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Science, Meaning, and Metaphysics: A Tribute to Wolfhart Pannenberg

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On the occasion of Wolfhart Pannenberg’s seventy-fifth birthday, it is appropriate to examine his lifelong contribution to the debate between science and theology. Even a brief survey yields some intriguing results.

When Pannenberg published *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* in German in 1973, there *was* no field of study called ‘religion and science’. It is hard to remember that fact today, when religion–science discussion has become the academic specialisation, the daily bread and butter, for hundreds of scholars around the world. I well remember looking for a mentor in 1979 who specialised in questions of rationality and religious belief and who could guide my doctoral work on ‘explanation from physics to theology’. The writings of T. F. Torrance in Scotland on theology and science were certainly well known, and yet I had become deeply convinced that his Barthian approach was not the correct route to take. Although there were a few scholars working in the field, there were precious few who could guide an inquiry of this kind. The answer was unanimous among those whom I sought out for counsel: only Wolfhart Pannenberg could really mentor the thesis in question.

Pannenberg and religion/science

To assess Pannenberg’s lifetime contribution to the field now known as ‘religion/science’, we will need to address three topics. We must first explore the ways in which Pannenberg’s work contributed to the present state of the field. We should then acknowledge those features of his approach that have been disregarded or superseded, at least from the standpoint of the contemporary consensus in the field. Finally, from a more visionary perspective, we should look to see what parts of Pannenberg’s programme have not yet been appropriated, even to the present day.

If there was no field of religion/science in the early 1970s, how could Pannenberg have written a groundbreaking book on the topic? The answer is that *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* was a natural outgrowth of the critique of Karl Barth’s theology that he had already been developing for close to two decades. In Pannenberg’s view, mistakes not unrelated to the Barthian errors had cropped up in the existential theologies of Bultmann and Tillich, albeit in more subtle ways. Each had insisted that theological assertions had to be freed from dependence

on science or on historical–critical scholarship. Only in this way, they thought, could theology be true to its ultimate subject matter.

What would a theology look like which rejected this Barthian premiss? By 1963 Pannenberg had already begun to call for a closer partnership between theology and historiography: ‘If ... historical study declares itself unable to establish what *really* happened on Easter, then all the more, faith is not able to do so; for faith cannot ascertain anything certain about events of the past that would perhaps be inaccessible to the historian.’¹ Parallel with his reassessment of theology’s relation to historical–critical scholarship, Pannenberg realised that theology was more intimately connected with the social sciences than his contemporaries acknowledged. Although his major work on anthropology, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, did not appear in German until 1983, he had already published his first sortie into the study of anthropology, *What is Man?*, in German in 1962.

Rethinking theology and the natural sciences

By the late 1960s Pannenberg became convinced that a fundamental rethinking of theology’s relationship to the natural sciences was also necessary. He began meeting with a group of scientists for discussion on overlap areas. The results of this discussion group were made public in 1970 in the very interesting interdisciplinary volume, *Erwägungen zu einer Theologie der Natur*, which included a major contribution by Pannenberg on the topic of contingency and natural law. His major work on science and theology, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science (Wissenschaftstheorie und Theologie)*, appeared three years later.

This is not the place to summarise the entire volume. But several features of Pannenberg’s work in this groundbreaking book became crucial for the field of religion/science as it emerged over the following ten years, partly under Pannenberg’s influence. On the one hand, he famously defined theology as ‘the science of God’, and worked out the implications of this definition in a rigorous manner. He realised that theology would have to hold itself to the standards of critical inquiry, even falsifiability, if it wished to present itself as a rational discipline in the university. The topics of theology and the natural sciences were not separate: ‘as the theme of theology, God by definition includes the empirical reality by which the idea of God must be tested, and thus defines the object of theology.’² On the other hand, Pannenberg showed the inadequacy of explanations in the natural sciences, taken by themselves, thereby opening a door from within the sciences themselves to dialogue with theology. He showed how the natural scientific theories inevitably raise for humans the questions of meaning that then become the focus of the social sciences and hermeneutics. Here was a rigorous proposal for a theology that would be ready to accept whatever revisions were necessary for it to take its place among the academic disciplines ‘in an age of science’ – even if doing so meant that, henceforth, doubt and revisability and hypothetical reasoning would become the *modus operandi* for theologians.

One should not be hesitant to admit those features of Pannenberg’s work that are no longer central for the religion–science discussion. The first of these even Pannenberg has admitted, at least in conversation: he did not know the work of Imre Lakatos. Ian Barbour’s brilliant little book on Lakatos, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, appeared the year after Pannenberg’s book on theology and science, and he had not seen Lakatos’s famous essay on scientific research

programmes, which was published in 1970 in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*. For this reason Pannenberg gave the strict falsifiability of Karl Popper undue weight; doing so partially skewed his conception of theology, especially in relation to the sciences. Nor did Pannenberg draw in any detail on specific results from physics and the biological sciences. This left his treatment of the natural sciences sounding rather more abstract and less dialogical in tone than much of the subsequent work in the field; since it was less informed by the sciences, it appeared less responsive to them. The impression of a certain distance from the scientific data was increased by one particular misstep: Pannenberg linked the Holy Spirit with the notion of a physical field – a move that has been widely criticised as representing a misunderstanding of the field concept in physics.

External and cultural factors not under Pannenberg's control also affected his influence on the blossoming English speaking discussion in the following years. He drew heavily, for example, on the field of hermeneutics and on the nineteenth century debate about the status of theology among the sciences, with a particular debt to Schleiermacher. In fact, history played a significant role in the text, including coverage of topics such as Protestant Scholasticism that are outside the purview of many scholars in the field. The book was deeply influenced by the German concept of *Wissenschaft*, which stands much closer to the Latin *scientia* than to the English 'science'. Finally, the book was abysmally translated; one finds scores of mistakes in the English text, and a number of the sentences are completely incomprehensible. (A retranslation is thus devoutly to be wished.) These factors may have slightly muted Pannenberg's influence on the subsequent religion–science debate. But if so, their role was slight; *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* remains one of the great classics of the field up to the present day.

Challenges for the future

I would like to close by exploring three aspects of Pannenberg's programme for relating theology and science which the contemporary discussion, for all its sophistication, has not yet been able to appropriate. The first concerns the question of interpretation. A bevy of books and conferences have acknowledged the urgency of the interpretation question for religion–science dialogue. Unfortunately, most use the topic primarily to draw sceptical consequences based on the subjective dimension in science (or theology) and on the relativity of knowledge claims. Few scholars have made serious *constructive* use of the hermeneutical elements in science. Pannenberg, by contrast, showed how acknowledging the hermeneutical dimensions of science leads one to ask about the nature of the human subject who does the interpreting. This topic flows over naturally into an examination of anthropology (wo/man as *homo hermeneuticus*) and hence to questions about history as a whole: 'Are there overarching patterns in history?' and 'What is the *telos* of history?' Perhaps the increasing specialisation of the religion/science field today has tended to obscure such questions. Authors now have difficulty even making the transition from the physical sciences to the social sciences – let alone to the sciences of interpretation. Yet Pannenberg's work has been driven by a larger vision: the natural, even inevitable, progression from the physical sciences through the social sciences to the sciences of interpretation, and on to the themes of philosophical anthropology and their possible grounding in the *imago Dei*. This comprehensive programme provides a way to link science and theology in one seamless account. Much here remains worthy of further exploration.

A second major theme in Pannenberg's work involves the question of meaning. This topic undoubtedly connects with contemporary concerns in religion/science, yet few have found the means to make a smooth transition from scientific theories to theological positions that *answer* the question of meaning. Instead, the meaning question too often appears in truncated form as the question of how one *feels* about things (perhaps E. O. Wilson's 'consilience' notion is a culprit here). In developing an all embracing theory of meaning that stretches from the physical to the social sciences, and thence to anthropology and theology, Pannenberg postulated conceptual connections that still remain to be explored thirty years later. Equally urgent is his challenge to theologians to accept that the meaningfulness of doctrines and traditions must be continually reestablished for each new generation. As Pannenberg notes in his systematic theology, a religion that ceases to make life meaningful for its followers will ultimately decline to a mere matter of historical or aesthetic interest, as the Greek gods did for the citizens of Athens.

Finally, Pannenberg succeeded in linking the religion–science debate with classical metaphysical topics in a way that remains unmatched in most of the field today. He frequently identified themes that are raised but not answered by the sciences – such as contingency, temporality, subjectivity, and emergence – and then connected them with the resources of classical metaphysics. One thinks for example of his superb *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*. Many scholars today do well even to *recognise* central themes from the metaphysical traditions! Pannenberg's life-long work still stands therefore as an ideal for the field: can we discover *from within the sciences* those overarching themes which, if systematically developed, can lead to a single metaphysical vision of the world in which both science and theology have a place?

I have sought to honour Wolfhart Pannenberg on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday by a brief overview of what he has contributed to the theology–science dialogue. Although, not surprisingly, there are some themes in his opus that have been left behind by the last thirty years of work in the field, it is humbling to realise that many other aspects of his legacy still stand before us as challenges for further reflection. Perhaps nothing would honour Pannenberg more than for present-day authors to carry on with the work he began.

Literature cited

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