

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, VOLUME 1

Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928 -) has had a long and distinguished career as a theologian, having served on theological faculties at Wuppertal (1958-61), the University of Mainz (1961-68), and the University of Munich. A prolific writer, between the years 1953-2000 Pannenberg published some 645 reviews, articles and books on a wide array of theological and philosophical topics.¹ Among the most important of these publications are the three volumes of his *Systematic Theology*. Volume 1, which we will consider here, was published in Germany in 1988, followed by an English translation in 1991.

Forward

Pannenberg's stated goal for this project is to express "the subject matter of dogmatics in all its variety as the unfolding of the Christian idea of God" (x). In order to accomplish this aim with as much precision and objectivity as possible, he tells us that his discussion will be informed by the way in which "dogmatic concepts" have developed historically. This approach is not intended merely to satisfy our historical curiosity. Rather, the selection of historical facts, "along with the analysis of contemporary writings, is based on . . . that which is necessary to develop the systematic argument, or at least to clarify it" (xi).

Chapter 1: The Truth of Christian Doctrine as the Theme of Systematic Theology

Pannenberg begins with a discussion of the various meanings of the word "theology." Noting that in our day "it denotes an academic discipline or at least a human concern for knowledge," he then briefly traces how the term was used by Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the

¹ See <http://www.st-foe.evtheol.uni-muenchen.de/personen/pannenberg/publikationen/index.html>, accessed 7 October 2008.

early Christians (1-2). He observes that apart from divine revelation there could be no knowledge of God—and hence, no theology (2-5).

He next turns to a discussion of dogma and dogmatics. He sees the task of dogmatics as “the comprehensive and coherent presentation of the doctrinal content of scripture and the articles of faith” (18). This links it closely with systematic theology, which “ascertains the truth of Christian doctrine by investigation and presentation of its coherence as regards both the interrelation of the parts and the relation to other knowledge” (21-22). Pannenberg notes that with the passage of time, Christian scholars became increasingly convinced that in order to carry out this project successfully it was necessary to have an introduction, or prolegomena, “to the actual presentation of Christian doctrine” (27). Among Protestant theologians, these prolegomena typically included discussions about the nature of theology, the doctrine of scripture, the articles of faith, and the use of reason (28). It was particularly over the doctrine of scripture, however, and how it was to be interpreted, that Protestant theologians clashed with their Roman Catholic counterparts (28-33).

Protestant theologians desired to make scripture the supreme authority in doing theology. They therefore emphasized a high view of the verbal inspiration of scripture, as well as the work of the Holy Spirit in testifying to its truth (33). However, with the advent of modern science and biblical higher criticism doubts about the reliability of the Bible began to surface. As a result, a distinction was drawn between the Word of God and scripture. In order to distinguish that in scripture which could truly be considered the Word of God, the testimony of the Holy Spirit, along with personal faith and religious experience, were increasingly emphasized as the basis for doing theology (34-46). In Pannenberg’s opinion, both of these solutions failed (46-48). Neither an appeal to the verbal inspiration of Scripture nor to personal religious experience is sufficient to guarantee the truth of Christian doctrine as a presupposition for doing theology. However, this doesn’t mean that Pannenberg thinks we should “abandon the truth claim of Christian doctrine itself. On the contrary, it means making the claim a theme of systematic theology” (48).

In Pannenberg's view, the "presentation of Christian teaching cannot begin by presupposing its truth." Instead, "it must face the contesting of the reality and revelation of God in the world" (50). Of course, he recognizes that "as a rule faith precedes theological reflection" (50). But "the certainty of faith" does not make argument and evidence unnecessary in establishing the truth claims of Christianity, especially in the context of a world that is often hostile to faith (50). What's more, "Christians . . . should have such confidence in the truth of their faith that they can let its divine truth shine forth from the content without any need for preceding guarantees" (52). In his estimation, we don't really honor the truth claims of Christianity by simply assuming that they're true. Rather, we honor them by taking them seriously, testing them, and allowing their truth to shine forth (58). The goal of systematic theology is to offer a model of God and his relation to the world which, if tenable, "will 'prove' the reality of God and the truth of Christian doctrine, showing them to be consistently conceivable, and also confirming them, by the form of presentation" (60).

Chapter 2: The Concept of God and the Question of Its Truth

Whereas in earlier cultures "the words 'God' and 'gods' had a more or less clearly defined place in the cultural world and human vocabulary," this is no longer true of modern secular societies (63). Not only is God's existence considered doubtful, but the very concept of God is thought to be unclear (64). How, then, should Christian theologians move forward?

In Pannenberg's view, it is unproductive to appeal to religious experience as a source for defining the term 'God.' The critiques of Nietzsche and Freud have made this route impossible (65). More helpful, he thinks, is the possibility of a natural knowledge of God which is available to all men through creation (Rom. 1:20). He's quick to point out, however, that this natural knowledge of God is not to be equated with the findings of natural theology (76). In fact, he says that natural theology was not originally concerned with God's *existence* at all, but rather with his *nature* (78). Thus, when it was later viewed "as the opposite of revealed theology, it had undergone a radical change of meaning" (81).

The various “proofs” of God’s existence that have been offered by natural theology are, in Pannenberg’s estimation, incapable of decisively settling this issue one way or another. At the same time, however, he does grant at least some significance to these arguments “as descriptions of the reality of humanity and the world which make talk about God intelligible and can thus establish criteria for it” (95). For this reason, Christian theology should see these arguments as serving “a critical function with respect to its . . . talk about God” (95).

Of course, this perspective has also had its detractors. Karl Barth, for example, was well-known for his opposition to natural theology. In his view, the project of natural theology amounted to little more than man’s “self-affirmation against God and his revelation” (103). But Pannenberg thinks that Barth’s understanding of this issue was actually somewhat idiosyncratic and inept (103). Although Pannenberg accepts “the impossibility of a theology . . . based on pure reason,” he claims that this tells us nothing about whether a natural (in the sense of factual) knowledge of the Christian God is really possible (107).

In fact, he believes that we do have such knowledge. While in one sense innate, he thinks that it arises primarily through our experience in the world over time. He writes, “Intuition of an indefinite infinite, of a mystery of being which transcends and upholds human life, and gives us the courage to trust it, achieves a differentiation from finite things only in the course of experience” (117). This should be distinguished from any knowledge of God which might be possible through natural theology. The natural knowledge of God for which Pannenberg is arguing is “an explicit awareness of God which is linked to experience of the works of creation” (117). And since this knowledge is available to all mankind, it must naturally inform our judgment about the world’s religions (118).

Chapter 3: The Reality of God and the Gods in the Experience of the Religions

How should religion be explained? And how should we think about the various religions of the world? In the early modern period the dominant idea among scholars was that the various religions (except for Christianity) were basically perversions of an original religion that

went back to the dawn of humanity (136). More recently, however, it became fashionable to seek the essence of religion “not in a natural religion that is common to humanity as a whole, but in the positive historical religions of the peoples” (136). In this latter case, what ties the world’s religions together *as religions* is that they all share a particular religious stance toward the world. That is, the world’s religions are somehow related conceptually, rather than as historical offshoots from a shared original (136-37).

But if the world’s religions *are* related conceptually, then what is the nature of this relation? What common elements or ideas do all religions share? Pannenberg, observing that this question has yet to receive a satisfactory answer, suggests that “detachment from the concept of God” is the ultimate reason why all attempts to define religion have so far failed (137). He theorizes that even *if* the modern understanding of the world’s religions is correct, it would still be “natural enough to regard the history of religion as a history of the manifestation of the unity of deity which God himself controls on the path of self-revelation” (149). He recognizes, of course, that this presupposes a monotheistic perspective. But he doesn’t think it should be rejected simply for that reason. After all, given the multiplicity of religious viewpoints, “it is an illusion to think we can formulate a concept of religion that is not characterized by a specific standpoint in the history of religion” (149). In Pannenberg’s view, the unity of God offers the most plausible unifying factor for explaining what it is that the various world religions have in common (151).

He next turns to a discussion of the truth and history of religion. He observes that most of religion’s defenders, even among the learned, respond to attacks against the truth of religion “by appealing to religious experience and faith” (153). Given how very common such religious experience is among mankind, we might wonder whether human beings have some sort of innate religious disposition. But while this is an interesting question, Pannenberg observes that it won’t help us discover whether a religion is actually true. After all, “we cannot rule out the possibility that the disposition is actually entangling us in a natural illusion” (156).

So how might we determine the truth of a particular religion? Pannenberg suggests we might do so through experience. He argues that “the gods of the religions must show in our experience of the world that they are the powers which they claim to be” (167). This is what the God of Christianity has done—and it’s had definite “consequences for our relation to God” (171). This naturally leads Pannenberg into a discussion of revelation, which he understands as “the self-demonstration of the deity of God in the process of salvation history” (187).

Chapter 4: The Revelation of God

Pannenberg begins this chapter with the crucially important observation that “God can be known only if he gives himself to be known” (i.e. by revelation) (189). Human finitude (on the one hand) and the greatness and majesty of God (on the other), make this absolutely essential. If God does not make himself known, then the human enterprise of theology is cast upon nothing more than its own vain imaginings. As Pannenberg says, “Only when it knows that it is authorized by God can Christian proclamation make its statements responsibly” (194).

The biblical concept of revelation is multifaceted. In surveying the biblical data, Pannenberg begins with the observation that “in every case prior knowledge of God by the recipient is presupposed” (206). Although the revelatory experience might modify in some way what the recipient believes about God, the content of revelation was usually (and primarily) about something other than God himself. Among the various ways in which the God of the Bible provided man with revelation, Pannenberg lists dreams and prophetic trances, theophanies, communication of the divine name and will, and the prophetic word of demonstration (206). It is in this final way, however, that he believes a turning point is reached “by extending the decisive revelation into the future” (213). Thus, in Isaiah 40:5 we read, “And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it” (NIV).

Having surveyed the biblical data on revelation, Pannenberg next takes a look at the concept of revelation in the history of theology. This sets the stage for his discussion of revelation as history and as Word of God. He begins by noting James Barr’s contention that we

should not “regard the OT narrative as history” since it had “no term corresponding to our word ‘history’” (230). In response, Pannenberg points out that this is simply not true. He grants, of course, that ancient Israel’s view of history differed from that of modern Europe. Rather than conceiving of history primarily in terms of human action, “Israel in OT days viewed history as divine action. It spoke of the ‘acts of God’ or of the totality of these acts” (230). In other words, ancient Israel viewed history as a medium of divine revelation.

The supreme example of this from Israel’s history is probably the exodus from Egypt. As Pannenberg observes, “For ancient Israel this was the basic revelatory event by which Yahweh showed himself to be Israel’s God” (245). But God’s revelatory acts in history did not end there. Indeed, God intends to make his deity known to all the nations. Thus, “the future consummation of world history which is connected with the coming of God’s kingdom . . . will finally also make God’s deity and divine glory manifest to ‘all flesh’” (246). And through the work of Christ, God’s coming kingdom is even now “a power that shapes the future. . . . for it declares that the saving future of the resurrection life of Jesus has come already, and that in him it has broken for us” (247).

Chapter 5: The Trinitarian God

How are we to understand the doctrine of the Trinity, which teaches that one God subsists as three distinct persons? Pannenberg is concerned to formulate his doctrine of the Trinity in such a way that he avoids tritheism, subordinationism, and modalism. He notes that tendencies in all three directions can be found in the discussions of the early church. For example, by comparing “the relation between the one deity and the three persons to that between a general concept and its individual realizations,” Basil of Caesarea came eerily close to compromising the doctrine of monotheism (274). On the other hand, in their attempt to discuss the nature of the Trinity without compromising the doctrine of God’s unity, church fathers like Irenaeus and Origen tended to subordinate the Son and Spirit to the Father (274-75). In Pannenberg’s view, Athanasius came closest to a correct formulation of this doctrine in the early

church by noting that a distinction of persons implies distinctive relations. Thus, according to Athanasius, the “Father cannot be thought of as Father without the Son. This was his decisive argument for the full deity of the Son” (279). Unfortunately, this insight was not equally powerful in elucidating the relationship between the Father and the Spirit (279).

Pannenberg continues to trace the historical development of this doctrine by looking briefly at its formulation by such important thinkers as Augustine, Anselm, Richard of St. Victor, Aquinas, Melancthon, Hegel, and Schleiermacher. Ultimately, however, he does not think that any of these formulations are completely satisfying. Recurring to the insight of Athanasius, that the Father would not be the Father without the Son, he wonders whether there might not be a sense in which the deity of the Father must also be dependent on his relation to the Son, thus insuring a basis for “true reciprocity in the trinitarian relations” (312). He finds such a basis in the concept of “lordship” (313).

Citing such passages as Matthew 28:18, Luke 10:22, and John 5:23, Pannenberg claims, “The Son is not merely the representative of the rule of God; he executes it. He is the holder of lordship. By his exaltation, the Risen Lord has been put in a position of rule” (312). Ultimately, however, the Son will hand back “the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:24). But Pannenberg contends that even then there is a sense in which “the kingdom of the Son does not end (Luke 1:33)”. For since the “lordship of the Son is simply to proclaim the lordship of the Father,” the lordship of the Son is actually “consummated when he subjects all things to the lordship of the Father” (313).

How does the Holy Spirit fit into this scheme? According to Pannenberg, “As Jesus glorifies the Father and not himself . . . so the Spirit glorifies not himself but the Son, and in him the Father. Precisely by not speaking of himself (John 16:13) but bearing witness to Jesus (15:26) and reminding us of his teaching (14:26), he shows himself to be the Spirit of truth (16:13). Distinct from the Father and the Son, he thus belongs to both” (315). Tying this all back together with the concept of lordship, Pannenberg argues that the work of “the Son and Spirit serve the monarchy of the Father. Yet the Father does not have his kingdom or monarchy

without the Son and Spirit, but only through them” (324). In this way Pannenberg hopes to have offered biblical warrant for the equality, mutual reciprocity, and dependence of each of the three persons on the others.

Chapter 6: The Unity and Attributes of the Divine Essence

Pannenberg begins this chapter with an appropriate reminder of “the inconceivable majesty of God which transcends all our concepts” (337). Of course, this does not mean that we should therefore abandon the project of theology as hopeless. The Bible promises that God reveals himself to those who seek him whole-heartedly (Jer 29:13-14). Although this promise does not primarily concern “the search for conceptual knowledge of God,” Pannenberg thinks that it embraces “this kind of seeking, too” (338).

In the history of the church many of the fathers, while acknowledging the incomprehensibility of God’s essence, nonetheless believed that his existence could be known (347). But if we can know of God’s existence, then can’t we also know something of his essence? Aquinas thought we could, and he famously attempted to derive all his statements about God’s essence “from the proof of his mere existence as the first cause of the world” (348). Although Pannenberg is mildly sympathetic to this view, he nonetheless considers it a rather “dubious” enterprise overall (349). How, then, might we come to a conceptual knowledge of God’s essence?

Pannenberg argues that, fundamentally, we come to know something of God’s essence by attending to his actions (359-60). He cites with approval the thesis of Hermann Cremer “that the kind of action characterizes the one who acts” (369). In particular, Cremer pointed to “the love of God as it is manifested in Jesus Christ” (369). In Cremer’s view, the qualities of God’s loving action “are in fact qualities of his essence” (369). But is it even appropriate to apply the concept of action to God (370)?

Pannenberg observes that the biblical writers describe God as *pneuma*, or Spirit (John 4:24; 2 Cor 3:17). In his view, it is a mistake to identify this term too closely with *nous*, or mind

(374). Rather, he thinks we should identify the Spirit as “the force field of God’s mighty presence,” similar to the field theories of modern physics (382). Understood in this way, “the Spirit would be impersonal” (383). However, he is quick to add that “the Spirit is not just the divine life that is common to both the Father and the Son. He also stands over against the Father and the Son as his own center of action” (383-84). Nevertheless, if God is *pneuma*, or Spirit, or an impersonal force field, then we must once again ask whether it is really appropriate to apply the concept of action to God (384).

Pannenberg writes, “The concept of action demands an acting subject” (384). But since the divine essence of God as Spirit is not an acting subject, it is inappropriate to attribute “this function directly to the divine essence” (384). For this reason, “only the three persons are the direct subjects of the divine action” (384). A bit later, however, he tells us that on the basis of the common action of the three persons in creation, attributes are predicated not merely of them “but also of the divine essence that is common to them all” (391). But what can this possibly mean? As I understand it, Pannenberg seems to suggest that “we must talk about two types of attributes, those that are ascribed to God on the basis of his action, and those that define the subject of the statements” (392). The statement, “God is kind,” would be an example of the first type, while the statement, “God is omnipotent,” would be an example of the second. Thus, when we say that “God is kind” we mean by “God” the one who is omnipotent, eternal, etc.

The attributes of eternity, omnipotence, and omnipresence naturally conjure up the notion of God’s infinity. But Pannenberg contends that God’s holiness is also closely linked with his infinity. He understands the concept of the Infinite as “a description of the divine reality in distinction from everything finite” (397). As such, it can naturally be linked with God’s holiness, for “the basic meaning of holiness is separateness from everything profane” (398). Pannenberg argues that God’s holiness is infinite because it enters into the profane world that it opposes “and makes it holy,” thereby transcending “its own antithesis to the finite” (400).

Turning to the doctrine of divine eternity, Pannenberg proposes a model that is explicitly indebted to both Plotinus and Boethius. According to this view, God enjoys “the

simultaneous and perfect presence of unlimited life” (404). All times are in his eternal present. He “does not have ahead of him any future that is different from his present” and “that which has been is still present to him” (410). But if this is so, if all things are present to God, then his eternity “implies his omnipresence” (410). How are we to understand this?

Pannenberg is careful to distinguish his view from Spinoza’s. Since God, as Spirit, does not have a body, he should not be thought of as extended throughout the universe. Rather, God’s omnipresence means that he “is present to his creatures” and since he has no body, his presence “does not exclude the simultaneous presence of other things in the same place” (411). What’s more, the Trinitarian nature of God enables us to understand how the transcendent Father in heaven can be present to believers through the ministries of the Son and Spirit (415).

Having considered the nature of God’s eternity and omnipresence, Pannenberg next directs his attention to the attribute of omnipotence. For him, God’s omnipotence essentially means “that his power knows no limits” (416). But this power, he thinks, “can be thought of only as the power of divine love and not as the assertion of a particular authority against all opposition” (422).

In the final section of the book, Pannenberg turns his attention to the love of God. For him, the statement in 1 John 4:8 that “God is love” is, like the statement in John 4:24 that “God is Spirit,” a statement about God’s essence (427). The supreme example of God’s love is seen in the Father “sending his Son to reconcile the world” to himself (445). But it is only with the world’s consummation “in the kingdom of God” that God’s love shall finally “reach its goal and the doctrine of God . . . its conclusion” (447).