

PANNENBERG'S FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGES TO THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

by Philip Hefner

Abstract. This paper is a response to Wolfhart Pannenberg's "God as Spirit—and Natural Science" (2001). I argue that the distinctiveness and significance of Pannenberg's approach to the conversation between theology and science lies in his method of relating biblical-theological concepts specifically and directly to scientific knowledge and theories. The example at issue in this paper is his correlation of the biblical-theological term *spirit* to the scientific term *field*. This approach is both distinctive and the most difficult of challenges. However, it results in a genuinely theological interpretation of the scientific knowledge of the world. In his argument, Pannenberg asserts that his use of the term *field* is both similar to and different from the scientific use of the term. This assertion is provocative, but it also requires further discussion.

Keywords: George Ellis; field; John Haught; kenosis; Nancey Murphy; Wolfhart Pannenberg; spirit; theology.

Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* (1991–93) poses a very great challenge to both theology and science as separate domains of thought, and also to the interaction between them, because he sets before himself and us the most difficult task imaginable. He recognizes that everything else is measured by comparison with what is most difficult to accomplish. The most difficult of accomplishments defines what is most important. If we attempt the most difficult and we falter or fail, we nevertheless, by our very vision, can see how far we have come and assess the significance both

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of what we have done and of what is left undone. If we accomplish what is less difficult—what is easier and more manageable, in other words—we not only will not gain a perspective on our work but may even increase our confusion by the possibility that we will be satisfied with what is less and thereby be blind to the dimensions of the genuinely significant.

What is the accomplishment most difficult to which I refer? The attempt to take the measure of the best knowledge of our day, in the most comprehensive manner possible, and relate it to God. This most difficult task is at the same time the definition of theology. Saint Thomas wrote that theology is not distinguished by the topics it talks about—it talks about everything that concerns people. Rather, theology is distinguished by the manner in which it talks about its subjects—it talks about them in terms of their relationship to God. This is also Wolfhart Pannenberg's understanding of theology. To say, therefore, that he has set before himself and us the most difficult task imaginable is also to say that he undertakes a genuine theology of the world. He writes (in *Systematic Theology* II, xiv) that the task of his theological work is to show how

the event of revelation which the Christian faith claims makes it possible to develop an integrated interpretation of God and humanity and the world which we may with good reason regard as true in relation to the knowledge that comes from experience of the world and human life, and also to the knowledge of philosophical reflection, so that we can assert it to be true vis-à-vis alternative religious and nonreligious interpretations.

He goes on to say that he will deal with “knowledge derived from experience of the world and humanity from the standpoint of the Christian understanding of God” (*ST* II, xv). To do so, he insists, will at the same time require “a reformulation of the Christian understanding of God from the standpoint of experience of the world and humanity and the related reflection” (*ST* II, xiv).

Pannenberg's contribution to a genuine *theological* understanding of the knowledge that we derive from experience of the world, human life, and philosophical reflection may be clarified if we make a brief excursion into two other recent works that also deal with scientific knowledge by relating it to God. I refer to *On the Moral Nature of Universe*, by Nancey Murphy and George Ellis (1996), and *God After Darwin*, by John Haught (2000). I regard both of these works as excellent and serious works of considerable depth.

Murphy and Ellis argue that the natural sciences confront limit questions that require metaphysics to answer such questions as “Why is there a universe at all?” The social sciences face limit questions that require ethics, such as “What assumptions concerning human nature are most adequate?” Ethics in turn requires metaphysics. The authors propose that the most adequate metaphysics is in fact a theological understanding of God as *kenotic*. The life of Jesus, specifically interpreted by the “kenosis hymn” of

Philippians 2:5–11 and exemplified in Jesus’ “vulnerable enemy love and renunciation of dominion” (Murphy and Ellis 1996, 178), reveals the moral character of God, which grounds the theological response to the limit questions that face the sciences and ethics. This kenotic God provides the best model, Murphy and Ellis assert, for understanding why the anthropic principle holds in cosmology, as well as why God’s causality operates under the conditions of quantum indeterminacy and evolution by way of natural selection, and also for understanding the most adequate ethic required for life in the human community today.

What Murphy and Ellis have done is to propose that a certain concept of God as moral is a way to conceive of the purpose of the natural world and of human life in that world. It is a concept of morality based on self-renunciation and self-giving love for the world and for human persons in that world. Their proposal is a way of understanding how God relates to the world and what God’s purpose for the world is.

John Haught sets himself the task “to think about God in a manner proportionate to the opulence of evolution in light of the thought of Charles Darwin” (Haught 2000, ix). The “opulence of evolution” includes the contingency of nature, as well as its lawfulness and the fact of irreversible time. Complexity and autopoiesis are also elements of evolution’s legacy. Haught proposes a concept of *God as future* to ground an alternative to the metaphysics of “past” and “eternal present” that have dominated our thinking up to now. He finds biblical basis for this concept of God, elaborated more fully by Teilhard de Chardin and also suggested by several other theologians, including Pannenberg. Like Murphy and Ellis, he also finds a resource in the divine kenosis. The God of the future who engages in self-emptying can be thought of “as the infinitely generous ground of new possibilities for world-becoming” (Haught 2000, 119).

Murphy and Ellis focus on the purpose of the world; they account for many of the same phenomena of the natural world on the hypothesis that such phenomena are consistent with a world that is governed by the purposes of the God who is conceived as they have described. Haught does not focus so singlemindedly on purpose. He rather asks, Why should the world be like this?—that is, formed in an evolutionary mode. He deals almost exclusively with biological evolution, while Murphy and Ellis consider the world as it is viewed by natural, social and ethical science. Haught answers that the world is like this because it is called into being by a God who is marked by self-emptying love and is thus not reluctant to let the world be free—indeed, divine grace is defined as “letting be”—and who orients the world toward future unfolding rather than toward determinisms that flow from the past or patterns that are fixed in static perfection.

In one sense both of these books unquestionably meet the criterion of theology: they relate knowledge of the world and of human beings to God. In another sense, they proceed very much as Wolfhart Pannenberg does in

“God as Spirit—and Natural Science” (2001). He, too, asks the question, How is the creator to be understood as active in the particularities of his creation? He, too, considers that the particularities of creation include contingency, the irreversibility of time, openness to the future, independence, and the like.

There are, however, contrasts to be drawn between these other authors and Pannenberg, and these contrasts will throw light on his having chosen the more difficult task. The first of these contrasts may be drawn from his “God as Spirit—and Natural Science.”

His response to the question of how God is to be understood as active in the particularities of creation begins with his interpretation of the biblical view that God is active as spirit. He then proceeds to relate this to scientific knowledge and theories. This is quite different from Murphy, Ellis, and Haught, who answer the same question with a biblical-theological term, “by [or through] kenosis,” and then proceed to use that biblical term to explain why certain natural phenomena exist—contingency, anthropic indicators, autopoiesis, and the like. Before Pannenberg proceeds to such explanation, he seeks a scientific term, which, even if it is to a certain extent metaphorical, will throw light on *how* God works. The biblical term *spirit* is not left uncorrelated with scientific understandings. This scientific term is, of course, *field*. Spirit and field are terms of how agency proceeds, with respect both to natural processes and to God’s activity in the world. The other authors provide no such natural scientific correlate to kenosis.

Field is Pannenberg’s way of clarifying “God’s relationship to space and time . . . in such a way that his powerful presence with his creatures and their movements in space and time becomes intelligible” (2001, 786). In my understanding, the chief point in his use of the term *field* is that, in this concept, the field takes priority over bodily particles (p. 788) as the locus of activity. Action does not take place as if in a billiard-ball model, the cue stick strikes the cue ball, which strikes two other balls, which strike others, and so on and on. In a field, as I understand Pannenberg, action is not described by the relationships of separate bodies to each other but by how those relationships between bodies emerge from the coexistence that derives from their being together in a field. He interprets Michael Faraday as conceiving of “bodies as manifestations of force fields” (*ST* II, 101), which turns the billiard model on its head. This same idea enables Pannenberg to describe the inner life of the Triune God as characterized by field (*ST* I, 383).

God’s relationship to space and time is spoken of in terms of the imminence of God, which I understand to correlate to what Kant called the infinite whole of space and time that is presupposed in the perception of any part of time and space.

I am struck by Pannenberg’s emphasis on the differences between the way theology uses certain terms from science, alongside the similarities; he

makes this point also in the *Systematic Theology* (II, 84f.). This deserves more discussion, of a very orderly sort. Just how can we speak systematically of the differences and similarities? In response to a questioner, Pannenberg spoke provocatively of metaphors giving rise to conceptual breakthroughs, as if a term might begin its career as a metaphor but become something more, namely a rational concept. Some might say, on the contrary, that a concept is less than a metaphor, and this point, too, deserves discussion.

I point to Pannenberg's correlation of Spirit, his way of speaking theologically of how God is active in the world, with a scientific concept, field, as an example of his choosing a more difficult task. This is exemplified by the sharp critique that some scientists level at his use of the concept of field. He has drawn the scientists into this engagement, to the extent that in some circles it has become a cliché that Pannenberg misunderstands the concept of field. In the paper, he elaborates his understanding of the term and takes the argument back into the scientists' territory, following a two-fold strategy: challenging Polkinghorne's criticism that he turns field into a "spiritual" term, questioning on scientific grounds the way in which Polkinghorne speaks of field, and also explaining and justifying his use of the concept of field in ways both similar to and different from the ways physicists use the term—all the while insisting that his usage is neither a vague analogy nor a poetic expression. If the physicists choose to reengage the discussion, Pannenberg has provided an agenda for the engagement.

This kind of critique and engagement has not happened in the case of the theologians' use of the term *kenosis* or "letting be." It cannot, because there is no direct contact between these terms and scientific concepts. In this sense the other theologians have chosen an easier task, and they have spared themselves critique and engagement on the point. We can learn from this, and we are forced to decide for ourselves. To what extent are theologians required to bring their key concepts into contact with correlative scientific ideas?

A second contrast between Pannenberg, on the one hand, and Murphy, Ellis, and Haught, on the other hand, has to do with how the scientific knowledge of the world and humanity is related to God. All four of these writers speak of the nature of God. The other three speak of God's nature primarily from the vantage point of God's activity of relating to the world—God directing the world according to divine purposes (Murphy and Ellis) and God letting the world be, endowing it with generous possibilities (Haught). Both of these sets of concepts of God, though derived from the activity of relating to the world, say something about the nature of God: a certain moral nature is premised of God and a certain character as future of the world. Neither of these sets of ideas speaks at much length directly about the internal nature of God, and they leave untouched vast areas of traditional theological discourse about God.

One reason Pannenberg's effort is so audacious and so difficult and, for some readers, problematic, is that he insists that the creation must be related to the interior life of God. Creation here is used in two basic senses: referring to the created world that God brought forth, and also referring to the act of creating. He wants to account, by reference to God, not only for the created world but also for the relationship that underlies creation. These matters are not much touched upon in the paper, but they are critical for understanding Pannenberg's difficult accomplishment and specifically his engagement with science. I will sketch here my understanding of these points in his *Systematic Theology*.

Pannenberg proceeds by elaborating the doctrine of the Trinity, and as he does so he also engages in the reformulation of the concept of God that he called for in the preface to volume 2 of the *Systematic Theology*. His revising of the traditional idea of God consists chiefly in introducing *relation* into the concept of divine substance. He wants to do this in a way that is an alternative to Spinoza, for whom God's transcendence thereby "vanishes pantheistically in the infinity of nature." He also intends an alternative to Hegel, for whom this revision "is simply an element in the divine process of producing and dissolving the world," and to Whitehead, for whom "it is just a correlate of the concept of the world" (*ST I*, 367). He might make the same comment about Murphy, Ellis, and Haught that he makes of Whitehead.

His own constructive proposal is quite complex, and I will not attempt to rehearse it here. It must suffice to say that introducing relation into the divine essence offers possibilities for understanding how the three persons are distinct and yet still related to the unity of God. This is of enormous importance for the *Systematic Theology*. First of all, the self-differentiation of the Son from the Father is the ultimate ground for the creation, both as action and as product. This self-differentiation forms the constitutive substance of the Incarnation and of Jesus Christ and underscores the distinctness of the Son and Father. Pannenberg will say that the Logos incarnate in Christ is the ground for the form of the created world. The assertion that the Spirit, in its distinctness, is the dynamic of the created natural world forms the basis of the paper at hand (Pannenberg 2001).

However, by positing that relation is of God's essence, Pannenberg is able to speak about the Son's self-differentiating from the Father both as an act of the Son's and a gift from the Father, just as he can speak of the Son's obedience to the will of God as the Son's free gift to the Father and as a form of the Father's presence in Jesus. This allows Pannenberg to understand the work of Jesus as the work of the Father. In a comparable manner, he elaborates how the Spirit is the ground for the dynamic of the created world and at the same time an expression of how the Father and the Son are present in the world.

We catch a sense of how Pannenberg perceives these matters in this quotation, which I shall simply read and not interpret.

We cannot regard the bringing forth of creatures as though creatures were an object of self-distinction. Only indirectly do they proceed from the self-distinction of the Son from the Father. In the same way they are willed and affirmed by the Father in his self-distinction from the Son, by which he also accepts the Son in his distinction. The Father wills and accepts them as an expression of the overflowing of the divine love with which the Father loves the Son. (*ST II*, 87)

How do we make the move from the interior triune life of God to the relationship with the world? Pannenberg writes:

A first step toward conceptual clarification is taken with deliberations on God's essence and existence as the Trinitarian persons are seen as forms of the existence of the divine essence both in the world and before it. But how is its existence in the world related to its existence before and above it? (*ST I*, 367)

Pannenberg answers this question with the idea of *action*. Action is an alternative to ideas of causality. Since causes are contingent, we cannot be certain even if we ascertain causality that it represents the essence of that which causes. We "cannot argue directly from the effects to the nature of the cause. . . . In the case of personal action, on the other hand, the essence of the subject may be seen in the choice and achievement of the goals, so that the kind of action characterizes the one who acts" (*ST I*, 369). However, this reasoning can be applied to God only by employing the concept of field to the inner trinitarian life of God. The Spirit, as the power of the field, brings the three persons together in a living fellowship, which enables divine action in the world. I do not claim to have explained this or clarified it, but rather simply to have asserted what Pannenberg argues in a rather complex and erudite manner.

The point is that this constitutes a more difficult accomplishment, because he has attempted to show not only that God is related to the world but that the kind of relationship in which God stands to the world is not a correlate of the world but is rooted in the interior essence of God and, furthermore, that the very possibility of relationship through the idea of action is also rooted in the essence of God. This is Pannenberg's profound accomplishment: He has related the natural world to God and grounded that relationship in the nature of God. This is what is meant by a genuinely theological treatment of the natural world.

I would welcome Pannenberg's correction of my preliminary interpretation of his work and also his elaboration of it. Finally, I pose two questions: (1) It has been asserted traditionally that it is not possible to speak of God *ad intra*, in terms of God's own inner life. A great deal of Pannenberg's argument about the Trinity and about the Trinity living as a dynamic field seems to speak of this inner life of God. How is this possible? What is the status of such theological hypotheses? (2) Pannenberg argues that his use

of the term *field* is both similar to and different from the scientific use of the term. In our conversation with scientists, how can we speak of similarity and difference in our theological use of language in ways that are both conceptually and methodologically generalizable?

There are other noteworthy items in the paper: (1) the critique of teleology and (2) the understanding of God and the future in a way that understands the future neither as distant to God nor as future *to* God, but rather conceives of God *as* future. These items also deserve further discussion.

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