weltoffenheit* or exocentricity) reveals a fundamental disposition within human nature itself. This disposition towards openness to the world is ‘in distinction from the dependence of the animals on their environment’, and such behaviour ‘gives the human being a special place in the animal world’.⁹⁸ Cognitive science stands to gain valuable insights from Pannenberg in understanding the uniqueness of the human brain in terms of its openness to the permeating and penetrating power of the Spirit as field.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have conducted interdisciplinary research on Pannenberg’s theology of divine action, using tools from cognitive linguistics to analyse his metaphor of force field for the Spirit. My analysis challenges most of his critics for failing to interpret Pannenberg in his own terms. Instead, it highlights his theological creativity in engaging in theology-science dialogue, which bears much fruit for his theological construction. Additionally, I have identified four aspects of Faraday’s field theory to elucidate the Spirit as the divine essence of the trinitarian persons in divine action. I have also analysed the metaphor SPIRIT IS FIELD in the form of conceptual blending. Then, by identifying the pantheistic elements in his theology, I have positioned Pannenberg as a ‘reluctant’ pantheist despite his own denial. Here, a pantheist is defined as one who accepts Gregersen’s ‘qualified (Christian) pantheism’, as described above.

I have also demonstrated that Kärkkäinen incorporates Pannenberg’s pantheistic thought to construct his own ‘classical pantheism’. From the standpoint of cognitive linguistics, Pannenberg’s pantheistic elements represent ‘an embodied spirituality’, and offer the potential for meaningful dialogue with Christian and Jewish mystical traditions. Finally, I scrutinised Pannenberg’s disdain towards anthropomorphism based on the vital principle of embodiment derived from cognitive linguistics. Although his criticism of theologians’ use of overly anthropomorphic concept is justified, Pannenberg’s tendency towards wholesale rejection of anthropomorphism appears unnecessary. Furthermore, I highlighted the usefulness of Pannenberg’s metaphor of the Spirit as field to construct a theology of divine action by informing, and being informed by cognitive science, debunking some of its misleading claims.

to do with openness to the world, unless we were to assume that the Priestly documents and the tradition of ideas behind it brought together ideas that had no objective connection, or that at least the Priestly document’s extension of the image of God traditionally found in the king to humankind as such as inappropriate in the light of the anthropological data. See Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, p. 76. This might contradict his thought elsewhere that ‘Christian theology must read the OT saying about our divine likeness in the light of the Pauline statements that call Jesus Christ the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; cf. Heb. 1:3) and that speak of the transforming of believers into this image’. See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2:208. However, it is important to note Pannenberg’s reminder in the introductory chapter of his *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* that ‘it is not my intention here to offer a *dogmatic* anthropology’. On the contrary, he aims at a ‘*fundamental-theological* anthropology’, which ‘does not argue from dogmatic data and presuppositions’. Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, p. 21.

⁹⁸Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, pp. 34–5; quoted in Joshua M. Moritz, ‘Evolutionary Biology and Theological Anthropology’, in Joshua Farris and Charles Taliaferro (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 50–51.

Cite this article: Feng JC (2025). Divine action in the flesh: A cognitive linguistic evaluation of Pannenberg’s theology. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930624000656>