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THEOLOGY IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE?

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A Review Article of *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, by Wolfhart Pannenberg, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell (T.&T. Clark, 1985). Pp. 552. £24.95 (hb)

Anthropology is a child of the Enlightenment. After having played a subordinate role as a part of metaphysical psychology in the 17th century, it later became (alongside with history and philosophical aesthetics) one of the "new sciences" which were characterised by the Enlightenment's emphasis on liberating human beings from the dogmatic presuppositions of traditional Christian doctrine and from the antiquated framework of Aristotelean metaphysics. In a time in which Europe suffered from the after-effects of religious wars and in which explorers brought news of human cultures totally different from those previously known, the quest for a secular scientific conception of human nature could be sure of a positive response.

Like most of the academic disciplines and spheres of culture which had claimed autonomy in the fragmentation of the unified culture of the Middle Ages, anthropology also claimed at one stage – most notably in Feuerbach's late philosophy – to provide the new centre of meaning for a new unified world-view and for a new unity of culture based on an enlightened explanation of the outmoded religious world-view and culture. And like most of the intellectual disciplines which had their origin in the general segmentation of culture in the Enlightenment, anthropology itself underwent a process of segmentation at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century when several disciplines were established (biological, psychological, social and cultural anthropology), each claiming to be the true representative of anthropology.

A common feature of modern intellectual history is that, when such conflicts among the arts and sciences arise, philosophy – having itself earlier lost to the new sciences many of its previous functions of giving a comprehensive interpretation of reality – appears on the stage offering not only to sort out the differences among the sciences but also to integrate their different viewpoints in a new philosophical synthesis. That was the case when in the first half of this century philosophical anthropology was introduced on the Continent as a philosophical synthesis of the anthropological sciences and as a new approach to philosophy in general.

The historical and cultural circumstances in which anthropology developed did not leave Christian religion and theology unaffected. With the dissolution of the medieval cosmos of meaning and with the fragmentation of its unified culture, religion lost its place as the generally acknowledged organizing centre of meaning and found itself reduced to the status of one cultural sphere among others. It has been maintained, no doubt rightly, that the Christian doctrine of creation (with its sharp distinction between a transcendent divine creator and the wordly order of creation) was one of the presuppositions of a scientific investigation of nature. Even so, the pro-

gress of the natural sciences in finding natural explanations for natural phenomena seemed to sever the links between God and his creation as they were traditionally understood and to call into question the traditional ways of inferring God's existence and nature from the world. One consequence of the crisis of natural theology – more acutely felt on the Continent than in Britain – was that the internal world of human consciousness displaced the external world as the primary point of reference for attempting to find a secure foundation for theology.

This development was accompanied by the privatisation of religion after the confessional wars had discredited the public religion of the Christian denominations. Many thinkers expressed this privatisation by contrasting the statutory faith of the churches with the rational faith of private religiosity. But this privatised religion could only retain its religious character of providing a comprehensive interpretation of reality, if it was not just a subjective perspective on the world, but possessed general validity. The moral religion of Rousseau and Kant was intended to serve this purpose, as well as Schleiermacher's conception of religion as the feeling of absolute dependence.

These attempts to compensate the loss of public legitimisation of institutionalised religion by claiming universal validity for the privatised religion of interiority have been subject to forceful criticism precisely with regard to its anthropological foundations. The historicism of the 19th century questioned whether it is at all possible to define a universally valid concept of human nature which is not subject to the changes of historical consciousness. Furthermore, it criticised the attempt to find a universal anthropological foundation for such an eminently historical phenomenon as religion. In the 20th century Karl Barth and his followers challenged the implied anthropocentricity of all these attempts to validate the anthropological universality of religion by contrasting it to the theocentricity of the Christian revelation. He also called into question the theological legitimacy of trying to find a basis for theology derived from an external (eg anthropological) perspective on the Christian faith. Yet these general criticisms did not resolve the problems of the relationships of theology and anthropology. They emphasised even more strongly the problems implied in viewing theology from an anthropological perspective and in assessing anthropology from a theological standpoint.

The work of Wolfhart Pannenberg is characterised by the patient attempt to unravel the cluster of problems confronting Christian theology in the modern era and to propose theological solutions which would be acceptable by the standards of modern scientific thought. As early as 1962 Pannenberg argued in his book *What Is Man?* (Eng trans 1970) that the anthropological thesis that human existence is open to the world points to an inherently religious openness to the future which anticipates the totality of meaning in which the human destiny is fulfilled. This attempt to demonstrate the justifiability of central claims of Christian theology by making use of anthropological research was reflected on a methodological level in his *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (1973, Eng trans 1976). In this work Pannenberg emphasised that God, the subject-matter of theology, is not directly "given" and cannot be thought of as empirically accessible like an

object in the world. Rather, the reality of God is indirectly “given” in the totality of reality as a totality of meaning which we cannot experience directly, but which we anticipate in every act of interpreting reality. Because of this anticipatory character, all theological statements must be viewed as having hypothetical status. Although they are not directly verifiable or falsifiable by empirical observation, they must nevertheless be validated by the experience and interpretation of reality until they are finally verified eschatologically. To assess the validity of theological assertions within the framework of a general theory of religion is in Pannenberg’s view the task of a *fundamental theology* which should be developed in close contact with non-theological sciences.

Pannenberg’s new *magnum opus* published in English in a translation by Matthew J. O’Connell is the attempt to put this programme into practice. In his introduction (pp.11- 23) Pannenberg vigorously defends this programme on the basis of considerations about the primary role of anthropology as the battlefield on which the dispute about the universal validity of theological claims has to be decided:

Theologians will be able to defend the truth precisely of their talk about God only if they first respond to the atheistic critique of religion on the terrain of anthropology. Otherwise all their assertions, however impressive, about the primacy of the Godness of God will remain purely subjective assurances without any serious claim to universal validity. (p.16)

This aim can in Pannenberg’s view only be achieved by “a critical appropriation of nontheological anthropological research by theologians” (p. 19) which, unlike dogmatic anthropology, does not start from the assumption of the existence of God and does not develop its conception of human nature on the basis of the witness of scripture. In Pannenberg’s *fundamental-theological* approach these doctrinal presuppositions are, so to say, bracketed in order to start the discussion on the level of the findings of the human sciences. Nevertheless, his final aim is “to lay theological claim to the human phenomena described in the anthropological disciplines . . . by showing that the anthropological datum itself contains a further and theologically relevant dimension.” (p. 20)

Pannenberg divides his discussion of anthropological research into three parts: after analyzing “The Person in Nature” (Part I, pp. 27-153) against the backdrop of human biology and behavioural science, he continues by presenting “The Human Person as a Social Being” (Part II, pp. 157-312), making extensive use of social psychology and related disciplines; the final part (“The Shared World”, pp. 312-532) concludes, after an analysis of the concept of culture and the theory of institutions, with an account of the relationship of historicity and human nature. In spite of his sharp distinction between dogmatic anthropology and his own fundamental-theological approach, Pannenberg discusses two fundamental aspects of Christian anthropology – the “image of God” and “sin” – in the first part of his book.

In Pannenberg’s assessment, the decisive move in modern anthropology, from a view which saw the defining characteristic of humanity in its relation to God

to the attempt to determine the specifically human by relating it to the higher animals, was further radicalized by the exclusion of concepts such as “soul” and “spirit”. This turn to corporeality, represented in its most stringent form by behaviourism, is – in a somewhat milder form – also a characteristic of the movement of philosophical anthropology in Germany from which Pannenberg draws the basic categories of his discussion of the person in nature.

Max Scheler’s work *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (1928) is commonly considered as the inauguration of the new discipline of philosophical anthropology. Although he continued to employ the concept of spirit to denote the defining characteristic of humanity which cannot be derived from its biological constitution, Scheler nevertheless tried to show that the spirit has a bodily correlate in the human *openness to the world* as exemplified in human behaviour. At the same time, Hellmuth Plessner saw the key for explaining the phenomena which Scheler had summarised in this formula in the *exocentric position* of human beings, ie in the fact that human beings find their centre outside themselves. By interpreting this exocentricity not as expressive of a spiritual principal but as a structural modification of nature in humanity, he prepared the ground for Arnold Gehlen’s thesis that humans are “deficient beings” who have to compensate the shortcomings of their instinctual capabilities by language and culture.

Pannenberg tries to exhibit the hidden religious dimension of this understanding of humanity by appealing to Herder’s interpretation of the metaphor of the image of God. Herder contends that in humans the deficiencies of their instinctual equipment is compensated by a sense of direction and meaning for human life which is the form of God’s image in humanity. On this view, the concept of the image of God functions as a teleological concept which denotes the disposition and standard for the education of the human species to a higher degree of reason, humanity and religion. Herder thus departs from the traditional view of the *imago Dei* as a state of original perfection. Instead it is interpreted as the destiny of unfinished humanity which is not achieved by the gradual self-perfection of the human race, but by God’s providential agency.

Pannenberg attempts to demonstrate the religious dimension of human openness to the world which is presupposed in Herder’s interpretation of the *imago Dei* by an analysis of the act of perception. The fact that we can perceive an individual object as an individual object presupposes, according to Pannenberg, that we can locate the object in question in relation to ourselves and in relation to other objects within a general framework; and this “step into the universal” presupposed in every act of perceiving an object “reaches beyond the totality of all given and possible objects of perception, that is, beyond the world” (p.68). It is here, claims Pannenberg, that the religious dimension of human openness to the world becomes apparent: even if we are not explicitly conscious of the divine reality we are implicitly presupposing it in every act of perception. “That which can become the explicit object of religious consciousness is implicitly present in every turning to a particular object of our experience.” (p. 72)

In his discussion of sin (pp. 80-153), Pannenberg again takes his starting-point from Plessner's concept of the "exocentricity" of human existence. The tensions between ego and self and between the awareness of non-identity and the consciousness of identity are interpreted as grounded in the conflict between the centralized organisation of human beings which they have in common with all higher animals and the specifically human exocentricity. The exocentric self-transcendence (as being present to what is other-than-the-self) constitutes the ego or person. This constitution from the other is obscured, however, when the ego tries to impose itself on everything that exists outside itself.

It is in this tension that Pannenberg locates the concept of sin, which he interprets in the Augustinian tradition as *concupiscentia*. Sin as concupiscence leads to a reversal of the end-means relation, so that transitory things which should be means of attaining the final end of finding fulfilment and enjoyment in the relationship with God become ends in themselves, whereas God is reduced to a mere means for accomplishing these ends. This discloses *amor sui* in the form of *superbia* as the source of sinful behaviour in which the ego becomes the centre and ultimate end of all volition and activity.

Locating sin in the conflict between the central organisation of human beings and their exocentricity implies that sin understood as concupiscence and egoism belongs to the *natural conditions* of human existence. But – as Pannenberg hastens to add – "even if human beings are in this sense sinners *by nature*, this does not mean that their nature as human beings is sinful" (p. 107). Pannenberg resolves this paradox by distinguishing the *natural conditions* of human existence from *human nature* which is understood as the essential destination of human beings as images of God.

Here, as elsewhere, Pannenberg insists on the empirical verifiability of the anthropological claims implied in theological concepts as the foundation for a more specifically theological development of Christian doctrine. "It is precisely by way of anthropological proof of the universality of sin that the universal relevance of redemption through Christ becomes convincing" (p. 134). But Pannenberg has to concede that the empirical demonstration of the universality of sin does not extend to its "theological" character as opposition against God. Sin in the theological sense is only implicitly present in concupiscence until it is revealed through the law and in the cross of Christ. Sin is recognized as guilt only in the light of the revelation of the ultimate destiny of humanity in Jesus Christ.

Pannenberg's approach in the first part of his book is characterised by a methodological abstraction in so far as he restricts his analysis to individual behaviour. He lifts this restriction in the second part, where he discusses the human person as a social being. By introducing a new set of categories taken mostly from social psychology, he refutes the arrogant reductionist strategy of socio-biology, which purports to account for complex cultural and social phenomena exclusively by employing biological principles of explanation, summarised in the criterion of the maximal propagation and diffusion of genes.

In this part of his book Pannenberg concentrates on the process of identity formation. But only after a historical description of the emergence of the independence of the individual in society, after a detailed discussion of social theories from Hobbes to Hegel and an exhaustive survey of philosophical and psychological theories of identity does he hint at his own solution for the problem. "Familiarity with 'oneself' is mediated through trust in a sheltering and supporting context in which I originally awaken to myself" (p. 221). The sameness of the self is the point of departure for identity formation. Identity is established when the momentary unity of ego-consciousness which is mediated through the self acquires stability and constancy, so that the ego can be an accountable and responsible agent. The religious dimension of this view of identity formation is, in Pannenberg's view, suggested by the phenomenon of basic trust which can be most clearly identified in the stage of symbiotic unity of mother and child as analysed by developmental psychology. Because it is virtually limitless, basic trust which accompanies the whole development of a healthy personality is for Pannenberg "antecedently a religious phenomenon" (p. 231). Here he follows – with slight modifications – Hans Küng's attempt to characterise basic trust as the anthropological phenomenon underlying faith in God. The conflict of identity and non-identity with its implied religious dimensions is the counterpoint of Pannenberg's discussion of feeling, alienation, guilt and consciousness of guilt.

In the third part of his book, Pannenberg covers an even wider field. In his discussion of the concept of culture, he modifies Johan Huizinga's interpretation of culture in terms of the phenomenon of play. In play, and especially in cultic drama, the consciousness of meaning which is constitutive for the unity of culture is represented. In this representation the symbolic activity is organised in a system of rules. Thought and language are constitutive for this representation of meaning. They both possess in Pannenberg's view a religious dimension which can be found in the most basic forms of the development of thought in infants and in the most ancient forms of language, like myth.

The thesis that the religious dimension is the source of human culture in all its different aspects is to be found not only in Pannenberg's general description of social institutions, but also in the discussion of individual institutions ("Property, Work and Economy", pp. 416-427; "Sexuality, Marriage and Family", pp. 427-443; "Political Order, Justice and Religion", pp. 444-473). Here theological concepts, such as "the kingdom of God", function as criteria for the assessment of the role these institutions play in organising the social relations in such a way that they are in accordance with the still unfulfilled destiny of humanity.

The reader of Pannenberg's book may be justified in expecting from the last chapter "Human Beings and History" (pp. 485-532) the all-encompassing summary of his discussion of the religious dimension of anthropology. This expectation is partly disappointed. The unfinished character of history which mirrors the exocentricity of human beings prevents its use as the definitive framework of interpretation which would provide the ultimate perspective on the findings of anthro-

pology. Pannenberg, therefore, concentrates on the problem of the historicity of human self-understanding which made its first appearance in the Christian claim that in the particular event of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth the true destiny of humanity is revealed and that only in relation to that event human beings achieve their final destiny. Once the modern historical consciousness had separated the historicity of human self-understanding from its christological roots and had subsequently discarded the idea of divine providence as interpreting the goal-directedness and unity of history, it was left with the problem of how human subjects which were now seen as the only agents of history are themselves constituted as acting subjects.

In Pannenberg's theological solution, the identity of the human subject (which is presupposed in the concept of historical action) is grounded in an antecedent experience of meaning which takes the form of an anticipation of the totality of as yet incomplete history. Pannenberg interprets the anticipatory experience of the unity of history as the experience of the presence of truth in history. And at this point he finally introduces the hitherto bracketed concept of spirit into his anthropology: "To this presence of the true and definitive amid the processes of history that always break off uncompleted and amid earthly failure and earthly transiency I give the name 'spirit'" (p. 519). The concept of spirit here signifies the sphere of meaning which constitutes the unity of conscious life (which implies both subjectivity and consciousness) and the unity of social and cultural life (which, in turn, implies the continuity of the historical process in spite of its incomplete and fragmentary character). In this way the concept of spirit summarises all that is experienced as constituting human existence as well as transcending its present state towards its future destiny.

Unlike the rest of the book, Pannenberg's remarks on the concept of spirit are very short. He justifies this brevity by saying that "an adequate treatment of the problems needing to be discussed would be possible only in the framework of a general ontology" (p. 521). Instead of giving some indication of how he would tackle this truly formidable task, Pannenberg limits his discussion to the connections between his concept of spirit and the Christian tradition. Noting that in important biblical texts "spirit" denotes the creative spirit of God as the source of life which transcends all given forms of life and points to their future perfection, Pannenberg can redescribe human exocentricity and the process of identity formation as the spiritual constitution of the human person: ". . . the human being as person is a creation of the spirit" (p. 528). Since the activity of the spirit which is made concrete in reason and love transcends any particular being, it also brings about human community in its most comprehensive form as the community of the human race. In their "societal structure" (E. Jünger) human beings are the image of God in accordance with the trinitarian life of God.

One cannot read this book without a deep sense of admiration for the scope and depth of its author's erudition and expertise in anthropological research as well as in historical scholarship. The immense amount of material discussed will undoubtedly make it for many years indispensable in the investigation of many individual anthropological problems. But it also accounts for the

open-textured and sometimes rather loosely connected structure of the argument, so that the reader will at times experience some difficulty in tracing the thread of Pannenberg's argument amid the many strands of the anthropological discussion. Since testing specific steps in the argument would exceed even the limits of a rather lengthy review article, I will restrict my remarks to two fairly general questions concerning Pannenberg's method in presenting the anthropological research.

Pannenberg's analysis in Part I of the concept of person by comparing individual human behaviour to that of higher animals suffers – as he himself points out – from a "methodological abstraction" which forces him to use concepts like "subjectivity" and "self-consciousness" before they are properly introduced in Part II. There he contends that self-consciousness cannot be understood apart from its social context. And, if Gehlen's much quoted thesis that human beings are by nature cultural beings is correct, it would follow that the social context is always a cultural context structured by language, ordered in specific institutions and historical in character. Would it not perhaps be a more appropriate approach to start from the shared world of culture which represents the fundamentally social character of human beings as a condition for assessing their place in nature? Would not such an approach help to account for the pivotal importance of the fact that persons are always "persons in relation" (J. Macmurray) who relate to one another in the context of the shared world of culture? And would not such an approach have advantages for describing the religious dimension of the constitution of the human person? It would, for instance, make it possible to present God not only as the horizon of totality for the exocentricity of human beings, but also as the personal being in relation to whom personality is constituted.

Although these questions concerning the method of shaping the anthropological material already have important consequences for the content of anthropology, there are some questions concerning Pannenberg's method of trying to place anthropology in a theological perspective which have even wider-ranging implications. Pannenberg sharply criticizes Brunner's methodological attempt to find a "point of contact" between theology and non-theological disciplines, because it would leave anthropology as it is: "It stands over against theology as something different from the latter, and theology, which in turn stands over against the anthropology as something different from it, is supposed to establish contact with this very different thing" (p. 19). Is it not possible or, indeed, even probable that at least some anthropologists would prefer *this* approach over Pannenberg's strategy "to lay theological claim to the human phenomena described in the anthropological disciplines" (ibid)? They might well feel that such an approach respects the autonomy of anthropology more than does Pannenberg's strategy, which at times seems to offer a religious *reinterpretation* of anthropological research.

The possible protest of anthropologists could perhaps be ignored by theologians whose chief concern must be how Pannenberg succeeds in putting anthropology in theological perspective. From the theological viewpoint possibly the most surprising feature of Pannenberg's book is that in his discussion of Christian anthropology

he concentrates almost exclusively on two undoubtedly central topics: the metaphor of the image of God and sin. Two other, perhaps equally important aspects of theological anthropology are never discussed in detail.

The first is the creatureliness of human beings. It would seem theologically important to stress that the relatedness of human beings as creatures to God as their creator is constitutive for the way in which the human person is related to him- or herself, to other persons and to nature. The second aspect which is only mentioned in passing in Pannenberg's *Anthropology* (cf p. 367) – despite its being of crucial importance in Pannenberg's own Lutheran tradition – is Luther's "definition" of humanity in his thesis: "hominem iustificari fide". This thesis expresses the anthropological content of the concept of justification by claiming that the recognition of the constitution of true humanity in the creative and recreative action of God is the standard of an adequate understanding of humanity. The crucial significance of this formula becomes evident when it is interpreted as an *ontological* claim which states the ontological constitution of humanity as it is restored in the justification of the sinner. Talk about the image of God refers to this *new* justified humanity in which the contradiction of sin is overcome by God's grace.

Can the reason why these aspects of Christian anthropology are virtually missing in Pannenberg's attempt to present anthropology in a theological perspective be seen in his method of appropriating anthropological research for theology? His technique implies that "the secular description is accepted as simply a provisional version of the objective reality, a version that needs to be expanded and deepened by showing that the anthropological datum itself contains a further and theologically relevant dimension" (p. 19)? Is it not a danger of this approach that theological anthropology comes into play only when the secular description of the anthropological phenomena seems to suggest it? And can the autonomy of *theological* anthropology (which is based not on the empirical findings of anthropologists but in the view of reality disclosed in faith) really be preserved in such a way?

These questions suggest a more general question. Is Pannenberg's approach – which sometimes seems to endanger both the autonomy of secular anthropology and of theological anthropology – the best method of achieving the mutual illumination of secular and theological anthropology which would result from a dialogue acknowledging their respective autonomy as well as their mutual interdependence?

It would seem that such questions are provoked by Pannenberg's contention "that in the modern age anthropology has become not only in fact but also with objective necessity the terrain on which theologians must base their claims of universal validity for what they say" (p. 16). Even if we leave aside the possible conflation in this statement of historical necessity and logical necessity and assume that theologians could meet this demand, a major difficulty still remains. Would not the existence of some kind of religious "dimension" in human nature and culture be the sole basis for their claims of universal validity? And, if so, is the possible evidence for such an anthropologically universal religiosity really sufficient for justifying the universal validity of theological statements? Is not the universality of theological statements rather an implication of the character of the Christian faith as implying distinctive *ontological* truth-claims which refer to what there is and how it is to be interpreted? If that is the case, then no amount of anthropological research can verify these ontological truth-claims. But would not precisely the ontological character of theological truth-claims constitute a theological perspective in which the findings of anthropology could be viewed as "a provisional version of the objective reality" (p.20)? And is not the ontological debate about the coherence of the truth-claims of the Christian faith (rather than the findings of anthropological research) the terrain on which theologians have to defend their claims to universal validity of Christian truth-claims? It depends on the answers to these questions whether one decides that Pannenberg's book indeed offers what the title promises – namely, anthropology in *theological* perspective. Some may feel tempted to ask if it does not in fact present theology in *anthropological* perspective.