

## HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE AS BASIS FOR FAITH

by J. Robert Ross

The fight really started hundreds of years ago, the separation occurred in the eighteenth century, and almost everyone today assumes that the divorce is final: Reason and faith simply cannot make it with each other.

But there were more idyllic days of cohabitation. Given the realistic epistemology of either Plato or Aristotle, the Middle Ages saw reason and faith live together as if their marriage were made in heaven—well, at least in the world of ideal forms or in the intellect which unites form and matter—for, as Augustine says, not only do faith and reason live together in peace but also God, who is the object of faith, is the very light of the mind by which it knows anything whatsoever. He alone is that “intelligible light, in whom and by whom all things shine intelligibly, who do intelligibly shine.”<sup>1</sup> And Saint Thomas, who presided over the last great union of faith and reason, affirms the powers of reason to know *that* God is, even though it is not within the power of the created intellect to comprehend fully *what* God is.<sup>2</sup> And if some divine matters are not readily apparent to us it is due only to a defect on our part and not to any incomprehensibility in deity as such, “for they are most knowable in their own nature.”<sup>3</sup>

### THE MODERN SPLIT BETWEEN REASON AND FAITH

The seeds of the modern divorce were planted by Christian philosophers themselves, who began to question the reality of universals apart from particulars. Faith thus became cut off from reason with the authority of an infallible Scripture as its only basis.

For a nominalist like William of Occam there is no dogma which can be asserted to be more reasonable than any other. God is not bound to conform in any fashion to eternal forms, for universals are nothing but names given after the fact to particular things. The Bible asserts

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that God is a trinity, that he forgives sin through Christ, and that murder is wrong. But there is no reason for any of these truths. God might have become an ass or a stone or the incarnate child of Mary. Or he might have commanded murder and forbidden kindness. We know only by the authority of Scripture taught by the Church that these things are indeed not true. Reason has nothing to do with the matter one way or the other. Thus were planted the seeds of a biblicistic positivism. In subscribing to this, modern fundamentalism recognizes the inability of reason and faith to make a happy marriage.

In modern thought the final wedge between reason and faith was the development of empiricism. And though Immanuel Kant hoped to stake out a place for faith even as he recognized the valid insights of the empiricists, he drove the wedge deeper. By his critical analysis of "pure reason," to which knowledge proper is restricted, and of "practical reason," to which faith is restricted as a necessary postulate of a moral life, he in effect separated faith from knowledge. Belief in God, freedom, and immortality are cut off from any ground in knowledge proper and are given the somewhat dubious honor of transcendental postulates. Kant's critique has been so effective that modern faith has accepted gratefully the divorce granted by Kant from reason. Faith no longer may be susceptible to rational proofs, but at least it enjoys the role of guardian of morality.

This rather cursory survey of the proceedings which have led to the separation of reason and faith must be complemented by recognizing a problem unique to the Hebrew-Christian understanding of faith. The blows dealt by nominalism, empiricism and Kantian transcendentalism to the medieval marriage of faith and reason apply to Eastern as well as Western Religions and to a distinctly metaphysical "faith" as well as a distinctly religious faith. But the Hebrew-Christian tradition is rooted uniquely in a number of historical claims, and in order to understand the state of the estrangement of Christian faith from modern reason some reference must be made to the criticism of history as a basis for faith.

A contemporary of Kant, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing is credited with the initial criticism of history as a basis for religious belief. Henry Chadwick summarizes Lessing's views thus:

Events and truths belong to altogether different categories, and there is no logical connection between one and another. Lessing's statement of this antithesis presupposes on the one hand the epistemology of Leibniz, with its sharp distinction between necessary truths of reason (mathematically certain and known a priori) and contingent truths (known by sense perception), and on the other hand the thesis of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, that the truth of a historical narrative, however certain, cannot give us the knowledge of God, which should be derived from general ideas that are in themselves

certain and known. Lessing's own way out of the dilemma was to conceive the role of religious belief in the historical process as a relative state in the advance of humanity toward maturity, a thesis which he argued at length in the tract *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* ("The Education of the Human Race," Berlin, 1780).<sup>4</sup>

There is, however, some ambiguity in Lessing's position. Lessing seems to assume that chronological contemporaneity would provide an advantage in the proposed move from historical event to religious truth. His discussion therefore moves between two rather different epistemological problems: (1) the problem of knowledge of past events and (2) the problem of the qualitative difference between historical and necessary truths.<sup>5</sup>

Søren Kierkegaard detected this ambiguity and clarified the problem for us by pointing out that there is an essential incommensurability between historical knowledge and faith, the eternal decision. He focuses the problem on a qualitative distinction, not a quantitative distance. "Understood in this manner, the transition by which something historical and the relationship to it becomes decisive for an eternal happiness, is *metabasis eis allo genos*, a leap, both for a contemporary and for a member of some later generation," he says.<sup>6</sup>

While Lessing spoke of one gap which separates historical event and religious truth, there are actually two (opened up by modern historical and hermeneutical inquiries) that have made the tie of faith to history ever more problematical. There is in the first place the gap between event and text. This does not refer primarily to a temporal gap, whether it be something like fifteen or twenty years according to some scholars or more like forty or seventy years according to others. Rather the fundamental gap between event and text is the hermeneutical difference between event and understanding, the difference between the event and the significance of the event as recorded in our texts. The second gap is that which exists between the ancient text and modern understanding of the text. There are obviously very real and very deep differences between the cultural, religious, social and linguistic situations of a first century Jew who testifies to Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah promised to Israel and those of a twentieth-century American with a democratic, pragmatic, scientific sociocultural world view. The question is whether the ancient text may be understood by the modern reader and hearer and, if so, how it leads to a faith which can be identified justifiably with the faith of the author.

It is not my purpose here to explore these problems. But it is apparent that the gaps between faith and reason and between an ancient historical event and modern faith have forced a dilemma upon us: Either we choose knowledge with unbelief, or we choose belief with-

out knowledge. There is apparently no way to root belief in knowledge or to reconcile faith and reason.

Those who continue to believe do so by choosing one of the following options, all of which tacitly recognize the split between reason and faith, especially the split between historical knowledge and faith. First, there are those who try to carve out a unique realm for "faith" which preserves it from the critical onslaught of reason. Faith so conceived is usually a guarantor of morality or an aid to social solidarity. The "reasons" for faith are pragmatic, not epistemological. This approach characterizes the modern liberal tradition exemplified, for example, in the theology of Albrecht Ritschl or in American liberalism known for its advocacy of the social gospel.

A second approach typical, for example, of Rudolf Bultmann, defines faith existentially. It presupposes the final divorce of reason and faith and history and faith. What matters is not whether I can know rationally that God is or whether Jesus did or said this or that. Rather the account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection becomes an occasion for me to move into a new existential self-understanding. There is no such thing as an objective historical basis for faith. Faith is a personal decision, a decision about who I am and about the possibility of receiving my existence from God rather than from myself. But the God whom I trust in the act of faith is not known objectively in any way, either cosmologically or historically. He is the subject who grasps the believer, not the object known by him.

Third, the modern fundamentalist in his own way also has accepted the divorce between reason and faith. As indicated earlier, fundamentalist epistemology is rooted more typically in the extreme nominalism of late medieval theologians than in an awareness and acceptance of empiricist and Kantian critiques of metaphysical knowledge. But the fundamentalist whose only reason for faith is an inspired Bible is surrendering in effect to the forces which have separated reason and faith. Indeed he may emphasize the "unreasonableness" of faith, maintaining that only an act of submission to biblical authority will enable a man to believe and to discern spiritual matters. Although he will sometimes inconsistently offer apologetics which attempt to prove the accuracy of the Bible or the existence of God, he does not accept in the final analysis an integral tie between reason and faith. Faith is based on the Bible, and the Bible stands above reason.

Finally I must mention various forms of appeal to a special illumination which ostensibly makes faith possible even though it has no rational basis. Karl Barth's suprahistoricality is one such appeal. Those characterized as theologians of *Heilsgeschichte* also appeal ultimately to a special salvation history which is apparent only to "faith." This is a

unique revelatory history which may be studied by the usual tools of historical criticism but whose meaning nevertheless is revealed mysteriously only at the moment of faith.

But however these modern justifications for faith may differ, they all accept the finality of the divorce between reason and faith and agree that the vagaries of historical research cannot serve as an adequate foundation for faith in God. But my main purpose here, however, is to look at an attempt at reconciliation, not one which would revive a dead marriage but one which takes account of the historical-critical factors which undermined the marriage in the beginning and thus bases faith on historical knowledge in a fashion consistent with a coherent philosophy of science, one in which the discipline of theology itself is conducted without doing violence to the criteria for historical-scientific methodology.

#### HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE AS BASIS FOR FAITH: THE PROGRAM OF WOLFHART PANNENBERG

In the first part of his latest work translated into English, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (here "science" really means "knowledge"), Wolfhart Pannenberg discusses at some length the critique of religious faith made in this century by logical positivism and then by critical rationalism. Karl R. Popper's disciple W. W. Bartley speaks of the "retreat to commitment" which characterizes modern faith stances. Referring to Paul Tillich's claim that "there is no criterion by which faith can be judged from outside the correlation of faith," Bartley ironically observes that "one gains the right to be irrational at the expense of losing the right to criticize."<sup>7</sup> He observes that the only excuse made for irrationality is that everyone else does it, that is, everyone—believers and skeptics alike—begins from certain premises and unquestioned axioms. However, Bartley believes that Popper's critical rationalism offers a distinct alternative, one which requires basic commitment only to the principle of tentativeness at every step in the learning process.

Pannenberg is sympathetic with the open-mindedness of critical rationalism and the scientific methodology it implies. However, he judges it inadequate in dealing with the formulation of historical hypotheses. The following quotation indicates how Pannenberg criticizes and revises Popper's views in order to provide for an integration of historical investigation into the larger scientific task, that is, the task of grappling with the entire scope of reality without the constrictions of dogmatic presuppositions:

It is the purpose of historical hypotheses to build the total stock of evidence

about a historical theme into as comprehensive and complex a hypothesis as possible, but they are not required to formulate general rules which exclude as much as possible. . . . All that can be required of historical hypotheses in the interest of testability and possible refutability is the greatest possible clarity in construction, so that a particular historical reconstruction, with its main assumptions and selection of evidence, can be clearly distinguished from alternative hypotheses.

The idea of critical examination can be regarded as a suitable basis for a general theory of science only if it is widened so that it is no longer restricted to hypotheses about general rules, but also includes hypotheses about singular events and contingent sequences of events. Knowledge of reality cannot be limited to a knowledge of general rules.<sup>8</sup>

Pannenberg clearly is attempting to establish a method for the development of historical hypotheses which will claim universal rational acceptance. As we shall see, such hypotheses may—indeed must—include hypotheses about the relationship of God to the events in question. But references to God and the establishment of religious truth claims cannot be verified by immediate religious experience. Indeed Pannenberg has rejected the basic presuppositions of the leading currents of twentieth-century theology precisely because they have attempted in some fashion to separate the decision of faith from the results of historical-critical research—not that modern theology has not been aware of and indeed has contributed to the advance of historical inquiries. Rather the problem with, for example, Barth and Bultmann is that they did not see how such research could contribute positively to religious truth claims. In fact they did not see how historical-critical research as such left any room for divine redemptive events. Thus their theology fled into a safe harbor above or beyond the storms raised by historical research, even research which they themselves certainly promoted and furthered.<sup>9</sup> Pannenberg therefore stands against all fideistic and existentialist attempts to separate religious truth claims from the results of historical investigation.

Faith, however, is not identical with historical knowledge. Although “faith” is capable of sundry definitions including intellectual acceptance of an unmoved mover (Aristotle) or a unique actual entity (Alfred North Whitehead) or the postulation by the practical reason of a nonempirical reality which stands behind this world (Kant), in the context of the Hebrew-Christian tradition faith must be defined, Pannenberg says, as “unconditional trust in Jesus and in the God whom he reveals.”<sup>10</sup> Faith as such has a futuristic orientation which extrapolates beyond our current knowledge of reality. It is directed “toward what is coming (and toward the coming, effective, invisible God).”<sup>11</sup> However, this trust in the coming God is based upon a certain knowledge of Jesus and of the history in which he appears. So a

knowledge of the history of Jesus is the basis for trusting the future created by God to be like the past which we know. "Faith," Pannenberg says, "is not something like a compensation of subjective conviction to make up for defective knowledge. If that were the case every advance in knowledge would certainly help to make faith superfluous. But faith is actually trust in God's promise, and this trust is not rendered superfluous by knowledge of this promise; on the contrary, it is made possible for the first time."<sup>12</sup> Trust involves believing certain things to be true, and to that extent faith is dependent upon a rational, critically verifiable knowledge of reality.

To base faith (*fiducia*, trust) upon knowledge implies, first, that the truth of God's revelation is not yet completely known. Faith presupposes unseen vistas of divine reality and to that extent must maintain a certain reticence when speaking of divine matters. The problem here is not simply the inability of reason to comprehend God. It is rather that the history wherein God has revealed himself retains an open future. Indeed faith instead of being a dogmatic claim to knowledge of all reality must be defined precisely as commitment of oneself to that reality which has not yet fully revealed itself.

Second, to base faith on historical knowledge opens faith up to the disputes which characterize historical inquiry. Obviously the results of historical research can threaten faith with the loss of its foundation. And, as Pannenberg says, "where the conflict with knowledge is unequivocal and complete, hardly anyone could base faith on a future, better knowledge without the loss of his intellectual and personal integrity."<sup>13</sup> This raises again the question discussed by Lessing and Kierkegaard how unconditional trust can be based on the relativities of history. The answer given by Pannenberg is that faith indeed may be subverted by history. But all that is required at any one moment is that the current image of the facts of history permit faith "to recognize anew and to appropriate again the event which establishes faith itself."<sup>14</sup> Christian faith is based upon a proleptic revelation of the whole of reality in Jesus of Nazareth, but it keeps itself open to further confirmation or critical revision depending upon the results of both historical investigation and the actual course of history itself.

The question before us at this point therefore is how the truth of faith possibly can be uncovered by historical investigation. Or, in other words, how can the revelation of God be construed as a proper subject for historical inquiry? The direction Pannenberg takes us is evident from the title of his book *Revelation as History*.<sup>15</sup> Revelation is not added to history or above or beyond history. Revelation occurs precisely within history. In this book Pannenberg has four key theses on divine revelation: (1) Divine revelation is not direct, that is, God

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does not reveal himself directly in a theophanous form. Rather revelation is indirect, that is, through historical deeds. (2) Revelation happens not at the beginning but at the end of revelatory history. (3) “. . . historical revelation is open to anyone who has eyes to see. It has a universal character.” (4) “The universal revelation of the deity of God is not yet realized in the history of Israel, but first in the fate of Jesus of Nazareth, insofar as the end of all events is anticipated in his fate.”<sup>16</sup>

Pannenberg's theses on divine revelation blaze several epistemological and theological trails, none of which I can trace here. But there are two points that deserve some discussion in view of our attempt to understand how Pannenberg hopes to establish faith on history. The first is that Pannenberg refuses to accept a dichotomy between special redemptive history and ordinary secular history. The principle of universal correlation inherent in historical methodology means that all historical events are interrelated immediately with contemporary events and more remotely with all other historical events. And Pannenberg claims that “it belongs to the full meaning of the Incarnation that God's redemptive deed took place within the universal correlative connections of human history and not in a ghetto of redemptive history. . . .”<sup>17</sup>

Another fundamental principle of historical inquiry is the principle of analogy which requires the interpretation of any one event in the light of other familiar and similar events. Essentially it means interpreting what is obscure by what is plain. And although the principle of analogy presupposes an anthropocentric structure to history, that is, a structure which is explicable in terms of human factors, Pannenberg, according to E. Frank Tupper, distinguishes between an anthropocentric methodological structure and an anthropocentric world view. The principle of analogy is consistent with the former but by no means demands the latter.<sup>18</sup> In other words, even though the way we understand history requires an anthropocentric point of view, our actual understanding of history does not have to be limited to purely human possibilities.

A second point which deserves some emphasis and clarification is Pannenberg's claim that revelatory historical events are self-evident when perceived within their own ordinary historical context and apart from a special divine illumination to reveal their meaning: “An inspired interpretation—supplementary to the event—is not first required to make the event recognizable as revelation.”<sup>19</sup> At this point Pannenberg is attempting a breathtaking leap across the chasm which has separated reason and faith since at least the eighteenth century.



The truth upon which faith is based is nothing more or less than the simple "perception of the natural consequence which emerges solely from the facts."<sup>20</sup> No one is required to have faith in order to understand the facts. Neither is he required to step inside the theological circle (Paul Tillich) or to receive some mystical illumination. The truth, as it were, stands naked before the normal cognitive faculties of every man.

Pannenberg is aware of course that modern historical inquiry is based to a large extent upon positivistic presuppositions which foreclose the possibility of the historical understanding of any event as divine revelation. He maintains, however, that the reality on which religions claim to be based is as legitimate an object of inquiry as the sociological, psychological, economic, and institutional factors which are the usual object of the historian's study. As he says, "the dichotomy between the general historical analysis of, for example, a history of the politics and institutions of Israel and primitive Christianity on the one hand and that of the subjectivity of the religious outlooks of the representatives of the biblical traditions isolated from those events on the other reflects the modern dichotomy of an isolated religious subjectivity and the objectivity of science."<sup>21</sup> And the question of the truth of any religion cannot be decided in advance by a priori rational criteria. Philosophy of religion as such is an inadequate tool to grapple with the reality of the claims made by historical religions. And this is not because the theologian has any right to decide on truth based on a purely subjective decision. On the contrary, Pannenberg says, the truth question lies outside the competence of philosophical or fundamental theology (the European term) because "the question constantly reappears in Christianity as a historical phenomenon, that is, in the process of the history of its tradition, from each step in the tradition to the next."<sup>22</sup> Indeed because of its distinctly historical nature the question of the truth of Christianity, or any other religion which is not simply philosophy but also a living tradition, cannot be conclusively answered in the present. As Pannenberg says, "the truth of the faith is not given to theology in advance for the simple reason that it is still in dispute in the history of Christianity and so is the *object* of Christian theology. The function of theology is to study and describe Christianity understood as the history which receives its impetus from the investigation of the truth of the Christian faith, or of the reality of the kingdom of God made present in Jesus."<sup>23</sup> What Pannenberg hopes to do is open up the question of the truth of Christianity within the context of all world religions and world history with a view to subjecting every claim of

divine action to the ordinary tests of historical inquiry as long as history itself is not foreclosed by an arbitrary decision about what is possible or not possible.

The unique historical question raised by religious claims is whether the historical data under investigation actually represent "a self-communication of the all-determining divine reality," a phrase used by Pannenberg to explicate in a shorthand fashion his understanding of the word "God."<sup>24</sup> Following Barth—and ultimately G. W. F. Hegel—Pannenberg agrees that there is only one unique revelation of God, and that revelation is self-revelation, not a communication of certain spiritual or supernatural truths. And revelation because it is revelation of one God is always singular, although there may be many "manifestations" of God which in and of themselves are inadequate, provisional, and anticipatory of the one final revelation.<sup>25</sup>

In testing claims made, for example, by the biblical text relative to the action of God in history the question to be addressed is "whether this God shows himself to be the all-determining reality, and so God, on the horizon of present experience."<sup>26</sup> In cases where it is concluded that the "God" of the ancient biblical text is not shown as "the all-determining reality," especially in the context of our present experience—and it must be admitted that many biblical texts speak of a god who is to us apparently quite impotent—the text itself, Pannenberg says, remains "as a challenge to the contrary experiences of the present and their protest has a chance of being proved right in a future perspective."<sup>27</sup> In other words, if only history can demonstrate who God is, that is, who actually determines reality, then in no moment during the process of history can we draw dogmatic conclusions about either the refutability or irrefutability of the claims of a historic religious text. This apparently leads to a relativistic and skeptical position regarding all religious claims. We shall see shortly, however, that Pannenberg confronts this problem and attempts to provide scientific criteria by which we can draw conclusions, albeit tentative conclusions, regarding the revelation of god within history.

In order to grasp Pannenberg's solution to the problem of verifiability in relation to specific religious truth claims we must bring into view at least two aspects of his thought, although I cannot here provide a thorough treatment of either. First, we must consider Pannenberg's claim to develop—indeed the absolute necessity to develop and work from within—a view of universal history. Pannenberg says that the "concept of truth is to be defined essentially as history," but Tupper explains that "while that does not signify the relativistic dissolution of truth, it does mean that the unity of truth can be conceived only as the whole of a historical process," that is, as universal history.<sup>28</sup>

Tupper further explains Pannenberg's position: "Since the divergent contents transmitted in tradition are all inter-related, the hermeneutical task not only requires the projection of the history of a specific subject matter but also the projection of universal history which encompasses the changing relationships of all the various subject matters."<sup>29</sup>

In other words, in order to understand any particular historical tradition we must take account of its interrelatedness to other traditions, and that means the historian is forced into an implicit or explicit projection of universal history in which any particular tradition can be comprehended. And understanding, it must be noted, is bound up essentially with the determination of truth. The historian inevitably asks not only what happened and how it has been understood but also whether this understanding is indeed accurate.

In order to answer theological questions in relation to any segment of historical events it is essential that history as a whole be the conceptual and theoretical context in which such questions are raised, for the small segment of history which is the usual object of historical investigation cannot in and of itself "provide sufficient basis for meaningfully raising the question of whether a God has revealed himself here in contrast to all other occurrences in nature and in human history."<sup>30</sup> For example, the question of whether God reveals himself in Jesus of Nazareth can be answered only by taking account of the entire history of Jesus including his relation to both the nation of Israel and the church which remembers him and exists in a living tradition of interpretation of the events of the first century A.D.

The development and projection of a tentative view of universal history have important implications for the relationship of Christianity to other world religions. Pannenberg maintains that Christian theology cannot be done in a religious vacuum, especially as our view of universal history becomes more and more adequate to account for the actual historical data. Thus Christian theology cannot begin on the premise that it is alone in possession of the truth. The question of the truth is precisely what is at stake. It is our goal, not our beginning point. And if Christianity should prove to speak of the God who actually determines reality, then that can be seen fully only within the framework of the history of world religions.<sup>31</sup> Thus the verifiability of truth claims made about particular historical events must depend upon the ability to project a universal history and to evaluate such claims in reference to the whole of which the particular event under scrutiny is only a part.

A second important consideration in Pannenberg's attempt to locate revelation within history and thus require that its truth claims be

subject to ordinary historical-critical verification is his understanding of the inextricable tie between event and meaning, between the objective occurrence and the subjective appropriation, understanding, and transmission of the event. Pannenberg explains:

History is never composed of so-called bare facts. As human history, events are always intertwined with understanding, in hope and remembrance, and the transformations of understanding are themselves historical events. These elements are not to be separated from the happenings of history, as they originally occurred. This history is always "the history of the transmission of traditions"; and even the events of nature, which are included in the history of a people, have significance only with reference to their positive or negative relationships to the traditions and expectations in which those men live. The events of history speak their own language, the language of acts, but this language is hearable only in the context of the interpenetration of the traditions and expectations in which these occurrences actually happen.<sup>32</sup>

Pannenberg is brave enough to call theology a science (*Wissenschaft*) but a science whose data is history, specifically the history of religions.<sup>33</sup> Its task, however, is not merely descriptive. Rather it must confront the question of the reality of the gods who are claimed in diverse religious traditions. But although the theologian as a "scientist" is concerned with the reality of the gods who are revealed in the history of religions, his final goal is historical accuracy, not dogmatic theological conclusions: "Theological interpretation must reveal the theological dimension of a historical phenomenon as a *historical phenomenon*."<sup>34</sup> And thus the question of the reality of God, "the all-determining reality," is inseparable not only from the event as such but also from the evident power of the event to effect the entire history of the transmission of traditions (*Überlieferungsgeschichte*).

It is necessary finally to devote more explicit attention to the criteria which are used by Pannenberg in evaluating religious truth claims. His writings reveal at least three interrelated tests which may be applied to any supposed historical revelation: actuality, universality, and power.

In the first place when the meaning of a particular event is in question the historian is bound by the event itself. Although meaning may transcend "fact," the meaning always depends on the fact, not the fact on the meaning. In reference, for example, to variant interpretations of the historical Jesus the important question is "whether or not they explicate the meaning warranted by the history itself."<sup>35</sup> Thus the way out of a total relativism is opened up. However tentative we must be in our search for the truth we can never say that the truth depends upon our personal bias or that it is merely a question of one's viewpoint, which is of course culturally and historically determined.

The event as such transcends the culture and the history in which it is remembered and viewed as significant.

Thus when a first-century Jew or a modern rational secularist asks what the significance is of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth different answers are possible: (1) Here is the execution of a political rebel, or (2) Jesus' death was an accident, the execution of an innocent man because of mistaken identity, or (3) his death is the point in history at which God takes the forces of evil and suffering upon himself and thereby liberates man from their power. Now although the mere event of Jesus' death by itself is not a sufficient criterion to choose one interpretation over another, the very nature of the event in its context makes one or the other interpretation more or less probable. In other words, what do the facts say in regard to Jesus' political activity? And what are the facts regarding his identification and arrest? And what are the facts in regard to his own moral character? Obviously to these questions there are different possible answers which would tend to confirm or perhaps refute any of the above possible interpretations.

But there is a second important consideration in the evaluation of religious truth claims. Because of the interrelatedness of contingent historical events a proper perspective on any one event or any segment of history demands a view of universal history. And the universal history which is posited as the framework for the interpretation of an event must be subject itself to rigorous critical scrutiny. Tupper explains Pannenberg's criterion of universal history in terms of its ability "to account for all known findings" on the one hand and the impossibility of explaining particular findings apart from the universal history in question on the other hand.<sup>36</sup>

In spite of or because of Hegel's failure to solve the problem of a universal history Pannenberg maintains that "it is possible to find in the history of Jesus an answer to the question of how 'the whole' of reality and its meaning can be conceived without compromising the provisionality and historical relativity of all thought, as well as openness to the future on the part of the thinker who knows himself to be only on the way and not yet at the goal."<sup>37</sup> While Jesus cannot be understood apart from a view of the whole it is also true that he himself provides the clue to that whole. If revelation is the self-revelation of God and if that revelation occurs historically, then the end of history is prerequisite for that revelation: "Only the End of history can reveal Israel's God as God, 'the power over everything,' " and "in the destiny of Jesus [i.e., his death and resurrection] the End of all history has happened in advance, as prolepsis."<sup>38</sup>

Thus one dimension of the criteria to be applied to religious claims is the ability to illuminate the whole of reality since only in that whole

is God really revealed as the “power over everything.” And in connection with this any particular understanding of a segment of history also must be coherent with the best possible universal history which can be constructed.

There is finally one more criterion for truth claims: the power which actually is manifested in any particular historical phenomenon and which continues to manifest itself in the light of our present experience of reality. As Pannenberg says, the proper scientific investigation of the claims for communication of divine reality must examine such communications “to see how far they actually prove themselves to be such in the experiences of the people who belong to such religious traditions.”<sup>39</sup> In a general sense we can test, Pannenberg says, the validity of claims to sacred power in two ways. First, we can scrutinize the actual experiences of those who have transmitted the particular religious tradition for signs reflecting the “power that determines everything.” Second, we can evaluate their description of this power in terms of our present experience. In other words, if a certain tradition claims divine revelation the question is how well its description of divine power matches what actually is happening in the course of history. For example, does the claim of the Hebrew-Christian tradition for a god who liberates (Israel from Egypt, man from the compulsions of egocentricity, etc.) match our present experience of the course of history? Are contemporary liberation movements—black, women’s, and gay liberation, etc.—consonant with the biblical understanding of the “power over everything”?<sup>40</sup> Pannenberg says:

Although the reality of the God asserted in the Christian tradition is disputed, church history might be expected, without sacrificing its methodological rigour, to examine and describe the history of Christianity in a way that would involve, for each period, an investigation of the relation between its experience of reality and the Christian view of reality handed down to it by tradition. It would then have to consider the related problem of how far in this historic experiential situation the God of the Christian tradition had manifested himself to the participants as the all-determining reality, as indicated by the actual changes undergone by the attitudes and way of life of Christians. Self-manifestations of this God which met these criteria could then be described, in the language of tradition, as “the action of God,” and the associated changes in Christian life and attitudes could be critically compared with the current traditional self-understanding of Christianity.<sup>41</sup>

#### POSTSCRIPT

There are several unanswered questions raised here, some of which I am only vaguely aware. One is whether Pannenberg is opting for a pragmatic criterion of religious truth. If it works, that is, if it proves

itself historically viable, is it therefore true? I do not really think Pannenberg is saying this, but I am not sure how he would answer the charge.

And then there is the question of the moral bias which interferes with the rational process and which makes it difficult to see how revelation can be read from the historical events as such. From the biblical point of view man refuses to believe not because of a lack of historical evidence but because he is morally and spiritually corrupt. The Hebrew poet writes: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God. They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none that does good.'" (Ps. 14:1). And Jesus responds to his enemies thus: "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my words" (John 8:43).

These, as I said, are questions. I am not sure yet how Pannenberg would reply. The major contribution he makes to contemporary thought is his insistence on a reconciliation between faith and reason and between reason and a recognition that religious truth claims cannot long exist without some epistemological underpinning.

#### NOTES

1. Augustine *Soliloquies* 1. 1. 3.
2. See Aquinas *Summa of Theology* 1. 12. 4.C.
3. Aquinas *Exposition of Boethius on the Trinity* 3. 1. C.
4. Henry Chadwick, "Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), 4:445.
5. See Henry Chadwick's discussion of this ambiguity in his *Lessing's Theological Writings* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1956), p. 52.
6. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 90.
7. William Warren Bartley, *The Retreat to Commitment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1962), p. 103. In all fairness Tillich does not simply opt for faith over reason. Rather he attempts a redefinition of reason as the depth of being which will allow for faith as one function of a more broadly—or deeply—conceived rationality, one which is identical to his uniquely creative and moral nature. Nevertheless Tillich does fail to demonstrate how the critical functions of reason ultimately can have anything to do with the decision of faith. At some mysterious level faith and reason are integrated, but just how reason can determine faith or serve as a basis for faith is not at all clear.
8. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 67–68.
9. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, trans. George H. Kehm, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 1:16.
10. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed: In the Light of Today's Questions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 6.
11. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions*, 1:65.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Response to the Discussion," in *Theology as History*, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., *New Frontiers in Theology*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 274.
14. Wolfhart Pannenberg, ed., *Revelation as History*, trans. David Granskou (New

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York: Macmillan Co., 1968), p. 138. Cf. E. Frank Tupper's discussion of this issue in his *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), pp. 126-28.

15. *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, originally published in Germany in 1961.

16. Pannenberg, *Revelation*, pp. 125-45.

17. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions* 1:41. The only problem that may arise with this principle is the extension of it to some causal principle which introduces an evolutionary determinism that denies the contingency of historical events and the openness of history to the future.

18. Tupper (n. 14 above), p. 112.

19. Pannenberg, *Revelation*, p. 155.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

21. Pannenberg, *Theology*, p. 389.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 417.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, p. 348.

25. Cf. Tupper, p. 82.

26. Pannenberg, *Theology*, p. 380.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions* 1:131; Tupper, pp. 119-20.

29. Tupper, p. 120. Pannenberg certainly has been influenced by Hegel at this point but criticizes and moves beyond him in several important respects. He faults Hegel (1) for failing to take account of what Pannenberg calls "the irreducible finitude of experience" (Pannenberg, *Basic Questions* 1:134), (2) for his denial of a real openness to the future "insofar as its openness would consist in its continuously bringing forth surprising experiences" (*ibid.*), and (3) for his failure to recognize "the impossibility of taking account of the contingent and the individual by means of the universal" (*ibid.*). In order to develop a universal history which takes account of these factors—a task which might seem like squaring the circle—Pannenberg maintains that Hegel's way is not the only way "because the end of history can also be understood as something which is itself only provisionally known, and in reflecting upon this provisional character of our knowledge of the end of history, the horizon of the future could be held open and the finitude of human experience preserved" (*ibid.*, p. 135).

30. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions* 1:66-67.

31. Pannenberg, *Theology*, p. 361.

32. Pannenberg, *Revelation*, pp. 152-53.

33. Pannenberg, *Theology* (pt. 2, "Theology as a Science"), pp. 225-440.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

35. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions* 1:150.

36. Tupper (n. 14 above), p. 101.

37. Pannenberg, *Revelation*, p. 135; see also n. 29 above.

38. Tupper, p. 91; Pannenberg, *Revelation*, p. 133.

39. Pannenberg, *Theology*, p. 365.

40. I think that there is one other criterion which is implied in Pannenberg's discussion but which he does not make explicit, i.e., the "goodness" of the apparent divine revelation in terms of both the original experience and our present understanding of the "good." E.g., Jesus presupposes such a criterion in his refutation of the Pharisaic charge that his exorcisms were accomplished by satanic and not by divine power, as Jesus himself claimed (Matt. 12:22-29, 33-35, and parallels).

41. Pannenberg, *Theology*, p. 399.