

## THE ONTOLOGICAL MOTIF OF ANTICIPATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF WOLFHART PANNENBERG

TODD S LABUTE\*

The intriguing theological system of Wolfhart Pannenberg has prompted critical examination and evaluation from nearly every spectrum of the theological arena. His insights have won him varying degrees of both acceptance and rejection from communities as diverse as conservative and liberal Catholics and Protestants, process theologians and philosophers of religion. Carl Braaten has appropriately echoed this diversity:

The neo-fundamentalists would enjoy his position on the historical verifiability of the resurrection as a datable event of past history. The orthodox would like the sound of *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia* but wouldn't know what to do about his anti-supernaturalism. *Heilsgeschichte* theologians would endorse his stress on history but would generally not approve of eliminating the prophetic word from the definition of revelation. Historians would applaud his devotion to the facts, but few would succeed in reading revelation right off the facts of history. Those who see Pannenberg's theology as a revival of conservatism need only to meet his doctrine of scripture and of the confessions to be disabused of any illusions. Pannenberg's theology obviously escapes ready-made labels.<sup>1</sup>

An analysis of the particular facets of a theologian's system will no doubt expose points of similarity and disagreement between said theologian and the analyst. But these points of unity and diversity are most often the result of deeper, all-pervading notions that govern the entirety of the theologian's program. Thus as one studies the entirety of the work of any major theologian certain patterns or motifs begin to surface.

In a careful investigation of Pannenberg's theological program the central motif of anticipation emerges as the foundation on which his entire system is built. Hence a proper grasp of Pannenberg's theology can only be obtained through an understanding of this central motif of anticipation, a metaphysical motif that will be seen to possess not only epistemological but also ontological significance. In reference to Karl Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery* Pannenberg writes "This immediate claim to a truth which is nevertheless still open to dispute, so that the most that can be done is to 'approximate' to it, might be described as anticipation."<sup>2</sup>

\* Todd LaBute, a doctoral candidate in systematic theology at Marquette University lives at 6625 West Lisbon Avenue, Number 3, Milwaukee, WI 53210

<sup>1</sup> C. Braaten, "The Current Controversy in Revelation: Pannenberg and His Critics," *JR* 45 (1965) 233-234

<sup>2</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976)

It is upon the nature of truth and reality that Pannenberg's concept of anticipation rests. In an important article<sup>3</sup> Pannenberg sets forth his notion of the historical character of truth. Herein Pannenberg denotes the two essential roots to the contemporary understanding of truth and reality: the Hebrew and the Greek.

The Hebrew notion of truth stems from the term *ʔemet*, which designates reliability, the unshakable dependability of a thing or of a word and likewise the faithfulness of individuals. The word *ʔemet* does not describe a timeless, binding state of affairs. Rather, *ʔemet* must occur repeatedly. Hence in the Hebrew sense of truth all of reality is regarded historically. Thus Pannenberg states: "Truth is that which will show itself in the future."<sup>4</sup> In distinction from this Hebraic notion of truth the Greek view, according to Pannenberg, completely lacks this important historical character. Hence the Greek term *alētheuein* originally meant "to let something be seen as it is in itself; not to conceal something."<sup>5</sup> *Alētheia*, then, is not something that "happens" as in the case of the Hebrew idea of truth. Rather, in the Greek view truth has a static position. The true being is not subject to becoming. It is indestructible and therefore can only be singular.<sup>6</sup> Of critical importance to the Greek notion of truth, in contrast to the Hebraic, is its timeless static nature. Hence Pannenberg states:

The truth of the God of Israel did not disclose itself in its fullness to the logos of cogitative comprehension, as did the Greek *aletheia*, but only when met with trust in God's faithfulness. Only the one who entrusts himself to God, who binds himself to him, will have stability through him (Isa. 7:9). . . . That man must bind himself to God in order to attain stability is once again linked to the historicness of the truth in the Hebraic view. It always proves itself for the first time through the future. Therefore it is accessible now only by trusting anticipation of the still-outstanding proof, and that means precisely, by faith.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the necessity of "the still-outstanding proof," Pannenberg is careful to insist that this does not exclude or compromise the need for a ground for faith. The previous experience of the constancy of an individual (or God) was for the Israelite the ground for faith. The notion of contingency enters as an important factor into this idea of an historically developed notion of truth. But Pannenberg points out that contingency does not necessarily entail irrationality.

Contingent events are the basis of a historical experience whose meaning is disclosed in relation to a long memory, a view which knows the great connections. The constancy of its God is thus, for Israel, also something that has already

<sup>3</sup> W Pannenberg, "What Is Truth?", *Basic Questions in Theology* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1971) 21-27

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* 3

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Parmenides 8 3, 5, cited in Pannenberg, "What Is Truth?" 5

<sup>7</sup> Pannenberg, "What Is Truth?" 7

appeared, and in this respect it is not different from the stability of "what-is" for the Greeks<sup>8</sup>

Thus "the truth of God must prove itself anew in the future, and that cannot be undertaken by any logos; on the contrary, only trust can anticipate it."<sup>9</sup>

In the above discussion one finds the seminal germs of Pannenberg's future-oriented ontology. From a human point of view Pannenberg's development of the historical notion of truth merits serious consideration. From our finite vantage point we have only a limited perspective. While the past is present to us via memory, the future is inaccessible. We may hope and/or hypothesize. But only at its culmination will the actuality of the future be available to us. Taken from a purely epistemological perspective, therefore, the uncertainty of the future for finite human beings is a given. The simple fact that we cannot apprehend something does not necessitate that it is not. But the ideas that are being proposed by Pannenberg are not to be understood merely on an epistemological basis—the result of our finite perceptions. Rather, as it will be seen, he is proposing an ontology that is future-oriented.

Within theological development, the Hellenized notion of truth with its unchanged structures of reality coincides with the notion of an immutable God and thus also with that of a static nature of the creative acts of God. Pannenberg contends that this philosophical idea of God ignores the principle of freedom in God's actions. Consequently any notion of contingency within the world is lost. Rather than recognizing the constancy of God as free acts in his contingent, historical action, the concept of an immutable God necessarily thwarts any theological understanding of God's historical action.<sup>10</sup>

In opposition to this static ontology, Pannenberg is developing a dynamic ontology that he considers to be most consistent with the Biblical notions of God's activities in history and the contingency of the world and the events therein. The principle of divine immutability that results from the Greek idea of static truth has resulted in the attribution of any and all change within the world to that of bodies other than God, the presupposition here being that all bodies are in some form of movement intrinsic to themselves. Hence "when the assumption that movement is intrinsic to the bodies themselves was combined with the principle of inertia, the need for the cooperation of God as first cause became superfluous in the explanation of natural processes."<sup>11</sup> From this one can quickly surmise how the deistic notion of the watchmaker God was able to gain a secure foothold within theological and scientific communities.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* 8

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> W Pannenberg, "The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology," *Basic Questions*, vol 2

<sup>11</sup> W Pannenberg, "The Doctrine of Creation and Modern Science," *Zygon* 23 (March 1988) 5

Pannenberg's understanding of the dynamic nature of reality results in an understanding of the history of the world as a series of contingent events. Thus

the world was not just placed into existence once, at the beginning of all things, in such a way that it would have been left on its own afterwards. Rather, every creature is in need of conservation of its existence in every moment, and according to theological tradition such conservation is nothing else but a continuous creation. This means that the act of creation did not only take place in the beginning; it occurs at every moment.<sup>12</sup>

Given this notion of contingency and a creative process as opposed to a singular act of creation, Pannenberg dispenses with the traditional notions of natural law. Hence positing of "laws" that govern natural process must become only approximations. In this concept of reality, which is not tied to the unchanging cosmos, the constancy and continuity of the world is the result of the ever-present active God who is freely creating anew.

This notion of the constant creative acts of God does much work for the development of Pannenberg's metaphysical system. For herein one can view with full impact the force of Pannenberg's argument as an actual ontological rather than epistemological concept. Hence all reference that is made concerning God and his faithfulness and the ultimate meaning of the world must be made provisionally upon the basis of previous historical experiences. "All the statements that we make about these, in the specific mode of all human talk about God, rest on *anticipation* of the totality of the world and therefore on the *as yet nonexistent future of its uncompleted history*."<sup>13</sup> More traditional forms of ontology conceptualize the act of creation at one end of the time continuum and the *eschaton* at the other. The net result of this conception is that past and present actions determine the future. But Pannenberg proposes that creation and eschatology function as partners in the formation of reality. Therefore for Pannenberg the present and each present now past is the result of its future. Thus Pannenberg's concept of the "ontological priority of the future" is such that the future decides the specific meaning and essence of all of reality by revealing what it really is and was.<sup>14</sup> Pannenberg esteems Wilhelm Dilthey's statement, which quite accurately captures the essence of his own argument here.

One would have to wait for the end of a life and, in the hour of death, survey the whole and ascertain the relation between the whole and its parts. One would have to wait for the end of history to have all the material necessary to determine its meaning<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* 8

<sup>13</sup> W Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1991) 1 55 (italics mine)

<sup>14</sup> W Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1969) 60 ff

<sup>15</sup> W Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig/Stuttgart, 1926) 233, cited in W Pannenberg, "On Historical and Theological Hermeneutic," *Basic Questions*, vol 2

As can be discerned from the discussion above, of critical importance for Pannenberg's ontology is the relationship of the part to the whole. Given that God is creating every moment, what can be said concerning the meaning as well as the being of individuals and events will ultimately be decided by the whole of reality, which then must not only be future and thus epistemologically inaccessible but also is still ontologically undetermined. Therefore what is decided from this temporal point of existence must be decided in anticipation of the coming future, a future that retroactively gives meaning to contingent historical events. "What is true in God's eternity is decided with retroactive validity only from the perspective of what occurs temporally with the import of the ultimate."<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless what is decided retroactively is decided based on the contingency of historical events. Because of his insistence on the deep integration of meaning and being, Pannenberg is willing to state that until the arrival of the future, reality is not yet fully existent. Anticipation therefore becomes the present status of all subjects.

For Greek thought everything has always been in its essence what it is. However, for thought that does not proceed from a concept of essence that transcends time, for which the essence of a thing is not what persists in the succession of change, for which, rather, the future is open in the sense that it will bring unpredictably new things that nothing can resist as absolutely unchangeable—for such thought only the future decides what something is. Then the essence of a man, of a situation, or even of the world in general is not yet to be perceived from what is now visible. Only the future will decide it. It is still to be shown what will become of man and of the world's situation in the future.<sup>17</sup>

Given Pannenberg's notion of the openness of the future, his insistence that God is constantly creating new things now and ultimately his rejection of the static notions of reality one must raise the question, "What is the nature of those things present to us now?" One of the critical distinctions between Pannenberg's thought and the process thought of Whitehead is that for Whitehead actual occasions adjudicate the ultimate decision over what they will become and the future only serves to give further validity to them. Hence an ultimate future becomes unnecessary. For Pannenberg, however, the ultimate meaning for any given moment can only be decided by a still outstanding ultimate future.<sup>18</sup> What thread of continuity, then, can link this temporal part with the still undecided whole of reality?

In his discussion of Jesus' proclamation of the coming kingdom of God and the Easter event of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Pannenberg determines that in both events the future (final reality) is viewed as already having broken into history.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the kingdom of God, Jesus proclaimed

<sup>16</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Jesus God And Man* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1968) 321.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 136.

<sup>18</sup> See J. B. Cobb Jr. "Pannenberg and Process Theology," *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (ed. C. E. Braaten and P. Clayton, Minneapolis Augsburg, 1988) 59-60.

<sup>19</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1990) 95.

that the kingdom of God was already present in his actions and in the lives of those who respond in faith to his message. Yet without the definitive coming of the kingdom, Jesus' message becomes but an embarrassment. Likewise, presupposed in the resurrection of Jesus is a future resurrection of the dead. Hence from the perspective of a future general resurrection "the resurrection of Jesus will appear not only as real but also as the anticipatory realization of this final completion, corresponding to the presence of the kingdom of God in Jesus' own message."<sup>20</sup> Thus, Pannenberg concludes, we here find anticipation to be a real occurrence of something in advance. "The anticipated future is already present in its anticipation—though only given the presupposition that the eschatological future of God's lordship and the resurrection of the dead actually occur."<sup>21</sup> So the nature of anticipation is that it always maintains a certain ambiguous nature. It always remains dependent on the course of future experience. But, Pannenberg states, Christian doctrine maintains that a certain relationship exists—albeit perhaps limited and weak—between God as Creator and his creatures. "All created life is to be understood as a form of participation in the divine eternity, however weak or limited this participation may be."<sup>22</sup> Such participation is to be understood as a real anticipation of eternity. Pannenberg cites Clement of Alexandria as one early theologian who incorporated the concept of anticipation into his theology. Clement's interpretation of faith as the anticipation or prolepsis of future salvation characterized it as "knowledge that is already present before its final confirmation at the eschatological completion, namely, through anticipation."<sup>23</sup> Pannenberg contends that the concept of anticipation depicts the assimilation of the twosidedness that arises in relationship of concepts and judgment to things.

On the one hand, both concepts and judgment claim for themselves an identity with the thing conceived: the thing whose concept is offered, or the state of affairs expressed through the assertorical or categorical judgment. On the other hand, the concept, as the "mere" concept of the thing that we attempt to conceptualize, is different from it, just as the judgment, as a "mere assertion," is different from the asserted state of affairs. The concept of anticipation, then, is able to unite both aspects—the identity with the thing and the difference from it.<sup>24</sup>

Pannenberg goes on to state that this relationship between the identity of the thing and the difference is a temporal determination. The anticipation of a thing is not yet identical with the anticipated thing in every respect. "Yet, given the presupposition that the thing will appear in its full form sometime in the future, in the anticipation the thing is already present."<sup>25</sup> In order for anticipation to adequately ascertain the two elements of

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 96

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 97

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 98

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 103–104

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 104

identity and difference within the essence of the concept, Pannenberg states, "the form of anticipation must correspond to the peculiar character of whatever it is that we claim is grasped anticipatorily and—at least given the limitations of finitude—can only be grasped in that way."<sup>26</sup> Pannenberg suggests that the anticipatory form of knowledge indeed corresponds to an element of the "not yet" within the reality toward which the knowing is directed. If such were not the case anticipation would be reduced to no more than a preliminary stage to be left behind upon grasping the concept itself. Not only the knowledge of but also the very identity of things themselves, however, is not known completely in the present process of time. The essence of events and forms changes throughout the temporal process such that only at the end of their movement through time can a definitive decision be made as to their actual essence. "The decision concerning the being that stands at the end of the process has retroactive power."<sup>27</sup> What something is now is not what it always will be. But what it ultimately becomes is what it always will have been. Pannenberg illustrates this difficult concept:

A zinnia is already a zinnia as a cutting and remains one during the entire process of its growth up to blossoming, even though the flower bears its name on account of its blossom. If there were only a single such flower, we could not determine its nature in advance; and yet over the period of its growth it would still be what it revealed itself to be at the end. It would possess its essence through anticipation, though only at the end of the developmental process would one be able to know that this was its essence.<sup>28</sup>

Continuing to develop this notion of anticipation Pannenberg looks to Aristotle's use of the term "completeness" (*entelecheia*). Calling attention to Aristotle's *Physics*, Pannenberg states that this term connotes motion that leads toward a goal. Motion thus is the uncompleted entelechy of what is moved. Since motion is a goal-directed becoming, Pannenberg states that the goal itself must be present and efficacious throughout the motion. If such is not the case, the moving object could not move itself toward its intended goal. Considering that the *telos* is simultaneously its reality, "then one must grant that this *entelecheia* which is already present in the process of becoming is a form of presence of the thing's essence, although the thing will be completely there only at the end of its becoming."<sup>29</sup> According to Pannenberg, such an understanding of motion based on individual motions leads to a concept of retroactive causality of the *telos* during the course of its becoming. Aristotle's notions, however, become fruitless in a sense because of his notion of timeless and immutable essential forms, though given his analysis of the historicity of reality one can easily see how for Pannenberg time and becoming are the medium that constitutes the whatness of things. "Things would be what they are, substances, retroactively from the outcome of their becoming on the one hand, and on the other in the sense

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 105.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 106.

of anticipation of the completion of their process of becoming, their history."<sup>30</sup> For Pannenberg, then, "even the question of God's reality, of his existence in view of his debatability in the world as atheistic criticism in particular articulates it, can find a final answer only in the event of eschatological world renewal if God is viewed as love and therefore as the true Infinite."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 107.

<sup>31</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 447-448.