

# **Issues in Faith and History**

Papers presented at the second Edinburgh conference on  
Dogmatics, 1987

*edited by*

Nigel M. de S. Cameron

RUTHERFORD HOUSE BOOKS  
Edinburgh

*Published by Rutherford House, 17 Claremont Park,  
Edinburgh EH6 7PJ, Scotland*

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY  
SPECIAL STUDY 3

ISBN 0 946068 37 2

Copyright ©1989 Rutherford House and Contributors

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of Rutherford House.

Computer typeset at Rutherford House on Apple Macintosh™  
Printed in Great Britain by BPC Wheatons Ltd, Exeter

# GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORY IN PANNENBERG

Timothy Bradshaw

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to spell out Pannenberg's rejection of what he takes to be the current options on offer of models of God's relationship to history, and to give a critical account of his own proposals so that we might begin to identify problems and possible reforms for evangelical theology.

Pannenberg may be particularly useful as a catalyst in this area because he tries to take up the Biblical tradition, especially apocalyptic, and is committed to seek a new synthesis incorporating the claims of revelation and those of modernity. He also criticises both wings, liberal and conservative, and could be said to 'seek to go beyond their polar opposition while taking what is essential from each'. Whether or not one buys into his total system, and there are very good grounds for not doing so, his acute presuppositional criticism is a healthy stimulus for orthodox theology. He offers a keen challenge to return to scripture and reassess the received doctrine of the God of Jesus. Pannenberg is, in short, a breaker of moulds and we must be sure to take careful note of helpful fresh insights that may result from his determined restructuring.

The plan of the paper will be, firstly, to sketch out Pannenberg's critique of both orthodox and modernist understandings of God and the world; secondly, we will review his own proposed revision of the traditional framework including particularly Pannenberg's increasing trinitarian emphasis coming across very clearly in the untranslated volume of essays which hopefully will soon be published in English as *Basic Questions* volume 4;<sup>1</sup> thirdly, an appraisal will be offered, and finally areas of special importance for evangelical theology will be raised.

1. *Grundfagen systematischer Theologie*, Band 2, Gottingen, Vandenhoech und Ruprecht, 1980 (hereafter referred to as 'GST2').

## **GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORY IN PANNENBEG.**

### **1. Problems Pannenberg perceives with positions ancient and modern**

Fear of dualism lies at the heart of Pannenberg's rejection of both the conservative and the modernist doctrines of God and the world. He considers both schools to have put asunder God from non-divine reality, and his theological enterprise is largely taken up with making a fresh synthesis of the two. Tillich says that the dynamo of the history of theology has been wrestling with the question of how to unite 'the principle of identity and the principle of detachment'.<sup>2</sup> How does he conduct his critique?

Against the modernist line of theology Pannenberg anticipated the kinds of critique of the enlightenment recently made in Britain by Keith Ward and Colin Gunton. Pannenberg attacks the anthropocentric orientation of liberal and existentialist theologies, which make man the measure of all reality. Modern man has become self obsessed. He now fails to see that he is dependent upon the context in which he finds himself for both his being and his knowing. The legacy of the enlightenment and of Kant has left theology in the grip of a metaphysic of subjectivism and positivism. Man has alienated himself from his history and has sought to gain his meaning from within himself.

Pannenberg severely attacks the existentialising version of anthropocentric theology for dehistoricising the faith. The content of Israel's salvation history, culminating with Jesus and the church, is lost by being funnelled into the individual's personal sense, oscillating between alienation authenticity, of the present moment. 'Historicity' has become narrowed solipsistically into the individual's immediate experience. Pannenberg says that

Heidegger's concept of the experience of anxiety and being-unto-death achieves something analogous to the historical relativisation of world historical content: the liberation of man to his real historicity in existential freedom.<sup>3</sup>

2. *Perspectives on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Protestant Theology*. Braaten, Carl E. (ed) London, p. 75.
3. *Basic Questions in Theology*, trans. George H. Kem, London, 1970, p. 234 (hereafter referred to as 'BQ1').

Pannenberg rejects this identification of historicity as personal authenticity because in effect it displaces not only the reality of history but also the God of that history. Such theology abandons its objectivity both in terms of man's world and in terms of the Lord of that world.

The emancipation of historicity from history, the reversal of the relationship between the two so that history is grounded in the historicity of man – this seems to be the end of the way which began when modern man made man instead of God the one who bears history.<sup>4</sup>

Against the Kantian divide between reason and faith, man and God, history and revelation, Pannenberg seeks to harmonise and synthesise, to locate man in his milieu of historical reality and meaning where he finds meaning and context.

The interpretation of Jesus by Wilhelm Herrmann and by Schleiermacher, for example, is wholly wrong in that they seek the revelation of God in the isolated person of Jesus,<sup>5</sup> cutting Jesus off from his historical tradition and context, the history of Israel. Likewise modernist christology cuts Jesus off from his God: 'Jesus of Nazareth without his message about the Father and His coming kingdom is not conceivable

. . . the man Jesus is not accessible without his God'.<sup>6</sup> Jesus must be interpreted in his historical and, inseparably, his theological context.

Pannenberg's version of historicism rebuts the modern world view which fits a naturalistic, positivistic grid over history. Modern theology encrusts itself with the doctrine that historical events are always identical in nature and Pannenberg protests: 'The levelling of historical particularity, brought about by one-sided emphasis in the typical and analogous, threatens to elevate the postulate of the homogeneity of all events to the status of a principle'.<sup>7</sup> He continues:

Theology must take a burning interest in this side of historical work. It is characteristic of the activity of the transcendent God,

4. BQ1 35.

5. BQ1 67.

6. 'Christologie und Theologie', GST2 p. 130.

7. BQ1 47.

## GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORY IN PANNENBEG.

whose essence is not adequately expressed in any cosmic order but remains free from every such order, that it constantly gives rise to something new in reality, something never before present. For this reason theology is interested primarily in the individual, particular and contingent.<sup>8</sup>

Joyce Baldwin in the introduction to her Tyndale commentary on Daniel welcomes Pannenberg's new framework in that it breaks with the old grid of rationalism and reductivism which has for so long rendered the insights of Biblical apocalyptic nugatory.<sup>9</sup>

Pannenberg therefore castigates modernist types of theology for their subjectivity and failure to accept historical objective content, and for their narrow positivistic exclusion of the unheard of event in history which effectively divorces God from the process. Autonomous, empiricist man has become the measure of everything. God is either a function of human interior sensibilities or is too far distanced to be of relevance.

Pannenberg matches his critique of modernism with his rejection of the orthodox Christian tradition of the triune God creating the world, revealing himself to it and redeeming it. The criticism is essentially the same as he turned against the liberal tradition: conservative theology also divorces history from God. Pannenberg thinks that conservative doctrine is theologically, as well as philosophically, untenable because its idea of God is too external and too dualistic: for Pannenberg God is *all-determining reality*, emphasising the 'all'. Both in terms of epistemology and ontology the conservative position fails to do justice to this truth about God, according to Pannenberg.

In *Revelation as History*, Pannenberg rejected the conservative view of Biblical revelation and the inspiration of Scripture on the grounds that these doctrines rest on *a priori* decisions of faith and fail to account of ordinary secular historical critical study. He says that this procedure is akin to a dualistic gnosticism claiming authority for a purely private body of knowledge, a body of knowledge which is insulated from the canons of ordinary common sense scrutiny. This

8. BQ1 48.

9. Daniel, 1978, IVP, p.16.

kind of theology makes authoritarian claims and refuses to justify them.<sup>10</sup> Barth's version of Word-based theology comes in for equally severe criticism as an exercise in ghetto theology.

Conservative theology splits the field of knowledge into the sacred and the secular and thus is guilty of dualism of knowing. This, for Pannenberg, is not only faulty philosophically, but offends theologically the understanding of God as the all-determining reality. If God is the one behind all truth and being then how can theology operate with this kind dualism of knowledge? The secular area of thought is not to be so sharply ruled off as irrelevant for our thinking about God. Pannenberg therefore cannot accept the understanding of salvation history as entirely different from secular history, nor can there be any special inspiration not available in principle in the whole field of human thought.

Pannenberg likewise applies his complaint to the area of Christology. The traditional trinitarianism of the conservative theology results in the person of Christ being insufficiently integrated into the course of ordinary human history. In his article 'The God of History' Pannenberg sums up his rejection of classical trinitarianism: 'The God of the classical doctrine of the Trinity is still only secondarily the God of history and of historical revelation'.<sup>11</sup> The traditional trinitarian dogma has burdened theology with having to uphold an absurd and meaningless relationship between God and the world; a changeless God with a contingent historical process into which the divine Son has somehow to fit.

In short, Pannenberg rejects both left and right, accusing each side of deistic dualism, of excluding the all-determining reality from the history of mankind, of forms of authoritarian abstract dogmatism. What is his proposed way forward? It must be one which will do justice to the whole of human experience and to the real events of history.

10. *Revelation as History*, trans. D. Granskou, New York, 1968; London, 1969, chapter 1.

11. GST2 123.

# **GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORY IN PANNENBERG.**

## **2. Pannenberg's revision of traditional theism**

Pannenberg sees no way forward in either the traditionalist or the radical proposals on their own. He wishes to take up their valid points and to reject their errors. Again it is strongly arguable that he is very concerned that what he considers to be a proper Christian doctrine of God be given a controlling role in his new proposals. God is the determining reality over the whole of human existence without exception, and this means that the division of sacred versus secular is not an ultimate one, or even a valid one. It is probably true to say that this central concern for synthesis, for the integrated unity of the whole of reality lies behind his theological programme. This is amply borne out in his understanding of revelation and the historical character of our knowledge of God to which we first turn.

### **A. Revelation and history**

Pannenberg is of great interest to the evangelical because he insists on the need for God to reveal himself if we are to have any knowledge of God. Barth, he says, is correct in upholding the dictum: 'by God alone can God be known', and Pannenberg points out that this originated with Hegel. God is not God if we can somehow subject him to purely human rational inspection and discovery. Knowledge of God must be given by God. On the other hand we live in the modern scientific, critical world and we cannot escape the responsibility of using all the modern critical apparatus on the material on which we base our faith. Pannenberg himself asks:

Is there a way out of this dilemma? Obviously there is a way only if the claim of Christian proclamation to derive from an experience of God does not remain a mere assertion but is capable of verification.<sup>12</sup>

Pannenberg wants to open the claim of the gospel to the scrutiny of every possible modern critical discipline, but he goes on:

This need not involve a court of appeal prior to the Biblical revelation of God before which the latter would have to legitimate itself. Such a



court of appeal would be incompatible with the majesty of divine revelation. Christian speech about God can be verified only in such a way that it is the revelation of God itself which discloses that about man and his world in relation to which its truth is proved.<sup>13</sup>

Critical verification then, for Pannenberg, is itself a product of divine revelational activity. The way he sets about achieving this synthesis between revelation and critical reason is, of course, by his programme of revelation as history. The whole course of history, history taken as a whole without any *a priori* selection of a specially inspired strand, argues Pannenberg, indirectly reveals God. He sketches out his doctrine of indirect self revelation, taking on Barth's definition of revelation and stretching it out across the whole canvas of time. God reveals himself, but in the whole of history whose meaning will be clear at the end of time. Jesus' life, death and resurrection all read by critical historical method, taken against the background of the apocalyptic thought world of the day for which the resurrection of the dead is the revelatory end time event – this whole nexus of event and meaning discloses to the historian that Jesus is the end time event in advance, proleptically.

For Pannenberg revelation involves not only the activity of God but the being of God; again Barth's influence is strong, but this revelation is appropriated indirectly, that is, through the medium of our reasoning and interpreting minds rather than in an experience of unquestionable power which compels acceptance and quashes all careful consideration and reflection. The self-revelation of God is going on as history proceeds, but in the history of Jesus we have a point of focus, a point where this is disclosed to our normal historical reason and therefore indirectly. History throws up many glimmers of the divine, hints and intimations of immorality and of the mysterious power behind things. But in Christ's resurrection we gain a clear advance picture of revelation, of God's self-disclosure.

This is Pannenberg's answer to the need to reunite revelation and history, the sacred with the secular, faith with critical modern reason. In effect he abolishes the distinction. David McKenzie correctly observes that Pannenberg does

13. *Ibid.*

## **GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORY IN PANNENBEG.**

away with supernatural knowledge while insisting on divine initiative, on revelation, for any knowledge of God, McKenzie asks:

But how is it possible for faith to be based only on the revelation of God if there is no supernatural knowledge? I believe that the answer to this question can serve as a key to understanding Pannenberg's approach in general. I submit that Pannenberg wants to link natural knowledge and revelation.<sup>14</sup>

Revelation compels itself onto the properly analytical historically enquiring mind because for Pannenberg the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus commands assent and therefore the Christian understanding of how things are becomes inevitable. Historical reason and revelation have been so defined as to make them inseparable. But just as Pannenberg can affirm the rationality of revelation in Jesus and his resurrection, so he also says and for the same reasons that this is provisional because the evidence may change and some new factor may arise which compels a reversal of the positive view of the resurrection. It is worth noting that this is the precise reverse of Bultmann's position which is that mere historical evidence is irrelevant for matters of faith.

By this Christological focus Pannenberg suggests that he has managed to do justice to the revelational aspect and to the critical rationality aspect of the theological problem. He was quoted above as saying that 'Christian speech about God can be verified only in such a way that it is the revelation of God itself which discloses that about man and his world in relation to which its truth is proved' The Jesus revelation discloses the proleptic nature of all reality and all reason, both of which are historical and emerge from the open future towards which they in turn move. The Jesus revelation is a disclosure as to how things are generally, it is a window into what we otherwise only glimpse.

Pannenberg synthesises reason and revelation by means of an historicist view of the world heavily indebted to Hegel. History is hermeneutically bringing meaning into being and human minds, which are not distinct from this web, thematise

14. *Wolfgang Pannenberg and Religious Philosophy*, Washington DC, p. 14.

or formulate the significance inherent in the developing process. Our reason sketches and reflects the ongoing meaning of history. Hence faith and reason share the same kind of structure of anticipating the shape of the whole and trusting what they take to be the central controlling principle behind things. Not only does the revelation of Jesus and his resurrection disclose the shape of reality as a hermeneutical process which is future orientated, it also discloses that this is a trinitarian metaphysic, and to this we now turn.

### **B. Trinitarian immanentism**

It would be a mistake to give the impression that we can make a fundamental distinction in Pannenberg's theology between the order of knowing and the order of being because his synthesising tendency operates to meld them together in the hermeneutical history which constitutes the whole, but we now look at the nature of the relationship of God to the world already implicit in his view of revelation.

In the first volume of *Basic Questions in Theology* Pannenberg wrote

the God who constitutes history has himself fully entered the process of history in his revelation. But he has done so in such a way that precisely as he is transmitted in a process of tradition, he is at the same time the future of this history, the coming God who . . . is always distinguishing himself in a new way from what happens in this history.<sup>15</sup>

This is simply another way of stating the doctrine of revelation as history, bearing in mind the identification of God and revelation. Pannenberg has produced a model of God and the world which revises the upstairs-downstairs, supernatural model; in favour of what seems initially to be a flat temporal model with the open future as the free source of the line of the developing finite history made up of the present and past.

For Pannenberg everything is encompassed by the category of history and the temporal, with God as the open, free future releasing events into finite history, although 'finite' is not a very good term to employ in Pannenberg's case. But God' as we have just read, indwells history's present and past as well

15. BQ1, 158.

## GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORY IN PANNENBEG.

as being its future. The whole finished story of history will constitute God's very being as revealed' indirect form. This is a trinitarian metaphysic, according to Pannenberg: the future, present and past correspond to the Father, Spirit and Son.

The Spirit is the divine capacity for events to go beyond themselves, to transcend themselves and to develop by incorporating new events or insights as they arrive from the future. The Spirit enables the present to take the past forward into the novelty bestowed by the future which can never fully be predicted. God is immanent in this process of historical advance and self-transcendence and is at the same time hovering before the process as its future.

The Son is no pre-existent being subsequently incarnated in Jesus. Rather Jesus was constituted the Son by the event of the resurrection retroactively and not just retrospectively. The process of history itself therefore contributes towards the identity of the Godhead. The Sonship of Jesus illustrates how, for Pannenberg, all being has its true meaning, and therefore its being, ahead of it and ultimately in the eschaton. This he sees as the relevance of apocalyptic thought which saw that the puzzling events of history would become clear at the end time.

Pannenberg regards his doctrine as a revision of Hegel's ontology which only failed because it absolutised the philosopher's own era and absolutised the power of God at the expense of his freedom. Pannenberg feels that his future reorientation of history and his emphasis on the divine freedom from the future enables him to keep what he regards as the advantages of the Hegelian metaphysic without its drawbacks.

It is important to stress that he rejects firmly the view of process theology<sup>16</sup> according to which God actually is at risk in the course of historical events: his sovereignty is sacrificed to enhance his immanent sensitivity and vulnerability to the world's free activity. Pannenberg in his essay, 'The God of History', says that Process theology 'loses the absoluteness of God by making him a factor in the universe alongside others and in interaction with them'.<sup>17</sup> Pannenberg indeed

16 *der Gott der Geschichte*, GST2 118

17. GST2 118.

goes to great lengths to distance himself from this surrender of divine Lordship into the soup of the finite. God's freedom over against the historical process is, for Pannenberg, secured by his futurity. That is why we may not even accurately say that God 'exists': he does not exist as an item in the universe as do all the other items known by us. God, says Pannenberg using Heidegger's distinction, is not *vorhanden*, not 'on hand' like an article in a shop. This is the same point that Macquarrie makes in his distinction between beings and Being:<sup>18</sup> the latter transcends the former while bestowing their existence on them; it is more a dynamic version of Tillich's 'ground of being' definition of God.

Pannenberg then steers between orthodox external and unchanging deity, over-influenced by Greek thought and not Biblical enough, and Process ideas of a vulnerable God at the mercy of history and really changed by it and in it. Hegel and the trinitarian doctrine offer Pannenberg his way of forging what he takes to be a new kind of synthesis doing justice to divine majesty and to real divine involvement in history whereby the divine being is really affected. It is after all only Biblical to think of God and the history of his activity as inseparable. God must not be thought of confined by the world, says Pannenberg, but as completing it through himself.

This is precisely what did happen in the case of the Sonship of Jesus. Pannenberg has abolished a preexisting, already completed trinitarian life of God independent of any creation. God's being and historical activity are not to be separated. Pannenberg says that 'the resurrection of Jesus is...just as constitutive for the Godhead of the Father as it is for the sonship of Jesus. Without Jesus' resurrection the Father proclaimed by Jesus would not be God. That means that the history of the Son concerns the divinity of the Father himself'.<sup>19</sup> This accounts for the fact that God's very existence is debated and controversial and always will be till the eschaton: the order of being is reflected in the order of knowing. Pannenberg concludes his article *The God of History* from which we have been quoting with this

18. *Principles of Christian Theology*.

19. '*der Gott der Geschichte*', GST 123.

## GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORY IN PANNENBEG.

unequivocal statement of real internal relations of God with history:

Both the fact that the divinity of God is still at stake and the fact that God's future reality is already at work in the process of history, both these facts can be expressed by the doctrine of the Trinity through the tension between the creative activity of the Father and his dependence upon the work of the Son and the Spirit for the realisation of the Kingdom of God'.<sup>20</sup>

Pannenberg's position then is that God, whose preexistent being cannot be called fully trinitarian, freely determines himself to be determined as he invests himself into the process of history and is genuinely affected by it. But God is the one who sends history from the freedom of the future, leading us to a dialectic: God's being and identity are affected decisively by the course of history and yet God is the one deciding the course of history from the future. The dialectic is our only answer to the issue of Jesus' sonship: he was constituted Son by the resurrection and this means that he always was so – Pannenberg leaves us to oscillate to and fro. This dialectic is crowned when we ask of the existence of the essential Trinity: does the Trinity depend on creation or has it an essential life in and of itself? Pannenberg answers that God did not have to create the world, but given that he did then he is so linked to it that his eternal essence depends upon the outcome of its history.

### 3. A Brief appraisal of Pannenberg's doctrine

Pannenberg has fashioned a subtle view in which the world is invested with the very being of God so that God is himself constituted in and through historical events, a radical pantheism. But God also remains the Lord over the process from the future, and here is the special and perhaps saving twist.

This is a Hegelian doctrine of quite a pure strain: the deity expresses itself as the totality of the process of history which grows or evolves by taking up the past into the future as the spirit of history continually reconstitutes both thought and reality in ever new syntheses of meaning. It may be unfair on

20. *Ibid.*, p 127.

Pannenberg to say that his Son is really a pictorial way of presenting the truth of the whole: after all, what exactly is revealed apart from the union in distinction of the Son and Father in the Spirit, distinctions which rest on temporal differences? God invests his essence, or even gives his essence of pure freedom a finite form. The whole of history is revelation and revelation involves divine essence. Has God revealed himself to himself through the medium of the whole process of the historical consciousness of humanity?

I have no doubt that McKenzie is wrong in denying that Pannenberg's metaphysic is one of Hegelian real relations, and also that he is wrong in locating Pannenberg in the process theology school, because Pannenberg seeks to protect the freedom of God as well as divine immanence.<sup>21</sup> We must place Pannenberg in the more subtle category of idealism. God is the beyond in the midst of the process, whose truth is disclosed in the unfolding of the event of the Son, the particular exemplification of the universal. The spirit breathes through the whole, drawing all thought and reality towards each other and towards the final point of ultimate unification, the eschaton. Macquarrie calls the spirit 'unitive being', and the title also fits for Pannenberg's pneumatology.

The model we are left with is in fact more subtle than a linear one. It is more truly Hegelian. All truth and all events are not simply adding to their precursors: they are taken forward into ever new configurations of meaning until the end time when all is taken into the one final reality. Everything finds its true identity only at the ultimate eschaton, since until then meaning is always changing, even according to Pannenberg, after an individual's death. This is a radically objectivistic system and has pared away the standing or ontological status of the individual subject, which becomes in effect a moment taken up and then reconstituted into the flow of time. The being of each individual is decided by its meaning, a decision lying outside the subjective will of that individual after death.

It is hard to see how Pannenberg can escape the logical conclusion of the reabsorption of the historical into the deity at the end of time. All things and all thought are moving towards

21. *Op cit*, p. 129.

## GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORY IN PANNENBEG.

the point of unity, the point of the final futurity of the free God, the point at which the final meaning of all will be located. Then God will have realised his own identity as triune and this is the obverse of the whole of history finding its final meaning. This is exactly the logic of revelation as history: Pannenberg has identified the divine and the historical and has left only a dialectical assertion to distinguish them. The historical process is at best the body or form assumed by the freely ordaining deity. God is as to the world as a mind, or better a free personality, is to the body: that seems to me to be the logical completion of this system. When the future is no longer the future to the now completed corpus of temporality, what then differentiates the divine from the finite?

Until that final end time event indeed Pannenberg has really been relying on the Hegelian dialectic of union and differentiation to prevent a straight identification of the immanent spirit with finite reality. This union and distinction is the trinitarian structure of things, a structure derived from temporal distinction of past and future being knit together in the present. God the spirit continually enlivens the body of history and indeed is the reason why there is freedom in history at all, a point of great apologetic potential. But Pannenberg can tell us that

The element of transcendence in spirit suggests that after all it might be neither wise nor necessary to admit a fundamental distinction between a human spirit and a divine spirit...the creature participates in the spirit and I venture to say in the divine spirit by by transcendence itself... thus the idea of spirit allows us to do justice to the transcendence of God and at the same time to explain his immanence in creation. Theology loses this chance when a fundamental distinction is accepted between a divine and human spirit .<sup>22</sup>

God is not a factor in the world as Process theology indicates. Rather for Pannenberg God is the dynamic life suffusing the whole while being beyond the sum of the totality of all historical events, in the same way that life is not just the sum total of the parts of the body: life is in each tiny part of the body, unites these parts, lives in the whole

22. *Spirit, Faith and Church*, by Pannenberg, Dulles and Braaten, Philadelphia, 1970, p. 19.



organism and yet is not confined to them. On the other hand life is not conceivable without the form of the body. Freedom needs the richness of form, but is not derivable from form. This is idealist metaphysics with all its synthesising fascination. Freedom invests itself into form, constantly uniting itself with and differentiating itself from that form, returning through this path of dialectical union and distinction, perhaps like the boomerang returning in its flight, back to itself enriched by this historical process. A divine kenosis returns through the historical process to plerosis. An undefined freedom puts itself forth and discovers its true trinitarian form and identity.

Pannenberg offers us this revision of an idealist historicism with its many insights and many problems: What can we learn from this work?

#### **4. Areas of importance for Evangelical Theology**

##### **A. Revelation and History**

Pannenberg cuts against evangelical theology by his refusal to acknowledge the authority of the canon of Scripture as special revelation in and of itself and for the same reason he declines to recognise that special illumination by the Spirit is needed for understanding and appropriating the truth of God. Pannenberg insists on a single field of knowledge and unaided rationality. For Panneberg the spirit is universally already involved prompting fresh projections or horizons of meaning; even our acknowledgement of Jesus as the Son is achieved by way of general historical hermeneutic.

This procedure is the very reverse of Barth's ruling out of natural theology: Pannenberg rules out the inbreaking of the Word and Spirit in favour of an unbroken epistemological continuum of spirit-breathed hermeneutic in which all mankind lives and moves and has its being. Pannenberg has immense confidence in human interpretive rationality. Unlike Aquinas he thinks that proper hermeneutical reasoning can deliver the understanding of the trinitarian nature of God. For Pannenberg reason, if accurately used, has the capacity to reach into heaven, itself – because heaven itself is already inside the ongoing process of the history of human thought, because God is the all-determining reality. Unlike classical

## GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORY IN PANNENBERG.

natural theology Pannenberg does not believe that grace and revelation complete nature and rational investigation, rather they are two sides of the one coin. If anything Pannenberg is less Augustinian and Pauline than Aquinas in taking seriously the factor of sin in the potentiality of human thought to reach God.

My own conclusion here is that we cannot escape making some deep distinction between the book of nature and that of grace and that Pannenberg's synthesis is purchased at too high a price in abolishing this distinction. Grace must break into our unaided minds to enable us to know God and to think clearly about him. Notwithstanding that Pannenberg can reply that in his system God is always breaking into the present, a different kind of influence is required from that in the universal field of knowing, a moral and spiritual regenerative act of grace is needed from outside of the historical continuum. Romans 1 compels some such conclusion.

Although I feel bound to make the distinction between secular and sacred knowing and cannot go along with a radical synthesis of the two in idealist fashion, yet I do think that the idealist tradition and Pannenberg's use of it has lessons for our consideration of reason and faith. Pannenberg is not a foundationalist: for him we are already in the sea of faith which is also the sea of reason. For the evangelical once we are in Christ and the sphere of his revelation, then I think we can also say that reason is primarily interpretative and hermeneutical, elucidating the content of revelation in terms of contemporary thought – rather than pretending to have some isolated separate standpoint from which we criticise that revelation on which we depend. Henry Vander Groot likens the process to pervading influence experienced by the reader of say a Sartre novel

Though the Bible's vision of the world is authoritative and thus confronts its reader with a demand rather than an option, *how* the Bible subjects its reader is similar to how the sympathetic reader of a Sartre novel becomes taken in. . . . As he is thus overpowered by the world of the Bible – which often forms a sharp contrast to the world to which he has become accustomed – he is transformed; his mind is renewed, his sensibilities are deepened and hallowed.

The strange world of the Bible becomes his and he now goes about trying to make the world of his life relevant to the new world that he

has discovered and that has compelled him to accept it at the deepest level of existence. It is in this way that man is transformed and controlled by the word of God. The revelation of the word of God becomes his context.<sup>23</sup>

Biblical revelation has a rich tapestry of cognitive, interpretable, objective content, and this is a point made by Pannenberg against modern reductivists, and we should as it were make that our own environment of mental life. The content of Biblical revelation is in fact far richer than Pannenberg's rather narrow apocalypticism would suggest and our reason needs to appropriate the richness of this content. Ongoing developments in secular thought will of course feed into this appropriation and elucidation.

Pannenberg's combination of rational defence of the resurrection along with his adherence to its historical provisionality demands a response from evangelical theology which claims to ground itself on the saving acts of God in history. Pannenberg posits the distinction between the logical possibility of evidence arising to destroy faith in the resurrection and psychological certainty in the believer. This is surely preferable to existentialising denials of the relevance of historical happenedness: Pannenberg insists on the need for a real concrete event to have occurred. This raises a most interesting question as to what we mean by an historical event. To say that something is historical means first that it actually happened. But secondly it usually implies that not only did it happen but that we know it happened because of accessible historical data. Pannenberg certainly affirms the resurrection as a result of his critical analysis of the available evidence. He would deny it as an event on the basis of a kerygmatic faith acceptance. The act of creation is historical in that it happened, but not in that we know it on the basis of purely historical data. We know it happened because we are given the inside information that it did. Evangelical theology could prefer this line and rests its certainty on the fact that the inside story is given in the text rather than on a purely secular historical analysis. But, unless it is to adopt the Barthian dualism, it must be prepared to be wise after the event and to

23. *Interpreting the Bible in Theology and the Church*, Lewiston, New York, 1984, p. 42.

## GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORY IN PANNENBEG.

spell out the connections of the event with secular historical questioning, even if it has to use the pending tray when the answers are not always perfectly clear.

Pannenberg again adds spice to this theological meal by his rejection of a third possible understanding of the term historical: that is that any event, to be historical, must be totally analogous to all other events, that a wholly different event is out of the question. For Pannenberg the novel is part of history and therefore we cannot rationally exclude the claims of any event *a priori*. He picks out the modern assumption that historical tends to imply a naturalistic world view. Clearly his argumentation here is very helpful to the case of orthodox Christianity.

### B. God and the World

Finally let us ask how Pannenberg can help us clarify our understanding of God's relationship with the world. Keith Ward, in his *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*, gives this opinion:

By a rejection of the basic doctrine of self sufficiency one can move to the idea of a truly creative being, which can freely choose to bring about subjects of awareness other than himself, and thereby actualise new forms of value which would not otherwise exist.<sup>24</sup>

Ward says that Christian theology has failed to articulate her revelation of a truly creative God who is affected by the creation, and is not as external as traditional theology has asserted. 'If genuinely free creatures are admitted, there is an overwhelming argument against divine immutability and for divine temporality. . . . The creation is consequent upon God's knowledge, which depends in turn upon free creaturely acts; so God must be conceived as responding to free acts moment by moment, as they are decided. This means that we have to 'conceive Divine creation as a gradual and temporal process, depending partly on possibilities in his own being and partly on creatures. In a strictly limited sense, God can be changed from without'.<sup>25</sup> Although this was written after Pannenberg's articles appeared, it expressed the problem

24. *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*, Oxford, 1982, p. 87.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 151-2.

Pannenberg addresses. Pannenberg maintains that the Biblical God is no immutable deity but relates to history in a real way, that is his being and identity are bound to the outcome of the course of history. At the same time God controls what happens in history from the open future, but the point is that Pannenberg has devised a way of formulating a doctrine of God in which God is affected by world events. Let us note that Pannenberg does not suggest that God's futurity can change, and that therefore provided that the case for theism holds up God would not be, for example, the God of the fixed past. Pannenberg in other words does not seem to presuppose aspects of deity which are not subject to change.

Perhaps the central teaching to consider is Pannenberg's idea of divine self-determination to be affected by the world. Given a more orthodox framework which does not define creaturely reality as the epiphenomenon of spirit, is this a helpful suggestion for our doctrine of God? The God of Abraham is not thereby in any sense susceptible to changes in his character, but he has decided to bring into existence free wills which are intended to live in covenant with him. The Lord's prayer, for instance, seems to me to imply that God sees himself in some such way: we are told to pray that God's will be done, an extraordinary command which implies that the prayers of the faithful do have an impact on, and are desired to have an impact on, how the Lord of history rules events.

But God must be complete and wholly stable in his identity, not *en route* to it, to be the Biblical Lord of history to whom we can confidently address our prayers. Pannenberg knows this hence his stress on freedom and futurity, but his historicised trinitarianism subjects God to too much change. Christian faith knows that there is a God above temporality, external to the one continuum of past, present and future, because God breaks into time to redeem it. History itself, as Reinhold Niebuhr pithily put it, is not messianic or redemptive,<sup>26</sup> not even, we may add, from its future.

A better model for divine immanence in creation focuses on the act of God rather than his essence, even when that essence is defined as freedom. God is present in creation in a way more akin to an artist's presence in the work of art than to the

26. *Faith and History*, London, 1949, preface, p.v.

## **GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO HISTORY IN PANNENBEG.**

**immanence of our life in our body. By running these types of model together. Pannenberg makes history too divine and God too historical. But he challenges us to better in revised models.**