

SEMINAR ON FOUNDATIONS: PANNENBERG ON THEOLOGICAL METHOD

This paper will attempt a brief exposition and critique of the main lines of argumentation in Wolfhart Pannenberg's recently translated *Theology and the Philosophy of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).¹ In the form of a rather tedious dialogue with numerous other authors, this work breaks no significant new ground in Pannenberg's theology but it does lay out in greater detail several foundational and methodological factors which have been operative in his impressive theological project. The book divides evenly into two parts dealing respectively with (1) the nature of science, and (2) theology as a science.

I. THE NATURE OF SCIENCE

Pannenberg begins with the question: Is there a unity of human knowing and thus a single scientific method anteceding separation into different sciences? That is, is there "a road to knowledge which transcends all the differences between the sciences and is based on the idea of knowledge as such" (26). His affirmative response to this question emerges gradually in the context of his discussions with three major dialogue partners: K. Popper, W. Dilthey, and H.-G. Gadamer.

The Dialogue with Popper

Logical Positivism responded affirmatively to Pannenberg's question for an underlying unity of human knowing by offering the method of the natural sciences as paradigmatic for all knowing. The verification principle limited meaningful language to propositions which were either analytic or tautological on the one hand, or reducible to observation sentences on the other; thus metaphysics, theology, and ethics were excluded at the outset from the realm of meaningful discourse. In criticism Karl Popper showed this criterion of meaning to be so narrow as to implicitly exclude even the general laws of natural science since an infinite number of observations would be necessary for their verification. Observing that although infinitely many observations would be necessary to conclusively verify a general hypothesis, only one counter-example would conclusively falsify it, Popper suggests that a general

¹Originally published, *Wissenschaftstheorie und Theologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973).

hypothesis becomes "corroborated" to the extent that it successfully resists falsification by observable situations which can be specified as conceivably counting against the hypothesis (i.e. falsifiability). Thus Popper offers falsifiability as a "criterion of demarcation" of scientific hypotheses from non-scientific (although meaningful) hypotheses. For Popper metaphysical hypotheses are non-scientific because non-falsifiable but they are not thereby excluded from the realm of meaningful discourse. Metaphysical assertions perform two important functions. (1) They "help to 'organize the picture of the world' in areas where no scientifically testable theories are yet available" (39). (2) They deal with basic assumptions implicit in scientific inquiry, e.g. regularity in nature, the nature of truth, etc. On this second point Pannenberg goes beyond Popper to argue that these metaphysical assumptions are not simply related accidentally to scientific inquiry but are so implicit as to be essential for treatment in an adequate theory of scientific method.

Pannenberg accepts enthusiastically Popper's idea of scientific method as the "formalisation of everyday learning processes of 'trial and error' " (46). Scientific method is essentially a process of setting up hypotheses and testing these hypotheses against public experience. This process in principle presupposes no unassailable dogmatic certitudes or self-evident truths be they of the positivist, empiricist, or idealist sort.

Pannenberg's main difficulty with Popper is the latter's delimitation of "scientific" method to the employment of falsifiable hypotheses and hence the exclusion of historical disciplines (at least implicitly) and philosophy from among the sciences. Pannenberg argues in three steps for the broadening of Popper's notion of science.

(1) As important as falsifiability is for the generalizing hypotheses of the natural and social sciences, even here the process of corroboration through resistance to falsification takes place within a broader context of corroboration. The observation sentences used in the process of testing the falsifiable hypotheses are not themselves decisively self-evident but possess a certain generality, hypothetical character, and "theory-laden" quality. The observation sentences already rest, along with the hypothesis being tested, within a whole system of hypotheses, values, and metaphysical presuppositions—i.e. T. Kuhn's "paradigm." The paradigm itself is not falsifiable but "holds sway" to the extent that it provides contextual unity and illumination to the evidence available.

(2) Pannenberg accentuates the fact that the criterion of falsifiability pertains by its nature only to general hypotheses or statements. Would it not be arbitrary to include among the sciences only those disciplines which utilize primarily generalizing procedures? Pannenberg poses the question about the scientific nature of the historical disciplines. Popper includes history among the sciences but to have it conform with the falsifiability criterion he tends to absorb history into the generalizing sciences. The study of history is not concerned primarily with general or typical modes of behavior or occurrence, as sociology, psychology, natural sciences, etc. are. Laws reflecting such general and typical modes of occurrence are certainly pertinent to the construction of historical hypotheses but historical hypotheses are concerned with explaining the concrete in its concreteness. Pannenberg speaks of historical events belonging to "contingent sequences." Every event is contingent and has its meaning within the sequence to which it belongs. It can be abstracted and treated as a typical member of a class but this entails abstraction from the historical particularity of meaning, in which every event is unique and unrepeatable. The meaning of an event in its historical particularity cannot be expressed in a general hypothesis but only in a concrete hypothesis (e.g. in narrative form), the derivation of which might well have employed general (e.g. psychological, sociological) laws by way of interpolating and illuminating connections. Thus Pannenberg distinguishes "monothetic" hypotheses (i.e. hypotheses about general rules) from "ideographic" hypotheses (i.e. hypotheses about singular events and contingent sequences). It would be arbitrary to exclude as scientific those disciplines which use primarily ideographic procedures. So history is a critical science in that like the other sciences it begins with data, elaborates explanatory hypotheses, and critically corroborates the hypotheses in light of the data.

(3) Broadening the notion of scientific method beyond the use of falsifiable monothetic hypotheses opens the way for consideration of philosophy or metaphysics as a science. Like the other sciences philosophy too begins with the data of experience, elaborates explanatory hypotheses, and attempts critically to establish the hypotheses. The hypotheses of philosophy deal with reality as a whole. To this extent Pannenberg's view of philosophy is akin to that of S. C. Pepper who has described the task of philosophy in terms of the elaboration and establishment of world hypotheses.²

²S. C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses* (University of California Press, 1942).

But Pannenberg takes the matter a step further by insisting that the world hypotheses of philosophy are extensions of the ideographic historical type more than of the monothetic. For Pannenberg reality *is* history—including the natural as well as the human course of events. The basic meaning of reality is that associated with concrete events in contingent sequence. An event receives its meaning in its concrete context which is ever expanding. The ultimate meaning of any reality or occurrence (i.e. its essence) will be given with the ultimate context, universal history. At any given present, universal history of course is incomplete; the future is indeed contingent and hence yet open. Therefore the essence or ultimate meaning of any reality is yet to be decided. The task of philosophy, in view of its concern with reality as a whole, is provisionally to anticipate the whole in the light of the evidence already in using hypotheses of universal scope. The corroboration of these broad hypotheses will indeed be a provisional one. Pannenberg offers three criteria for their validation: coherence, efficiency, and degree of simplicity and subtlety (69).

Scientific method as it emerges from Pannenberg's dialogue with Popper then is: the systematic elaboration and critical corroboration of hypotheses in the light of the available evidence. This method, while recognizing the need for presuppositions in all interpretation, presupposes that there are no dogmatic or self-evident truths unassailable in principle by critical examination.

Pannenberg makes but one explicitly theological application of his dialogue with Popper. This has to do with the critical nature of theology. If theology is a science—and Pannenberg will argue that it is—then theology may not base itself upon a “retreat to commitment” (44ff.). That is, if theology is to claim scientific integrity, it cannot be based upon a commitment either to a set of “truths” or to a privileged “faith perspective” which is impervious to rational critique. Those who argue for such a view of theology as based upon commitment or an act of faith often use a form of the “*tu quoque* argument”: “This is the claim that any position, and any scientific procedure, rests on premises which have to be assumed without proof, or a set of basic postulates or axioms which are the basis of all subsequent reasoning” (45). Theology, then, like all sciences starts from basic axioms which cannot themselves be proven and hence rests on a kind of faith. The “*tu quoque* argument” is invalid, however, against Popper's understanding of scientific method where all axioms are hypothetical in character and together with all presuppositions—explicit or hidden—are in principle open to rational investigation.

Pannenberg's insistence on the "critical" nature of theology is essentially valid. He is correct in affirming that theology must take place in a public forum and that it sacrifices scientific integrity to the extent that it bases itself upon unassailable "revealed truths" or a privileged "faith perspective" impervious to rational criticism. It would seem, however, that such an emphasis should be nuanced to take account of the intrinsic relationship between the commitment of faith and religious—and hence theological—understanding. Ian Ramsey has shown convincingly that religious language is essentially "disclosure" language; i.e. it is evocative and expressive of situations in which the "Cosmic More" discloses itself within the finite "given" which is experienced. As Ramsey insists, such disclosure always entails discernment and commitment, not in the sense that discernment precedes the commitment, but in the sense that the discernment is given with the commitment and is intrinsically related to it. Paul Ricoeur accepts Ramsey's basic position in his own insightful treatment of "The Specificity of Religious Language."³ Bernard Lonergan similarly speaks of another kind of knowledge which transcends the axiom "*Nihil anatum nisi praecognitum*," i.e. the knowledge born of love.⁴ Lonergan beautifully defines "faith" as "the knowledge born of religious love" or "the eye of religious love."⁵ If conativity is thus inextricably intertwined with religious understanding, it is reasonable to expect that commitment will play more than a merely heuristic role in theological understanding and even enter into the process of judging at least by way of honing the sensitivities for judgment.

The recognition of a constitutive role for commitment in theological understanding need not preclude Pannenberg's case for a truly critical theology. In general, need a person first appropriate a value in order to understand it? Yes and no. Both Lonergan and Rollo May have argued for the human capacity somehow to anticipate the experience of a value before opting for it. May speaks of "the imaginative playing with the possibility of some act or state occurring."⁶ For Lonergan the capacity to make value judgments must somehow precede decision in order for decision to be free.⁷ For both men, while apprehending a value is intrinsically

³In *Semeia 4* (Scholars Press, 1975), pp. 107ff.

⁴B. J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 122f.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 115-9.

⁶R. May, *Love and Will* (Dell Publishing Co., 1973), p. 218.

⁷Lonergan describes the criterion of the value judgment as a "heading towards" moral self-transcendence; *Method in Theology*, p. 37.

related to the experience of the value, it is possible as it were to experience the value proleptically through imagination. Similarly, the religious commitment intrinsic to theological understanding is not the unassailable "gnostic preserve" of the believer but is available to every human being either implicitly or proleptically.

The Dialogue with Dilthey

Wilhelm Dilthey in attempting to lay a methodological foundation for the *Geisteswissenschaften* gave currency to several oppositions which Pannenberg is concerned to counter in the second and third chapters: human sciences vs. natural sciences; hermeneutic vs. scientific method; understanding (*Verstehen*) vs. explanation (*Erklären*). Throughout his writings Pannenberg opposes the similar dichotomies in the "existentialist" theologies between existential understanding and objectifying thinking or between history and nature, and the tendency in each case to view the former as the specific realm of theology.

Before considering Pannenberg's problem with Dilthey, we should observe that Pannenberg attributes to Dilthey the central idea of his own thought, i.e. Dilthey's contextual definition of meaning. For Dilthey meaning is always a relationship between a whole and its parts. As experienced by human beings meaning is the very structure of life. Human life is a system⁸ of interrelated experiences, open to itself, essentially historical, and forming a whole which at any given moment is not yet given. This structure or system of human life is open in two senses: on the one hand it is conscious, and on the other hand it interacts with wider "wholes" (e.g. the groupings of society, cultures, epochs, etc.) to form ultimately the overarching whole of history. Any event or experience is meaningful in the context of the relative wholes to which it belongs and ultimately in the context of the final whole of history which is yet outstanding; and of course the wholes are reciprocally dependent upon the parts which constitute them. Pannenberg refers to this view of meaning as Dilthey's "logic of history experience," and with it he entirely agrees.

Dilthey failed, however, to carry through consistently with his own logic of historical experience because he did not adequately come to grips with the problem of how the yet-outstanding whole is "present" in the apprehension of meaning. Dilthey slips into a

⁸In his recent writings Pannenberg employs the language of systems theory to develop this and other aspects of his thought.

kind of "pantheistic intuition of the stream of life flowing in individuals" so "that the uncompleted whole of life becomes intelligible in its parts" (78). The failure to account for the prior relevance of the whole to the part leads away from the contextuality of meaning to a sort of encounter with the part. The apprehension of human meaning becomes a quasi-divining of the whole of life in the part and thus takes on a fullness that escapes rational theorizing. Schleiermacher's romantic hermeneutic was readily available for adaptation by Dilthey—understanding became the re-experiencing of the experiences of others via the "expressions" of their lives. Since the human sciences are concerned with expressions of life, their methods will be of the hermeneutical type as opposed to the objectifying methods of the natural sciences. Understanding (*Verstehen*) thus becomes the mode of apprehension of meaning peculiar to the human sciences, as explanation (*Erklären*) pertains to the natural sciences.

Since Dilthey several attempts have been made—especially in sociology—to develop a methodology for the human sciences in the light of their distinctive object, human experience and its expressions. Pannenberg reviews a few of these in some detail—e.g. M. Weber, T. Parsons, J. Habermas, *et al.* The common difficulty which he finds in these attempts is that in its own way each fails to ground human meaning within the broader, total context of meaning.

Is there a difference between the human and the natural sciences? Of course, Pannenberg answers affirmatively, but he insists that the difference is not a fundamental one. If meaning is defined contextually according to Dilthey's logic of historical experience, both the meaning of human experience and the meaning of natural process pertain to the same basic structure of meaning. The processes both of nature and of human experience are characterized by contingency and regularity. With the recognition today of contingency even in nature it becomes clear that both monothetic (generalizing) and ideographic (individualizing) procedures will be employed in both human and natural sciences. It is clear too that the element of contingency is considerably heightened in the world-openness (*Weltoffenheit*) of human experience, and so ideographic procedures will figure more prominently in the methodologies of the human sciences, even those which are primarily monothetic. Thus for Pannenberg, the human sciences are distinguished by "a concentration on the historical character of the formation of meaning, which is intimately connected with its mediation by individual perception of meaning" (135).

In view of the preceding considerations, the exclusive association of "understanding" with human sciences and "explanation" with natural sciences obviously breaks down for Pannenberg. He suggests another use of the two words based on their ordinary usage. Ordinarily explanation is called for when a given state of understanding breaks down or is deemed inadequate. So explanation is a process which attempts to move from a given state of understanding or misunderstanding to a more adequate one. Understanding is the grasp of meaning interrelating the individual and the whole to which it belongs. Explanation is a heuristic procedure which moves to a more adequate understanding by "putting forward a new frame of reference within which the previously unintelligible becomes intelligible" (139). Thus explanation constructs a new hypothetical context in order to "make sense of" human or natural processes. Connecting this with the notion of science which emerged from Pannenberg's dialogue with Popper we might say that scientific method is the systematic employment of explanation.

The Dialogue with Gadamer

Pannenberg's hermeneutic is essentially the development of Dilthey's "logic of historical experience" or contextual definition of meaning. The breadth of his idea of hermeneutic is reflected in the chapter title, "Hermeneutic: A Methodology for Understanding Meaning."

H.-G. Gadamer is the major dialogue partner in the discussion of hermeneutic. Pannenberg agrees that Gadamer has decisively overcome the "romantic hermeneutic." The hermeneutical act of understanding as such is not to be equated with understanding the author of a text or even what the author intended but the subject matter (*Die Sache*) of the text. Likewise, Gadamer's description of the hermeneutical event as a "fusion of horizons" is masterful. Nevertheless, Gadamer fails to overcome the opposition between hermeneutic and scientific method due to his tendency—under the influence of Heidegger—to devalue the assertive aspect of language.

Gadamer, with Heidegger, refers to the "derivative" and "objectifying"—and thus to some extent distorting—aspect of assertive language. The statement or assertion (*Aussage*) isolates (and thus "objectifies") its contents from the web of the "totality of involvements" of the world (*Welt*) of lived immediacy. An unexpressed semantic horizon of meaning is hereby methodically obscured by the statement. The hermeneutical event of interpreta-

tion cannot be accomplished adequately by means of a scientific method (which is essentially assertive in character) but only as an event of language (*Sprachgeschehen*) in which what is said is held together with an infinity of what is unsaid in the unity of one meaning. Thus the hermeneutical event of interpretation is still placed over against scientific method.

Pannenberg responds that the tendency to devalue assertive, so-called "objectifying" language fails to recognize the objectifying character of human understanding even at the level of lived immediacy itself (the *Welt* of Heidegger and Gadamer). He chides Gadamer for not carrying through consistently on his own recognition that human experience at its primordial level is *weltoffen*, i.e. characterized by a capacity of detachment, distancing of man vis-a-vis his world via the mediation of language. So Pannenberg is inclined to see greater continuity between the objectifying thinking of science and the understanding of lived experience.

Gadamer is correct in affirming that every statement has an "unexpressed horizon of meaning," but this is not to be identified merely with an "essentially available world" (179) from which it emerged but with the broader total horizon of meaning which the interpreter attempts provisionally to construct in the act of interpretation. Pannenberg agrees with J. Habermas that Gadamer's dependence on the "linguisticity" of the tradition renders his hermeneutic insufficiently critical of tradition. It is true that tradition (i.e. as a history of transmission of tradition) accounts for both the linking and distancing between the text and the interpreter, and that both text and interpreter in a sense "belong" to the tradition. However, the fusion of horizons of text and interpreter does not take place by a kind of mystical language event but by means of the interpreter's projection of a more comprehensive horizon, a horizon which at least implicitly anticipates the all-embracing world-historical context. Note here the similarity between Pannenberg's description of the fusion of horizons and his notion of explanation as the putting forward of a new frame of reference to "make sense of" the previously less intelligible. In the fusion of horizons the more comprehensive horizon put forward is not ordinarily an explicit attempt to project a world history but a context "open to" or "in anticipation of" an ultimate universal horizon. It attempts, as it were, to "cover" the horizons of text, interpreter, and intervening history of tradition, and to make sense of these in the light of an open future.

In contrast with Gadamer, then, Pannenberg presents the hermeneutical event of interpretation as a methodical event of

construction, consciously controlled to a high degree by the interpreter.⁹ Pannenberg of course recognizes tacit factors involved in this process. For example, he points out the differential between the provisional comprehensive horizon projected by the interpreter and the indeterminacy of the actual totality of meaning being anticipated. Likewise, with Polanyi he recognizes tacit factors at work as the interpretation is corroborated in "making sense of" the data (217). The result of Pannenberg's dialogue with Gadamer is that the hermeneutical event of interpretation carried out methodically is not to be contrasted with scientific method but is in fact an instance of scientific method.

In summary, Pannenberg's philosophy of science combines Dilthey's contextual definition of meaning, explained in the language of systems theory, with Popper's critical rationalist view of science as a systematic testing of hypotheses against data—without Popper's delimitation of scientific method to monothetic, falsifiable hypotheses. This broad definition of science will include not only philosophy, history, human and natural sciences but also theology.

II. THEOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

After reviewing several of the forms which theology has taken historically—e.g. a "derived" Aristotelian science, a practical science, a positive science of Christianity (or of revelation) which presupposes a retreat to commitment—Pannenberg concludes that theology like philosophy must be a universal science. As the "science of God" theology is concerned with the broadest horizon of meaning. In distinction from philosophy, theology considers reality as a whole precisely in its relationship to God, i.e. *sub ratione Dei*. So the hypotheses of both philosophy and theology are of universal breadth; the main difference being that the world-historical hypotheses of theology reflect and affirm a divine ground.

Theology as the Science of God via the History of Religions

It is important to appreciate the intimate relationship between Pannenberg's notion of God and the whole of reality (as historical). He nominally defines "God" as "the Power over all things" (*Die Macht über alles*). Note that God is not defined "in himself," as it

⁹For a brief reflection on how Gadamer's use of Hegel takes him a step beyond Heidegger's almost exclusive use of passive terms to describe understanding, cf. R. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Northwestern University Press, 1969).

were, but in relation to creation. Also, recalling Pannenberg's emphasis on the historical nature of reality with the ensuing implication that the whole of reality is not yet in, and combining this with his insistence that the very reality of God be associated with the whole (*alles*), we can see that for Pannenberg the reality of God is not yet decisively manifest. Only with the eschaton will God manifest himself as God, i.e. as Power over all. Though we can anticipate this manifestation, we cannot be absolutely certain that reality will even constitute a meaningful whole. Thus the reality of God as the Power over *all* is not yet decisively established and is always problematic.¹⁰

Can God be experienced? If he is, and will be shown to be the Power over all, it would be reasonable to expect that we might experience him not as an object among others but as a "co-given" in our experience of finite reality. Pannenberg suggests that a subtle, immediate apprehension of God co-given with *all* our experience of finite events and things grounds the "basic trust which enables people to live their lives" (301). He further suggests an association of these tacit apperceptions of God with the tacit anticipations of the totality of reality which form the horizon of all our particular experiences. As one experiences the totality of finite reality one implicitly experiences the Ground or Power behind it. Such anticipations constitute the religious experience. They achieve intersubjective levels and thematization especially in the religions.¹¹ *Since it is in the religions that the theme of God comes to expression, religions are the subject matter of theology viewed as the science of God. Religions make claims to the experience of the all-determining Power. The task of theology as distinct from any other science which might study the religions is to test the truth of these claims "against the full range of accessible experience."*

¹⁰In the light of the resurrection of Christ understood as a prolepsis of the eschaton one has reason to be confident of the ultimate manifestation. But like all of our knowledge our understanding of the resurrection is provisional and open to challenge by our continuing experience of reality.

¹¹Pannenberg defines "religion" and "the religions" strictly in reference to the understanding of reality as a whole: "Following an important trend in the modern philosophy and sociology of religion, we may regard 'religions' as including any organization of human life in which the prevailing experience of reality as a whole is given expression and which also provides a basis for the order of society and the understanding which underlies it. Conversely, it will now be possible to talk about religious phenomena wherever an understanding of reality as a whole is articulated, even if there is no mention of God or gods" (311ff.). It is noteworthy that in commenting on F. Ferrè's definition of religion as "one's way of valuing most comprehensively and intensively" (312 n. 616), Pannenberg opts to exclude the "most intensive valuing" from the definition and subsume the valuational aspect of religion under the broader category of "meaning." He is reflecting here

Pannenberg speaks of theology not merely as the science of religion but as the "science of the history of religions." This is an important aspect of his thought to which he gives little elucidation here. Religion, like reality in general, is essentially historical. The paradigmatic events of the religions are historical in their occurrence. Their significance is not simply completed with the event and fossilized in scriptures, symbols, and rites, but like the significance of any historical events their significance is left open to be determined and transformed within their ever-expanding contexts. Thus the essential meaning of Christianity is the meaning of the Christ-event which occurred in the first century, yet its full import is not yet determined in that the history of transmission of its traditions is intrinsic to the meaning of the Christ-event.¹² For Pannenberg Judaism and Christianity are explicitly historical in this sense; by the very nature of religion every religion, even the most static, is at least implicitly so. In fact, Pannenberg sees the uniqueness of the Jewish and Christian religions precisely in their raising of this aspect of religion to explicit thematization. The meaning of a religion, then, is essentially the meaning generated in the whole history of transmission of its traditions. Thus theology as science of God is in turn more specifically science of religion and again in turn science of the history of religions.

The Internal Organization of Theology

Pannenberg's treatment of the internal organization of theology, or specialization within theology, can be confusing for two reasons. (1) On the one hand, he is proffering an ideal structure for theological specialization based upon his own view of theology, but on the other hand he is frequently adapting it to the present division of labor. (2) In his own view of theology the historical, systematic, and praxis dimensions interweave so intimately that a division into truly autonomous disciplines is impossible.

his valid rejection of "extrinsicist" and "projectionist" notions of value, but in excluding some explicit reference to the "most intensive valuing" (Ferrè), the "ultimate concern" (Tillich), the "Being-in-love-in-an-unrestricted-manner" (Lonergan) aspect of religion, Pannenberg's definition suffers from a loss of specificity. Even if the notion of value is correctly perceived in a non-extrinsicist fashion as a transcendental equi-primordial with meaning—thus the validity of Pannenberg's interchangeable use of meaning and value—nevertheless in the finitude of our experience the valuational and noetic aspects of experience mutually mediate one another. Cf. the observations above on commitment and religious understanding.

¹²If Catholicism were shorn of all authoritarian elements, Pannenberg's position might be called quite "Catholic."

Bernard Lonergan has offered a division of theological labor by "functional" specialization, wherein on the basis of his transcendental method the theological task is divided into eight autonomous but interrelated disciplines.¹³ The internal organization envisioned by Pannenberg does not allow for such a neat differentiation of functions.

Systematic theology *is* theology, i.e. the scientific study of the history of religions in which the claims of the religions are tested against all available experience. While this critical study of the history of religions is the main body of systematic theology, systematics also includes a philosophy of religion which provides its general concepts, e.g. the notion of God, anthropological prolegomena, etc. These general concepts, though necessary for the more central and historical part of systematics, yield to and are refined by the latter—this is in keeping with Pannenberg's conviction that concrete historical meaning holds priority over general concepts.

The main body of systematics, the critical study of history of religions, can be further specialized into historical (including biblical), systematic (in the narrow sense), and practical theology. Historical theology is theological, i.e. it does not prescind from validating the truth-claims of the past traditions which it studies, rather in bringing past traditions and phenomena to light it must also "show how the all-determining reality makes itself known in the relevant phenomenon and how this is given only limited expression in, for example, a text referring to the phenomenon" (349). In other words, historical theology must test the adequacy with which religious traditions illuminated the total experience of past

¹³Cf. his *Method in Theology*. Pannenberg does not dialogue with Lonergan on this point. In this work he considers Lonergan only once to dismiss his approach to meaning via intentionality as another example of the identification of meaning with meanings intended by the human subject and hence as insufficiently comprehensive (286 n. 585). Unfortunately Pannenberg fails to recognize Lonergan's distinction between the unrestricted intending of the *intentio intendens* and the categorial acts of intending. This distinction leaves Lonergan's cognitional theory open to meaning which transcends Dilthey's reciprocity between a whole and its parts. We shall return to this below. In another place (*The Irish Theological Quarterly* 40 [1973], 103-14, esp. 107f.) Pannenberg's criticism of Lonergan is perhaps more pertinent. He criticizes a certain artificiality in Lonergan's separation of the operations of conscious intentionality into the three distinct levels of experience, understanding and judgment. Pannenberg suggests that understanding is already implicit in experience, and judgment is implicit in understanding and that the two latter operations emerge as distinct only by way of explication. This interpenetration of experience, understanding and judgment (and decision?) would correspondingly influence the nature of the interrelationship between the functional specialties which are based upon Lonergan's four levels of conscious intentionality.

generations and peoples. In continuity with this systematics, in the narrow sense, reinterprets and tests the history of traditions in the light of the present total experience of reality, including future anticipation. Practical theology is concerned with the practical imperatives implicit in the tradition as reinterpreted in the light of an open future. As it is defined practical theology obviously depends upon historical and systematic theology but Pannenberg stresses that practical theology is more than an application of prior constructs drawn from systematic theology. Rather, practical theology entails *praxis*, i.e. theory informed by and informing practice; thus the movement: interpretation, experience, reinterpretation. The *praxis* of practical theology, then redounds back to weigh as a major moment in the interpretation and judgment of the systematic theologian, whose own perspective is not without major relevance to the theological interpretation and judgment of the historical theologian.

Practically speaking, how are specializations which are so interdependent to relate to one another? How Pannenberg envisions this can perhaps best be gleaned from his own practice as a theologian who demonstrates enormous versatility in the various areas of theology. Practitioners of the different specialties must indeed rely on one another but in such a way that each can move with some degree of facility in the other's field to receive and provide a kind of heuristic stimulation on an "inter-specialized" basis.

Pannenberg is somewhat vague in describing the relationship between theology and the so-called "sciences of religion"—e.g. sociology, psychology, phenomenology of religion. On the one hand he insists that these latter disciplines may not "bracket" the question of the validity or truth of the religions which they study without reduction of their genuine religious character, "since suspension of judgment is itself a prejudice in favor of an immanent or anthropological interpretation of religion" (363). Again he says, "A mere phenomenology, psychology or sociology of religions cannot get to grips with religion's specific object, and the claims of such investigations to be sciences of religion and religions must consequently be described as problematic" (364). On the other hand, he does grant these non-theological sciences of religion status as "auxiliary disciplines of a genuine science of religion" (365). He seems to be saying that ideally, since the heart of religion is the self-communication of divine reality, the only science that can study religion non-reductively is theology. In lieu of the wil-

lingness of the so-called sciences of religion to be theological, they still have auxiliary value to theology in spite of their reductionist tendencies.

In a similar manner Pannenberg tends to collapse the boundary between historical theology and the historical study of religion (395ff.) Historical theology, as theological, deals with the problem of "how far in this historic experiential situation the God of the Christian tradition had manifested himself to the participants as the all-determining reality" (399). To the extent that it judges critically and undogmatically, although provisionally, that God had indeed manifested himself in the historic situation, historical theology might then speak of the event as an "action of God." The further suggestion is made that historical theology might offer "a generally applicable corrective to the historical view of reality which underlies the present state of historical attitudes to method . . . in reintroducing into the concept of history the religious element which was excluded for understandable reasons in the eighteenth century" (400). Does this mean that the historian *qua* historian may speak critically and provisionally of historical events as "actions of God"? Pannenberg's earlier works answer affirmatively; here too his answer appears to be affirmative with stronger accentuation on the critical and provisional nature of the historian's judgment in the matter. In a previous article I have argued against this position in calling for a more restricted delimitation of the historian's task in conformity with the parameters which the community of professional historians itself sets for its discipline.¹⁴ This argumentation would hold too in reference to the psychological, sociological, phenomenological, etc., study of religion. These sciences serve theology more satisfactorily by not becoming theological themselves. The empirical sciences tacitly or explicitly restrict the warrants, the metaphysical presuppositions, the value judgments operative in the elaboration and corroboration of hypotheses for the sake of empirical control. These limitations need not entail reductionism when the sciences are applied to religion nor do they imply the relegation of religion to "private life." Rather, they relegate the further issues to broader disciplines. Pannenberg is correct in resisting compartmentalization of the sciences in his effort to preserve the integrity of meaning. But the integrity of meaning would seem better served through interdisciplinary dialogue between autonomous sciences sensitive to the interrelated dimensions of their subject matter.

¹⁴Cf. "Reflections on W. Pannenberg's Revelation Theology," *Louvain Studies* 4 (1972), esp. 28ff.

III. GENERAL CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

Universal Hypotheses

Pannenberg's insistence that philosophy and theology are concerned with the meaning of reality as a whole and in this sense are universal sciences is valid. That these universal sciences employ and test universal—and even universal-historical—hypotheses is likewise reasonable. But the envisioning of the methods of these sciences almost exclusively in terms of the projection and corroboration of universal hypotheses is one-sided and its implementation would almost inevitably become tendentious, in spite of all reminders of the provisional nature of the universal projections.

Pannenberg justifies this universal-hypothetical approach to theology and philosophy by arguing that it is "merely a matter of explicitly recognizing a process which takes place implicitly in all perception of meaning and therefore in all experience whatever" (196). He refers here, of course, to his inference from Dilthey's contextual definition of meaning that a tacit apprehension of the whole of reality provides the horizon of every perception of meaning. But how is it that we grasp the context of the whole in ordinary experience? Is it by means of a kind of tacit structured noetic hypothesis? Or is it not rather an apprehension which takes place at that level of the immediacy of our experience where cognitive, conative, and affective dimensions intersect and interweave inextricably? The cognitive aspect of this level of experience is at least partially mediated by the conative and affective and thus constitutes with them the basic web of our totality of involvement with the world.¹⁵ Pannenberg is correct in affirming that this level of "immediacy" is characterized and made possible by a distinctively human capacity for "openness," "differentiation," "relative autonomy," or "objectivity" vis-a-vis the world (human *Weltoffenheit* vs. animal *Umweltgebundenheit*). Furthermore, this "open" relationship with the world is indeed mediated by language, but it would seem that this language is primordially of a "tensive"¹⁶ type, which by its nature would resist the distinct

¹⁵Note the affinity between these considerations and the remarks above on the relationship between commitment and religious understanding.

¹⁶Cf. P. Wheelwright's treatment of the "tensivity" of metaphor, symbol, poetry, etc. in *The Burning Fountain* (Indiana University Press, 1968) and *Metaphor and Reality* (Indiana University Press, 1962). Wheelwright and Ricoeur point out the "untranslatability" of tensive symbols. This essential untranslatability is due no doubt to the impossibility of adequately separating the cognitive from the conative and affective aspects of the symbol. The interpretation of the symbol can certainly entail the projection of noetic hypotheses but other techniques are called for to bring to light the cognitive meaning precisely as mediated by conativity and affectivity.

separability from its content which Pannenberg identifies with the "objectivity" of assertive language (cf. 184). Returning to the apprehension of the whole of reality in every perception of meaning, Pannenberg's view of these pre-grasps of totality as anticipations of future wholeness in light of the essential historicity of human experience is fascinating and perhaps correct, but I think he short-circuits the process of their interpretation by jumping immediately to the projection of world-historical hypotheses. Other forms of philosophical investigation are called for to unravel the immediacy of our symbolic apprehension of the world with its complex interweaving of cognitivity, conativity, and affectivity; e.g. some form of transcendental method or hermeneutical phenomenology. Pannenberg reacts negatively to the Kantian connotations of transcendental method and the "typifying" aspects of phenomenology. But some form of "mediating the immediacy of experience" is necessary to balance the world-hypothetical approach to philosophy and theology.

The Contextual Definition of Meaning

Is Dilthey's contextual definition of meaning, the cornerstone of Pannenberg's argumentation, fully adequate to the understanding of meaning? This issue cannot be treated in depth here, but I shall merely demonstrate that Pannenberg's own statements about God seem to presuppose an understanding of meaning which at once transcends and sublates meaning as contextual.

It is abundantly clear throughout Pannenberg's writings that God is transcendent and actually¹⁷ infinite. Although he defines God's "essence" or "deity" strictly in terms of God's relation to creation—e.g. "power over all things," "God's being is his rule," "The deity of God is his rule"¹⁸—he qualifies this in several places to assert God's essential independence of creation. For example he states: "This does not mean that God could not be God apart from the existence of finite beings, for God certainly can do without anyone or anything else."¹⁹ He seems to presuppose here that God's intrinsic meaning in some sense at least is independent of the dialectic between the whole and the parts of finite reality. Even his definition of God's "essence" in terms of his power over all

¹⁷That is, as opposed to the "abstract" infinity of C. Hartshorne's process theology, yet presupposing in the word "actually" Pannenberg's own ontological priority of the future.

¹⁸Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, ed. by R. J. Neuhaus (Westminster Press, 1969), p. 55.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

assume explicitly (cf. 309 n. 615) that God is not equated with the "whole" in the dialectic of meaning but transcends it. Thus Pannenberg himself presupposes meaning which transcends the dialectic between whole and parts, though this transcendent meaning is mediated to us via the dialectic.

Interestingly Pannenberg occasionally uses another approach to the notion of God, which he does not clearly relate to his usual nominal definition. In his anthropological studies he defines God as the answer to the question which man is. The juxtaposition of the German titles of two of his studies demonstrates this anthropology nicely: *Was ist der Mensch?—Die Frage nach Gott*.²⁰ Although Pannenberg develops his anthropology in a rather unsophisticated way, his general approach to God here corresponds roughly to the "Augustinian" approach via interiority, offered for example by Bernard Lonergan in terms of the unrestricted intentionality of the human spirit.²¹ Pannenberg's failure to carry through with this approach is probably due to what he would consider its vulnerability to attack as illusionary or projectionistic à la Freud or Feuerbach. But without the development of some such avenue via interiority it is difficult to see how Pannenberg can satisfactorily sustain his own conviction of a transcendent, actually infinite God. Furthermore, the careful development of such an approach would have to bring to light some tacit apprehension, intimation, or pre-grasp of infinite reality which though always given with the dialectic of whole and parts is the very condition for the possibility of the dialectic.

Religious Meaning as a History of Transmission of Traditions

A significant contribution of Pannenberg's thought to contemporary theology is his emphasis on religious meaning as an intrinsic dialectically unfolding process of reality. This is a valid emphasis against theological approaches of almost exclusively "archetypal"²² or existentialist orientations. The history of transmission of traditions is studied for its own intrinsic religious

²⁰Respectively: *What Is Man?* (Fortress Press, 1970), and "The Question of God," *Basic Questions in Theology 2* (Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 201-33. Note that the English translation of the latter title loses the connotation of *nach* thus implying that the subject of the article is God rather than man.

²¹Cf. *Method in Theology*, pp. 101ff.

²²See his contrasting of the archetypal, invariant universality of the meaning of myth with the concrete universality of historic religious meaning and his subordination of the former to the latter in his essay, "The Later Dimensions of Myth in Biblical and Christian Tradition," *The Idea of God and Human Freedom* (Westminster Press, 1973), pp. 1-79.

meaning and not simply to reconstruct a religious text or to contextualize a symbol in order to unveil a general, universal meaning of existential import. Of course, both general and concrete historical meanings are involved in the human apprehension of religious meaning, but Pannenberg's tendency to grant priority to the latter stands as a challenge to some trends in contemporary theology which ignore the processive character of historical meaning. For example, in contemporary christology it has become increasingly common to investigate the meaning of Jesus Christ primarily and almost exclusively in terms of the "mode of being-in-the-world" which Jesus represents. Without denying or de-emphasizing the existentially representative character of Jesus in either his concrete life or the kerygma of the Church, Pannenberg's approach to theology raises what he would consider the broader and more basic question: Does Jesus, understood concretely within the history of transmission of traditions, manifest the ultimate destiny of a meaningfully unfolding open history?

EDMUND J. DOBBIN, O.S.A.
Washington Theological Coalition
Silver Spring, Md.