

A new and ambitious intellectual enterprise attempts to derive the meaning of history's fragments from a promised future

Theology and Our Common World

Carl E. Braaten

"Morality" and "ethics" are words that come up regularly in the pages of Worldview. Which is not surprising, since the whole idea of Worldview is putting and keeping together the worlds of moral discourse and public policy. It is commonly thought that "moral discourse" is little more than the assertion of the self-evidently good, while the "public policy" side of our mix poses complicated alternatives requiring expert knowledge and exact calculation. Moral discourse, in this view, is the "soft" subject and public policy the "hard." There is very little that is self-evident about ethics, however. Moral discourse is shaped by particular, and largely religious, intellectual histories. Theology is the rigorously disciplined reflection on the assumptions, the worldviews, if you will, that inform and support moral judgment. At least that is the way Wolfhart Pannenberg sees theology.

*Pannenberg is Professor of Theology at the University of Munich and is acknowledged by theologians as one of the most exciting forces in that discipline today (which is why, as readers of mastheads will have noted, we have enlisted him as a Contributing Editor). Carl Braaten is perhaps the foremost American exponent of Pannenberg's thought. In this general introduction to Pannenberg's enterprise, Braaten takes off from a recently published two-volume collection of essays by Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* (translated by George Kehm, Fortress Press). Among Pannenberg's writings available in English the best book-length introduction to his work is *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (edited by Richard Neuhaus, Westminster Press). Within the scope of the following article it is possible only to suggest the complexity and daring that mark Pannenberg's intellectual construction, for it is in the nature of introductory surveys simply to posit conclusions, without the exhaustive argument and evidence that led to them. Braaten's outline, then, is offered as an aperitif in the hope that the reader will be encouraged to study further the theological underpinnings of the moral discourse that must inform politics and policy in our time.*

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Medieval schoolmen used to illustrate the problem of free will by telling the story of Buridan's ass. Standing at an equal distance between two bales of hay, the ass died of starvation, unable to decide whether to turn right or left. Modern theology is becoming anemic as it stands indecisively between two extremes. On the right everything is tagged by the prefix "re." "Re" is going back—return, restore, revive, recover, reprimand. On the left the prefix is "de." The "de" process is the style of modernist reductionism—demythologizing, desacralizing, dekerygmaticizing, dehistoricizing, deeschatologizing. To escape the fate of Buridan's ass, an anemic theology needs another alternative.

The theological program of Wolfhart Pannenberg has been worked out in a series of essays now published in two volumes entitled *Basic Questions in*

Theology. It presumes to be a total program, a project of thought proposing an intellectual frame of reference of universal character. Neither the prefix "re" nor "de" is adequate to its intention. "Re" suggests the past as containing the essential truth of things; "de" clears away the past to reveal the present as the moment of truth. Pannenberg holds to the priority of the future in human encounter with reality, and therefore is fond of words that begin with "pro," to suggest that the meaning of anything is determined by its relation to the whole of reality—the final future of all events. Words such as "promise" and "prolepsis" refer to the essential future which forms the universal horizon of meaning for all things in their concrete particularity.

The voice of Pannenberg was first heard within the highly parochial setting of a theological scrimmage

on the doctrine of revelation. His initial thesis was inauspiciously propounded in an article, "Redemptive Event and History," in a neo-Lutheran journal of theology, *Kerygma und Dogma* (1959). Shortly thereafter Pannenberg edited a volume of essays, *Revelation as History*, supporting his thesis from the angle of other disciplines. He was on his way, partly because of the sharply one-sided formulation of his historical conception of revelation, partly because he laid bare vulnerable areas in the leading positions to the right (Karl Barth) and to the left (Rudolf Bultmann).

Critics pounced on the seemingly excessive claims of the new theology: revelation is history happening, not some meaning hovering above and beyond the sphere of historical events; historical research as it is critically done today is capable of grasping the factual data which theology interprets in new situations. The resurrection of Jesus, surprising as it sounds, is such an historical event which can be established by the methods of critical investigation. The hostility and puzzlement that Pannenberg first aroused in theological circles have gradually yielded to better understanding and new expectations from his theological program. A growing number of Ph.D. students at universities here and abroad focus on Pannenberg's works, relating them to his intellectual heritage and today's cultural milieu. (Perhaps these studies are premature, for although Pannenberg has written many books and articles, he is only forty-four years old and surely just approaching mid-career. One knows from the study of other creative minds that significant shifts and new interests develop in later years. Meanwhile, we can expect soon from Pannenberg a full exposition of his theory of knowledge, which he calls a "theology of reason.")

Basic Questions in Theology works out the fundamental principles of an historicist metaphysics. Some theologians write monographs on special themes, without a total perspective that unifies them. That is the approach of the fragmentist. Pannenberg projects a whole frame of reference within which all the fragments of knowledge are given a meaningful place in relation to each other. He is constructing a *Weltanschauung* friendly to the interests of history and truth. In doing this he draws on the inherent universalism of theology's own theme—the idea of God. For Pannenberg theology must be universal in scope, for the idea of God points to the power to determine all reality. All other intellectual enterprises that describe parts of the whole of reality must be taken up into the universal perspective of theology.

At the same time Pannenberg criticizes modern theological trends that focus on faith or the gospel without relating them to a *Weltanschauung*. Truth is *one* in the end, and that final unity of truth is to be found in God. Therefore, a dualism in which theology sits in a corner thinking about God, oblivious to the parade of the so-called secular disciplines passing

by, must be overcome by a unifying vision that does justice both to the partial truths of these disciplines and the universal horizon of theology. To establish the legitimacy of his outlook in dialogue with the secular experiences of reality Pannenberg follows a basic line of hermeneutical thinking that runs from Schleiermacher through Dilthey and Husserl and up to Heidegger and Gadamer. In this stream of critical analysis of human understanding we find the emergence of the most sophisticated secular mind. The challenge Pannenberg accepts is to demonstrate the meaningfulness of theology in relation to the main premises of this secular philosophy.

The question of meaning is where Pannenberg starts. It is a starting point in agreement with the method of phenomenological hermeneutics. This should not be seen in narrow theoretical terms, for the broader cultural context has given birth to existentialist pessimism and its outeries of meaninglessness, anxiety and absurdity. Not only the heroes of Sartre's novels but the youth in our society feel themselves in a meaningless drift, members of groups going nowhere. The question of meaning gives rise to the concern for context. Each of us experiences life in bits and pieces—as fragments in a nexus of fragments. The meaning of each fragment cannot be grasped as a thing in itself, but only in its wider context. Dilthey formulated the key principle that "the single moment derives its meaning from its connection with the whole." This is decisive for the theory of meaning. Meaning is not an attribute of parts as such, but involves the *relation* of parts to the whole. Gadamer's work demonstrates from this that the meaning of the historical parts derives from the whole of history. It is thus from an analysis of the conditions of meaning that Pannenberg reaches the notion of universal history. He also speaks of "the totality of history" or "history as a whole."

History, however, is an unfinished project. Humanity is still on its way. No one can yet possess the universal historical perspective, as though we were standing at the end of history enjoying a retrospective grasp of all events and their essential meaning. Reality is not yet complete. All that is now is not the whole of what will be in the end. It is at this point that the much overworked word "eschatology" comes into focus. Pannenberg knows that the average Christian—and his secular brother—associates eschatology with images of "life after death" and the "immortality of the soul." In the context of Pannenberg's thought, eschatology means the end of history; not in the sense of a stop to it but as its final goal. This idea was also suggested by Dilthey, though he never carried it through in his hermeneutical theory. Dilthey wrote: "One would have to wait for the end of history to have all the material necessary to determine its meaning." Does this mean that man cannot know the meaning of anything at the present time, that all

meaning must be postponed until the final future? Neither skepticism nor pessimism pervade Pannenberg's system of thought. The mind has the capacity of running ahead of the present through anticipation. As in Heidegger's thought a person can run ahead (*vorzulaufen*) to the *eschaton* of his life and live the present in that light, so for Pannenberg the final whole of all reality can already now be present and meaningful through anticipation.

Is it a desirable thing for reason once again to project a worldview?

The future aspect of eschatology was first brought to the fore in the Gospel research of Albert Schweitzer. Pannenberg latches on to that, since he regards it as theologically significant. But, as we have seen, the future aspect also arises as the horizon of meaning in the process of history. It would seem that the idea of a *future* eschatology is a pleonasm—a peculiar redundancy. We grasp the eschatological future only in a partial and provisional way. The whole truth can never be fully expressed within the finite structures of human knowing, yet it is that truth that is present in our partial understanding and fragmentary thoughts. In the future these present apprehensions of truth will prove to be inadequate and new cognitive perspectives will arise. In this way the categories of immanence and transcendence are applied to a historico-eschatological system of reality and scheme of knowledge.

When the early Christian gospel made its way into the world of Greek metaphysical philosophy, it achieved a synthesis that framed a worldview shaped by the doctrine of God. Modern Protestant theology, following Harnack, has called this the "Hellenization" of Christianity. The school of Albrecht Ritschl, represented by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, demanded a thoroughgoing elimination of the metaphysical elements in the patristic synthesis (the theology of the Church fathers of the first five centuries). This synthesis was continued by the Middle Ages, also by the Reformation and post-Reformation theologies, until it was attacked and demolished, first by critical philosophy (Kant) and then by biblical theology (Barth and Cullmann). Pannenberg agrees with the judgment that the traditional doctrine of God linked itself to Greek meta-

physics. But this was not in principle a mistake. In fact, the universal claim of the God of Israel, being the one true God, compelled Christian theology to make its witness *also* in philosophical terms. Whether this was done altogether successfully is another question. Pannenberg thinks not.

The biblical witness to the freedom of God, freely acting in the course of historical events, did not achieve appropriate expression in the philosophical categories of that time. But the task itself was and is legitimate, as an expression of the universal claim of the Judeo-Christian God. The task is to penetrate and transform critically the philosophical concept of God in light of the biblical God of freedom and futurity, the God of history and hope. This biblical perspective does not call for less universality than the patristic theologians attempted, but rather for a reworking of the philosophical doctrine of God without abandoning the heritage of a critically interpreted metaphysics.

The collapse of the traditional Christian *Weltanschauung*, with the idea of God as the main subject of history and nature, of church and society, is undeniable fact. Whether this is occasion for rejoicing or regret can be left to a person's subjectivity. But it is a fact with world-historical consequences; it is also a fact that no functional equivalent has arisen to take its place. There is no total framework of meaning which assigns to things their place in the plot, no vision of holistic destiny that directs the dynamisms that drive history—no "predestination." The laughing of the secular mentality at the loss of the overarching canopy of meaning that the Christian worldview once provided is not to be taken at face value. A case of gallows humor? Whistling in the dark?

Pannenberg is in no way calling for a romantic retrieval of the Christian worldview that commanded the basic loyalties and shaped the futurist vision even of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment. It is more a question of going forward to a new construction, which is not a reconstruction but a preconstruction of the shape of coming things in their essential future. In this way theology can do for our time what the thinkers of the Enlightenment and of German idealism tried as a matter of principle to do for theirs; namely, to construct a total synthesis of meaning in which biblical truth is combined with the most enlightened reason of modern times. It must be reason with ecstasy and transcendence inherent in its flight, not a reason that flies close to the ground with clipped wings.

Will it be a desirable thing for reason—once again to project a worldview—imaginative yet reasonable, provisional yet meaningful—within the total horizon of which the scattered fragments, the odd parts, bits and pieces of experience, can be sustained in basic trust that they

possess significance in the ultimate scheme of things? It is a risky thing for theology to attempt. Might it not run up against the biblical warning about gaining the whole world while losing one's soul? Was this not the crux of Kierkegaard's crusade against Hegel and of Barth's against nineteenth-century Protestant theology? No doubt it was. But I think the risk worth taking for the sake of a sick and perhaps dying culture. Theology could have therapeutic meaning in a culture that suffers from future-neurosis, future-shock, or whatever one calls the present mood. In the wake of a collapsing Christian worldview, other movements with hubristic claims to universality gathered up the scattered fragments into their total systems of interpretation; but these systems did not have the necessary self-critical and self-relativizing impulses inherent in their very foundations.

In contrast, Christianity has repeatedly raised up its own critics from within, fighting against every tendency to absolutize itself. Movements such as fascism, communism and scientific humanism have offered themselves as the new gods after the old ones fled. These worldviews generate idolatry in their very essence. Therefore, the biblical message cannot stay out of the competition among the worldviews at work in history. The desired worldview is one that remains a servant of meaning and freedom for man in history, never a master in control of his thoughts and actions. The ontological basis of such a worldview is Pannenberg's idea of God as the power of the future that moves in history as the source of freedom and newness. It drives man to transcend every state of affairs, to be open to the future of God, whose essence is pure freedom. This is the *principium*—the ontological principle—which is at once at the heart of the Christian message and the starting point of a possible Christian *Weltanschauung*.

Theology should no longer find it amusing that its gospel has exercised a purely negative iconoclastic effect on the worldviews of modern man. Where men have not been swept into other total networks of meaning in history, they have been abandoned to a miserable emptiness—without either the gospel or other gods. Neither a person nor a culture can exist meaningfully without a frame of reference, without a vision of the whole that bestows confidence that man is not alone in a world of facts without values, motions without meanings, demons without angels, process without purpose, play without joy, futurity without fulfillment. The breakdown of the comprehensive unity of all things in their ultimate and essential future is what happens when man becomes the only subject and subject-matter of history. The doctrine of the historicity of man in existentialist philosophy was intended to liberate him from all worldviews and total systems. The result, however, was the interpretation of history without God, therefore also without a meaningful goal,

an expectation of a fulfilling future of life. Pannenberg doubts, in fact he denies, that history can be meaningfully interpreted in its uniqueness and continuity without the notion that God is the bearer of history; history is the history of God in the largest sense of its meaning. "It is the horizon of world history which first makes it possible to appreciate the full significance of an individual event." The connection between contingent events in history is grounded in the transcendent unity of God as their common universal future. In this way the idea of God is indispensable for the historian who does not restrict himself to detailed research of small segments of small happenings.

Pannenberg is fighting on two wide fronts in modern culture—existentialism and positivism. These moods and movements have made deep inroads into theology, forcing it to retreat and sometimes to hide in sheltered havens, forsaking its own world-historical horizon. Breaking the worldview in Western culture brought dark clouds of doom and depression into the present and a fatal break with the past. The realm of the future carried the stench of death in iconoclastic existentialism. No hopeful images of the future were retained—no immortality, resurrection, world renewal or fulfilling endstate. There is only existence in the present; condemned to our Sisyphean fate, we have no hope of reaching the top, and there is nothing there to greet us in any case. Not only the glory of God fades away but the glory of man becomes jaded by endless boredom. Days and nights roll on in a dreary desert state of nihilized future, enclosing us in a unidimensional timeless present.

At this point Pannenberg's insistence on the eschatological future as the horizon of existential, social and world-historical meaning is calculated to meet the existentialist themes of meaninglessness and futurelessness. Nihilism, pessimism and fatalism have never released any power to create something new and interesting under the sun. They spell individual and cultural suicide. Therefore, the question of worldview is a survival issue. The biblical message of life cannot keep warm by its own fire, watching the surrounding culture pound nails into its own coffin. Biblical faith cannot be imprisoned in any existing *Weltanschauung*, but in a pioneering way it throws open new dimensions, sponsoring change, always keeping its own viewpoints moving in history. The elements of the worldview that Pannenberg is constructing are not parts of a closed, fixist and rigidly self-sufficient system. His image of the eschatological future of universal history breaks through the frontiers of time that threaten to close down history, putting men at the mercy of the tyranny of an absolute system or the tyranny of time contracting into almighty NOW. This image of the future brings value into the present while keeping it relative, provisional and open to the new.

On the other front is the pervasive spirit of pos-

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itivism in which the future of novelty expires in a flattened-out world without myth and metaphysics, without divinity and transcendence. If the eschatological and metaphysical dimensions of human consciousness have been put out of commission, will the human spirit be able to thrive in the petrified soil that remains? Pannenberg takes his theology into the areas of culture and science, willing to argue its merits in face of the credentialing process to which they at least pay lip service. Thus reason and not faith is the point at which theology must meet the consciousness of our time. Faith is voided of special noetic significance—as a category of special revelational knowledge—in order to emphasize its character as trust in God, as a way of orienting life to the future in trust and openness.

It is a serious question whether theology can contend with a positivism that rules out in advance the elements of freedom, novelty, uniqueness, contingency, unity, universality, transcendence—all of which are entailed in Christian language about the one God freely acting as the power to determine the essential meaning and future of all things in nature and history. The influence of the natural sciences has been such that even the cultural sciences give way to the use of quantification, mathematics and value-free judgments. As science became swollen, conscience began to shrink. By suggesting a worldview that can unite both science and conscience in a higher unity, a crisis sets into science itself. The question is now being dealt with in full earnest as to what science is, what it ought to be, its task and responsibility, its place and function in culture. Scientific humanism expected to deliver the salvation on earth that the world religions deferred to another world. The progress in the battle against disease and hunger and in controlling the elements of nature seemed to promise infinite benefit. But there is now widespread doubt that all this has brought us closer to utopia—to life without hate and poverty, without war and hunger, without injustice and inequality.

The crisis in science is due in part to the growing awareness, also on the part of scientists, that our science benefits first and mainly those in control. Science is class-power in the hands of the highest bidders. Pure science, like pure religion, is an abstraction. Scientists, like others, work for bread. The piper calling the tune today is government, industry, advertising, entertainment, perhaps also big crime laboratories, as certain radicals have called the univer-

sities. In relation to “hired science” it is increasingly essential to develop elements of a common worldview in which the moral decisions bearing on the future of mankind can at least be discussed in a common language.

Nowhere should there be a greater opportunity for responsible thinkers to develop a common horizon of meaning for all the specialized compartments of knowledge than the university. In Pannenberg's theology universality is a constant theme; the idea of a *university* presupposes theology as the essential condition of its possibility. “Theology is a universal science,” says Pannenberg. He charges much of modern theology with having neglected its universal task, willing instead to confine itself to being one positive science among a plethora of specialized disciplines. This led to an estrangement between theology and the secular sciences, theology getting the worst of it. Pannenberg is calling for theology to advance, as it first did in the patristic era, into the universal consciousness of truth, as a way of giving expression to what it means by the word “God.”

Does the university need theology? Does it need a discipline performing the intellectual task of speaking of God in relation to the totality of reality, the special parts of which are investigated by the non-theological disciplines in a university? This sounds almost preposterous when one considers a modern American university of over 40,000 students in which the discipline of theology is totally absent from the curriculum. This is almost the rule, not the exception. Pannenberg is convinced that this condition does not bespeak the health of the university. He is not among those who, like Ivan Illich, claim to hear the hoofbeats of the apocalyptic riders approaching the gates of the modern university. After all, in his country theology continues to enjoy a place of dignity in the university, though perhaps not as queen of the sciences. But what about the huge universities in America? The catalogues promise that almost anything can be bought over the university counters, out of an impressive inventory of science and technology. But what do all the pieces add up to? Does the university provide a framework of meaning—a *Weltanschauung*—for all the subspecialties that turn out scattered fragments of knowledge? Students complain that they are becoming, as it were, scatterbrains, gathering up loose parts.

Goethe's *Faust* was prophetic: "*Dann hat er die Teile in seiner Hand. Fehlt leider! nur das geistige Band.*" (Then he has all the parts in his hand. What is missing, alas, is the connecting band.) The prophecy has come true a century and a half later. We master microphysics and are lost in the macrocosm.

The present-day strategy is to overcome the overblown specialties through interdisciplinary alliances. But this is hardly the answer. A collection of academic splinters cannot be glued together to make an integrated whole worthy of the name of university. It is a matter of worldview. An unkind reviewer once dismissed one of Pannenberg's books under the title, "Turning Back the Clock!" The idea of a theological worldview, involving a full-scale metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of history, will strike many readers as a romantic dream about the good old days when theology ruled from on high. But that is not the contention. The role of theology is much more modest. It enters not as a tyrant with privileged authority but as a servant-healer working out continuities of meaning, referring parts to a whole frame of reference and integrating the threads of human learning into a tapestry of knowledge. The

results will not be final, certainly always fluid and in motion, provisional and relative, yet promising and meaningful enough.

One cannot read far in Pannenberg's writings without being impressed by the strength of his own drive to know the whole truth and to view things from the most comprehensive viewpoint presently attainable. He issues frequent and strong warnings to his fellow theologians not to imagine that the quest for truth is an easy trip that one can make by an arbitrary "leap of faith." He will not allow theology to withdraw into a ghetto to carry on a separate conversation, as though it could long survive in the modern world by coiling protectively around a special revelation it keeps to itself. Neither is his call a form of the reductionistic re-process, of making the gospel "relevant to modern times" at all costs. It strives to be a new synthesis, with too much of the old thesis for the modernists and too much of the current anti-thesis for the conservatives. Pannenberg is really at home neither with the modernists nor the conservatives. On the American scene he is perhaps the most read and talked about theologian among theologians who are working out their own new synthesis.