PANNENBERG'S USE OF HISTORY AS A SOLUTION TO THE RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE PROBLEM

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Like the sound of ice breaking up on a frozen lake came the publication of *Offenbarung als Geschichte* in 1961. There had been numerous cracks in the Bultmannian scheme of theology, notably Ernst Kasemann's, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus" and Gunther Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth.* This new volume, however, indicated that the revolt against Bultmann was not merely exegetical, but involved a whole shift in world view. A group of younger scholars, headed by Wolfhart Pannenberg, then of Mainz, later of Munich, was proposing a radical alternative to Bultmann's existential theology. Since then numerous volumes and essays have poured from the pen of the prolific Pannenberg, extending the concept of revelation *as* history into various areas of doctrine. While he has not addressed himself at length to the question of religious language, it has come in for treatment in several essays, particularly, "The Question of God" and "Insight and Faith." It will be the task of this article to examine the contributions of Pannenberg to the solution of the religious dilemma. It will be less a summary of what he tells us he is doing than an analysis or statement of what I think he is doing.

In analysing the function of religious language, or indeed of any type of language, I have found a set of concepts developed by Charles W. Morris to be especially helpful.[1] Morris described the role of a sign in terms of three relationships: the relationship of a sign to what it signifies, or *semantics;* the relationship of a sign to other signs, or *syntactics;* and the relationship of a sign to a knower, or *pragmatics.* This general theory of signs he termed *semiotic,* a much broader and richer understanding than the contemporary tendency to regard all questions dealing with language as "semantical problems." Two dominant approaches within recent Protestant theology can be fitted within this apparatus. Neo-orthodoxy dealt with the semantic dimension. This was done, not so much in terms of an indirect assessment of the meaningfulness of the sign, as by a direct encounter with the One spoken of. Since this One is always subject rather than object, the language aims to point a person to that reality, rather than actually *re-present* it. Karl Barth continually labored to build in objective elements, placing the emphasis upon what was known, rather than the knower.

Rudolf Bultmann, on the other hand, stressed the pragmatic or subjective dimension of language. The real meaning of Biblical language does

1. Charles W. Morris, "Foundation of the Theory of Signs," *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), Vol. I, No. 2, pp. 13-34.

not lie in its objective reference. This would ask whether the terms correspond to what actually was or is the case, a literal history or cosmology. Such, according to Bultmann, is virtually irrelevant to the dynamics of faith. The real question to be asked is what these referents do to us. Their meaning lies in supplying an interpretation of existence, and awakening in us the same experience that the original writers of those terms had.

In Pannenberg and the "circle" of scholars associated with him, we find an attempt to understand Biblical and theological language in a fashion quite different from either Barth or Bultmann. This understanding may again be seen in the model of Morris Peirce. The meaningfulness of theological language for Pannenberg arises along two lines.

In a lecture on "The Question of God," Pannenberg notes that language about the living God of the Bible tends to become hollow today. This is true even for many believers, to say nothing of non-Christians. Not only does the term "God" appear to be dispensible, it even seems at times to be an obstacle to understanding the world in which we live, explained as it is by scientific technology.[2]

Language about God is meaningful first, if, and only if, it relates to the existential questions of man himself. Pannenberg sees a similarity here between Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich. For Barth, the question of man is really only awakened by the divine answer. In Tillich's version, the answer of revelation is correlated not only with the question of human existence, but of everything that exists whatsoever. Despite these particular idiosyncrasies, however, Pannenberg sees a common concern.[3]

An examination of human existence leads to the awareness of the lack within human reality. Man realizes his finitude, his lack of totality, and this at least presupposes the *possibility* of that totaliy. The answer to these questions contained in man's experience cannot be deduced from the question itself, however. Natural theology attempted to go that route. To the extent that natural theology has given such answers, however, it has answered them upon the basis of an experience of the reality about which the question asks. Even the non-Christian religions are based on unclear provisional forms of the true answer found in the history of Jesus. Distortion occurs because the powers which these religions accept as the ground of all reality still belong to the realm of finitude.[4]

The first aspect of Pannenberg's question about the meaningfulness of language about God can be seen to deal with what we are here calling *pragmatics.* It concerns the relationship of the sign to the knower himself. Beyond this, however, he would insist that we must deal with the issue of *semantics,* or the correspondence of the sign with its purported object. Recognizing that relevance of language can deteriorate into mere subjectivism (as it does in the thought of Herbert Braun), he suggests that there is a way out of the dilemma:

> Obviously there is a way only if the claim of Christian proclamation

2. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Question of God," *Basic Questions in Theology,* Vol. II (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 201.
3. *Ibid.,* p. 212.
4. *Ibid.,* pp. 225-226.

> to derive from an experience of God does not remain a mere assertion but is capable of verification. This need not involve a court of appeal *prior* to the biblical revelation of God before which the latter would have to legitimate itself. Such a court of appeal would in fact be incompatible with the majesty of divine revelation. Christian speech about God can be verified only in such a way that it is the revelation of God itself which discloses that about man and his world in relation to which its truth is proved. In this way Christian speech about God would be more than mere assertion.[5]

For Pannenberg, this attempt at establishing the reality of the symbols of religious and theological language is very much wrapped up with his conception of history. Three tenets of this conception are basic:

1. the connection of man with the ground of this history
2. the organic character of history
3. the inseparability of historical event and its interpretation.

Theology is still attempting to cope with the epistemological problems raised by Immanuel Kant nearly two centuries ago.[6] Kant, it will be recalled, distinguished between the phenomenal world and the noumenal world, or the world as it appears to us, and the world as it really is. Ultimately a type of scepticism resulted because there is no way to be certain that the world as we perceive it is how the world really is. We never come into direct contact with the noumenal world. We know it only as filtered through the pure forms of intuition (space and time) and the twelve categories of the understanding. A variety of persons, from the mystics to Karl Barth, have attempted to short-circuit the gap by claiming a direct contact with God. Pannenberg does not take this approach, however. God is known, not in direct theophanies, but indirectly, through historical events. The knowledge of God is, as it were, an inference drawn from these events.

Some have seen parallels between Pannenberg's thought and that of Georg Hegel, who was one of the first to grapple with the problems which Kant raised. For Hegel, there was genuine knowledge of the world as it is in itself, because the knowing mind is intimately connected with the reality which it knows. Thus, the order of mind is the same as the order of the reality which it knows, and the accuracy of its knowledge is guaranteed. For Hegel, the statement went even further: not only is there a parallel between the logic of mind and world; both are merely manifestations of the same rationality thinking out its own autobiography, as it were, through both.

In Pannenberg something similar appears, most clearly in his discussion of the concept of the personal. He attempts to answer Fichte's criticism of the concept of the personality of God as projection. It is not, Pannenberg

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 206-207. Cf. Pannenberg, "The Nature of a Theological Statement," *Zygon*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (March, 1972), pp. 6-19.
6. Thus, for instance a significant series of works on the history of Christian thought separated two volumes as *Protestant Thought Before Kant* and *Protestant Thought After Kant.*

argues, that we project our concept of our own personality upon God; it is the other way around. Our awareness of personality, even of ourselves, arises out of religious experiences. He observes:

> The possibility of anthropomorphic speaking about the reality constitutive of religious experience could be grounded in the fact that man participates in the personal character of the divine power or has received this already from his creation.[7]

Pannenberg does not really elaborate upon or explain this conception, at least not in the detailed fashion of Hegel. Whereas Hegel emphasizes the metaphysical, Pannenberg stresses the religious dimension of this relationship. It does appear, however, to be a key factor in his system, as should become apparent from our discussion of the relationship of historical fact and interpretation.

A second element in his system, again similar to Hegel, is the organic character of history. Probably all competent historians have insisted that historical events to be understood must be seen in the context of ongoing movements, rather than as isolated entities. Pannenberg, however, carries this emphasis to virtually an extreme. This is his concept of universal history, which is universal in two respects.

Revelation comes not *by* or *through*, or *in*, but *as* history. The second thesis of his notable chapter, "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation," is that "revelation is not comprehended completely in the beginning, but at the end of the revealing history."[8] It is not individual events, but the total activity of God, that constitutes the knowledge of God. For this reason, revelation can only be said to be accomplished when the end has been reached, thus giving the total picture.

Several implications for religious language immediately emerge. The first is that one should not seek to explicate the meaning of particular propositions in isolation, for they lack full meaning outside the larger context. Analytic philosophy had taken a step in this direction by making the proposition, not the atomistic word, the basic unit of meaning. This takes it yet a great deal further. The test of the validity of language at this point becomes primarily syntactic, rather than semantic. We cannot establish each point of our language, either by historical proof, as the liberal searchers for the historical Jesus attempted to do, or by the immediate presentation by God of himself to us, as Karl Barth thought. In itself, this is no insuperable problem, however. The endeavor should rather be to see the relationship of these symbols to the other symbols in our system of religious thought. To the degree that they cohere with that system, they have meaning, and verification will be made of the whole rather than the parts independently. Thus the semantic is intimately connected with the syntactic.

The second aspect of the universality of revelatory history is its accessibility to all men. Since revelation is not restricted to the events recorded in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, but involves all of history, it is available to all men. No special working of the Holy Spirit is essential

7. "The Question of God," p. 231.
8. "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation," *Revelation as History*, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg (New York: the Macmillan Co., 1968), p. 131.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

to this understanding, no special breaking-in of an esoteric truth. An understanding of revelation which puts it into contrast or even conflict with, natural knowledge, is in danger of distorting historical revelation into a gnostic knowledge of secrets.[9]

Pannenberg sees this idea as bound up with the concepts of the lordship and omnipotence of God. If God really is Lord, he must be Lord of all reality. If reality is equated with history, however, then God must be Lord over all of history, not just of certain "sacred events." While agreeing with some aspects of Oscar Cullman's thought, he is critical of all types of *Heilsgeschichte* concepts which remove revelation from the full stream of history, and limit it to certain redemptive events.[10]

This leads us to the third basic tenet of Pannenberg's thought. In many ways, twentieth century theology has separated event and interpretation, facticity and meaningfulness. For Barth, there was the event and the prophetic word of interpretation. In Bultmann, Martin Kahler's distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* takes on major significance. The mere fact of what occurred may be undeterminable. This, however, does not necessarily undercut the significance that the event has for us. This split between the fact and its meaning meant that in neo-orthodoxy's understanding there were those who were present when revelation occurred, but to whom no revelation came. This was true of those in John 12:28, 29 who, when God spoke from heaven, said that it thundered. Similarly, some who saw the miracles of Jesus attributed them to the power of Beelzebub. What was true in Biblical times is also true today. Some hear or read the words of the Bible, but without ever "hearing" the word of God. Unless there is a special work of the Holy Spirit, considered to be "revelation" or "inspiration," the words or events are opaque.

Pannenberg emphatically rejects all such dualisms. The interpretation is not a super-added extra from the Holy Spirit. The events are not to be plucked out of the context of traditions and interpretations in which they took place. They were interpreted as they were because they came into a historical situation where there were certain pre-conceptions and expectations. In his debate with Althaus, the position of Pannenberg became quite clear. Althaus argued that while the facts may be known by historical reasoning, their meaning is only known through a supplementary inspiration. To this, Pannenberg replies:

> The limit of the 'historical faith' is not that the significance of the events is inaccessible to it, so that it is able to view these events only as bare facts....But even the meaning is not to be left, say, to the taste of the individual. If the events were understood in their context, in their connection with the history of the transmission of tradition, their original meaning would be recognizable in the events themselves.[11]

10. Pannenberg, "Response to the Discussion," *Theology as History*, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), p. 241n.
11. Pannenberg, "Insight and Faith," *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. II (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 37, 39.

having happened.[12]

Facts do speak for themselves, according to Pannenberg, despite what a large number of theologians, philosophers, and historians have been saying. It is not that the interpretation offered in the Bible is inspired, it is better said that the event is what it is because of the context of traditions into which it falls. If we are to understand it, what we ought to do is to examine it as closely as possible, using historical study, and bringing the horizon of the original witnesses or writers within our own horizon.[13] This sort of empathy is what is needed. Faith is not equated with historical reason, but it arises from it, rather than in some supernatural fashion.[14]

If Pannenberg can succeed in what he is attempting, a major problem for theology will be overcome: the problem of verification of doctrine. While historical events can perhaps be verified, the doctrines which attach to them like meaning to facts are not subject to this sort of empirical confirmation or disconfirmation. For Pannenberg, however, the interpretation or the doctrine is laminated inseparably to the happenings. If the latter are verified, the former also are, ipso facto.

Problems loom, however, and Pannenberg recognizes and deals with them. If revelation takes place at the end of history, rather than its beginning, how can we know the revelation at any point short of the eschaton? And how can we verify it now? Pannenberg solves both of these problems by contending that the end of history has already occurred, proleptically, in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.[15] This is the eschatological event *par excellence*. While it is not true that nothing additional is occurring to shed any additional light, it is nonetheless the case that the really decisive event has occurred.

If, then, the reality of the resurrection can be established by historical investigation, the entire chain of links in the argument will presumably be secure. Time and space will not permit us here to recapitulate his already familiar argument for the resurrection. It must at this point suffice to recall his statement that the resurrection of Christ can be *proved*, just as any other fact of history. Faith does not ground the truth of the historical fact. Rather, faith is grounded by the historical evidence.

But what is the potential for success of Pannenberg's effort? Many criticisms, both positive and negative, have been directed at his theology, and have by now become virtually stock answers. We shall address ourselves to those which particularly pertain to the language question.

On the positive side, Pannenberg has seen that dualisms which take the meaning of Christianity's symbols out of the realm of the falsifiable do so at a precious cost. If something cannot be falsified, it really cannot be verified either. As Kai Nielsen has pointed out quite persuasively, the question is not whether can one rely upon faith to establish that statement X is

12. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
13. Pannenberg, "Hermeneutics and Universal History," *History and Hermeneutic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 137ff.
14. "Insight and Faith," pp. 40-42.
15. *Revelation as History*, p. 134.
16. Kai Nielsen, "Can Faith Validate God-Talk?" *Theology Today*, Vol. XX, No. 2 (July, 1963), pp. 158-173.

true; it is whether faith can tell us what X means.[16] You may tell me that I ought to accept by faith that the tone middle C is yellow, whereas B flat is green. In my naivete I may grunt my agreement, since I know what middle C is and I know what yellow means. As I reflect a bit, however, I realize that I do not know whether I believe middle C to be yellow rather than green, because I do not know what it means for a musical tone to be colored. (A professional philosopher would say that this is a category-transgression.) Unless we are willing to settle for "belief in the great whatever" (a Christian version of which is "Jesus is the greatest") we have a problem here. Pannenberg has attempted to avoid that problem.

The question, however, is whether his purported solution really accomplishes its objective. There are certain points where it seems to me that difficulty remains.

The first question concerns the objectivity of interpretation of historical events. Pannenberg may well have succeeded in establishing that there was a normative interpretation of the events, and that this interpretation can be found by close examination of the historical context. There remains, however, the problem of secondary interpretation. To put it differently, the interpretation of the event is itself subject to differing interpretations. Pannenberg's answer to the problem is that the Holy Spirit removes the false pre-understanding, restoring true rationality. This, however, appears to re-introduce the very type of subjectivism that Pannenberg was attempting to eliminate or at least minimize.

The other major criticism relates to the conception of history as an organic whole. The meaning of any event appears to be dependent upon its fitting within the context of universal history. Is it really possible, however, to show the indispensibility for universal history of the events upon which other Christian doctrines than the resurrection and deity of Christ rest? If not, do we not face the dilemma of either a considerably restricted set of doctrines, or of a series of reiterated occurrences, as in Hegel's view (which Pannenberg rejects).

On these and other problems we continue to look to Pannenberg for further elucidation. Perhaps they constitute the Achilles heel of his theology. On the other hand, as Carl Braaten has observed, there is a flexibility and adaptability in Pannenberg's thought, and we may find the answer forthcoming.[17] It is at least encouraging to note than in his case one of the most intense, persistent, and productive minds of our time has been brought to bear upon the issues.

17. Carl Braaten, "History and Hermeneutics," *New Directions in Theology Today*, Vol. II (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 51.