History as Sacred Drama

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This little book will be as offensive to some Christian and Jewish believers as it certainly will be to determined secularists. That, plus a demanding style of presentation, will keep Pannenberg's *Human Nature, Election, and History* (Westminster; 116 pp.; $4.95) off anybody's best seller list, but that may be just as well. Arguments that relentlessly probe first principles and aim to upset our most deeply rooted assumptions need to be conditioned, as it were, in smaller and more disciplined discussion before they are readied for popular dissemination. Such a statement may seem frightfully elitist, but it would in no way embarrass Wolfhart Pannenberg.

Pannenberg, professor of theology at the University of Munich, is both celebrated and criticized as the architect of one of the most ambitious theological and philosophical projects of our century. Key to his work is the view that philosophy and theology are, properly understood, a single enterprise. One would expect that idea to be cheered by theologians, who are thus permitted back into the intellectual mainstream of Western culture. But Pannenberg cuts the cheering short, insisting that by "theology" he means a discipline based upon thoroughly modern, post-Enlightenment critical reason. Truth, he contends, cannot be established by appeal to religious authority or to the subjective experience called faith. Theological statements are truth claims based upon rational reflection upon public evidence. And so, as far as method is concerned, the theologian's task is not essentially different from that of, say, the secular and critical historian. This is not to deny that there may be other ways of "knowing" reality, such as through mystical experience. But as important as these ways are to the personal and communal life of believers, they do not constitute public knowledge. Public knowledge must be based upon public evidence, publicly examined and debated—and subject to public verification or falsification.

It is the last point that distresses many conventional theologians. They commonly believe that religious knowledge is secured by "epistemological privilege"; that is, such knowledge is derived from a divine revelation that is not vulnerable to critical challenge. In their view, Pannenberg pulls the rug out from under religious certitude and has in effect sold out to the secular scientific method.

If Pannenberg upsets conventional theologians, however, he is equally disturbing to the yet more conventional rationalists of secular intellectual discourse. He accuses them of an unscientific bias against asking the really big questions—the theological questions, if you will—about the meaning of reality. In the current work he explores sympathetically some of the reasons for this bias. It is important to underscore the sympathetic tone of his critique: This is not just another Christian polemic against modern secularism. In fact, it is not too much to say that Pannenberg is first of all a modern secular man committed to critical reason, and that therefore he is a believer.

This may sound contradictory on several scores, not least because religious belief is commonly thought to imply the suspension, if not the abandonment, of critical reason with respect to the truths believed. But Pannenberg argues that the very nature of biblical religion precludes such uncritical faith. A critical faith is not a compromise with modernity. It is, rather, a more radical commitment, which takes the risk of making one's faith vulnerable to refutation by further evidence. This, according to Pannenberg, is required by a biblical religion that premises everything upon a promise that has not yet been fully actualized. In biblical language that promise is, of course, the culmination of history in the coming of the Kingdom of God. The implication of this, so very frightening to many religious believers, is that the promise may turn out to be illusory.

Truth claims "have to be evaluated within the comprehensive horizon of an unfinished process of human history. Even today in that ongoing process of experience the question of the reality of God is not definitely settled." And so, in answer to the question "Does God exist?" Pannenberg's yes is a yes of hope. That means that, if that hope is vindicated, then at the end of history God's existence will be proved true and therefore it is true of all of history, including the present moment. Biblical religion is an hypothesis about the ultimate meaning of history, of all experience in time. Hypoth-
ses can be true or false, depending upon the outcome of the experiment. The experiment in question here is history itself.

Pannenberg's contention—a theme of his many books and one extended importantly in the present volume—is that biblical religion provides the most rationally comprehensive and compelling, and therefore the most probably true, statement about the meaning of reality. It is imperative to emphasize that the "reality" in question is not some spiritual, eternal, or supernatural reality, but the reality of ordinary fact—such as is studied by the secular historian or by the physicist in his laboratory. It is to this reality that the biblical promise is attached. The theologian is not studying a different reality from that studied by other scientists; he is exploring a bolder hypothesis and pressing further, even to the ultimate, the partial meanings suggested by others. Although it requires careful translation if it is to be properly understood, Pannenberg's argument is that the meaning of everything is, quite simply and complicatingly, God. Or, to put it differently, the word "God" refers to the ultimate meaning of everything.

The modern mind gets very skittish when it comes to talk about ultimate meanings. We are inclined to dismiss such talk as nonsense, or else to retreat to our special and limited competence, leaving talk about ultimate meanings to the metaphysicians and theologians. In fact, says Pannenberg, such an attitude reflects a failure of nerve and of intellectual responsibility. It also contributes to the situation in which theologians, only too happy to have some intellectual turf attached. The theologian is not studying a different reality from that studied by other scientists; he is exploring a bolder hypothesis and pressing further, even to the ultimate, the partial meanings suggested by others. Although it requires careful translation if it is to be properly understood, Pannenberg's argument is that the meaning of everything is, quite simply and complicatingly, God. Or, to put it differently, the word "God" refers to the ultimate meaning of everything.

There are many possible interpretations of history or constructions of reality. They should be acknowledged and debated as frankly as possible in the arena of public discourse. Certainly one of the most impressive and pervasive is the interpretation of history that sees it as the drama issuing from the "election" of the people of Israel and pointing toward history's consummation in the Kingdom of God. In this interpretation the covenant with Israel is extended to include the Christian church, and the latter is viewed, not as an exclusivist community, but as an effective symbol of the future of all humankind. In this vision the crucial metaphors for understanding history are election, covenant, judgment, and vindication.

Pannenberg challenges the assumption of Toynbee, for instance, that the basic "units" of history are discrete civilizations, twenty-one of them to be precise:
Do civilizations in the sense of the recently accepted definition of that term really form those basic units of history? The case of Western history does not provide a particularly favorable example for that theory. It seems more natural to take the entire development of Christianity to represent one such historical unit. That would include not only Western history all the way through the modern period but also the Byzantine empire and the heirs of the Byzantine culture, especially Russia. To make religion the fundamental issue in determining the basic units of history would also correspond to the assumption of modern sociological theory that religion in one form or another constitutes the basis of the social system. Certainly, religion is not necessarily bound to a particular social system. The Christian religion became basic for different forms of social systems in the course of Christian history without being confined within their limits. On the other hand, religious continuity itself provides a degree of social and cultural continuity, since religion is concerned not only with another world but with a transcendent reality that constitutes the true meaning of precisely this present life and world.

Obviously, the above paragraph is heavily loaded. Pannenberg tends to take a great deal for granted as to the knowledge and sophistication of his readers. But even those unfamiliar with his larger project will recognize the obviousness, if you will, of Pannenberg’s question: Why—aside from church historians or historians of Christianity—is the patent continuity of Christianity as an interpretive mechanism so neglected in the modern study of history? Why are economic, political, racial, national, and other factors assumed to be the significant variables in historical change, rather than belief systems? This is especially odd when it is manifestly clear that historical actors interpreted their time in history by reference to the belief system of Christianity. In this connection Pannenberg offers brief but telling observations about the link between the rise of nationalism and religion confined to the private sphere. That change largely explains the reticence of modern intellectuals to deal in the public arena with religious belief, with the ultimate questions of meaning. Yet—and here there is elegant irony—even the divine judgment represented in, for example, the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror was instrumental in moving Christianity into a new, and in some ways stronger, period. “Nevertheless, the principle of religious and political liberty, the basic principle of modern culture, could be understood—and has been understood—as representing the most universal and concrete realization so far of the Christian faith in human life. In contrast to the particularism of the confessional churches disproving each other by their narrow dogmatism, the principle of religious and political freedom could be taken as the universally valid expression of that Christian freedom which the Reformers had identified as characterizing the very essence of Christian faith.”

The impact of the Reformation on the social order was well articulated, although only partially actualized, by people like John Milton and Cromwell in England. The key insight was that of the immediacy of the individual to God, and therefore the individual’s absolute value, and therefore the necessity of pluralism in the social order, without which the modern concept of freedom is impossible. As Hegel noted, “Christian faith assured the individual of his unity with the absolute truth.” Until Christianity, Pannenberg argues in the earlier essays in the present book, the individual was valued in terms of his relationship to tribe, economic order, hierarchical religious institution, or, as in classical Greek thought, in terms of an abstract idea temporarily embodied in a person. Pannenberg is at pains to emphasize that the Christian contribution did not appear ex nihilo, but is derived from and is still dependent upon

| Some Other Books by Wolfhart Pannenberg: |
| Theology and the Kingdom of God (1969) |
| Jesus—God and Man (1968) |
| The Idea of God and Human Freedom (1973) |
| Theology and the Philosophy of Science (1976) |
| And About Pannenberg: |
| The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg, by E. Frank Tupper (1973) |
developments within Judaism. Although proclaimed long ago, the actualization of this truth awaited the modern era, which, ironically, was launched largely in opposition to Christianity, or at least in opposition to the church. But the important truth for today is this: If religion is the heart of society, then "it depends on the kind of religion whether it allows for the final value of individual life and consequently for pluralism of behavior and opinion."

In The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, Daniel Bell has joined others in worrying about whether the public values of liberal democracy are sufficient to save it from the forces of obvious corrosion. He suspects that the answer to this question is somehow to be found in religion. But to the secular modern mind religion is understandably suspect. In dismissing a viewpoint today, it is sufficient to say that it is "sectarian." But Pannenberg contends that we should not fear the divisive power of sectarianism—or, more precisely, of particularism—provided that public discourse is controlled by the canons of critical reason. He is confident that Christianity can hold its own in such a debate, but whether the new era of Christian culture that he envisions is possible depends upon a number of radical changes. It would require that secular intellectuals overcome their bias against religion and ultimate meanings. But before that can happen, Christianity itself must change in several significant ways.

First, Christianity must finally and definitively come to terms with its relationship to living Judaism within God's one election and covenant. (Speaking of the judgment visited on Germany in World War II, Pannenberg writes: "The single most serious reason for that in theological as well as in historical terms may have been the persecution and attempted annihilation of the Jewish people. This attempt disclosed to the world the radical nature of [German] nationalism.")

Second, the church must understand, accept, and even celebrate its symbolic role in history. It must repudiate once and for all the temptation to dominate the political order. Marx was right, Pannenberg implies: Religion is the sigh of an oppressed humanity. It is in articulating that sigh that the church makes its most crucial contribution—expressing the hunger for the Kingdom that cannot be satisfied by any political order, and keeping every political order under judgment so that it does not idolatrously identify itself with the Kingdom.

This emphasis upon the symbolic nature of the church is posited against Byzantine and Western efforts coercively to impose a "Christian society," and also against contemporary regimes and revolutionary movements (the latter sometimes employing "liberation theology") that claim an absolute religious legitimation for their rule. The symbolic role of the church is also important to the relationship between Christianity and other religions, underscoring the fact that Christianity is neither a threat nor an exclusivist club of the saved but, rather, a lively celebration of the promised future that belongs to all of humanity.

The third major change required of Christianity is that the church become more visibly one. Only a church catholic that is truly global can temper the passions and pretensions of nationalism. And only such a church can finally put to rest the memories of confessional wars that destroyed civil discourse and made it necessary to exclude religion from the public arena. In this urgency for Christian unity Pannenberg combines his appreciation of the Protestant foundations of individual freedom and pluralism with a thoroughly catholic understanding of the necessity for religious institutions that, sacramentally as it were, signal the universal future.

Finally, these richly textured essays convey what will seem to many Americans a remarkable appreciation of America's role in world history. Nowhere in today's world, Pannenberg believes, is the history of freedom and pluralism in such promising conversation with religious faith as in the United States of America. In this sense America continues to be the vanguard nation. Americans have perhaps learned too well the evils of "manifest destiny." It may be that in the larger scheme of history America is, in some significant sense, elected or chosen, although it is almost impossible to say that today without rousing a storm of protest. But election, in Pannenberg's view, should not feed national pride or pretensions to privilege and power. Election means that at a moment in history a particular people faces special responsibility and opportunity; to be elected is a prospect that should humble more than it exalts. "The inherent dangers in any claim to chosenness are obvious. They are essentially the same as in the history of ancient Israel—pride, exclusivism, presumptuous security, and contempt for possible or even impending judgment. But these dangers do not render the claim to chosenness illegitimate. They are taken care of by the category of judgment. By its claim to chosenness a group...thus makes itself accountable to the terms of God's covenant." This view of historical election gives a surprising—and in some superpatriotic circles an unwelcome—twist to the 1954 addition to the pledge of allegiance: "one nation, under God...."

In offering this summary of Human Nature, Election, and History, I have paraphrased Pannenberg's argument and at some points may have carried it further than he intended. Admittedly, I have emphasized lines of convergence with my own thought, in Time Toward Home: The American Experiment as Revelation and elsewhere. Pannenberg approvingly cites Time Toward Home and is conversant with much other literature that feeds his fascination with the possible role of America in history. Yet there is no denying that he is still in many respects a European thinker. His grasp of the nuances of American pluralism, for example, or of the much tortured American debate about Church-State relations, is sometimes tenuous. Yet, as has so often happened in the past, it is precisely this distance that enables some Europeans to see, better than we do, the significance of the American experiment. In any case, this latest book of essays reinforces the belief that, for Christians and non-Christians, there are few thinkers today worth reading and arguing with more than Wolfhart Pannenberg.