

## Wolfgang Pannenberg

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Wolfgang Pannenberg is a German Lutheran theologian born in 1928 in Stettin, a city east of Berlin that is presently part of Poland. His father was a customs officer. By the age of twelve, Pannenberg had started reading historical novels and had become interested in medieval and early modern history. His passion was music, and he started piano lessons when he was seven years old. He briefly served in the German army during the Second World War but was spared actual combat by scabies, ending up as a British prisoner of war. After the war he studied theology and philosophy, first at Humboldt University, then at Göttingen under Friedrich Gogarten and Nicolai Hartmann. He also studied under Karl Barth and Karl Jaspers at Basel University and under the great Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad at Heidelberg. Gerhard von Rad had an important influence on Pannenberg's understanding of history. Other influential thinkers were Nietzsche, Kant, Hegel, and Marx.<sup>1</sup> Pannenberg was ordained at the University chapel in Heidelberg in 1955.

I shall consider three main aspects of Pannenberg's theology: (1) his theology of the relationship between revelation and history, (2) his Christology, and (3) his theological anthropology. Each section is followed by some critical remarks.

## REVELATION AND HISTORY

History is a major interpretative category in Pannenberg's thought, an aspect of his theology that was laid out in a sustained fashion in the multiauthor collection *Revelation as History* (1968). The question of history was for Pannenberg also the question of revelation. Bringing these two together was in fact a way of correcting the prevailing view of revelation, which subordinated history to revelation by promulgating a notion of revelation as the singular, absolute manifestation of the Divine in discrete moments, experiences, and events directly communicated by God. (I shall call this revelatory singularity.) In this early work he distinguished between direct and indirect revelation.<sup>2</sup> The first names the reality of God, and as such is not immediately accessible to us without mediation. The second refers to how the relative events of history bear partial witness to God and God's presence.<sup>3</sup>

Pannenberg wanted to avoid a view in which revelatory singularity in certain actions and events was completely identified with God at the expense of God's continuing self-manifestation in history.<sup>4</sup> At the center of this way of formulating the issue lies a basic problem: if revelation is always experienced within history as partial and incomplete, on what basis can it ever be said that history in its totality discloses the secret of the fullness of God? Pannenberg deals with this problem by emphasizing several points.

First, he argues that God has always provided humans with revelation in historical terms, that is, in mediated and provisional terms. He finds evidence for this in God's dealings with the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, the events of Jesus' life (precisely because they are historical) reveal God only partially. Second, Pannenberg says that we can fully understand God's intentions and purposes only at the end of history or time. Because history is a forward-looking movement of contingent events, we cannot have a total view of its meaning before it is completed. This refusal to overdetermine history in terms of revelatory singularity means that all revelation is future oriented.<sup>5</sup> Third, this view of revelation is so thoroughly historical that Pannenberg denies the need for the Holy Spirit as an agent of God's self-disclosure. For him, revelation is universally available to all those with eyes to see.<sup>6</sup> There is nothing hidden or gnostic about it that would require special intervention by the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup> Fourth, revelation is rational, that is, consistent with reality as we know and experience it. This is what it means to say that revelation as history is always incomplete.

While this emphasis on the historicity of revelation is consistent with many liberationist notions of history and revelation, it fails to provide content, except in abstract and general terms, to the meaning of both terms. Surely, in both the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, history gives witness to the concrete activities of God in and on behalf of enslaved Jews, downtrodden women, the sick, the disabled, widows, and prostitutes. It is to these groups that the future is promised as freedom, and the history of their struggles is endowed with revelatory power. If this is undeniably so, why then is it that the authors of *Revelation*

as *History*, including Pannenberg himself, simply fail to mention these facts? Are these facts also not open to those with eyes to see?

The troubles lie in how Pannenberg presents history. His understanding of history, and thus of revelation, is both abstract and general on the one hand and Western and Eurocentric on the other. It is abstract because it does not directly address concrete human beings in the social particularities of their everyday circumstances. It is general because history is presented as a general category, not descriptive of any event or activity whatsoever.

This raises a number of crucial questions: Just which events in history are revelatory? Do all events reveal the fullness of God? Do events, activities, and institutions that sanction genocide, slavery, heterosexism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression reveal God's purposes and intentions? Pannenberg's view of history is also Western. He is aware of this and does not apologize for it. In his book *Faith and Reality* (1977) he identifies the history of the ancient Hebrews with that of the West: "For the history of God which began with leading Israel out of Egypt and the settlement in Palestine, did not come to an end with the resurrection of Jesus. It became from then onwards a history of the spread of the Christian faith, a history of the Christian mission. *Hence the nations of the West were drawn into Israel's history of God, received from it their world-historical mission, and are still part of history with the God of the Bible.*" He concludes: "The unity of this history is founded in the unity of the God who became the God of Israel and by whom the whole history of the West is determined."<sup>8</sup>

Given this view, it is not surprising that Pannenberg winds up more or less endorsing missionary Christianity's support of the civilizing project of colonialism.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Pannenberg's idea of revelation as history is rather thin on connecting the questions of power, ideology, and history. Who writes and defines history? Are all humans subjects of history in the same way?

## CHRISTOLOGY

Pannenberg's Christology is consistent with his view of revelation as history. In other words, he comes to Christology through his emphasis on history. This requires him to rethink the doctrine of the nature, person, and work of Christ against the "Christology-from-above" paradigm, in which doctrinal or metaphysical statements provide the regulatory framework for determining the identity and meaning of Jesus' presence in history. Instead, Pannenberg proposes a Christology "from below."<sup>10</sup> Christology "from below" is primarily informed by the dynamics of history. Pannenberg elaborates this view in *Jesus: God and Man* (1968), beginning with the facts and events of Jesus' life.

I will summarize his thinking thus: (1) Christian hope, that is, the content of the Christian faith, is defined and circumscribed by history as both that which actually happened in the past and that which the past anticipates. (2) Because of the actuality of the event of Christ, faith can characterize itself as truth, again not

in a merely symbolic or metaphorical sense, or as self-validating belief, but as real, exact, and reliable knowledge that it cannot supplant without rendering itself into nonsense.<sup>11</sup> (3) The knowledge on which faith depends is of uncommon historical value, because it is shaped and illuminated by the resurrection of Jesus.

The resurrection as historical event gives faith its content, because it attests to God's presence and work in the life of Jesus. It confirms Jesus as the Son of God.<sup>12</sup> Neither an irrational event dreamt up by the disciples after losing their leader, nor the residue of a mythical worldview inherited by Christianity from the past, the resurrection is historical fact. The truth and meaning of Christianity depends on this. Thus it is a mistake to base Christology on faith alone, since faith itself needs a basis.

To be sure, the role of the resurrection is not confined to its function as evidence for the theological significance of Jesus' history. It also anticipates the future God has prepared for the world and for humanity. It is the unique event that proleptically actualizes the future of God's kingdom ahead of its consummation at the end of time. The resurrection of Jesus was a foretaste of the resurrection promised by God to all. By making the resurrection uniquely decisive, Pannenberg gives theological meaning to his understanding of Jesus' history, by turning Christian history into Christology and into the summons to Christians to live in anticipation of the reign of God.

Synthesizing theological and historical hermeneutics in this way allows him to claim a rational basis for Christology. Having done this, he then turns to the question of whether there is reliable information on what Jesus did and said. Pannenberg claims that such information can be gleaned from careful historical examination of existing written traditions and human testimonies in the ancient world. From this viewpoint, Christology is a function of historical research: "If Christian faith presupposes information about events of a distant past it can gain the greatest possible certainty about those events only by historical research."<sup>13</sup> But lest we think that history exhausts the meaning of Jesus' life, Pannenberg is careful to stress that the reason for Jesus' mission was to usher in the kingdom of God. This is why he preached the forgiveness of sins and called people to repentance.

Missing from this narrative is a concrete profile of the content of Jesus' message to the poor and the hungry, the blind, the sick, and the brokenhearted. Notwithstanding his detailed analyses of Jesus' self-consciousness, Logos Christology, and Jesus' essential unity with God—all of which are deployed with forbidding erudition in *Jesus: God and Man*—Pannenberg has little to say about "the below" that he wants to differentiate his Christology from abstract Christologies "from above." His conceptualization of "Christology from below" is asymmetric and ambiguous, partly because it operates with categories of an opposite Christology that effectively excludes the essential elements of the everyday, run-of-the-mill realities in and through which Jesus lived and carried out his ministry. Pannenberg fails to incorporate these elements into his Christology. It is at the level of these elements of the workaday world, or what Michel de Certeau calls "the

practice of everyday life," that the category "from below" must be established and defined, eliminating the abstract thing called "history."

## ANTHROPOLOGY

One reason for Pannenberg's emphasis on the historicity of Jesus has to do with his understanding of Jesus as the "true man," the bearer of true humanity. In the fifth chapter of *Jesus: God and Man* Pannenberg takes up this theme and hints at what might be called christological anthropology. By this I mean an understanding of the human person informed by the nature, work, and person of Christ. He argues that because Jesus was truly open to God and thus bore God's divinity, he not only was God's revelation but also the revelation of true humanity. Jesus is the second Adam, representing the origin of humanity and human destiny. Through the resurrection, as humanity's promised end, origins are determined christologically.<sup>14</sup>

This begs the question, what or who is a human being? Pannenberg provides an answer to this question in his later work *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (1985). In this book Pannenberg engages and challenges many modern views of the human person. One of his major points of criticism is how secularized understandings of the self have resulted in the privatization of religion and have undermined a properly relational understanding of the structure of the human person. His range in this book is, again, quite impressive. His themes include the history of the person in modern philosophical anthropology, as shaped principally by the German philosopher J. G. Herder; sin and selfhood; self-consciousness; identity; and the relation between society and the individual.

Methodologically the book opens with the observation that "understanding the human being has increasingly played a foundational role in the history of modern theology." This is a claim Pannenberg has consistently made in his major writings, such as *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* and *Systematic Theology*. Anthropology is important for several reasons. First, the meaning of Christian salvation and God's dealings with humans presupposes a view of humanity and personhood. Second, outside anthropology, the incarnation of Christ would have no meaning. Third, anthropology is important because historically it has come to provide the basis on which both religious and nonreligious thinkers in modernity seek to prove their claims about reality as universally valid.<sup>15</sup>

A key feature of the modern context is that the underlying assumptions of anthropology are no longer guided, as in the past, by Christianity or by the idea of God in which the human person is made in the image of God, but by the place of humanity in nature or the question of the uniqueness of humanity.<sup>16</sup> How different are humans from the higher animals? Does humanity have a special place in nature? In response to these questions, Pannenberg makes two crucial moves. First, he proposes universal continuity between modern scientific and theological anthropologies. This is important because without a universally

applicable anthropology, Christian claims about personhood, God, salvation, and so forth would be largely vacuous. Pannenberg seeks to achieve this universality by engaging a wide range of disciplines: biology, psychology, cultural or social anthropology, sociology, and philosophy.

Second, he locates the uniqueness of humanity in its capacity for self-transcendence and self-reflection, what he calls exocentricity. The capacity for self-transcendence/and reflection has several interconnected characteristics: objectivity, openness to the world, relationality, and consciousness. On the one hand, objectivity is the distancing of the self from its environment and the objects within it. On the other hand, openness to the world qualifies objectivity such that how humans distinguish themselves from the world is not simply a function of instinct (after all, the higher animals are also capable of some degree of objectivity) but rather of self-reflective consciousness.

Indeed, self-transcendence in its reflective mode extends beyond consciousness of the physical environment and particular objects in the world to the totality or universality of things.<sup>17</sup> This is consciousness of the universal Other. According to Pannenberg, "the so-called openness of the human being to the world signifies ultimately an openness to what is beyond the world, so that the real meaning of this openness to the world might be better described as an openness to God which alone makes possible a gaze embracing the world as a whole."<sup>18</sup> All this is grounded in Pannenberg's understanding of personhood as a reflection of the Trinitarian being of God. The Trinitarian being of God is exocentric because it is the place where recognition and celebration of otherness is perfectly instantiated.

*Anthropology in Theological Perspective* is a rich and fascinating book, if also deeply curious and troubling. Again, as in the case of his Christology and his view of the relationship between history and revelation, Pannenberg's argument remains totally unengaged with the particular histories, structures, institutions, and discourses through which concrete individuals and communities experience the affirmations, denials, and violations of their humanity. Although the book makes repeated reference to identity, biology, sexuality, the environment, and freedom, nothing in it speaks to the challenges to which these notions have been subjected by the long histories of racism, heterosexism, sexism, and class struggles. Pannenberg makes exocentricity, or the human capacity for recognition of otherness in the form of self-objectification, central to his anthropology, but fails to deal with the massive history of social, political, and economic "othering" of people of color, women, disabled people, subjects of different sexualities and genders, as well as marginalized Whites.

His engagement with the development of philosophical anthropology in modernity is troubling because it omits the centrality of race in the works of Kant, Herder, Hegel, Hume, Nietzsche, and many other leading thinkers of modernity (most of whom are his interlocutors). He writes as though self-transcendence can somehow be experienced outside of history. This is curious for a thinker who emphasizes the role of history in human consciousness.

Pannenberg's anthropology is an anthropology without a face, without color, without gender and sex, and without social location. It is an unnatural anthropology, because it is without history.

My argument is not that it is wrong to attempt a universal characterization of what makes us truly and uniquely human, or even that Pannenberg fails to hint at insights in that direction. Rather, I am arguing that any authentic sense in which such a characterization is at all possible must surely be rooted in the ongoing historical tension between the universal and the particular, between our quest for a common humanity (without which all struggles for justice boil down to guns, money, and power) and actual human differences. Such differences cut across and bring into question modes of exocentricity and self-transcendence that are life denying rather than life affirming.

### Notes

1. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, "An Autobiographical Sketch," in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques with an Autobiographical Essay and Response*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1988). See also Nathan J. Hallanger, "Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-)," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Theologians*, vol. 2., edited by Ian S. Markham (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
2. Wolfhart Pannenberg, ed., *Revelation as History: A Proposal for a More Open, Less Authoritarian View of an Important Theological Concept*, trans. David Granskou (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1968), 125-31.
3. *Ibid.*, 9-21.
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 131-35.
6. *Ibid.*, 135-39.
7. *Ibid.*, 136.
8. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Faith and Reality*, trans. John Maxwell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 73-76. Emphasis added.
9. *Ibid.*, 102-4.
10. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 2nd ed., trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 21-37.
11. Pannenberg, *Faith and Reality*, 69.
12. *Ibid.*, 66-73.
13. *Ibid.*, 71.
14. Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 196.
15. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Mathew J. O'Connell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 15.
16. *Ibid.*, 27.
17. *Ibid.*, 68.
18. *Ibid.*, 69.