

## **God and the Future: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine of God**

*Christiaan Mostert*

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Since the publication of *Revelation as History* (German 1961, ET 1969), the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg has been distinguished by a focus on eschatology and universality, by an intense and intellectually rigorous conviction that the concrete anticipation of the eschaton in Jesus' resurrection was also the meaning of the universal history of God's relationship to creation. Christiaan Mostert's *God and the Future* expounds, explores and defends this remarkable theological achievement, bringing to the fore the union of eschatology and universality in Pannenberg's complex and innovative understanding of the future. For Mostert, while the early Pannenberg (of e.g. the 'Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation' in *Revelation as History*) emphasized eschatology, and the later Pannenberg (of the magisterial three volume *Systematic Theology*; volume 1 German 1988; ET 1991) the doctrine of the trinity, his work is characterized by a fundamental union between a theology of God's rule and God's being, a complex and sustained elucidation of the trinitarian meaning of Christian eschatology. One of the great strengths of Mostert's book is the detailed and persuasive way in which this union of eschatological and trinitarian themes in Pannenberg's work is displayed and interpreted.

*God and the Future* studies Pannenberg's work as a whole through the lens of the theme of futurity, and is distinguished by a careful tracing of the development of his thought within its intellectual context and in relation to critical response. Chapter 1, 'Eschatology in Twentieth Century Theology' considers Pannenberg's place in the development of eschatological theology from Johannes Weiss onwards, with a particular focus on the similarities and differences between Pannenberg's and Moltmann's understanding of eschatology: while Moltmann emphasized a theology of hope, Pannenberg's theology was primarily a theology of the future as God's rule. Chapter 2, 'The Appeal of Apocalyptic', notes that both these thinkers took up this at the time unfamiliar theme as a key source of their theology, but – in contrast to Moltmann – Pannenberg was interested in the potential of apocalyptic thought to throw new light on the ontological question. In his view, the demonstration of the deity of God, central to apocalyptic expectations of the vindication of divine justice, can be established only in relation to the whole of reality in a historical perspective. Assessing the evidence in current Biblical research, Mostert defends Pannenberg's understanding of apocalyptic against a number of prominent critics. A key question is the role of resurrection from the dead in apocalyptic expectation: arguing that there is good support for belief in the resurrection of the dead in the intertestamental period, Mostert focusses on Pannenberg's 'proleptic' or anticipatory interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus. While the resurrection of the individual was not a key part of the apocalyptic tradition, Jesus' resurrection anticipates the general resurrection in the Kingdom of God, transforming the present through the power of the future and reconciling the many through the vindication of an individual.

These themes of present and future, one and many, are explored in Chapter 3, 'An Ontology of the Whole', which pursues Pannenberg's attempt to develop an 'eschatological ontology'. Mostert endorses the argument of F. Shults, in his *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) that Pannenberg is a 'postfoundationalist thinker', that is, a theologian whose method embraces both the specific Christian tradition and a concern to understand human experience and reality in its universality. This union of particularity and universality has its most characteristic focus in his understanding of the resurrection of Jesus as the anticipation of the meaning of both individual human existence and human history as a whole in the Kingdom of God. 'Anticipation' and 'meaning' are two terms that loom large in this eschatological ontology: influenced by Dilthey's contextual view of meaning, Pannenberg argues that the Biblical 'already' and 'not yet' of the Kingdom of God are best interpreted in terms of the meaning of history as retroactively confirmed by the power of the future.

This set of arguments is the key concern of Chapter 4, 'The ontological priority of the future'. Here the author interprets Pannenberg's challenging, controversial and illuminating perspectives on the relationship between future and present, time and eternity. For Pannenberg, new events are not the result of a determining chain of past events, but are rather received from the future: only in this way can their contingency – and freedom – be understood. God created a contingent world in freedom. His power is the power of the future, of the Kingdom of God, to realize truly new possibilities. Informed by the apocalyptic tradition's conviction that 'those things which belong to the end-time already exist in heaven' (107) and by Plotinus' philosophy of time and the future, Pannenberg argues that the eschaton is the coincidence of time and eternity, that God's future is the *parousia* of his eternity. As we have seen, for Pannenberg this future, in which eternity is revealed, can be anticipated in the present: only in this way can Christian faith's affirmation of the absolute within history (here Pannenberg debates with Troeltsch in particular) be made without fideistic assertion. In a highly developed critical account, Mostert focusses on Pannenberg's notion of retroactive establishment of identity, the thesis (both epistemological and ontological) that while the identity of things is not established until the end-time, it can nevertheless be possessed in anticipation, by the power of the future at work in it. Mostert highlights a key point in the critical response to this thesis: is this merely a futurist determinism, no less constraining than a chain of past events, or can it allow for genuine historical freedom?

Chapter 5, 'The God of the Future', beginning with Pannenberg's critique of the classical concept of God and its attempted reformulations in German idealism and process theology, focusses on the ways in which he interprets the relationships between God's futurity and eternity, informed by the Biblical premise that God's being is God's rule, that God's eternity must be interpreted in eschatological terms. Drawing on Plotinus, Pannenberg rejects the notion of eternity as timelessness and characterizes it as the fullness of time. Since God's being 'encompasses all the modes of time' (144), God does not relate to creation solely in its beginning, but as 'in front of every past and present moment, allowing it to participate in that part of God's future that is most immediate to it'

(143). This link of eternity and futurity raises the question of a 'becoming' in God and sets the stage for Pannenberg's argument with process theology and with the accusation of determinism. As Mostert emphasizes, Pannenberg's God creates out of freedom, not out of a Hegelian self-developmental process, yet once creation exists, God's own divinity is bound up with it in the sense that God can only be God if the history of creation ends in the Kingdom of God. Within human history, the divinity of God is radically debateable in the face of evil and suffering: only the experience of the Kingdom can show God to be God. Once again, God's being is inseparable from God's rule. Yet this does not mean Pannenberg is a process theologian: not only does he affirm a 'closure' of creation in the Kingdom through God's almighty power, but his 'retroactive' linking of futurity and eternity contends that what turns out to be true in the future can then be seen to have been true all along. At the eschaton, economic and immanent trinity meet: the 'becoming' of the economic trinity in the saving history of creation meets the eternal being of the immanent trinity. Mostert sums up a nuanced critical discussion: 'only in a very qualified sense based on the distinction (but ultimate identity) of the immanent and economic Trinity, could one speak of "development" in God' (161). The accusation of determinism is carefully examined and firmly rejected: the openness of the historical process is not compromised by the coming of the Kingdom, since 'God is able to connect the fullness of the divine rule with any historical course of events' and the only determinism is the 'determination' of love to bring into being a creation different from Godself (180).

Chapter 6, 'The reign of the triune God', focusses explicitly on the developing relationship between eschatology and trinity in Pannenberg's thought: in a detailed examination of the early essays and the *Systematic Theology* in the context of his relationship to Hegel and Barth in particular, Mostert shows that there is a fundamental unity of eschatology and trinity in Pannenberg's work as a whole. While his earlier work focussed more on eschatology, and the *Systematic Theology* more on trinity, the union of the two is achieved through a sustained development of the implications of the union of God's being and God's rule. The most far-reaching of these implications lies in Pannenberg's conception of the trinitarian relations as not only relations of origin but also eschatological relations. Since God's divinity is only demonstrated eschatologically, and since it is only through the Son and the Spirit that the Father can bring creation to its fulfilment in the eschaton, then 'the Father receives his deity as much from the Son and the Spirit as they receive theirs from the Father' (188). On this basis, Pannenberg argues that the Cappadocian emphasis on relations of origin risks subordinationism: only a greater mutuality between the persons can do justice to their role in salvation history, in particular the ways in which the New Testament speaks of the Son handing back Lordship over creation to the Father (208). This challenge to the Patristic tradition is based on a very strong conception of the identity of economic and immanent trinity: as Mostert argues, the heart of the problem is the relationship between 'the eternal triune being of God and the history of the world' (217). There is an eschatological identity of immanent and economic trinity since once the world exists – from a free divine act of love – God must be in real relation to it and God's divinity is at stake in its ultimate fulfilment. At the same time, Mostert takes care to show that Pannenberg wants to avoid any notion of a 'developing' God, and so must reconcile the claims that God is eternally

what God is and that events of history have a bearing on God's being. Here again, the principle of 'retroactivity' plays its role: in the eschaton God's eternity enters into time and 'the eschatological consummation is "the locus of the decision" that the triune God is the true God, has been all along and will be always' (222). God's eternity is not changelessness but rather 'the presence of the totality of life' (223), so that a 'handing back' of Lordship to the Father in the eschaton is not because his eternal Lordship was 'at risk' but because what is eternal is also enacted within salvation history. Mostert carefully considers a range of criticisms of this particular way of unifying the immanent and economic trinity, particularly the Thomist perspective of John O'Donnell, coming to the conclusion that Pannenberg's axiom 'that once there is a cosmos God's deity can only be established in relation to it – while affirming that God was under no necessity to create a world – is, in my view incontrovertible' (228).

In his foreword to *God and the Future*, Pannenberg expresses his particular satisfaction and gratitude for the way in which this book shows 'how the idea of God in terms of the power of the future requires for its explication a reinterpretation of the trinitarian doctrine of the church' (ix). In its wealth of detailed scholarship, its comprehensiveness in interpreting Pannenberg's thought in the context of historical and contemporary debate, its consistent clarity and insight, and its critically engaged interpretation of a complex and highly innovative theological system, *God and the Future* makes an invaluable and distinguished contribution to theological scholarship. Pannenberg's specific interpretation of the union of eschatology and trinity will continue to stimulate debate, in particular his conjunction of time and eternity in interpreting the nature of God's eternal triune life in relation to a freely created world. In what sense is the demonstration of God's divinity in the fulfilment of temporal creation constitutive of the divinity of a God who is eternally divine and eternally in a three-fold relationship of love? Is that demonstration of God's divinity purely a demonstration from the perspective of creatures, who live in hope of the new Jerusalem, rather than a demonstration in which the fulfilment of the relationships of the divine persons themselves is accomplished? Although I would still want to debate these questions, Mostert's book gives detailed and well-argued answers to them: what, in my view, is not debateable is Mostert's conclusion that Pannenberg's theology 'exemplifies the work of the public theologian', confessing the Christian faith in critical dialogue with the thought of his day, and that it 'is likely that he will be recognized as one of the great teachers and defenders of the Christian faith of the twentieth century' (238). It is the achievement of this book to have given good grounds for that recognition.