

“SCIENTIFIC” THEOLOGY/ “THEOLOGICAL” SCIENCE:  
PANNENBERG AND THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN  
THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

by Stanley J. Grenz

*Abstract.* Throughout his distinguished career, Wolfhart Pannenberg has sought to show that the Christian understanding of God is crucial to the pursuit of knowledge. As the essays in *Beginning with the End* indicate, Pannenberg has attempted to construct a bridge between theology and science via the idea of contingency and the concept of field. His interest in dialogue, however, arises out of a deeper theological foundation, which views theology as a public discipline and sees the human quest for truth as the quest for God. Although susceptible to criticisms that all objectivist approaches attract, this focus on “reasonable faith” provides a helpful point of departure for dialogue.

*Keywords:* apologetics; cosmology; faith and reason; theology and science; truth.

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Ever since the infamous seventeenth-century conflict between the church and Galileo, science and theology have repeatedly been at loggerheads. At times the relationship has become so tense that for a practitioner of either discipline to express interest in the interface between the two is to risk evoking suspicion from both camps. Biochemist Jeffrey Wicken has noted the presence of such consternation among scientists. Even though he himself is convinced that “everyone who does theoretical science seriously *is* a theologian,” he reports that “scientists who think theologically are suspect creatures” (Albright and Haugen 1997, 256).

More distressing is the fact that theologians also have been known to respond with suspicion when any of their colleagues attempt to “think

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scientifically.” According to scientist Lindon Eaves, this “ghettoizing” on the part of theologians has had dire results. He bemoans that theology “has all but abandoned the intellectual and cultural challenge of the sciences. In so doing, it has condemned a significant part of the human world and has abandoned part of the future.” By being ambivalent toward the sciences, he adds, theology has “retreated behind the walls of confession,” and in the face of this vacuum, science, in turn, has “assumed theological importance both for its methodology and for its content” (Albright and Haugen 1997, 311).

Perhaps no modern theologian has engaged in a more unrelenting attempt to correct this situation than Wolfhart Pannenberg. In a career spanning the second half of the twentieth century he has pursued an ambitious, even seemingly audacious goal, which Carol Rausch Albright describes as that of developing a new synthesis of theology and human scientific learning rivaling the great intellectual construction of the Middle Ages (Albright and Haugen 1997, 31). To this end, Pannenberg has single-mindedly explored the thesis that the Christian understanding of God is crucial to the pursuit of knowledge. In the process he has laid “theological claim to scientific understandings.” By pointing out the intellectual impossibility of conceiving of the universe as a completely autonomous system and by asserting the importance of contingency in physical processes (Albright and Haugen 1997, 441), Pannenberg has steadfastly refused to allow science to declare its independence from theology.

Arising out of a symposium of scientists, philosophers, and theologians, *Beginning with the End: God, Science, and Wolfhart Pannenberg* addresses several features of this bold project. More specifically, the participants interact with two central issues: Pannenberg’s claim that scientific descriptions are provisional yet theologically relevant, and his attempt to construct a link between theology and science through the idea of contingency and the concept of field. My intent in the following paragraphs is twofold: (1) to place the discussion evidenced in *Beginning with the End* within the context of the specifically *theological* foundation for such interdisciplinary dialogue Pannenberg brings to the table, and (2) to indicate what I see as the crucial aspects of Pannenberg’s broader constructive theological agenda for the discussion presented in the volume.

#### THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR PANNENBERG’S QUEST FOR DIALOGUE

Running throughout the essays in *Beginning with the End* is an appreciation for Pannenberg’s concern to bring theology and science into a mutually edifying dialogue. Not explicit in the book, however, is the theological foundation that forms the context for Pannenberg’s interest in such dialogue.

Pannenberg, of course, approaches the “great divide” between science and theology primarily with theological rather than scientific interest. His overarching goal is to revamp theology, not science. Specifically, he is attentive to the interface of the two above all because of his desire to overcome from the side of the theologian the very situation that Eaves finds so unfortunate. Pannenberg wants to provide a new direction in theological understanding that can combat what he perceives to be a widespread privatization of religious belief in general and of theology in particular.

Decrying the turn toward the believing subject he finds in much modern theology, Pannenberg avers that theological statements cannot be grasped merely by some blind act, that is, by “a decision of faith.” Faith is not a way of knowing in addition to reason, he argues, but is grounded in public, historical knowledge. For this reason he declares that theology cannot be relegated to a private, sheltered sphere of life. Instead, theological affirmations must be subjected to the rigor of critical inquiry into the reality on which they claim to be based. Theology, in other words, must be evaluated on the basis of critical canons, just as the other sciences are. Thus, for Pannenberg, theology is a public discipline.

Pannenberg’s understanding of the public nature of theology is motivated by certain crucial theological suppositions central to his thinking. As the essayists in the volume repeatedly note, the foundation for Pannenberg’s engagement with science lies in his understanding of God as the power that determines everything. Less evident in the book, however, is how the theological implications of this way of conceiving of the divine reality led Pannenberg inevitably to such dialogue.

From Pannenberg’s foundational theological premise flows the far-reaching assertion that the deity of God is connected to the demonstration of God’s lordship over creation. For Pannenberg, this means that the idea of God, if it corresponds to an actual reality, must be able to illumine not only human existence but also experience of the world as a whole, thereby providing unity to all reality.

The overarching task of theology, in turn, is to show the illuminating power of the Christian conception of God. Following the medieval scholastics, Pannenberg undertakes the task of demonstrating the truth of Christian teaching through a representation of its coherence both internally (the relation of the various topics of systematic theology to each other) and externally (its relation to other knowledge) (Pannenberg 1991, 21–22). His belief that the theologian’s task includes showing the coherence of Christian teaching with all human knowledge drives Pannenberg to take the dialogue with science seriously. He believes that in a certain sense the failure to bring to light the illuminating power of the idea of God for scientific knowledge would mark the failure of the Christian vision of God and, consequently, the failure of the Christian God.

Pannenberg approaches the dialogue with another, related theological

assumption as well. He believes that in whatever form it is found the human quest for truth is ultimately the quest for God. Here Pannenberg builds from the classical Augustinian linking of truth with God (Pannenberg 1991, 53). Because God is truth, Pannenberg surmises, all human inquiry has God as its ultimate subject matter. And if God is the power that determines everything (that is, the Creator of the universe), all truth must cohere in God.

At the same time, Pannenberg brings to the dialogue a theologically grounded assertion of the penultimate character of all knowledge. All human attempts to set forth a coherent articulation of truth, he avers, remain an incomplete “thinking after” the divinely grounded unity of truth. This sense of the provisionality of human knowledge thrusts Pannenberg toward a proposed solution to the human quest: the appeal to the future as the focal point of ultimate truth.

Pannenberg’s turn to the future marks a crucial break with the Greek idea of truth. Rather than viewing truth as constant and unchanging essences—the eternal presence—lying behind the flow of time, he draws from the Hebrew idea that truth is essentially historical and ultimately eschatological. Truth is what shows itself throughout the movement of time climaxing in the end event (Pannenberg 1991, 54). Consequently, according to Pannenberg, prior to the eschaton all human knowledge will remain provisional and all human truth-claims contestable.

The provisionality of knowledge leaves us in a situation in which alternative claims to truth compete with each another. In such a situation, Pannenberg concludes, theology takes on an apologetic dimension. In contrast to editor Joel Haugen, who suggests that Pannenberg’s program harbors a conflict between theology as apologetics and theology as explanation (Albright and Haugen 1997, 19), for Pannenberg explanation *is* apologetics. He believes that the systematic reconstruction of Christian doctrine is itself a way of testing and verifying the truth-claims of Christian revelation (Pannenberg 1991, 257). Thus, in his estimation the best apologetic for the truth of the Christian faith is the rational demonstration of both the internal and the external coherence of Christian teaching, that is, the demonstration of the power of the Christian conception of God to illumine our understanding of reality.

But how should the theologian pursue this goal? Pannenberg believes that in a secular world the quest makes dialogue between theology and science inevitable. The essayists rightly note the programmatic progression Pannenberg envisions (see, for example, Albright and Haugen 1997, 10–11). In his attempt to show that the idea of God is foundational to the structure of the human person and of human society, Pannenberg begins with a critical appropriation of “secular” anthropology (Albright and Haugen 1997, 59), at the heart of which is his appropriation of the concept of “openness to the world,” which he draws from biology.

At the same time, Pannenberg is aware that this anthropological foundation is insufficient without the cosmology cradling it, a cosmology that asserts that God is the ground of the world. If God is the reality that determines everything, Pannenberg argues, the world can be properly understood only when it is seen as the creation of God.

This is the theological programmatic that Pannenberg brings to the dialogue.

#### DIALOGUE AND PANNENBERG'S LARGER THEOLOGICAL AGENDA

The chief interest of *Beginning with the End* is to interact with the cosmology that undergirds Pannenberg's interest as a theologian in engaging constructively with science. Although crucial to his work as a theologian, the cosmological concern that forms the heart of the discussion in the volume is only one aspect of a larger theological agenda spelled out more fully in Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* (1994).

In proposing that God is the truth of the world, Pannenberg sees himself as standing in the tradition dating to the early Christian apologists (but for which he finds credence already in the Old Testament linking of Yahweh to Elohim) that equates the God of the Bible with the philosophical idea of God as the source of the unity of the world (Pannenberg 1991, 70). As the essayists note, this opens the door to a dialogue with the scientific account of the universe.

Pannenberg, however, pushes the matter further. Although he draws from Barth's proposition that revelation occurs at God's own initiative, unlike his mentor Pannenberg argues that the focal point of this revelation is the historical process. And for Pannenberg this history is actually the history of religions. On the world historical stage, conflicting truth-claims are struggling for supremacy. And at their core these claims are ultimately religious. Hence, Pannenberg anticipates that the religious orientation that best illumines the experience of all reality will in the end prevail and thereby demonstrate its truth value. For him, therefore, it is in the specifically *religious* history of humankind that truth emerges (Pannenberg 1991, 167–71).

While Pannenberg himself does not take the seemingly obvious next step, this perspective suggests the contemporary idea that in a certain sense the scientific portrayal of the universe is also fundamentally religious in tone. Consequently, the dialogue between theology and science does not pit faith against reason, or the religious against the secular. Rather, it entails a discussion between alternative (if not rival) views of reality. In his contribution to the volume, Philip Clayton asserts that "theology is one of many semantic worlds or meaning-complexes that individuals and societies can draw on in their attempt to understand human existence" (Albright and Haugen 1997, 402). Clayton's description would characterize science equally well.

The “move to the religions” Pannenberg makes in the opening chapters of his *Systematic Theology* provides the foundation for the central role that the Christian conception of God as triune plays in Pannenberg’s theological cosmology. One dimension of this conception focuses on the Spirit, whom Pannenberg views as the more specific concretization of the God who is the dynamic field unifying all created reality. The scientific foundation for Pannenberg’s “field pneumatology” lies in the biologically based idea that life is essentially ecstatic (Pannenberg 1977, 33). Each organism lives in an environment that nurtures it, and each organism is oriented by its own drives beyond the immediate environment, on which it is dependent, to its future and to the future of its species. Pannenberg argues that both of these dimensions are aspects of the presence of the Spirit. But he adds that life in the Spirit is the destiny of all creation—most specifically that of the human person—and that the fullness of this life is an eschatological reality.

*Beginning with the End* highlights this pneumatological link between science and theology. Yet the volume omits interacting with another potentially fruitful bridge that is also crucial to Pannenberg’s cosmology. In his *Systematic Theology* Pannenberg proposes a connection, noted by the physicist C. F. Weizsäcker, between the idea of *logos* and the modern concepts of energy and information. Pannenberg suggests that energy, as the dynamic that brings forth change and ever new forms, offers a link to classical Christology, and especially to the doctrine of the Incarnation which declares that the destiny of creation is fulfilled in the one human, Jesus Christ (Pannenberg 1994, 293). This leads to Pannenberg’s central christological conviction that although God’s self-disclosure lies at the end of history it is proleptically present in Jesus of Nazareth. More specifically, through his resurrection Jesus experienced in the midst of history that eschatological transformation for which humankind is destined (Pannenberg 1993, 159–60, 220). This assertion carries important, but to date largely unexplored, implications for the dialogue between theological anthropology and the human sciences.

Also absent from the book is interaction with the central role the doctrine of the Trinity plays in Pannenberg’s cosmology. Pannenberg locates even the possibility of the universe as an existing reality in the transcendent trinitarian life. He argues that the Son is the model of an “other” different from the Father, and hence the Son’s self-differentiation from the Father is the basis of the existence of the world as independent from the Father. This, in turn, provides the theological context for the role of the Spirit as the principle of God’s immanence in creation and hence as the principle of the participation of creation in the divine life. By omitting the doctrine of the Trinity from the discussion, the book disengages Pannenberg’s use of the Spirit as a link between theology and science from its theological foundation.

This, however, raises an even more fundamental difficulty. By holding in abeyance the actual trinitarian identity of the God linked to the dynamic field, the discussion partners implicitly focus the dialogue on the generic “God of the philosophers.” But this begs the question of the basis for concluding that the great Unifier of the universe is none other than the God of the Christian faith. In other words, viewed from a Christian perspective, the form of the dialogue between theology and science represented in *Beginning with the End* risks running aground on a modern rearticulation of Tertullian’s cry, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?”

A final consideration remains. Despite his focus on the indeterminacy of knowledge, Pannenberg “conceives of theology as claiming to add to our knowledge of empirical reality,” to cite Philip Hefner’s judgment (Albright and Haugen 1997, 100). As a result, Pannenberg’s project, like his description of the science with which he desires to be in dialogue, reveals a strong objectivist bias (see Albright and Haugen 1997, 3). For this reason, the discussion described in *Beginning with the End* appears to retain the Enlightenment epistemological paradigm that assumes the objectivity of knowledge.

Objectivist approaches, however, risk minimizing the importance of “stance” in the quest for knowledge. For the theologian this raises the perennial question of the relationship of commitment to the quest to know. Hence, can Christian thinkers—ought Christian thinkers—bracket the insights of the biblical narrative of Creation and Fall when attempting to determine “what biological research tells us about the special character of human beings as opposed to the animals most closely related to them and to the animal world generally” (Albright and Haugen 1997, 62), to cite one example? Further, to what extent is the assertion that God is the ontologically prior source of meaning a *scientific* hypothesis? That is, to what extent is it a postulate to be proved rather than a commitment giving shape even to one’s scientific research?

In his essay, Wentzel van Huyssteen pinpoints the tension. He avers that Pannenberg “fails to confront the vital question of the intrinsic role of the theologian’s subjectivity (his ultimate commitment and its conceptualization) in the theorizing of this theological reflection” (Albright and Haugen 1997, 369). He suspects that Pannenberg may be caught in a dilemma between critical rationalist demands for noncommitment and the theologian’s subjective religious commitment. Regardless of whether or not van Huyssteen has given Pannenberg due credit, with this poignant comment he has put his finger on a question all theologians do well to ponder.

Writing in *Atlantic Monthly*, Edward O. Wilson has called for an accommodation between two opposing worldviews, which he terms “scientific empiricism” and “religious transcendentalism.” The process of accommodation Wilson envisions requires a religiously sensitive science and a

scientifically sophisticated religion. He writes, "Science faces in ethics and religion its most interesting and possibly most humbling challenge, while religion must somehow find the way to incorporate the discoveries of science in order to retain credibility. . . . Blind faith, no matter how passionately expressed, will not suffice" (Wilson 1998, 70). Indeed, modern Western culture has been the battlefield between two competing cosmological narratives, the theological account of a creation under God and the scientific story of a universe unfolding according to inherent and empirically discernible principles. The essays in *Beginning with the End* indicate that, with his focus on reasonable faith, Pannenberg has made significant strides in setting forth a version of the theological narrative of creation in a manner that resonates well with the vision of accommodation articulated by scientists such as Wilson. By advancing the dialogue between the two narratives, Pannenberg has done both theology and science a crucial service.

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