Wolfhart Pannenberg: Reason, Hope and Transcendence

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In the 1960s, the German systematic theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg was hailed as a proponent of the emerging theology of hope. Pannenberg has never been keen on accepting that label for himself. His aversion is correct, in that his program moves beyond the original intent of that theology; nevertheless, the inclusion of Pannenberg within this historical movement remains appropriate. His rise to theological prominence occurred in the context of the advent of the theology of hope, and he shares the central orientation of the movement, namely, the emphasis on the future or the eschaton as the point of transcendence.

PANNENBERG'S EARLY THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Wolfhart Pannenberg was born in 1928 in a part of northeast Germany that now belongs to Poland. The basic outlook that drives his theological program came to be shaped quite early in life. A crucial factor in this molding process was the path he followed in coming to faith, for this was at the same time the path that led to his choice of theology as his life's pursuit. A series of crucial experiences launched him in this direction.¹

The first occurred when he was about sixteen years old. While browsing through the public library, Pannenberg happened on a book by the atheist...
philosopher, Friederick Nietzsche. Thinking it was a work on music, Pannenberg's "first love" at that time, he read it. Nietzsche's writings convinced young Pannenberg that the influence of Christianity was responsible for the disastrous shape of the world. Yet they also sparked his interest in philosophy.

At about the same time, what Pannenberg has termed "the single most important experience" of his life occurred. While walking home through the woods near sundown one winter afternoon, he was attracted to a light in the distance. When he approached the spot, he found himself flooded—even elevated—by a sea of light. The theologian now views this experience as the time when Jesus Christ made claim to his life, even though he was not yet a Christian. Over the ensuing years this experience has become the basis for Pannenberg's keen sense of calling.

His first positive experience with Christianity itself came through his Gymnasium (high school) literature teacher, who had been a lay member of the confessing church during the Third Reich. In this teacher, Pannenberg saw a contradiction to his view that Christianity is responsible for the distortions of human life. Because he was wrestling with the question of the deeper meaning of reality, he decided to look more closely at the Christian faith by studying theology and philosophy. From his inquiry he concluded that Christianity is the best philosophy, a conclusion that launched Pannenberg's life both as a Christian and as a theologian.

Soon after his experience of light, the Pannenberg family left their home in the wake of the Soviet offensive. Two years later he began studies at the university in Berlin. His initial fascination with Marxism gave way to opposition to it, as he subjected the system to intellectual scrutiny. His first-hand exposure to the evils of two human social orders—Nazi Germany and Stalinist Eastern Europe—forms a part of the background to Pannenberg's conclusion that no human political system can ever fully mirror the perfect human social structure that one day will come as a divine gift in the kingdom of God.³

While in Berlin, Pannenberg became impressed with the work of Karl Barth. He saw in Barth's early writings an attempt to establish the sovereignty of God and to claim all reality for the God of the Bible. But study in Basel with Barth himself beginning in 1950 resulted in Pannenberg becoming uneasy with what he perceived to be a dualism in his teacher's thought between natural knowledge and the divine revelation in Christ. This reaction to Barth spawned another important aspect of Pannenberg's theological program,⁴ the attempt to show that God's revelatory work does not come as a stark contradiction to the world, but is the completion of creation. Pannenberg seeks to draw out the religious implications found in all secular experience,⁵ claiming a continuity between redemption and creation, a continuity he came to find in the historical process.

In 1951 Pannenberg moved to Heidelberg where he studied under such scholars as Peter Brunner, Edmund Schlink, Hans von Campenhausen and
Gerhard von Rad. During the years as a student in this great German university, his thinking concerning the nature of revelation took shape, in part through ongoing discussions with a group of students from various disciplines, which came to be known as the Pannenberg circle. The conclusions of the group were subsequently published as *Revelation As History.*

In 1955 Pannenberg completed his academic training. After teaching at the Lutheran Church seminary in Wuppertal (1958-1961) and the University of Mainz (1961-1968), he moved to the University of Munich in 1968, the site of the bulk of his academic career.

THE INTENT OF PANNENBERG'S THEOLOGY

Pannenberg is a theologian of both the Church and the public sphere. His program is directed toward the unity of the Church and the place of the one Church in a secularized world. As a result, he has been an untiring supporter of ecumenism. But his understanding of the goals of the ecumenical movement have made him no friend of the political orientation that characterized the World Council of Churches for many years. Such activities take away from what he sees as the central task of ecumenical endeavors, the establishment of eucharistic fellowship among the churches, leading to Christian unity. Unity, he believes, is the only way by which the Church's voice can speak with credibility in the contemporary secular society.

His concern, however, does not end with Church unity, but moves beyond to include the future of humanity. Pannenberg sees the function of the Church in the world as being a witness to the temporality of all human institutions prior to the coming of the kingdom of God. As it gives expression to fellowship among humans and between them and God, especially in the Eucharist, the Church becomes the sign of God's eschatological kingdom, which is the hope of the world. Theology is, in part, a servant to this task.

THEOLOGY AND TRUTH

Despite this broad intention lying behind Pannenberg's work, its central importance lies in his understanding of the nature of theology itself and of the truth to which theology is related. Simply stated, he is attempting to change the course of contemporary theology, to combat what he perceives to be a widespread privatization of religious belief in general and of theology in particular.

This quest must be put in the context of Pannenberg's assessment of the trajectory of modern theology. In 1975 he indicated his perception of the failure of theology in an autobiographical remark given to a group of students in Denver: "Perhaps if you have heard anything about my work, you have learned that I am accused of being a rationalist by some people. Others call me a fundamentalist...But...there is one thing I am certainly not; I am certainly not a pietist."

Underlying this remark is Pannenberg's conviction that in seeking to deal with the Enlightenment, the intellectual revolution which drastically al-
tered the understanding of the basis of the Christian faith, the theology of the last two centuries has, to its detriment, turned to a pietistic emphasis on a decision of faith. 13 Prior to the Enlightenment, the salvation-historical events, which were seen as providing the foundation for faith, were accepted on the basis of what was claimed to be the authoritative witness of God, mediated either by the teaching office of the Church (the Roman Catholic view) or by the Bible as the product of the divine inspiration of the prophets and apostles (the Reformation position). In keeping with this, the Reformers posited a connection between three aspects of faith—noticia (knowledge), assensus (assent) and fiducia (trust).

In the Enlightenment, however, the understanding of an authoritative testimony to historical knowledge, taught by Augustine and Luther, was replaced by science and a newer historical methodology that sought to reconstruct past events by employing scientific and critical tools. As a result, the historicity of events became uncertain, and the historical basis for faith was called into question. Thus, in the post-Enlightenment world, humanity lives without revelation, understood in the sense of a word from beyond history by means of which reality can be viewed through the eyes of God.

To avoid making faith uncertain and dependent on historical research, post-Enlightenment theology moved the foundation for faith away from historical events to the experience of conversion, which is seen as providing its own certainty. In other words, a shift has been made from the older view, which began with a rational appeal to historical fact, to the modern approach, which moves from the subjective experience of the believer.

This modern position has given birth to two distinct, yet equally erroneous, alternatives. Some theologians dismiss the historical content of the Christian tradition as irrelevant. This is the position of the radical pietists, in whose ranks Pannenberg includes Rudolf Bultmann. Others follow the path of what he terms “conservative pietism,” in which the plausibility of the historical aspects of the faith is grounded in the experience of faith. Thus, for example, personal conversion is made the basis for the certainty of the events of Jesus’ history, such as his miracles and the Resurrection.

At the heart of Pannenberg’s alternative to this development is Luther’s thesis that, by nature, faith cannot be derived from itself, but only beyond itself in Christ. 14 From this Pannenberg concludes that faith is dependent on a historical basis. Specifically, the historical revelation of God must form the foundation for the act of trust, if faith is to be trust in God and not in itself. He admits that the revelation which grounds faith remains contestable in this world. But he nevertheless adamantly declares that only the field of argument, and not a nonrational decision of faith, can meet the philosophical and historical challenge to the Christian claim to knowledge of God.

According to Pannenberg, then, theology is necessary because actual truth must underlie faith, if faith is to be valid. 15 His theology, in turn, is an attempt to place Christian faith on firm intellectual footing once again, and thereby to provide an alternative to the subjectivist approach of much mod-
ern theology.

In one sense Pannenberg’s understanding of theology follows the classical model. As in the older view, he sees theology as a public discipline related to the quest for universal truth. For him the truth question is to be answered in the process of theological reflection and reconstruction. He criticizes any attempt to divide truth into autonomous spheres or to shield the truth content of the Christian tradition from rational inquiry. Theological affirmations must be subjected to the rigor of critical inquiry concerning the historical reality on which they are based. Theology, in other words, must be evaluated on the basis of critical canons, just as the other sciences for, like they, it deals with truth. And the truth of the Christian faith must be measured according to the coherence criterion, that is, insofar as it fits together with—even illuminates—all human knowledge.

At one crucial point, however, Pannenberg’s understanding of theology moves beyond the classical tradition. He declares that truth is not found in the unchanging essences lying behind the flow of time, but is essentially historical and ultimately eschatological. Until the eschaton, truth will, by its own nature, always remain partial and truth claims, debatable. Therefore, theology, like all human knowledge, is provisional. It simply cannot pack the truth of God into formulas. The future alone is the focal point of ultimate truth. As a result, all dogmatic statements are to be treated as hypotheses to be tested by means of their coherence with other knowledge. This, he claims, is in accordance with the Scriptures, which declare that only at the end of history is the deity of God unquestionably open to all.

**REASON AND HOPE**

Pannenberg’s understanding of the nature of the theological task gives rise to a theology oriented toward two intertwined focal points—reason and hope. The significance of the term “reason” is obvious from what has already been noted—theology is a rational undertaking. The term “hope” capsulizes the thorough-going eschatological orientation of his program. In that his entire systematic theology focuses on the eschaton, it may be characterized as a theology of hope. Foundational to the whole of Pannenberg’s theology is the concept of the kingdom of God understood as the glory of the Trinity demonstrated in God’s rulership over creation.

Pannenberg does not follow nineteenth-century theology in understanding the kingdom in terms of an ethical community. Rather, his view accords with the exegetical discoveries of the twentieth century, which find the source of this term in the apocalyptic movement and the teaching of Jesus. The biblical message of the kingdom is thoroughly eschatological in orientation, for it proclaims the final lordship of God over creation, a lordship which has already broken into history in the appearance of Jesus. En route to the eschaton, the Christian community lives in hopeful expectation of the final consummation of the lordship of God over the entire world. Only then will the glory and reality of the triune God be fully demonstrated.
The theme of hope, however, leads back again to the rational dimension of Pannenberg's theological enterprise. As a public discipline, theology's purpose is that of giving a "rational account of the truth of faith." This orientation to "rational accounting" is foundational to the mandate of the Church itself, as he understands it. As a people of hope whose eyes are directed to the eschatological consummation in the kingdom of God, the Christian community dares not retreat into a privatized ghetto of individual or familial piety. Rather, it is called to remain in the world, where the struggle for truth occurs, and there to engage in the theological task. Because the theological task is linked with the quest for ultimate truth, the truth of God, theology is a public and rational endeavour.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Following the classical tradition, Pannenberg asserts that the whole of systematic theology is essentially the doctrine of God. In fact, God is the all-inclusive object of theology. Even though Christian dogmatics moves beyond the doctrine of God to include anthropology, ecclesiology and other disciplines, these must be seen as belonging to that one overarching topic.

The starting point from which we can talk about God is the commonly held "semantic minimum" concerning "God," that views God in terms of power. God is "the power on which all finite reality depends" or "the power that determines everything." From this basic premise, however, Pannenberg draws a far-reaching assertion: The deity of God is connected to the demonstration of God's lordship over creation.

This thesis implies that the idea of God, if it corresponds to an actual reality, must be able to illumine not only human existence, but also our experience of the world as a whole. In his words, "It must be made plausible that all finite reality depends on him, not only human beings and the course of their history, but also the world of nature." This can only be done, Pannenberg adds, by presenting "a coherent model of the world as God's creation." This is why for him to show the illuminating power of the Christian conception of God is the overarching task of systematic theology.

In addition, however, the thesis that God's deity is connected to his lordship over creation means that only the final salvation of God's creatures can ultimately demonstrate the assertion of God's existence. This realization, of course, serves to shift the emphasis of theology to history and eschatology. "It is only in the event of final salvation," Pannenberg argues, "that the reality of God will be definitively established." Consequently, the entire process of history climaxing in the consummation constitutes "a self-demonstration of God's existence." Systematic theology is an explication of this self-demonstration.

THE STARTING POINT FOR THEOLOGY

In keeping with his thesis of the debatable nature of the assertion of God's existence, Pannenberg argues that theology cannot merely launch
into the doctrine of God, but must win its starting point. To accomplish this, he builds on an anthropological observation which in turn provides a link between philosophical and revealed theology, namely, that humans are in a certain sense naturally religious.\(^29\) By this he means that the structure of the individual human person and of corporate human life is pervaded by a religious component. In theological terms, the destiny of humanity is existence in the image of God, a destiny visible in human "openness to the world."\(^30\)

This understanding of humanity's basic religious nature builds from the early Schleiermacher concept, and a reinterpretation of the Cartesian concept, of the infinite. Its background, however, lies earlier, in the medieval discussions of what is first, albeit dimly known to the human mind. Pannenberg finds this question illumined by means of two contemporary concepts. The first is "exocentricism," the thesis that each human must ground personal identity outside oneself. Although this concept has been disseminated by twentieth-century philosophical anthropology, Pannenberg finds its foundation in Luther's understanding of faith. The other concept is Erik Erikson's well-known idea of "basic trust."

Religious awareness, Pannenberg explains, arises out of the rudimentary consciousness of the difference between "I" and "world" found inherently in the act of trust, which is then augmented by one's presence in the family. As a person experiences finitude and temporality in everyday life, an intuition of the infinite develops. To this, however, Pannenberg adds an innovative thesis. The intuition of the infinite does not itself comprise explicit knowledge of God. Rather, such knowledge is mediated by religious traditions. This subsequent knowledge allows the individual to reflect on the earlier immediate experience and to conclude that therein lies an "untheematicized knowledge" of God. In other words, that this basic intuition of the infinite relates to the theme of God is a conclusion drawn only by reflection on the process of religious history.

In this way Pannenberg connects this basic religious phenomenon to the experience of God found in the religions, which come to an awareness of the activity and essence of God through the works of creation. This connection, in turn, opens the way for him to view the rivalry of the religions as the location of the revelation of truth.\(^31\)

With Barth, Pannenberg asserts that revelation occurs only as God gives Himself to be known. But he argues that the focal point of this revelation is the historical process. For Pannenberg this history is the history of religions. On the historical stage conflicting truth claims, which are at their core religious and are ultimately attempts to express the unity of the world, are struggling for supremacy. The religious orientation that best illumines the experience of all reality will in the end prevail and thereby demonstrate its truth value.

In this context, Pannenberg finds significance in the religious history of Israel. In Israel came the breakthrough to monotheism, which allowed for an understanding of the world as a unity, and the breakthrough to the future
orientation of God’s activity in history. These discoveries formed the context for the message of Jesus, which Pannenberg declares to be the focus of the revelation of the nature of the eternal God. Jesus is the prolepsis—the historical preview—of God’s self-disclosure, which ultimately lies at the end of history. For this reason, Pannenberg develops the Christian doctrine of God out of the life of Jesus.32

THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPTION OF GOD: THE TRIUNE ONE

At the heart of Pannenberg’s theology is the doctrine of God. And at the heart of the Christian conception of God, he argues, is the doctrine of the Trinity.33 It comes as no surprise, therefore, that God as the Triune One forms the center of Pannenberg’s systematic theology.

In contrast to theological practice since the Middle Ages, Pannenberg’s systematic theology moves from the concept of revelation immediately to an explication of the doctrine of the Trinity and only then to the delineation of God’s unity and attributes.34 The traditional attempt to derive the plurality of the trinitarian persons from a concept of God as one being, he asserts, can only lead to problems, because in such approaches God remains a single subject, rather than the three persons.

In moving away from the older methodology, Pannenberg’s doctrine of God offers an intriguing proposal for the contemporary question of the link between the immanent Trinity (God’s eternal essence) and the economic Trinity (God as active in salvation history).35 The link he forges arises from the foundational thesis that all systematic theology is but the explication of what is implicit in God’s own self-disclosure. Consequently, he seeks to ground the doctrine of the Trinity on revelation, that is, on the economy of salvation—on the way that the Father, Son and Spirit come to appearance in the event of revelation—as is presented in the life and message of Jesus. Only then does he move to the discussion of the unity of God found in the divine attributes. In this way, Pannenberg grounds the doctrine of God in the divine economy and, as a result, the understanding of the immanent Trinity flows from the economic Trinity.

Crucial to Pannenberg’s development of this doctrine is his concept of self-differentiation.36 The essence of person, he argues, is to give oneself to the counterpart; hence, the concept of person includes the idea of dependency. All three trinitarian persons are mutually dependent on the others, he asserts.

In this way Pannenberg offers an alternative to the subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father which he finds so detrimental to traditional theology. He brings this mutual dependency into the process of salvation history and emphasizes the eschatological completion of the divine program in the world as the focal point for the revelation of the unity of the divine being. The unthematized infinite comes to be named by the purposeful activity of the three trinitarian persons in the world.
TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

Whereas Pannenberg was noted in the earlier stages of his career for his attention to Christology, when he set himself to the task of delineating his full systematic theology the importance of pneumatology or the doctrine of the Spirit became increasingly evident. In fact, central to Pannenberg’s entire dogmatics is his attempt to develop a new pneumatology. He intends to replace the tendency in theology to reduce the role of the Spirit to that of offering an explanation in situations in which all rational suggestions fail with a much broader and more biblical doctrine of the Spirit. But in so doing, he develops the key to an understanding of the divine transcendence and immanence.

Crucial to his pneumatology is Pannenberg’s understanding of spirit as “field,” a conception related to, but not to be equated with, the field theory introduced in nineteenth-century science. Actually, the roots of the idea lie much earlier in the ancient Stoic philosophers who developed a doctrine of a physical pneuma (spirit). This idea, however, was rejected by the theologians of the patristic era in favor of the conception of God as spiritual mind.

This new pneumatology of field is central to Pannenberg’s doctrine of God. In agreement with the atheistic criticism of Feuerbach and others, he rejects as a mere projection the classical understanding of God as reason and will (i.e., mind). The divine essence, Pannenberg maintains, may be better described in terms of the “incomprehensible field”—i.e., dynamic spirit—which likewise comes forth as the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

In addition to field/spirit as characterizing the divine life, Pannenberg sets forth a profound assertion of the Spirit’s all-pervasive, creative presence in creation and in human life, climaxing in the new life of the believer and the Church. In this way the same concept that describes the divine essence functions as the principle of the relation of God to creation and as the principle of the participation of creation in the divine life.

Crucial here is the connection Pannenberg draws between the Christian assertion of the Spirit as the source of life in creation and the biological discovery that “life is essentially ecstatic.” Each organism lives in an environment which nurtures it and is oriented by its own drives beyond its immediate environment toward its future and the future of its species. This is the sense in which creatures participate in God through the Spirit, Pannenberg asserts. Hence, the Spirit can be understood as the environmental network or “field” in which and from which creatures live.

The Spirit is also the “force” that lifts creatures above their environment and orients them toward the future. This work of the Spirit ultimately leads to the self-transcendence that characterizes the human person and forms the basis for the special life beyond the self in Christ, found in the believing community of the Church.

The concept of field also forms the foundation for Pannenberg’s anthro-
pology. The human person, he argues, is not to be seen in terms of an "I" that preexists experience of the world. Rather, he has a more complicated understanding of the formation of personal identity. Important for identity development is the immediate perception of the totality of a person's existence, which Pannenberg terms "feeling," or the "field" in which a person lives.

Because this totality of existence is an eschatological concept related to the meaning of reality that only arises when the flow of life is completed, Pannenberg views the biblical concept of the image of God as eschatological as well; it is realized at the end of human history, not at the beginning. He likewise defines sin in terms of the idea of the building of personal identity. Sin is "self-love," the "I" as it fixates on its own finiteness, rather than finding its identity from fellowship with God, that is, via existence extra se in Christ.

Lying behind this understanding of God and the world is a specific theological interpretation of space and time that parallels the concept of the religious nature of humankind outlined earlier. Pannenberg argues that it is impossible to imagine the parts of space and time without presupposing both space and time as undivided wholes that form the background or context for these parts. This intuition of infinite space points to the immensity and omnipresence of God, whereas the intuition of time as a whole points to God's eternity.

God, then, is the "field" in which creation and history exist. In Pannenberg's words, "the presence of God's Spirit in his creation can be described as a field of creative presence, a comprehensive field of force that releases event after event into finite existence."

As the comprehensive field, God is both immanent in the world and also transcendent over it. His immanence is obvious. All creation and all events live from their environment, which is the divine field, the source of life. And the immanent Spirit is what animates creatures in raising them beyond themselves to participate in some measure in the divine life. Yet in the process of life God is not only immanent; he also remains always transcendent. God is more than the chain of the finite parts of time and space. And the divine life is more than the sum of the lives of finite creatures.

Above all, however, transcendence arises from the future orientation inherent in the relation between God and the world. As Spirit, God functions as the whole which provides meaning to the finite events of history. This meaning is profoundly future, for only at the end of history do we find the meaning of history and the connection of each event with that meaning. The end, then, transcends each moment, as that glorious reality toward which all history is moving. In this way, time and eternity are interrelated, for, Pannenberg writes, "it is through the future that eternity enters into time."
JESUS AND THE SON

The doctrine of the Trinity lies at the heart of Pannenberg’s systematic theology. It remains, however, to round out the picture by indicating the main themes of Pannenberg’s doctrine of Christ. For in Jesus, eternity—the future—has entered profoundly into time.

Issues of Christology have always been of central concern to Pannenberg. In fact, the first of his works translated into English was the monograph, Jesus—God and Man. This book contains his controversial delineation of the centrality of the Resurrection for Jesus’ history and his important emphasis on the historicity of this event. In this work, Pannenberg argues that the resurrection of Jesus is God’s confirmation of the appearance and mission of Jesus, for through this event Jesus experienced in the midst of history that eschatological transformation to which humanity is destined.

As a monograph, the earlier work presupposed the reality of God and unfolded solely in terms of a Christology “from below.” However, Pannenberg admits that such an approach is incomplete when Christology is pursued within the context of systematic theology. Such a discussion must occur in the context of a specifically Christian anthropology, undertaken with an awareness of the doctrine of God.

To accomplish this, in his systematic treatment, Pannenberg reintroduces the classical theological concept of logos, understood as the principle of the unity of the world. But to this traditional idea he adds an interesting twist. The logos represents the order of the world as history. Consequently, Jesus is the logos, not as some cosmic abstract principle, but in His human life as Israel’s Messiah and as the one who brings to light the proper relationship of the creature to the Creator.

Foundational to Pannenberg’s proposal is the assertion that the connection between Jesus and God not be viewed directly in terms of the unity of the preexistent logos with humanity, but rather indirectly, via Jesus’ relationship to the Father as unfolded in Jesus’ own history. As the one who was obedient to the Father to the point of death, Jesus is the eternal Son, the logos, for the attitude that humbly differentiates oneself from God and places oneself in the service of God is the way to participation in life.

As the one who was obedient to his divinely-given mission to the point of death, Jesus is God’s reconciliation. He acted as our substitute, in that Jesus shared our situation (death) and thereby altered it. Pannenberg calls this view “inclusive substitution.” Through faith we can participate in the new life brought by Christ. In our voluntary subordination to God we enjoy communion with God and will participate in God’s eternal life beyond our own finitude and death.

PANNENBERG AND HIS CRITICS

The program undertaken by Wolfhart Pannenberg is perhaps the most ambitious attempt since Barth to set forth a complete systematic-theological
delineation of Christian doctrine. Not only does he systematize the teaching of the Church, He seeks to outline an approach for Christian engagement with the philosophical underpinnings of contemporary society’s movement away from its religious roots. In this bold undertaking Pannenberg has refused to be dissuaded by the many voices who reject the mere idea of attempting a truly systematic theology in the contemporary context and by those who have sought to shift the focus of the theological task in other, less ambitious directions.

As a result, Pannenberg’s work has been rigorously criticized and at times dismissed in toto as no longer relevant. However, when viewed from the perspective of theological history as a whole, he emerges as a modern heir to the classical understanding of theology viewed in terms of the reasonable demonstration of the Christian truth claim and the Christian conception of God. Whatever problems are present in his proposal, Pannenberg ought not to be faulted for attempting to “do” theology. Rather, critical discussion with his proposal must focus on questions concerning the correctness and adequacy of his theological method.

REVELATION AND THE BIBLE

Pannenberg offers an important contemporary restatement of the traditional attempt to ground theology on revelation. Although not minimizing other focal points of revelation, classical Protestant theology emphasizes the Bible as the deposit of divine revelation. Pannenberg diverges from this traditional approach. He does not adhere to the older Protestant doctrine of verbal inspiration, but bases his understanding of the nature of Scripture in the relation of the history of religions to revelation. For him the history of religions is the location of a dispute among rival religious truth claims. In this history, the religion of Israel, leading to the advent of Christianity, is crucial because of the insights developed through this process. The Bible is the sourcebook for this tradition, and thereby it retains a central importance for theology, even in the post-Enlightenment situation.

Pannenberg’s criticism of the older Protestant doctrine of inspiration must be taken seriously. In the contemporary world simple appeal to the Bible as an unquestioned authority is no longer possible. Pannenberg rightly points out that, in the present context, the doctrine of Scripture can no longer simply be set forth at the beginning of theological reflection. Therefore, his suggestion that the authority of the Bible is to be the goal, rather than the presupposition, of theology stands as a valid challenge to the classical Protestant approach.

Nevertheless, agreement with his perception of the contemporary loss of biblical authority does not require agreement with his appraisal that modern textual criticism destroys the doctrine of inspiration. Nor can Scripture simply be set aside for that reason, as even Pannenberg implicitly acknowledges. Pannenberg’s doctrine of reconciliation contains a promising basis for a renewed doctrine of Scripture, in the thesis that the apostolic procla-
mation became the vehicle for the ongoing speaking of the risen Lord. Unfortunately the German theologian has not made the step from this idea to a full-orbed doctrine of Scripture.

REVELATION AND THE SPIRIT

Pannenberg’s emphasis on the historical nature of revelation leads to the related question as to how the observer comes to see this revelation, that is, to the question of the role of the Spirit in illuminating history. He sees himself as attempting to develop an understanding of the unity of revelation in the face of the bifurcation of the concept. For this reason, Pannenberg tolerates no suggestion that some additional inspired word or some supernatural working of the Spirit must be added to events; meaning arises out of the events themselves.54

Although he does not mean to suggest that the Spirit has no role in the process of faith, at times Pannenberg appears to minimize the place of the Holy Spirit in the epistemological process of grasping the revelation of God in history. The question therefore, remains. How is it that some respond positively to the hearing of the report, whereas others reject the message?

Whatever that answer may be, Pannenberg refuses to ground the solution to the problem of faith and unbelief in the mystery of the action of the Spirit, an approach often found in traditional theology. Why a person comes to faith or remains in unbelief resides in the mystery of human personhood, which he sees as a gift of God.

In his systematic theology Pannenberg comes to a more profound understanding of this dynamic than is found in his earlier works. Here he acknowledges the brokenness of the knowledge of revelation in the era before the consummation, with the result that the apostolic proclamation is of utmost significance for the understanding of revelation in history. This marks a helpful development in his thought. While he continues to maintain that no inspired word must be added to events, the acknowledgment of the brokenness of knowledge opens the way for an affirmation of the mysterious aspect in the epistemological process in this era of the contestability of truth claims.

REASON AND PIETY

The characteristic orientation to the future of Pannenberg’s thought and its attendant revision in ontology could appear to call into question certain aspects of traditional Christian piety. His theology seems to lay no foundation for the traditional emphasis on God’s presence as an existing being in the here and now and for talk of current events as in some sense divinely preordained before the world was created.

More problematic than the lack of these themes in his theology, however, is Pannenberg’s apparent thorough-going rationalism and hard-nosed rejection of any attempt to base theological conclusions on a faith decision that has not been through the fire of rational reflection and challenged by
alternative viewpoints. Before drawing any conclusions concerning this dimension of his theology, however, we must place his perceived bent toward rationalism in the context of Pannenberg’s understanding of himself as a theologian called to serve the church in the setting of the public marketplace of ideas.

Pannenberg’s intent is to articulate a solid intellectual foundation for Christian faith in an age in which any religious commitment is often prematurely rejected as unreasonable or even irrational. In response to what he sees as a wrong turn made by theology at the post-Enlightenment fork in the road, Pannenberg is seeking to return to a balanced understanding of the role of reason in establishing faith. He readily admits that, in the present, truth claims can only be provisional; consequently, the quest for truth must orient itself to the eschaton, when truth in its fullness will emerge. Although prior to the eschaton only a provisional, controversial answer can be made to the question of life’s meaning, people of faith can obtain a greater degree of certainty than is often admitted. They have good reasons to affirm their faith, which need not be based on an irrational decision.

Although he admits that humans do not only live on the basis of reason, and cautions against thinking that through rational arguments people will be brought to faith, Pannenberg points out that if the reasonableness of Christianity is not indicated, the step to faith is made difficult. In the midst of irrational barriers, he sets himself to the task of changing the climate that presupposes that Christianity fails the test of reason.

At the same time, Pannenberg is also convinced that in the public testing of ideas, a rational delineation of the Christian faith, more so than personal piety, is the chief weapon of the Church. Despite the fundamental correctness of his intent, he has overstated the case. As important as the rational discussion may be, the piety of conscious Christians also provides an important apologetic for the truth of the faith.

In spite of this cautionary word, we must admit that Pannenberg’s emphasis on the illuminating power of the idea of God for our experience of the world as a whole challenges those who would reduce the faith to the private world of personal piety. The German theologian invites us to see that Christian theology ought to have an impact on all dimensions of life and the entire range of disciplines connected with the pursuit of faith.

ESCHATOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY

Critics have raised questions about a final central dimension of Pannenberg’s theology, namely, his eschatological ontology and its corollary understanding of God as Spirit. The German theologian identifies God, the all-determining reality, with the divine field which works upon the world from the future. Like Moltmann, he has attempted to reconceive transcendence and immanence in temporal rather than spatial terms. God’s transcendence is his futurity and wholeness, and in this ontology, the future has power over every present, not only defining it but also determining it in its depth.
This raises the issue of reverse causality. Can the future, which is in some sense truly open, have an effect on the present? Is retroactive causality conceivable? Does the temporal category of futurity actually solve the problems of divine transcendence which plagued the traditional spatial imagery?

Pannenberg’s ontology also raises the question of God’s personhood. Does the imagery of God as the divine field working upon the world from the future allow us to conceive of God as truly personal? Does the language of “field,” coupled with Pannenberg’s aversion to traditional notions of God as mind and will, imply an impersonal or suprapersonal God, a God who is the whole that is greater than the sum of the world’s parts but not a gracious, completely free and self-sufficient divine person?

Critics who raise questions such as these await the full development of Pannenberg’s theology for clearer answers. No doubt in the future he will address these concerns. In the meantime, however, many readers continue to have reservations about Pannenberg’s commitment to God’s personhood and freedom over the world, as well as about the cogency of his highly creative ontology of the future.

CONCLUSION

Despite the reservations stated here, Pannenberg must be lauded as providing an alternative both to the dominant existentialist bent characteristic of German theology throughout much of the twentieth century—with its emphasis on an existentialist transcendence—and to the resurgence of immanent theology found in much of American theological thinking. He offers a quite different proposal, focusing attention again on the classical quest for ultimate truth in the midst of the contemporary, post-Enlightenment situation.

Following the theology of hope, Pannenberg reintroduces the concept of the divine transcendence—and this in the mode of the future as standing over against the present. Yet, he tempers the radical transcendence delineated in Moltmann’s early writings and the radical immanence which developed in Moltmann’s later writings. For Pannenberg, God’s transcendence does not so much contradict the present as bring it to completion, and God’s immanence through the divine Spirit does not so much imprison him as give opportunity for his love freely to increase the bountiful unity of creation. More so than Moltmann, Pannenberg has been able to link salvation with creation, thereby developing a creative understanding of the relation of the world to its transcendent/immanent Source.

Notes

1. For his own account of these experiences, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, “God’s Presence in History,” Christian Century 98 (March 11, 1981):260-263.
2. Ibid., p. 261.
8. This conclusion is articulated in "Portrait of a Theologian" by Neuhaus, p. 38.
15. See, for example, Introduction to Systematic Theology, pp. 4-5.
16. Ibid., p. 6.
18. Ibid.
21. See, for example, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, p. 154.
25. See, for example, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, pp. 55-56.
27. Ibid., p. 12.
32. See, for example, the conclusion reached in *Systematische Theologie*, pp. 280-281.
33. See, for example, "God's Presence in History," p. 263.
34. This is set forth in *Systematische Theologie*, pp. 283-483.
43. See "Spirit and Mind," p. 137.
44. *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, pp. 85-96.
46. E.g., *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 48.
47. Ibid., p. 49.
48. Ibid.
49. See note 11.
51. *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 61.
52. Pannenberg has been accused of minimizing the Bible as divine revelation. E.g., Fred H. Klooster, "Aspects of Historical Method in Pannenberg's Theology," J.

53. Even with respect to the history of Jesus, the biblical texts "allow themselves to be questioned," Pannenberg wrote in 1964 ("On Historical and Theological Hermeneutic," Basic Questions in Theology, 1:155). He delineated the importance of Scripture and its use in essays such as "Hermeneutic and Universal History" and "What Is a Dogmatic Statement?" Basic Questions in Theology, 1:155, 184-198.

54. For a criticism of Pannenberg's position, see Daniel Fuller, Easter Faith and History (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 186.