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The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg

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The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques, with an Autobiographical Essay and Response

Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton, editors

Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988

352 pp. with bibliography. \$37.50

Wolfhart Pannenberg is one of the most prolific and celebrated contemporary theologians. This volume—which marks 25 years since Pannenberg first travelled to the U.S. as a visiting professor—promises to be “an accurate barometer of the influence Pannenberg has had in America, as well as the sorts of reservations that English-speaking theology brings to his work” (10).

This is a rather eclectic work, representing a wide cross-section of contributors and subjects. As is the case in most volumes of this nature, some essays are more creative and stimulating than others—depending, of course, upon one’s theological agenda and posture.

In his autobiographical sketch, Pannenberg briefly acknowledges his debt to medieval studies, and scholars like Edmund Schlink, Gerhard von Rad, Karl Barth, Karl Jaspers, and Hans von Campenhausen. According to Pannenberg, any systematic theologian worth her or his salt must master philosophy as well as the natural and social sciences sufficiently before he or she is able to develop a doctrine of God. Pannenberg claims to be a theologian of the whole Christian community and his theology addresses that community.

Process theologian John B. Cobb Jr. begins Part I—Philosophical and Methodological Critiques. Cobb questions the notion that theology is the product of objective or confessional thought. Feminist and liberation theologians have presented quite convincing cases against the “objectivity” of theology. Cobb is more skeptical than Pannenberg about the historical future and consummation of history. He doubts that the future end of history holds the solutions to all worldly problems. Thus Pannenberg is faulted for his failure to change now for the sake of justice and an improved present condition for the two-thirds world. He also questions Pannenberg’s view of human freedom. Cobb suggests that Pannenberg fails to appreciate the pivotal nature of subtle, unconscious decisions in the human being’s moment-to-moment existence.

Readers familiar with Pannenberg’s concept of anticipation-prolepsis will enjoy Philip Clayton’s essay. Clayton critiques the “ontological” sense of prolepsis and doubts that Pannenberg is able to base a system of thought upon such a concept. He gives Pannenberg high marks for his attention to the philosophical underpinnings of theology.

David Polk opens Part II—Theological Critiques. With an esteemed yet cautious response to Pannenberg’s development of “the all-determining God”, Polk probes God’s freedom and omnipotence, human will/freedom

and the absolute immutability of God in relation to the temporal process of history.

Avery Dulles critiques Pannenberg's view of the resurrection as transcendent and eschatological; proposing that there are other phenomena through which we encounter God's self-revelation. Dulles has detected an excessive "Hegelian rationalism" in Pannenberg's theology and advises that in the future he might focus more on the subjective, personal qualities in relation to knowledge.

Robert Jenson believes that Pannenberg's Christology and trinitarian theology place a very heavy emphasis upon the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Jenson is skeptical of a historian's ability to confirm the resurrection of Jesus. Jenson opines that: "Karl Rahner has provided a maxim for much contemporary trinitarian theology: 'The immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity.' Pannenberg is among those who have adopted it" (197).

Richard John Neuhaus in Part III—Applications, states the premise that, for Pannenberg, theology is *the* crucial point of all meaning. He then presents a kind of apologetic for Pannenberg's universal, absolute truth-claiming theology over against the deficiencies of contemporary particular theologies. However, does the Church not have to be equally cautious in baptizing a universal, absolute truth-claiming theology? The history of Christianity has suffered much from this theology. For Neuhaus, there is a continuity of historical Christian truth claims which must test the troubled waters of contemporary theologies.

Ted Peters gives readers a very enlightening interpretation of the universal Christian truth-claims in Pannenberg's theology as it applies to ethics and politics. According to Peters, Pannenberg's "proleptic ethics and politics" insists that "the common good" takes precedence over individual good, national, ethnic, racial, class, etc., good. The common good is the inbreaking of God's reign. Peters believes that Pannenberg's eschatological ethics are both "disjunctive"—i.e., having little or no continuity between the present and the ultimate future rule of God—and "conjunctive"—i.e., the present has some influence upon the reality of the future. He then presents an excellent comparative analysis of Pannenberg's ethics with that of John Howard Yoder, John Cobb and several liberation theologians. Peters' essay is perhaps the best of them all in the sense that it is most provocative and written in a lucid, captivating style.

Carl Braaten's essay provides readers with a very good overview of Christianity in relation to the world religions. Braaten contends that religious pluralism has been around for a long time. A new relativism now influences Christianity and the world religions. The paradigm shift in theology is from Christocentricity to theocentricity; from no salvation outside of the Church and *sola fide* to salvation through all the world religions. He suggests that Pannenberg's theology insists upon theocentricity *and* Christocentricity. Braaten maintains that "a theology of religion" is a necessary corrective to "the sciences of religion" (296). He agrees with Pannenberg and a host of other scholars "that there is genuine revelation of God within

the history of religions" (309). What he finds problematic is Pannenberg's lack of a clearer distinction between "general" revelation and "special" revelation. He also questions whether Pannenberg views Christianity as superior in relation to "the soteriological *efficacy*" of other religions.

In "A Response To My American Friends", one encounters a little of Pannenberg's angst as well as his proficiency. He does not believe—in response to Braaten—that the truth claims of all religions are equal. On the other hand, he believes that the doctrines of Christian churches are provisional and do not guarantee truth. Only the final consummation of God's reign shall reveal the truth in all of its fullness. Until then, the truth is openly disputed and encountered in fresh ways. Pannenberg critiques the God of process theology as well as their anthropology. In response to Cobb, he denies having a closed-mindedness towards third world and feminist theologians; yet he finds liberation theologians' uncritical adoption of Marxist analysis problematic. His eschatological ethics always presuppose the traditional Lutheran anthropological position that sin and ambiguity are ever-present and shaping human life. For Pannenberg, the ecumenical movement shows its greatest promise in bilateral dialogues. He sees the World Council of Churches' role as the facilitator of this process.

This volume is quite esoteric and therefore most appealing to Pannenberg scholars. The cost may be prohibitive for some. The editors are to be critiqued for not using inclusive language and failing to include feminist as well as other particular/contextual theologians.

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Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters

Harold Coward, editor
Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989
xix + 281 pp.

Edited by Harold Coward, Director of the Humanities Institute of the University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, this volume draws together scholarly research, anecdotal material, and the personal reflections of eighteen scholars and religious thinkers. The result of their work not only reviews historical and current interactions between representatives of the Hindu and Christian communities, but also considers future exchanges. Part I opens with an examination of the earliest contacts Hindus had with the St. Thomas Christians. Other essays in this section trace Hindu-Christian dialogue in missionary activity, the Hindu Renaissance, Indian nationalism, and Hindu-Christian encounters in Europe. In exploring current interaction, the essays in Part II are wider-ranging. They examine examples