

What Shall We Make of Wolfhart Pannenberg? A Symposium on Beginning with the End: God, Science, and Wolfhart Pannenberg (eds., Carol Rausch Albright and Joel Haugen)

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

by Gregory R. Peterson

Abstract. *Beginning with the End* represents an excellent collection of articles devoted to the thought of Wolfhart Pannenberg. This volume includes many of the most important thinkers in the science-religion dialogue and shows as well the importance and impact of Pannenberg's theology. This response addresses themes that surface in several of the articles: What is religion? What is science? What is theology? What is God? On some of these themes there is agreement, on others sharp disagreement. The conclusion also considers what this volume suggests about the future of Pannenberg's theology.

Keywords: definition of God; definition of religion; definition of science; field; Wolfhart Pannenberg; research program; spirit.

Beginning with the End presents the reader with a cornucopia of responses to the work of one of the most important theologians of our time. While this is a work that will be most useful to those already conversant with Wolfhart Pannenberg's *oeuvre*, it can also stand as a suitable introduction to the major aspects of Pannenberg's theology as well as its implications for the science-religion dialogue.

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Having said this, it must be remarked that a work such as this is difficult to review satisfactorily. With the exception of the initial contributions from Pannenberg himself, the bulk of the book consists of often divergent responses to Pannenberg's theology. Any further review, then, must be a response to the responses, a curiously second-order endeavor. For that reason, I am going to avoid the normal "list and summarize" approach as much as possible and instead take a more thematic turn, in the hope that this approach will more effectively uncover the nuggets contained in this volume. The themes I wish to consider will be posed as questions: What is this book about? What is religion? What is science? What is theology? What is God? What is the future?

WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

The most obvious answer is that this book is about the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg and its significance for the relationship between religion and science. Every one of the essays easily falls into that category. Beyond this, editors Carol Rausch Albright and Joel Haugen have divided the essays into major thematic sections, each one beginning with a useful summary by Albright that guides the reader to the most important points covered. In some ways, the most important contribution is the selection of Pannenberg essays in part 1. Much of Pannenberg's most important work is buried in rather large volumes such as *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* and *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, excellent texts that are nevertheless lengthy and difficult to understand in translation. The four works by Pannenberg presented here manage to be both concise and comprehensive in portraying his most important ideas as well as their relevance for the sciences.

The responses progress methodically, starting with an overview of Pannenberg's thought by Philip Hefner and Robert Potter; proceeding to an analysis of Pannenberg's engagement with physics by Frank Tipler, Robert John Russell, and Willem Drees; moving to an analysis of the relevance of Pannenberg's concept of field for evolutionary biology by Jeffrey Wicken and Ted Peters; followed by a reflection by Lindon Eaves on the challenge posed to Pannenberg's theology by behavioral genetics; and concluding with reflections on theological method by Wentzel van Huyssteen, Paul Sponheim, Philip Clayton, and Nancey Murphy. At the end of it all, Pannenberg himself responds thoughtfully to the proposals and criticisms made.

Given the variety of topics covered, what will count as the most important contributions will depend on the need of the reader. The most substantial contributions (in terms of volume and number of participants) are those on physics and methodology. These two collections alone represent important contributions to thinking not only about Pannenberg's program but also about the religion-science field generally. In these (as in the other)

sections, the authors are responding not only to Pannenberg but also to each other, providing a rich sense of dialogue.

It is important to note, however, that although the contributors all recognize and emphasize the significance of Pannenberg's work, they are not all Pannenberg disciples. All of the contributors are mature scholars in the science-religion dialogue and, consequently, all represent theological programs that, to varying degrees, represent some independence from Pannenberg's own agenda. The book is thus more a critical appraisal than a simple working out of Pannenberg's theology. Comparisons are made, structures are analyzed, and from time to time constructive criticisms are presented as well. This raises an important point that remains open and that the book does not fully address. What is the future of Pannenberg's theology? Should one speak of a Pannenberg school, or should one speak more loosely of Pannenbergian influences?

WHAT IS RELIGION?

I ask this question not because it is a major theme of the book. It is not. I ask it because it seems important to Pannenberg's theology and because I suspect that it lingers behind many of the discussions involved.

Pannenberg is, first and foremost, a theologian. Moreover, he is among a minority of contemporary theologians who have made strong claims for the objectivity of theology as well as for its status as a science. The object of theology is God. God, for Pannenberg, is the all-determining reality, the world's future, the science of the whole. Theology can but does not need to be Christian, although Pannenberg does argue as well for the truth of Christianity. Such arguments imply, among other things, that theology, and by extension religion, make cognitive claims about reality. Theology, despite many modern commentators to the contrary, is about the truth.

Many of the respondents would, with various caveats, be able to agree with these claims. Nevertheless, there are enough differences for one to detect philosophical tensions on the subject. We may take as a first example the contribution by Drees, "Contingency, Time, and the Theological Ambiguity of Science." Drees targets two issues that are of prime importance for Pannenberg's theological project: contingency and time. Pannenberg's questioning of the principle of inertia in his "Theological Questions to Scientists" (Albright and Haugen 1997, 37–50) is based explicitly on his view of the universe as supremely contingent. Likewise, Pannenberg's concept of God as the world's future and his correlative claim that the future can act on the present strongly imply a philosophy of time. Drees argues that science, by its very nature, can neither tell us anything about the ultimate contingency or necessity of the world and its physical laws nor (it would appear) settle theological issues related to time. Science, claims Drees, is theologically ambiguous.

It is in Drees's view of religion, however, that we most clearly see why science is theologically ambiguous. In his view religion is (or at least should be) primarily functional. Religion should be, in his word, "prophetic," helping communities respond to the evils of the world. Religion that dwells on intelligibility and metaphysics (where Drees places most of the current science-religion dialogue) is described as "mystical." Prophetic religion encourages us to improve the world. Mystical religion, by contrast, simply reinforces the status quo.

But if religion is primarily concerned with motivating action, does it possess any cognitive content? Drees states his view thus:

[My] proposal might be misunderstood as one more in the antirealistic camp. It portrays God as a merely subjective notion, useful in some language games and dispensable in others. However, I hold our knowledge to be unavoidably hypothetical, but nonetheless purporting to refer to something real. (p. 239)

Indeed, while religious language purports to be real, Drees asserts that there is "no warrant" for such claims. We make them not because of the evidence we have from the natural world but (it would seem) in spite of it. Nevertheless, we must construct such beliefs to justify our moral (prophetic) action. Although Drees does leave room for some cognitive content of religious beliefs, he reveals deep differences with Pannenberg on the confidence with which we can make such claims.

A second indicator of this divide is the article by Jeffrey Wicken, "Toward an Evolutionary Ecology of Meaning." Wicken claims, "History has revealed humans to be motivated jointly by the *desire for clarity and the need for meaning*" (p. 261, emphasis in original). In practical terms, the desire for clarity produces science; the need for meaning produces religion. "These meaning structures emerge in a context of *value* that merges into those human systems of values that are religions" (p. 274, emphasis in original). As in Drees's article, science and religion seem to be divided by a fact-value split. Science is the province of fact; religion is the province of values.

Specifically, Wicken argues that religion should be based on the facts of science. But which science? Wicken contrasts the reductive agenda of sociobiology with the more holistic approach of ecological science. It is the holistic approach of ecology that Wicken views as a satisfactory basis for grounding religious reflection. Ecology shows how we are all dependent upon and part of the whole. Ecology shows our crucial interrelatedness, justifying an altruistic ethic beyond sociobiology's kin altruism. Thus, Wicken is able to conclude, "A religion would seem to be 'relatively true' insofar as it promotes the ecological home by bringing life's global conditions and responsibilities into focus within the individual consciousness" (p. 283).

For Pannenberg, religion makes cognitive claims about the whole of

reality, of which science describes the parts. For Drees, religion can make unverifiable hypothetical claims about reality, although this is not its primary function. Furthermore, science, which is theologically ambiguous, can play no part in such formulations. For Wicken, religion is not about facts but about value-inducing meaning. But religion should be informed by the facts that science discovers. These differences reveal the depth of disagreement that remains about some very basic issues. At the same time, the very dialogue shows some hope that progress may yet be made.

WHAT IS SCIENCE? WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

The definition of religion is not a major concern of this volume; the definition of science is, for the simple reason that its definition affects how theology in turn is defined. As such, for many (if not most) of the contributors, the two questions are linked and for that reason need to be treated together.

In *Beginning with the End*, Pannenberg's own view is best expressed in his "Laying Theological Claim to Scientific Understandings," Hefner's "The Role of Science in Pannenberg's Theological Thinking," and the set of responses in part 6 (methodology). For Pannenberg, theology *is* a science, the science of God. Deeply influenced by the philosophy of Karl Popper, Pannenberg holds that science produces empirical claims about reality that are rationally falsifiable. A soft falsificationism via Thomas Kuhn (see Pannenberg's comments in his final response, p. 430) is implied here, so that the social sciences are included in this definition.

And theology. For Pannenberg, if theology is not to sink into mere subjectivism, it must lay claim to the sciences and to scientific status. These are two different but related tasks. For Pannenberg, to claim that theology is the science of God is to claim that theology has objective content, that it is not merely "true for me." Beyond this, it must also mean that theology contains, or at least implies, statements that are falsifiable in nature. Pannenberg has described God as the all-determining reality toward whom the world is moving. This should mean that the sciences are "shot through" with evidence of the divine. For instance, Pannenberg's view of anthropology is stated thus:

The aim is to lay theological claim to the human phenomena described in the anthropological disciplines. To this end, the secular description is accepted as simply a provisional version of the objective reality, a version that needs to be expanded and deepened by showing that the anthropological datum itself contains a further and theologically relevant dimension. (p. 59)

The contingency of the scientific program means that all of the sciences are only partial explanations. It is only within the context of the whole (God) that we can get at their true and ultimate meaning and context. The sciences, therefore, should manifest limitations or themes that can be

fully informed only by a theological perspective, a perspective that does start from the standpoint of the whole and of the world's final context.

Surprisingly, none of the contributors to the section on methodology challenges the core of Pannenberg's methodological claims. This is all the more remarkable given that theological method has been a particular item of debate during Pannenberg's time. This may simply represent a convergence of thinking among those in the science-theology dialogue. It may also represent one area into which Pannenberg's thought has most deeply penetrated.

God, as they say, is in the details, and the set of responses on methodology are finely detailed. Van Huyssteen nicely summarizes Pannenberg's approach, but he questions whether science (and therefore theology as well) truly requires the level of detachment that Pannenberg and the critical rationalists he builds on seem to assume. Van Huyssteen argues that both science and theology require a significant degree of personal involvement in order to develop sustainable paradigm articulation.

The articles by Sponheim and Clayton, in turn, ask much the same question but in different ways. The question is, in essence, what exactly counts as a verification or falsification of a theological claim?

For Sponheim, this breaks down to three related questions. First, what would it take to demonstrate Pannenberg's theological claims? Second, what would it mean formally? Third, what would it mean materially? Corresponding to these questions are three things that Pannenberg's theology must do if it is to be counted as successful. In answer to the first question, Pannenberg's theology must "reveal continuity in the data, while yet achieving genuine change in the sense of advance" (p. 381). Pannenberg's theology must be progressive, able to account for data as it appears. For Pannenberg's theology to succeed formally, Sponheim asserts that theology must remain distinguishable from the other disciplines. If theology uses the data of other sciences, Sponheim perceives the danger that theology may simply be collapsed (reduced) to one of these disciplines or a combination thereof. If theology is to be a legitimate discipline, there must be a sense in which theology remains unique, in which the whole of God transcends the sum of the parts. In answer to the third question, Pannenberg must actually show that a theological understanding of scientific data is superior to that which the science itself can give within its own partial framework. Discussing Pannenberg's treatment of anthropology, Sponheim asserts that Pannenberg must actually show that a theological understanding, using such theological vocabulary as "fall" and "redemption," is superior to that which anthropology itself can give. In regard to this last point, Sponheim raises a host of questions indicating his dissatisfaction with Pannenberg's answers to date. For Sponheim, any substantial verification of Pannenberg's theology has yet to take place.

Like Sponheim, Clayton is concerned with the scientific criteria of success for Pannenberg's project. Responding to the previous articles of van Huyssteen and Sponheim as well as those of Eaves, Clayton asks what controls—that is, what norms—should count in a theological science such as Pannenberg's. Clayton is strongly sympathetic to Sponheim's analysis but wishes to take the discussion a step further, from method to ontology. Clayton argues that the basic reality claims of Pannenberg's theology are what can and should drive the criteria for success. Pannenberg's theology is commended for being more hegelian (with a small *h*) than kantian (with a small *k*), determining the subject matter before criteria, rather than the other way around.

For van Huyssteen, Sponheim, and Clayton, the question is not whether theology is a science or even what is a science, but really what are the distinctive features of a theological science. What is (for van Huyssteen) the specific level of commitment? What are (for Sponheim and Clayton) the specific criteria, and how do we determine those? The questions posed by Sponheim and Clayton are particularly important, simply because they have not been asked of a theologian's project at this level before. Much of the science-theology discourse is indeed still involved with demarcating the nature of science and (to a lesser extent) determining what theology's status is in relation to science. These articles represent an important next stage of discourse.

The article by Murphy, however, does ask and answer the more basic question, what is science? A science is anything that follows the scientific methodology as described by the philosopher Imre Lakatos. Because theology can do this, theology is a science as well. Much of Murphy's article is concerned with showing how Pannenberg's theology in fact follows such an approach. Pannenberg's theology is, therefore, a scientific research program, and a mature one at that (p. 418)!

Despite some caveats I am generally supportive of Murphy's attempt to apply Lakatos's philosophy of science to theology. It should be noted, as well, that Hefner in this volume also delineates Pannenberg's theology in terms of a research program. Yet, I wonder: can an *individual theologian* be a research program? Is not this a major disanalogy with much of contemporary science, where a program implies a *community* of scientists? One can speak of the research program of Stephen Hawking or Jonas Salk, but often implied in such references are a number of graduate students doing the "grunt work," fellow scholars building on the program (those famed negative and positive heuristics), and young doctoral fellows elaborating or shooting down applications. Is this being done with Pannenberg's work? Perhaps it is. Certainly *Beginning with the End* can be considered a step in that direction. But let us return to this issue later.

WHAT IS GOD?

If, as Pannenberg asserts, theology is the science of God, then the task of theology must be to elucidate what God is. Much to his credit, Pannenberg attempts to do precisely this. The issue of the nature of God slips to the fore in several of the responses.

Several of Pannenberg's claims about God are included in the introductory articles by Pannenberg himself. God is the all-determining reality. God is the world's future. God is the whole toward which all things move. God is a field. God is spirit.

It is the last two ideas that represent the major part of Pannenberg's thinking in this volume, discussed in "The Doctrine of the Spirit and the Task of the Theology of Nature" and "Spirit and Energy in the Phenomenology of Teilhard de Chardin." For Pannenberg, the modern concept of field in physics helps to explain the Jewish and Christian concept of spirit. A field concept goes beyond the simple atomistic view of the world as billiard balls colliding in empty, neutral space. Fields are localized but not simply local. Likewise, spirit is localized but not simply local. A field or object interacts with other fields or objects to create novelty. The spirit also interacts with other objects to create novelty.

These two essays of Pannenberg's have appeared elsewhere, but their inclusion in this volume (which creates wider dissemination) is important for two reasons. First, these articles reveal the care with which Pannenberg has read and been influenced by Teilhard. For many this will not come as a surprise, but these articles make explicit that relationship. Second, I suspect that many American and English readers have yet to grasp the radicality of Pannenberg's claim that God is spirit as field. For Pannenberg (and much of the German philosophical-theological tradition), spirit, mind, and consciousness are not simply equivalent terms. At one point, Pannenberg writes:

Spirit is not identical with mind, nor is it manifested primarily through mind. Rather, the reflective nature of the human mind represents a particular form and degree of participation in the spiritual power, and that is closely connected with the particular mode of human self-transcendence. (p. 77)

On the Anglo-American scene, several of the most prominent contributors to the science-religion dialogue (most notably John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke) have emphasized the personal nature of God. In identifying God as an all-determining field, Pannenberg has called into question much of this personalistic language. So Pannenberg's theology radically poses the question, to what extent should we think of God as personal?

It is this depersonalization of God that precisely characterizes Frank Tipler's now infamous book, *The Physics of Immortality*. The article included in this volume, "The Omega Point as Eschaton," is essentially an earlier précis of the larger volume. Unless one is intimately familiar with

physical cosmology, much of Tipler's contribution will simply be unintelligible, although the main themes of his proposal are given in a manner approachable by the average layperson.

Tipler presents what may be called a physical theology. God is defined in terms of the omega point, the convergence of living beings at the end of time as the universe converges into a "big crunch." Because this is a necessary future, the omega point can also be represented through the wave function Ψ (psi), which can then, from the perspective of the omega point, be seen as acting on the now. God, indeed, is the all-determining future.

Tipler's work has many problems, although this fact is more apparent in his book than in the article presented here. In transgressing the usual boundaries separating science, philosophy, and theology, Tipler truly has, as one *Zygon* reviewer put it, something to offend everyone (York 1995, 477). Yet, as with Pannenberg's doctrine of spirit as field, I think the true implications of Tipler's proposal are underappreciated. Tipler, following Pannenberg, is attempting to answer the question, what is God? Tipler does indeed give what amounts to a physicalist account, but it is an account that largely retains many higher-order theological claims. That is, it is not a *hostile* reduction, as is typically the case when religion confronts the social sciences. I would suggest that this is a line of thinking worth pursuing, even if the path taken leads where neither Pannenberg nor Tipler originally intended.

While Tipler is in many ways supportive of Pannenberg's conception of God, Sponheim differs, challenging the characterization of God as the future, all-determining whole of reality. Sponheim directly challenges the coherency of speaking of God as the all-determining future acting on the past and present. Further, Sponheim worries that speaking of God as the whole slips into pantheism and that speaking of God as all-determining abrogates human freedom. In a flurry of rhetorical questions that express some of his frustration, Sponheim states:

Is this to say that the future is determined and so the present is determined to end in that future, but that we do not yet see it to be so? But are we to make 'openness' something with no more ontological contingency than that? . . . Are human beings free if they cannot affect the future? Do we 'deepen and expand' by exposing that what we supposed to be true was merely an illusion? Where is the continuity in the advance from the provisional to the objective in that case? (p. 393)

Sponheim understands the radical nature of Pannenberg's theological claims, and he is disturbed or at least deeply ambivalent about those dealing with the nature of God. His concern with human freedom and the openness of the future also reveals a clash of theological temperaments. American theology has been deeply influenced by process thought (among other streams), and it is precisely in these issues that pronounced differences emerge.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE?

The above treatments do not do full justice to the scope and variety of articles in this volume. Although I have not discussed them, the contributions by Potter, Russell, Peters, and Eaves are also significant and enlightening. I will, however, turn now to a more general question that this volume raises: What is the future of Pannenberg's project?

By one measure, the very publication of this volume is an indicator of the great success and influence of Pannenberg's theological project. Indeed, this is the second collection of essays wholly devoted to his work, a rare accomplishment for a living theologian. (See Braaten and Clayton 1988.) In terms of response by living contemporaries and influence, Pannenberg's prominence is eclipsed by very few.

At the same time, the essays contained in this volume reveal a countervailing trend as well. There are very few Pannenberg "disciples." It would be safe to say that all the contributors to *Beginning with the End* have, to varying degrees, read closely and been influenced by Pannenberg's theology. Among the contributors, however, only Tipler and Peters could fairly be described as significantly following and developing Pannenberg's thought, each in his own way. None of the other contributors significantly endorses any of the most distinctive claims of Pannenberg's theology. Murphy and Hefner are able to describe Pannenberg's project as a scientific one, but it is one in which they themselves do not partake. Clayton can describe Pannenberg's approach as being developed from a substantive theological position, but it appears not to be Clayton's own. Russell is willing to speak of an omega point, but he wants also to speak of an alpha point at the beginning of the universe, which seems immediately to oppose the emphasis on God's futuricity.

I do not fault the contributors in any way for taking the stances that they do. As a whole, I would argue that they reveal the current dominant response to Pannenberg's theology: Fascinating! Thought-provoking! Insightful! But does it work?

I previously asked whether a single theologian can constitute a research program. What this volume shows, perhaps more than anything else, is that Pannenberg needs allies to develop and explicate his work if it is going to continue to be, as Murphy claims, a mature research program. The development of process theology in the United States can, within limits, show what needs to happen. Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy has become popular precisely because of early banner bearers such as Charles Hartshorne and John Cobb Jr., scholars who were able to explicate, modify, and develop the themes Whitehead propounded. Pannenberg and Whitehead share a further similarity in that their major texts are largely inaccessible to the introductory reader. Two of Pannenberg's most important volumes, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* and *Anthropology in*

Theological Perspective, assume a level of background the average student does not have, besides being out of print. His current systematic theology, the short anthology edited by Ted Peters (Pannenberg 1993) and the current collection alleviate this need to some extent. A Pannenberg textbook is needed. This, after all, is the true sign of success! Pannenberg has certainly influenced us all, and this volume is significant tribute to this fact. The real question, however, remains: Does he persuade?

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