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 indelicately between two extremes. On the right everything is tagged by the prefix "re." "Re" is going back—return, restore, revive, recover, repriminate. On the left the prefix is "de." The "de" process is the style of modernist reductionism—demythologizing, desacralizing, decerygnatizing, 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 skirmmage
on the doctrine of revelation. His initial thesis was
inauspiciously propounded in an article, "Redem-
tive 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 Bult-
mann).

Critics pointed on the seemingly excessive claims
of the new theology: revelation is history happen-
ing, 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 situ-
tions. The resurrection of Jesus, surprising as it
sounds, is such an historical event which can be es-
blished by the methods of critical investigation.
The hostility and puzzlelement 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 knowl-
dge, which he calls a "theology of reason.")

Basic Questions in Theology works out the funda-
mental 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 uni-
versalism 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 de-
scribe 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 theol-
ogy 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 Hrusserl and up
to Heidegger and Gadamer. In this stream of critical
analysis of human understanding we find the emer-
gence 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 Pan-
nenberg 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, mem-
bers of groups going nowhere. The question of mean-
ging 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. Human-
ity 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 Chris-
tian—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 car-
rried it through in his hermeneutical theory. Dilthey
wrote: "One would have to wait for the end of his-
try 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 pervaded 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 (vorszulaufen) 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 metaphysics. 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 universalism 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 holoscopic 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 ecstacy and transcendency 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-reflectivizing 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 to 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 futuritylessness. 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-
As science became swollen conscience began to shrink

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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. Nor 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 antithesis 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.