

History and Eschatology in the Thought of Wolfhart Pannenberg

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to explain Wolfhart Pannenberg's understanding of history and eschatology and the way in which these ideas affect his conception of human freedom and activity. I will also discuss his approach to the problem of world peace as a means of showing the contributions of his theology to a contemporary concrete problem. My argument, briefly stated, is that Pannenberg's theology of history contains significant resources that Christians may profitably use as they wrestle with the intellectual task of understanding our world and with the practical task of changing our world.

Understanding Pannenberg's theology can be a daunting experience. His thought ranges widely over several disciplines, including philosophy, science and hermeneutics. Accordingly, a few introductory words may be helpful in order to provide some orientation to his theology and the concerns that motivate it.

It seems axiomatic that history has an importance for the Christian faith that it does not have for other religions. I am not claiming that history is unimportant for other religions. Judaism has a prominent role for history in the form of tradition; Islam is founded upon some pivotal historical events. But the Christian faith relates to history in a more extensive way because of its eschatology. Christianity arose from the apocalyptic strand of first century Judaism and has never completely lost the sense that history is God's doing and that it moves in a direction determined by God. As a result, philosophical reflection on history has found a welcome home among Christians to a greater extent than it has among adherents of other religions. Systems of thought such as those of Augustine, Joachim of Fiore and G.W.F. Hegel all testify to the vital role that the concept of history plays in Christian thought. The fact that Christians have never come to complete agreement on how best to interpret history does not detract from this judgment. This

disagreement is only an index of the extent to which Christians take history seriously and feel the need to understand it in the light of Christian theology.

However, the rise of historical criticism in the eighteenth century and of modern historiographical methods has not been completely kind to theologians in their attempt at thinking about history in a Christian way. To be sure, modern historical research has yielded impressive benefits for theology, from the discovery of ancient documents to a greater knowledge of the Bible's historical background. But along with the benefits came certain liabilities. Historical criticism cast doubt on some long held assumptions about the authorship and dating of Biblical books. It excelled at showing that the Bible is an *ancient* book, thereby throwing into clear relief the difference in worldview between the Bible and modern, scientifically oriented people. In short, it tended to show both the Bible and Christianity to be historical phenomena, thoroughly embedded in their intellectual milieux. This result, in turn, tended to subject the Christian faith to the relativities of history, making it difficult for theologians to make absolute claims to truth.

It is not surprising, then, that theologians worried about the corrosive effects of modern historical study and acknowledged the need to come to terms with it. Some did so by ignoring the results of historical criticism and by trusting in the absolute, trans-historical character of the Bible. This was the path taken by Fundamentalism. Others came to the conviction that the Christian faith must be brought into conformity with the modern historical outlook, even if doing so meant a substantial trimming of some traditional Christian doctrines. This was the path taken by liberal theologians such as Ernst Troeltsch. At length a third option became popular, namely to grant the validity of historical criticism and of modern historical thinking but also to insulate the Christian faith from the corrosive effects of historical thought. This insulation was accomplished by declaring that the Christian faith is based, not on Jesus as reconstructed by historical investigation, but on Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament and as proclaimed by the church. This displacing of

theology from the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith safeguarded the Christian faith from historical criticism by affirming the trans-historical nature of revelation. Revelation, in this view, comes to be separated from world history. Biblical eschatology is shorn of its apocalyptic framework. Rudolf Bultmann exemplifies this third option, but it was also adopted by theologians as diverse as Martin Kaehler and Karl Barth.

Pannenberg has developed his theology of history against this background and with these problems in mind. His thought on this subject may be summarized in four points.

First, he fully accepts the methods and results of Biblical criticism. While his theology has not taken advantage of the most recent developments in Biblical studies (for example, canonical criticism and narrative analysis), his thinking has been thoroughly shaped by the modern historical outlook and his theology presupposes the results of modern Biblical study. Consequently, he stands firmly outside the Fundamentalist tradition.

Second, he has set himself against Rudolf Bultmann and others of his generation who regarded the apocalyptic stream of the Bible as an aberration, a detour from the more authentic prophetic tradition. Pannenberg believes that apocalypticism represents the culmination of the Biblical tradition, for in apocalyptic thought the Bible breaks the provincial boundaries of the Israelite nation and regards God as the lord of the whole world and of all history. For this reason he emphasizes the apocalyptic tendencies of the New Testament, seeing in them a continuation of the Old Testament's central tendency.

Third, and as a result of his emphasis on Biblical apocalypticism, he understands revelation to be equivalent to history in its totality. That is, universal history, in its entire scope, from beginning to end, constitutes the revelation of God. There is an essential connection between history and the God of the Bible. But the history in question is not the history of a particular people such as Israel; it is not even Christian history. It is instead the history of world as a whole. This

history *is* revelation because this history is, in a fundamental sense, the act of God. History in its totality and in its particulars is a result of God's creative activity. As a result, it reveals God. Who and what God is will stand forth with clarity and assurance only at the end of history and as a result of what transpires in history. With these affirmations Pannenberg rejects the early twentieth century tendency to depict revelation as something trans-historical.

Fourth, Pannenberg asserts that the concept of history applies not only to the realm of human events but also to nature. Pannenberg has led the way among theologians in the latter half of the twentieth century in calling for a theology of nature. Moreover, his approach to the theology of nature is distinctive, for he wishes to reverse our customary ways of viewing natural events and organisms. We should, he argues, see even things in nature as thoroughly historical. Natural events and beings are not instances of deterministic universal laws but are instead contingent, just as events in human history are contingent. Consequently, we must regard history as a fundamental metaphysical category. All finite events and beings have a historical and contingent character. They have this character because they arise from the creative activity of the Biblical God, who is the lord of history.

In summary, Pannenberg has provided Christian intellectuals today with a powerful and needed corrective to the narrowly existential focus that characterized much of Protestant theology in the first half of the twentieth century. His main theses, although not above improvement here and there, point the way forward for any Christian who wishes to understand history on the basis of the Christian faith and who wishes, as a Christian, to engage contemporary academic disciplines in the study of the world. The first step toward comprehension of Pannenberg's theology of history is to note his recovery of Biblical apocalypticism.

Although eschatology was an important theme for early twentieth century Protestant theologians, Pannenberg takes issue with the way in which they handled it. In particular, he is critical of Rudolf Bultmann's understanding of history and eschatology. Bultmann interpreted the eschatological language of the New Testament existentially and understood it to designate the crisis of human existence as it stands between the old age of sin and the new age of the Spirit. Bultmann acknowledged the radically historical character of human existence and of the Biblical text; however, his theology had no place for a consummation of history. Although revelation occurs in history, history as such is not revelation. Pannenberg is especially impatient with Bultmann's argument that the New Testament tends to divorce itself from an apocalyptic understanding of history.¹ Pannenberg, on the contrary, focuses his attention on the apocalyptic tradition of the Bible, with its emphasis on the whole sweep of world history and with its images of the eventual consummation of that history. From his study of the apocalyptic writings he draws the following conclusion:

A specific understanding of reality corresponds to the God of the Bible. From the standpoint of God, all reality is referred to the future and is experienced as eschatologically oriented. He has left his impression on the experience of the world and of the situation of man as the God of the promises, as the God who leads history into a new future, and as the God of the coming kingdom.²

Two aspects of this understanding of reality deserve attention.

First, we notice that the Biblical conception of God is associated with a particular understanding of reality--a metaphysics. This is the basis for Pannenberg's critique of Bultmann's kerygmatic theology, which restricted the significance of revelation to its relevance for human being and declined to ask about the meaning of revelation for history and nature. For Pannenberg, Christian theology must be thought out against a wider horizon. Its metaphysical implications must be drawn out, for it concerns more than just salvation narrowly considered. Although it speaks to human existential concerns, it is not limited to them. If God is truly the creator, he argues, then

theology must concern itself with reality as a whole and not just with the significance of revelation for human salvation.³

Second, we notice that the metaphysics associated with the Biblical view of God is one that emphasizes the future. This, for Pannenberg, constitutes the essential difference between the Biblical view of reality and that of mythological thinking and of ancient Greek philosophy. Greek philosophers tended to identify true reality with that which is eternally changeless. True reality, in this philosophy, transcends the temporal world of history. The mythical view sees historical events in the present as a repetition of what transpired originally in the past.⁴ As with the Greek philosophical view, in myth there is no true contingency and freedom in history. Out of the same concern, Pannenberg contests the opinion that the events of history and nature are merely organic developments (in Aristotle's sense of *entelechy*) of a principle inherent in the past.⁵ In each of these views, historical events are deficient in reality. Either they lack the changelessness that characterizes true reality (the Greek philosophical view) or they are mere recurrences of the past (myth) or they are already contained in principle in the beginning, their historical development adding nothing essentially new. In all these cases the contingent historical events of the present have little importance. Against these, Pannenberg sets forth the Biblical view, with its apocalyptic orientation toward the future. Because of this orientation, historical events bear an importance in relation to the future consummation of history--they anticipate that future. This character of historical events is seen, for example, in the structure of promise and fulfillment. The God who promises is not only a God who is faithful and who guarantees the continuity of history and nature. This God is also the God who is able to do new things. The future does not simply repeat the past but goes beyond it. God's freedom to do new things can be seen in the fact that the fulfillment of the Biblical promises usually diverges somewhat from the original form of the promises.⁶ Although God is faithful in keeping promises, in no case is God tied absolutely to the past.

Beyond affirming that history awaits a future consummation and that God is the God who accomplished new things in history, the Biblical understanding of reality implies something about the nature of historical causality. It implies that divine causation transpires, not from the past to the present, but from the future to the present and into the past. Contrary to our customary way of understanding, the act of creation is not an event in the world's past. It is not a case of efficient causation in the past exercising effects into the present and future. If it were, then theology would have to embrace a deterministic philosophy just as early modern science did with its one-sided emphasis on efficient causality. The present and future would be merely a playing out of causal forces lying in the past. On the contrary, the experience of reality ensconced in the Bible and in its apocalyptic framework points to the contingency of historical events. This contingency can be explained only by accepting the causal priority of the future--the fact that it is the future and not the past that is causative.⁷

The Priority of the Future

This notion of the future's causal priority is undoubtedly Pannenberg's most recondite and counter-intuitive conception.⁸ However, his point can be easily grasped by examining what he takes to be the most illuminating case of the future's priority--the resurrection of Jesus. Here an event occurs that is not conditioned or caused by prior events; it is genuinely new. Furthermore, this novel event, like other events in Jesus' ministry, is the appearance, in historical time, of the future kingdom. The resurrection does not merely herald the future; it is in fact the end of history--God's kingdom occurring in advance. The resurrection of Jesus is the fullness of the future kingdom of God occurring in the midst of history. As a direct act of God, the resurrection of Jesus is paradigmatic for our understanding of all reality, which likewise results from God's creative activity.⁹ Every event in reality is effected by God and therefore is an appearance of the future. Of course,

each event is merely a fragmentary and anticipatory arrival of the future that is God's kingdom. The future has not yet arrived in its completeness. Further, we must not suppose that history is moving progressively toward the future kingdom in a linear fashion. To do so would be to ignore human freedom. When we factor freedom into history, then we see that humanity can resist God's will. Nonetheless, as will be shown below, even human freedom to resist God testifies to the contingency of events and thus to the priority of the future. In turn, this priority of the future indicates that each present moment is a creation of God.¹⁰

But how is the resurrection a case of the future exercising a *causal* effect on the present and the past? It does so by having a retroactive effect on events in the past. Once again, the resurrection is the paradigmatic case. The resurrection, for Pannenberg, means much more than that Jesus was raised from the dead. It was in addition a confirming event. By this Pannenberg means that the resurrection makes it true that Jesus is the Son of God. We should not, he avers, think that Jesus would have been all through his ministry the Son of God even if the resurrection had not occurred. The resurrection does more than merely giving us a subjective assurance of Jesus' Sonship. To think otherwise is to overlook the fact that, until the eschatological consummation of history, all things are undetermined. As Pannenberg writes, "Had Jesus not been raised from the dead, it would have been decided that he also had not been one with God previously. But through his resurrection it is decided, not only so far as our knowledge is concerned, but with respect to reality, that Jesus is one with God and retroactively that he was also already one with God previously."¹¹ Jesus' essence--his identity and his significance--was not complete until the resurrection. Only with the resurrection does it become true that Jesus was in fact Son of God. We might be tempted to think that Jesus was in fact the Son of God from the beginning of his life, for this would be something that his eternal Father would have known and determined. But Pannenberg believes that such thinking ignores the essential historicity of being. The essences of

historical beings are not pre-given or determined in advance. Instead, those essences become in the course of history. At the same time, we should not imagine that Jesus was not the Son of God until the resurrection. The resurrection did not make of Jesus something that he was not in his previous life and ministry.¹² Instead, the resurrection makes it true that Jesus was the Son of God all along--from the beginning of his life onward. In other words, Jesus' Sonship was during his earthly ministry a contingent and incomplete fact. It became true only through the resurrection, but the resurrection determines that Jesus was always the Son of God. Of course, even this determination remains somewhat provisional, for the complete consummation of history lies still in our future. The resurrection is the eschaton. It is the future. However, because of the contingent nature of historical events--the fact that the future determines their meaning--even Jesus' Sonship is provisional until the very end of history.¹³ We may generalize this point, for what is true of Jesus is true of all things and events. Their essences are determined only in and through the process of history. Things become what they are in history. Only at the end of history will it finally be decided exactly what things are. Only then will the truth about reality emerge and be determined.

Pannenberg, then, is offering not only a theology of history but also an ontology. He understands "unity" to be "the most comprehensive characteristic of being. . . . Everything is a unity to the extent that it is at all."¹⁴ But, as noted previously, in the midst of history, all things are fragmentary and contingent. Therefore, until the end of history all things are undetermined and not fully actual. Let us return again to Jesus Christ. Until the resurrection, his identity and his essence were undecided. If his history had turned out differently, he would not have been the Son of God. It is only the end, in this case the resurrection (the end of history having occurred in a preliminary way), that conferred unity and identity on Jesus. So it is with all things. What they are--their identity--is given only in the course of history and thus only determined at the end of history. But the end of history is the future kingdom of God. We must think of the kingdom, then, as the

“definitive unity of the world.”¹⁵ Unity is a gift of God to the world. Only in the eschatological kingdom will things and events be completely unified together and thus attain their true being.

This emphasis on the future discloses something of importance about creatures. If creaturely existence is not determined by causal forces lying in the past and if instead that existence is oriented toward and flows from the future, then it is appropriate to speak of a creaturely self-transcendence. In this self-transcendence, creatures are free as God raises them above themselves, freeing them from slavish repetition of the past.¹⁶ Through this self-transcendence, this radical orientation to the future, humanity is “inspired” to be creative in such areas as the arts and the world of ideas.¹⁷ Pannenberg uses the term ‘inspiration’ because creaturely self-transcendence is an act of the Holy Spirit in the created realm. Such self-transcendence is the creature’s participation in the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

For Pannenberg, the centrality of the future is significant for our understanding, not only of the resurrection, causality, and ontology, but also of God’s own being. Pannenberg affirms the traditional doctrine that God is independent of the world, did not need to create the world and does not require the world for actualization. However, he has developed the idea that God, having created a world, is now in a sense dependent on the course of world history, for “if there are finite beings, then to have power over them is intrinsic to God’s nature.”¹⁹ There is an important sense in which God’s being depends on history, for, having created the world, God’s being is now inseparably united with God’s rule over the world. Once God has created a world, God’s being is linked to God’s rule, for it is only in history that God’s Lordship is determined. Just as Jesus would not have been the Son of God without the resurrection, so God does not exist without actually ruling in history. As a result, at present the being of God is an open question, for history is not yet complete. It is possible that historical events could occur that would make it clear that there is no God ruling history. Of course, Pannenberg holds that there are good reasons for believing

otherwise, but the matter is not yet settled and in fact will not be settled until the eschatological consummation of the kingdom of God. As noted above, even the Sonship of Jesus is not fully settled, in spite of his resurrection. In Pannenberg's view, *all* events remain contingent and their meaning provisional until the final eschatological consummation of history. This is not merely an epistemological issue. It is not that the matter is truly settled and that it is we, being ignorant, who are unsettled. No; the question of God's being is itself not yet settled in history and will not be until the eschatological consummation. As noted above, it is only at the end of history that the being, identity and essence of things is finally determined. God's being and rule are no exception. By creating a world, God has subjected God's own being to the course of history with its contingencies. Although Christians *believe*, on the basis of the resurrection, that God rules, only the end of history will determine that God indeed has ruled.

Since God's being is inseparable from God's rule and since God's rule is and remains, in the midst of history, a matter of debate, there is a valid sense in which it is true to say that God does not yet exist.²⁰ This does not mean that God is in some process of historical becoming or that God does not exist today but will exist someday.²¹ Rather, it means that God's being and rule will not be determined until the end of history. Only the end, the consummation of history, will decide and determine that God in fact exists. Only then will it be decidedly *true* that God exists, although the end will determine that God did in fact rule all through the course of history and not only at the end. There is, therefore, no justification for any sort of Christian triumphalism or naive optimism. Pannenberg takes fully seriously the modern atheistic critique of theism and recognizes its force. At the same time, the debatable character of God's existence is no cause for despair, for, as noted, Pannenberg believes there is good historical reason--the resurrection of Jesus as an anticipation of the future kingdom--to affirm the existence of God and therefore to live on the basis of hope.

The principal reason for hope is that the rule of God, God's kingdom, is not merely future. It is not merely something hoped for, as are many things in our lives that we long for but which are not yet a reality. God's kingdom would be merely future in this sense if causation proceeded from past to present. In this case, the future kingdom would be only a possibility yet to be actualized, a mental projection of ours, subjectively fashioned by extending the past into an idealized future. On the contrary, the kingdom of God has already occurred--provisionally--in history, especially in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.²² In Jesus Christ, the future kingdom of God has already become a historical event. In him the future of God's kingdom has appeared definitively. Of course, this judgment is possible only in light of the resurrection of Jesus. Since the resurrection retains a provisional and contingent character until the end of history, our confidence in the future kingdom is not a matter of certitude. As noted above, God's existence is still subject to the course of history and its ultimate confirmation awaits the full revelation of God's lordship at the *eschaton*. Nonetheless, based on the resurrection, the church asserts that the message and deeds of Jesus were not merely *about* the future; they were the future. They were not the future in its totality, in its eschatological fullness. But they were the future. They were truly God appearing among us. As such they were an anticipation of that eschatological state in which God's peace will rule. Accordingly, the world is not locked into a mere continuation of the past. It is not the aimless repetition of eternal, unchanging structures. On the contrary, the world is constituted by genuinely new events, so new that we humans struggle to embrace the newness and often turn away from the new thing that God is doing. Nonetheless, the future is in its own way fully determinate. It is the kingdom of God. And it is the destiny of the world. In our sin we may not today embrace it, but it is in fact the world's future and it presses upon the present at every moment.

The idea of orientation toward the future, then, is highly significant for Pannenberg. It is his way of understanding God, creation, historical causation, the nature of finite reality, and human

freedom. The main point for Pannenberg is that, whereas other metaphysics have a difficult time accounting for freedom, contingency, openness and creativity, the metaphysics that arises out of the Biblical view of God does successfully account for them. The practical significance of this is that history is not a predetermined set of events, not a causal nexus with the present following inexorably out of the past and issuing forth just as inexorably in the future. Instead, history is the creation of the God who makes things new, who in freedom creates from nothing, and who invites us to participate, however provisionally, through self-transcendence in the coming of God's kingdom, which is a kingdom of world peace.

World peace, therefore, is not simply a human desideratum. It is in fact the destiny and future of the world. It is inevitable, but not deterministically so. It is inevitable because this future has already occurred and even now presses upon the present. "It *wills* to become present."²³ But its coming is not concretely determined, for the world is the place of contingency and freedom. God will eventually bring about the kingdom in its fullness, but not in a way that contradicts human freedom.

Freedom

Because all reality (even at the merely organic level²⁴) is oriented toward the future, instead of being caused by events in the past or a being the reflection of a changeless eternity, there is an element of contingency and freedom in all things.

The power of the future does not rob man of his freedom to transcend every present state of affairs. A [divine] being presently at hand, and equipped with omnipotence, would destroy such freedom by virtue of his overpowering might. But the power of the future is distinguished by the fact that it frees man from his ties to what presently exists in order to liberate him for *his* future, to give him his freedom.²⁵

This quotation indicates clearly enough that God is not to be thought of as one efficient cause among other worldly causes or even as a transcendent efficient cause.²⁶ This is not to say that God

is not creative and active. As noted above, Pannenberg affirms the doctrine of creation from nothing. It is to say that God's activity is not comparable to efficient causality, which always proceeds deterministically from the past to the present and into the future. As a result, the activity and power of God do not compromise human and creaturely freedom. Indeed, the fact that God is the power of the future is what imparts to events their contingency in the first place and thus creates the possibility of freedom. True freedom for creatures consists in self-transcendence (and not merely in the power of choosing among alternatives).²⁷ Self-transcendence in turn signifies a participation in the divine Spirit. It is a kind of cooperation (although Pannenberg does not use this term) between creaturely activity and divine activity.²⁸ The connection between freedom, self-transcendence and creaturely orientation to the future is brought out in the following quotation:

Freedom itself presupposes openness to the future. Man is free only because he has a future, because he can go beyond what is presently extant. And so freedom is in general the power that transforms the present.²⁹

Of course, creaturely freedom also means the possibility of turning away from the future. Each created event has a certain autonomy in its relation to God. Pannenberg writes of the future "releasing" events into existence and setting events free.³⁰ But the autonomous finite being tends to ignore its fragmentary and anticipatory nature. In self-assertion it seeks to prolong its existence. It cuts itself off from the future in which is found its true freedom and its authentic existence.³¹ In this way, sin is grounded in the freedom that the God of the future kingdom grants to us.

Moreover, creaturely freedom is grounded in God's own Trinitarian freedom. Part of what makes Jesus the Son of God is the fact that he willingly distinguishes himself from God in humility and obedience. But Jesus' self-distinguishing from God

is grounded in the self-distinction of the eternal Son from the Father. Hence the eternal Son is the ontic basis of the human existence of Jesus. . . . But if from all eternity, and thus also in the creation of the world, the Father is not without the Son, the eternal Son is not merely the ontic basis of the existence of Jesus . . . he is also the basis of the distinction and independent existence of all creaturely reality.³²

Humans and other creatures are truly independent and are free. This independence and freedom are grounded in God's Trinitarian life. The Son eternally distinguishes himself from the Father. This independence establishes the possibility of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and of Christ's own distinction from God. But more than this, the Son's distinction from the Father establishes the possibility of creaturely existence as such. Creatures have a measure of autonomy because there is eternally separation and distinction within the divine life. The act of creation, whereby God grants independent existence to creatures, is accordingly neither an act of arbitrary choice on God's part nor a fall away from an original unity. It is instead grounded in the Trinitarian life of God, in which distinction in the midst of unity is already found.

What is the significance of Pannenberg's view of creaturely freedom? First, it affects the way in which we think of human activity. The fact that God continually creates the world from the future does not mean that human deeds are unnecessary. Humanity is responsible for embracing the future, God's kingdom, that lies before us. Although this future is not something we create, it is nonetheless true that humans can participate in its coming. Further, God's activity does not mean that human activity is impossible or a mere illusion. Reality is not causally determined in any sense--either through natural laws³³ or through divine predetermination. Although the future of God's kingdom is, from the perspective of faith, assured and the universal destiny of all reality,³⁴ it will not occur without the concurrence of humans as they in freedom participate in the power of the future:

In relation to the God of the power of the future, man is free . . . for that creative love that changes the world without destroying it. This creative love proceeds from freedom and is directed toward affirming and creating freedom in the world. If the unity of mankind, which is the purpose of history, one day becomes a reality, it will be achieved by this love.³⁵

Pannenberg has sought to preserve the delicate balance between God's creative activity and human responsibility and between the inevitability of the future and the contingency of the present.

Although humanity does not create the kingdom of God by its efforts, we are called to participate in

its coming. Although in faith we are sure of the kingdom's coming, the contingency of the present means that the kingdom will not arrive without us.

World Peace

Pannenberg's theology is difficult and challenging. Furthermore, this difficulty is augmented by his chosen strategy of engaging modern thought in a philosophical and often highly theoretical way. One drawback of this approach is that his theological writings often amount to technical discussions of methodological principles. The practical relevance of his theology is sometimes not immediately evident. However, Pannenberg has addressed himself to some urgent contemporary issues. An examination of his essay on world peace will help the reader gain some sense of the ways in which Pannenberg's thought can help Christians today think creatively about the problems that face the world today and the appropriate Christian response to those problems.

I noted previously that the future kingdom of God brings unity to the world. For humanity, unity takes the concrete form of community. Community offers to the individual a unity of experience that far transcends anything that the individual human mind can achieve.³⁶ The importance of human community points us to the role of peace in Pannenberg's thought, for he understands the world's eschatological unity to be the ultimate reconciliation of all schisms and contradictions.³⁷ In short, the future of the world is peace.

The first thing to note about Pannenberg's views of peace is his concern to recover the Biblical conception of peace as *shalom*. The Biblical conception goes beyond the mere idea of a cessation of armed conflict or even the disarming of the nations. "The peace of God is concerned with the well-being, the wholeness of our existence, a wholeness which in this life is found only in fragmentary form."³⁸ Although the cessation of hostilities is of course something of great

importance and a part of world peace, the future of God's kingdom transcends this narrow expectation. More fully expressed, the Biblical conception of peace

involves peace among the nations . . . [understood as] a matter of overcoming the conflicts which are the occasion of violent encounters. The ending of such conflicts is anticipated as the result of the universal worship of Yahweh and of following the laws that he has established. Worldwide peace, together with justice . . . is the most important mark of that long-awaited divine Lordship which will one day replace the forms of authority exercised by the empires of this world. . . . God's Lordship, which makes it possible for human life to become whole, includes political peace.³⁹

In other words, Pannenberg regards world peace as one aspect of the eschatological salvation described in the Bible. As such, peace is inseparable from justice and from the rule of God.

The eschatological character of this peace reminds us that our hope for it is rooted in Jesus Christ and his kingdom. World peace is not a human achievement or ideal. Because this peace is *God's* peace, it presupposes the rule of God. Furthermore, since this peace is *shalom*, it signifies complete wholeness for finite creatures. This wholeness necessarily involves victory over death. Consequently, this peace is something that cannot be effected by political means.⁴⁰ It is first and foremost a quality of the kingdom that has appeared decisively in Jesus Christ. Since this peace is grounded in Jesus Christ, it "remains firm even if we do not succeed in securing and preserving world peace" by political means.⁴¹ Although humanity can and should work for peace, its ultimate victory depends not on human efforts but on God.

The question then arises, How does this kingdom and peace of God relate to human effort? Is it completely independent of our work? No. Pannenberg writes that *shalom*

is characterized by a system of world peace which we are to strive to establish. . . . Humans should not be passive recipients of God's actions. It is our destiny to participate responsibly in God's Lordship over the world. . . . His Lordship can find its universal, although provisional, expression in a world order characterized by peace.⁴²

Several aspects of this quotation deserve comment. First, there is a legitimate and needed place for human striving. Not that our striving can build the kingdom of God, but it can establish a measure of world peace that would be an anticipation of that kingdom. In this way, human efforts at creating world peace are neither directly effective in building the kingdom nor totally unrelated to the kingdom. Instead they are anticipations of the kingdom. As such, they are enormously important, if provisional. Second, the kingdom does not come solely through divine activity. Within the creative providence of God, human activity is a necessary aspect of the coming of the kingdom. For that reason, we are not to wait passively for God to act. The truth is that God is always acting, continuously, in bringing unity and wholeness out of the disparate elements of human history.⁴³ So, God has always already taken the initiative, as God's future presses in upon the present. The proper human response to this initiative is not passive receptivity but rather active participation. Third, this participation in the coming kingdom is our destiny. However, it is not a fated destiny, one that will occur without us. Instead it is our destiny in the sense that it is our future. It is our true being, for this future destiny is the unified and unifying totality and wholeness of reality. Fourth, this destiny means our participation in God's Lordship. This signifies more than just sharing power with God, for, as noted above, God's power is not in competition with creaturely power. The participation of which Pannenberg writes is in fact a participation in God through the Holy Spirit. Whereas the eternal Son is the ground of the creatures' independence from God and freedom, the Spirit is that principle of our participation in the divine life.⁴⁴ Finally, any peace accomplished by humanity remains

provisional. Although in faith we believe in the inevitability of the coming of God's kingdom, we live in the midst of time. This means that we recognize that even the existence of God is debatable and undecided. In historical time all things remain provisional until the end. Even the total absence of war would not be the kingdom of God, for the kingdom is the future in which all things are new. However, such absence of war would in truth be a provisional anticipation of the kingdom. Accordingly, Pannenberg writes that God's peace

cannot be produced by our efforts; it can become present only by grace . . . and as a foreshadowing . . . of complete peace. By contrast, world peace, which must take the form of a political condition, is something entirely provisional and is by no means either present salvation or a golden age.⁴⁵

But because worldly peace would indeed be a provisional anticipation of the kingdom of God, "Commitment to the cause of world peace [is not] superfluous." On the contrary, the fact that humanly achieved peace, however fragmentary and imperfect, is a real anticipation of the kingdom of God should motivate our commitment to working for world peace. For this reason,

Anyone who . . . does not work wherever possible for peace . . . has no share in the peace of God which has been made available to mankind through the death and resurrection of Jesus. . . . The challenge is to take part in the incarnational movement of the coming of God, which Jesus proclaimed and which took place when through him the hope for the future Kingdom of God and its peace became present reality.⁴⁶

It is significant that, in this quotation, Pannenberg speaks of "anyone." Although the ground of our hope for world peace is Jesus Christ, Pannenberg does not think that only Christians can be peace-makers. "God recognizes [peacemakers] as belonging to him, because through them the same spirit [sic] is at work who speaks through the action of God in sending Jesus into the world. . . . Everyone who works in this way is filled with the spirit of God which Jesus announced, whether he confesses himself a Christian or not. This is the basis for cooperation between

Christians and non-Christians.”⁴⁷ As a result, there is great opportunity and need for the Church to work for peace with an ecumenical attitude.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been more expository than critical. It would not be difficult to offer a critique of Pannenberg’s theology. For example, it would be helpful if he were to discuss the appearance of the kingdom of God in relation to a greater range of historical events. As it is, he has limited himself to relating the kingdom to the Biblical tradition. He has offered only the most general of comments regarding the way in which the kingdom is related to modern secular history.⁴⁸ The fact that he has worked at a level of high generality is to be expected, for he has always made it clear that he wishes to engage intellectual disciplines at the philosophical level. However, his desire to present a theology of history demands that he or someone else take his principles and use them to interpret the course of history in a fairly detailed way. Nonetheless, we should not overlook Pannenberg’s accomplishment. He has restored to theology a sense of the importance of history and has, by his recovery of Biblical apocalypticism, provided a way for Christian intellectuals to engage the study of history, although at an admittedly general level. Further, he has argued strongly and persuasively for both the need for and the limitations of human action in relation to the kingdom of God. His theology presents us with neither a pessimistic, other-worldly quietism nor a too easily optimistic activism. Taking with full seriousness both the contingency of historical events and the inevitability of the coming kingdom of God, he has portrayed the Christian’s task in the world against both a realistic and an ecumenical background.

¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Redemptive Event and History," in *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays, Volume I*, trans. George H. Keim (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 22-25 and 36.

²Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The God of Hope," in *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays, Volume II*, trans. George H. Keim (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 237.

³Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Contingency and Natural Law," in *Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith*, ed. Ted Peters (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 74.

⁴Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Biblical Understanding of Reality," in *Faith and Reality*, trans. John Maxwell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 17.

⁵"Contingency and Natural Law," 83-84.

⁶"The Biblical Understanding of Reality," 12.

⁷See "Contingency and Natural Law," n. 11 (p. 116): "Contingency means . . . that which is not necessary *on the basis of what is past*" [emphasis original].

⁸Pannenberg acknowledges the strangeness of this conception in *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 54.

⁹"The Biblical Understanding of Reality," 10.

¹⁰*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 59 and 65-66. See also "Contingency and Natural Law," n. 22 (p. 117), where Pannenberg quotes with approval the following statement of Langdon Gilkey: "Every fact and event . . . comes to be in each new moment and is upheld by the active, creative power of God, which continually gives to every creature its power to be in each new moment, and its power to act and relate itself to other creatures."

¹¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus--God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 136.

¹²*Jesus--God and Man*, 135.

¹³*Jesus--God and Man*, 108.

¹⁴*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 60.

¹⁵*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 59.

¹⁶Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Doctrine of the Spirit and the Task of a Theology of Nature," in *Toward a Theology of Nature*, 133-135.

¹⁷"The Spirit of Life," in *Faith and Reality*, 37.

¹⁸Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 2:33.

¹⁹*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 55.

²⁰*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 56.

²¹*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 62-63.

²²*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 133-135.

²³*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 143.

²⁴"The Spirit of Life," 33-34.

²⁵"The God of Hope," *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays, Volume II*, 242-243.

²⁶See "The Spirit of Life," 7, where Pannenberg asserts that God's activity is not in competition with human activity or with natural laws or with biological evolution.

²⁷"Man--The Image of God?" in *Faith and Reality*, 47. See also *Systematic Theology* 2:32-34 for a further discussion of self-transcendence as a participation, through the Spirit, in God.

²⁸"The Spirit of Life," 35-37.

²⁹"The God of Hope," 245-246.

³⁰*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 59 and 65.

³¹*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 69.

³²*Systematic Theology*, 2:23.

³³"The Biblical Understanding of Reality," 19.

³⁴*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 59.

³⁵*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 69-70.

³⁶"The Doctrine of the Spirit and the Task of a Theology of Nature," *Toward a Theology of Nature*, 136.

³⁷*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 60.

³⁸Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Ethics*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 151-152.

³⁹*Ethics*, 152.

⁴⁰*Ethics*, 159.

⁴¹*Ethics*, 154-155.

⁴²*Ethics*, 172.

⁴³"Divine Revelation and Modern History," in *Faith and Reality*, 87-88.

⁴⁴*Systematic Theology*, 2:32.

⁴⁵*Ethics*, 151-152.

⁴⁶*Ethics*, 155.

⁴⁷*Ethics*, 155.

⁴⁸For example, see “The Christian Empire and Civil Religion in Christianity,” in *Human Nature, Election, and History* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 62-82.