

Wolfhart Pannenberg's eschatological ethics and their application to ecological theology.

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§1. Introduction

This essay is a discussion of the contribution to ecological theological ethics of the eschatology of Wolfhart Pannenberg.

Christians have long believed that the worship of God embraces respect and care for God's creation. The ecological challenges of recent decades have stimulated the development and articulation of this commitment as 'ecological theology'. Ecological theology draws on the full spectrum of theological resources to consider questions such as God's self-revelation through the natural realm and humankind's ecological relationships and responsibilities within the created order. For many, ecological theology offers ethical guidance for Christian attitudes and conduct concerning nature and society.

Eschatology is one of the fields of theological study important to ecological ethics. Christian tradition about the fate of the Earth, our physical world, ranges widely, including ideas of annihilation, transformation and deification. But if the world is doomed for destruction, what incentive remains to care for the Earth? How is this incentive affected if we believe that the Earth will in some way be transformed or redeemed, rather than destroyed? Does the hope of such transformation by God diminish or enhance the need to do anything to preserve the Earth in this present age? These are just some of the eschatological questions bearing on ecological ethics. Pannenberg's eschatology directs attention to an outworking of God's love in the

world and is a thus potential resource for ethics concerned with nature and human society.

Arguments can be made for ecological theology regardless of the eschatological fate of creation. Respect for God's creation has value in the present and can be seen as an outworking of the *imago Dei*. The earthly creation merits care and respect, regardless of its ultimate fate, precisely because of its inherent value as God's creation. However, this essay does not debate the value of ecological theology as such. In a sense, this is taken as a given. The essay aims specifically to assess whether an eschatological perspective as seen in the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg may strengthen ecological ethics.

The essay begins with a brief overview of the development of Christian thought concerning the ultimate fate of the Earth and the motivation for ecological theology. The main body of the discussion briefly begins with an outline of Wolfhart Pannenberg's eschatology and its relationship to creation. It will be seen that Pannenberg encourages an eschatological ethics based in God's self as the ultimate good and God's love for the world. From this can be drawn implications for ecological ethics in particular. The concept of humankind's creation in the image of God is central to an understanding of humanity's place in the natural realm and merits specific attention. Pannenberg's eschatology is founded on his understanding of the causal priority of God's future and it is this concept that is most criticised in his eschatology. Some of these criticisms are considered.

§2. *The fate of the Earth and ecological theology*

Science suggests that, in the very long term, the earth will be consumed by the fiery death throes of the Sun. Ultimately, the universe will either dissipate in entropy, becoming dark and cold, or will collapse into itself in a 'big crunch'. In the much shorter term, catastrophic extinction of human (and possibly all) life on earth is possible. There are challenges, therefore, in reconciling the views of science with the hope that is at the heart of the Christian gospel.¹ Throughout his work, Wolfhart Pannenberg has emphasised dialogue between science and theology. On this issue he concludes that,

The distinctive claim of Christian faith that the world will have an end cannot find support in our scientific knowledge of the world even though it does not have to be in opposition to it. ... [T]he cosmic eschatology of the Bible that expects an imminent end to the world, even though no timetable is set (Mark 18:32 par.), is not congruent with scientific extrapolations regarding a possible end to the universe that look to a remote future. We cannot readily argue, then, that they relate to the same event.²

The idea of a final consummation and an end to history is found in Jewish apocalyptic (Daniel, chapters 2 and 7) and was a background for Jesus' teaching of the imminence of the coming of God's kingdom. Through much of Christian history, the dominant view of the fate of the Earth has been that the world will be transformed by God at the end of the age, rather than utterly destroyed.³ However, orthodox Lutheran theology, for example, held that annihilation, not transformation, is the ultimate destiny of the world. Originating in the patristic idea of the physical redemption of the whole cosmos, eastern Orthodox theology suggests that the redemption of humankind will bring with it the redemption of nature, so that both will participate in the nature of God.⁴

From the mid-eighteenth century, Protestant theology moved away from the Luthern concept of the destruction of the world to a revival of the idea of an end-time transformation of the world. The idea of an end to human history was also questioned. In the nineteenth century, Ritschl and others related eschatological statements about the end of world to the death of individuals, which was for each individual the end of the world.⁵

Paul Santmire distinguishes two traditions in Christian theology concerning the status of nature in the end-time. In the 'asymmetrical' vision, only humans are called to final redemption; nature has value only in its service to humanity and is not called to the final perfection. In the 'symmetrical' concept, on the other hand, the whole cosmos is destined to be redeemed by God. In this view, nature is intrinsically and not merely instrumentally valued. Its value derives not from its service to humans but from its own created being.⁶

Some ecological theologians have argued that this present earth, itself a living thing, holds within it the God-given promise of the new earth and that our present earthly life holds within itself the promise of a life that is eternal.⁷

In his famed 1967 paper "The historical roots of our ecological crisis",⁸ Lynn White Jr. argued that attitudes influenced by Christianity in Medieval western Europe led to the rise of science and technology, the union of which empowered the threat to humanity posed by ecological catastrophe. The Bible banished the spirits from nature and Christianity became the most anthropocentric religion in history. White's historical conclusions have been contested.⁹ It is also argued that it is not the biblical outlook on nature but human sinfulness that is the problem. But White's paper is an important example of criticism that stirred the Western churches into a re-evaluation and re-vitalisation of thinking on creation and the natural environment.

There has been a great deal of writing in recent decades directed towards a theological understanding of the created universe. Some examples are listed in the footnotes.¹⁰ Sustainability has become the touchstone of ecologically sound practice. But as John Nash notes, it must be complemented by other values, notably distributive justice.¹¹ For Nash and many other writers, the primary value for the Christian in God's creation is love.

Perhaps the most urgent and difficult task in the development of a Christian ecological ethic is an adequate interpretation of Christian love in an ecological context. The task is essential, in my view, because love is the integrating center of Christian faith and ethics. If so, a Christian ecological ethic is seriously deficient - even if conceivable - unless it is grounded in Christian love.¹²

Love not merely permits Christians to adopt an environmentalist perspective, but gives a strong reason and motivation.

§3. *Wolfhart Pannenberg's eschatology and its relation to creation*

In common with much of liberal theology, nineteenth century Christian eschatology reflected the social ideals of a secular European society. By contrast, the twentieth century saw a movement of eschatology from a "perfectly harmless chapter"¹³ at the end of Christian dogmatics to the centre of theological reflection. The importance of eschatology in the twentieth century and today is indicated by the place given to it by many leading theologians.¹⁴ Eschatology has become a disparate, complex and diverse discipline, reflecting the various schools of theology of which it is a part.¹⁵

Protestant discussion of eschatological theology since 1960 has been particularly influenced by the separate contributions of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann.¹⁶ Pannenberg and Moltmann conceive of God's future as 'already' existing in eternity. God's kingdom is eternity entering into time. The present reality is shaped by God's future.¹⁷ Pannenberg describes a human movement towards the future, and God's movement from the future into the present¹⁸ and employs an eschatological perspective throughout his theology. "Because God and his lordship form the central content of eschatological salvation", he says, "eschatology ... determines the perspective of Christian doctrine as a whole."¹⁹

Pannenberg's eschatology has to do with the perfecting of individual life after death and with the consummation of humanity and the world in God's kingdom.²⁰ If God is truly the creator, he argues, theology deals with all of reality and not only with the significance of revelation for human salvation.²¹

The emergence of human life in the course of the cosmic process must also be related to that process as a whole in such a way that it determines the structure of the entire universe. Salvation cannot be conceived as occurring separately for humans at the end of history.²²

Thorwald Lorenzen typifies Pannenberg's work as having an eristic thrust. That is, Pannenberg seeks to formulate a well argued, credible basis for Christian faith, more reliable than human experience, and not based on simple assertion or arbitrary claim for authority. At the same time Pannenberg is interested in communicating the gospel to the modern person. In contrast to the existential approach of Bultmann on the one hand and the supra-historical approach of Barth on the other, he seeks to give theological status to history - history that can be investigated with generally accepted scientific methods. History must be the medium of divine revelation if it is to be the basis for faith.²³

Pannenberg breaks with the classical Greek idea of truth. Rather than seeing truth as a constant and unchanging presence, he draws from the Hebrew idea that truth is essentially historical and ultimately eschatological. Truth is what is revealed throughout the movement of time, climaxing in the end event.²⁴ Consequently, according to Pannenberg, prior to the *eschaton* all human knowledge will remain

provisional and all human truth-claims contestable. In such a situation, all theology has an apologetic dimension. A systematic construction of Christian doctrine is an attempt to verify the truth claims of Christian revelation.²⁵

Pannenberg's concentration on eschatology begins with the centrality of Jesus' proclamation. In Jesus' words, deeds and fate, everything is directed towards the coming kingdom.²⁶

[The] resounding motive of Jesus' message - the immanent Kingdom of God - must be recovered as a key to the whole of Christian theology. ... Our starting point ... is the kingdom of God understood as the eschatological future brought about by God himself.²⁷

Writing in 1967, Pannenberg found that, despite the centrality in Jesus' message of the proclamation of God's immanent kingdom, the dogmatics of recent decades had been marked by steady erosion of the notion of the kingdom of God.²⁸ It had come to be accepted that, because the kingdom of God is found where God's will is obeyed, extension of the sphere of obedience to God's will would mean the extension and establishment of God's kingdom. Late in the nineteenth century, however, Johannes Weiss had demonstrated that, according to Jesus' message, the kingdom of God will be established not by human effort but by God alone.²⁹ According to Pannenberg, theology was, "yet to digest this radical change from the ethical to the eschatological understanding of the Kingdom of God."³⁰ Despite Jesus' proclamation of the coming reign of God, theological understanding of the future as a "mode of God's being" was underdeveloped. "Is not God God only in the accomplishment of his lordship over the world? This is why his deity will be revealed only when the kingdom comes, since only then will his lordship be visible."³¹

In Jesus' teaching, Pannenberg says, God's kingdom is not in the distant future but is immanent.³² The present is not independent from the future.³³ Jesus, the paradigm of our own future, inspires and makes possible living toward that future. Before the kingdom had fully come, God's love was announced in him. The communion with God made possible in Christ demands our active participation in God's creative love to all creatures. Thus emerge the ethical implications of Pannenberg's eschatology. "Since we are able to participate proleptically in the promised future, we are encouraged to anticipate this future proleptically."³⁴

... God's rule is not simply in the future, leaving men to do nothing but wait quietly for its arrival. No, it is a mark of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God that future and present are inextricably interwoven. ... Jesus underscored the *present impact* of the immanent future.³⁵

God's government of the world and preservation of its creatures expresses God's faithfulness. "Every creature is itself an end in God's work of creation and is therefore an end for his world government as well."³⁶ The purpose of God's creation and rulership is not God's self-glorification, Pannenberg argues. Rather, God's creation and rulership are expressions of God's love and have as their content and purpose, "the consummation of creation and creatures."³⁷ This consummation is profoundly trinitarian, for "What ultimately underlies the participation of God in the life of creatures that works itself out as their preservation and governing is the self-differentiation of the Son from the Father."³⁸ (Heb. 1:3, Eph. 1:10)

God's government of the world reveals God's supremacy over the misuse of creaturely independence and God's ability to bring good from evil. "Its final vindication, of course, will come only with the eschatological transformation and consummation of the world as the kingdom of God."³⁹ Above all, it is God's love revealed in Jesus that is being made known through history and in creation.⁴⁰ The outworking of this love in the context of God's coming kingdom is the foundation of Pannenberg's 'eschatological' ethics. Our actions will be profoundly ethical when we participate in this outworking, the making known of God's love in the world.

§4. *Pannenberg's eschatological ethics in application to ecological theology*

In his *Theology and the kingdom of God*,⁴¹ Pannenberg discusses whether or not there is an essential relationship between ethics and eschatology. He considers that neither imposition of 'God-given' rules, nor appeals to conscience or to reason seem to be effective in bringing about ethical conduct. Thus, Pannenberg's ethics are axiological - based in a theory of the ground of value. An ontological foundation for ethics has to do with what is beyond the presently realised human condition.⁴² "If all men are seeking what is good for them but are so easily mistaken about what is good, the obvious need is for a criterion."⁴³

God is the ultimate good of our ethical endeavours, not when thought of in splendid transcendent self-isolation, Pannenberg says, but when understood as being

related to our world through the coming of the future kingdom. Not yet fully possessed, our goal is the good defined in God's future.⁴⁴ This requires our striving for the ultimate good to be turned into concern for the world. For God intends that the world be transformed through God's rule. (For Pannenberg, the last judgement will not annihilate the world but cleanse it. This can be interpreted as the transformation from the perishable to the imperishable (I Cor. 15.50ff.)).⁴⁵ Therefore, rather than leaving the world behind for God's sake, we must experience 'conversion to the world'. Love for God and love for God's world are not separate. Rather, by loving one another and our world now, we participate in the transforming power of the rule of God's love.⁴⁶

By sharing in the dynamics of God's love for the world, Pannenberg believes, the Christian moves beyond narrow concern for personal happiness to realise that fulfilment is comprehended in the larger love of God's affirmation of the world.⁴⁷ Pannenberg aligns this participation in God's love particularly with a love for one's fellow being, but it applies equally to a love for the whole of creation. This requires a commitment to the provisional that, Pannenberg says, is "essential to Christian faith in the Kingdom of God."⁴⁸ We cannot withhold commitment because the absolute remains out of reach in the future. Rather, from the future come impulses for criticism and change toward a better future of freedom, peace, and caring community life. We express our love by action in the present, temporal, provisional and finite realm. Everything we accomplish is provisional and subject to transformation. Even Jesus' message of the kingdom was a preliminary, heralding God's still immanent kingdom. "To love the preliminary is no little thing. ... He who despises the preliminary because he waits for the ultimate will not be able to recognise the ultimate in its coming."⁴⁹ For Pannenberg, the immanence of God's coming kingdom impels concrete, loving, action in this present world. To go beyond the present, Pannenberg affirms, "must not mean the destruction of the present, but rather the advent of its own future destiny."⁵⁰

An eschatological understanding of the kingdom, Pannenberg argues, does not allow any particular social program to be mistaken for the kingdom. Pannenberg sharply distinguishes an eschatological foundation for ethics from liberal evolutionary

optimism. Equally, he criticises a conservative dualism that contrasts the world of sin with the rule of Christ and avoids social responsibility.⁵¹ The potential for radical action indicated by Pannenberg's ethics encourages comparison between his ideas and those of liberation theology. However, he is reluctant to accept this, because of the Marxist social analysis underlying much liberationist thought and what he sees as a potential for violence.⁵²

Pannenberg's approach does not place God outside history, but attempts to discern how God's desires might be best enacted in history. A weakness of such an approach, Gerald Sauter argues, is that we may too readily assume our ability to evaluate human action in the knowledge of God's will. The resulting set of demands can make hope of little effect except as a motivation for action in a world that falls short of what God desires.⁵³

A difficulty in eschatological theory is the relationship between the present and the future - is there a disjunction or a conjunction between the two? That is, will the future be so different from the present that there is little continuity? Or does the present have significance for future reality? A strict disjunction would imply that present ethical actions have little relevance for the eschatological future. A strong conjunction would imply the opposite, but also risk collapsing the *eschaton* into history.⁵⁴ On the one hand, Pannenberg contrasts the future kingdom of God with present reality. "The human destiny of the individual can never be adequately fulfilled by the political order. ... Human salvation ... can only be awaited in the coming world of God ..."⁵⁵ On the other hand, Pannenberg allows that human institutions, especially the communal life of the church, do mediate to us our anticipated participation in the future world. Christian unity, for example, embodies ahead of time the eventual unity of the coming kingdom of God.⁵⁶

There is for Pannenberg a strong proleptic conjunction between present action and the future kingdom and his ethic is one of anticipation. There is a conjunction between history and eschatology. The present is incomplete and the reality to come will be a fulfilment and a completion.⁵⁷ For Pannenberg, the primary causal direction of this relationship is from the future. God's future impacts on our present. The

accomplishments of today are effects of the future, not the determinants of the future. "By giving priority to the future", Peters comments, "Pannenberg can preserve emphasis on the initiation of God, on divine grace."⁵⁸

Pannenberg's eschatological ethics relate directly to ecological principles concerning the care of the Earth and right relationships with the natural realm. However, an assessment of this contribution may depend on the sustainability of Pannenberg's eschatological schema as a whole, particularly in its employment of a determinative priority for the future. This key concept in Pannenberg's theology is one of its most debated aspects. Some criticisms will be discussed in a later section of this essay.

§5. *The imago Dei* and ecology in an eschatological perspective

The previous section discussed the contribution of Pannenberg's eschatology to ethics generally, including ecological ethics. For Christians, the theological concept of the *imago Dei*, the creation of humankind in the 'image of God' (Gen. 1.26-28, 5.1-2, 9.6-7), has a particular bearing on humanity's place in the natural world.⁵⁹ Therefore, this section sketches very briefly the importance of the *imago Dei* in ecological theology and then refers to Pannenberg's consideration of the *imago Dei* in the context of eschatological ethics.

Traditional understandings of the *imago Dei* have been criticised as anthropocentric and divorcing humankind from its proper place and role in creation. More recent scholarship has brought an understanding that the image of God in humankind can and should be outworked in creation in a way that is centred in creation and in God's own self. Some, including Pannenberg, consider that our place in creation is best understood as an expression of the image of Christ as the ultimate perfection of God's image in man and woman.⁶⁰

As there is transcendence and mystery in God's self, so there is mystery in the 'image of God' and in the character of being human. As the human image of God, Christ restored the *imago Dei* from the corruption of sin. As in all aspects of the redemptive work, this is a "now, but not yet" event. Our place as bearers of the *imago*

Dei has been assured through the work of Christ, yet we are engaged in its expression and renewal in the world (I John 3.2).

Following Karl Barth, Charles Sherlock suggests that, rather than asking, "What is the image of God in which we are made?" it is better to ask, "What does it mean to be made in the image of God?"⁶¹ In a survey of the study of the *imago Dei* concept in the century to 1988, Gunnlaugur Jónsson concluded that such a 'functional' view had come to dominate. It seeks to understand in context the purposes and outcomes of humankind's creation in the image of God - rather than to determine the meaning of the *imago Dei* as such. The only view that Jónsson concluded could challenge a functional understanding of the *imago Dei* is a relational interpretation, of which Barth⁶² and Claus Westermann⁶³ have been exponents. Westermann argues that the creation of humankind "in the image and likeness of God" is not a declaration about humans, but about God's creative act. Its meaning is in God's purpose itself and in relationships between God and humans.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, it would be naïve to discuss the *imago Dei* without some apologia for the Genesis concept of dominion or rulership in creation.

In his *Systematic theology* Pannenberg brings the functional and relational approaches together. Our co-rulership with God in creation can be realised for the good only as we are reconciled to God and in relationship with God in Christ.⁶⁵ Pannenberg does not absolve humankind from blame for ecological devastation. But he disagrees that Christian misapplication of the *imago Dei* is at fault. Citing exegetical and archaeological evidence on the meaning of humankind's creation in the 'image' of God, Pannenberg finds that,

the criticism of biblical anthropology that claims the giving of dominion in Gen. 1:28 for the unrestricted exploitation of nature by modern technology and industrial society and for the resultant ecological crisis must be rejected as without merit.⁶⁶

Pannenberg cites Lynn White's essay as an instance of the criticism he rejects.⁶⁷ Industrial society, Pannenberg argues, is based on secular culture, which has cut itself off from its historical Christian roots. Modern economic life presupposes emancipation from religious considerations. Contemporary secularism cannot reasonably boast of liberation from religious ties and at the same time blame religious

origins for "the consequences of its absolutizing of the striving for possessions".⁶⁸

God's dominion over the world,

excludes arbitrary control or exploitation. ... [W]e may view the ecological crisis at the end of the modern age of emancipation as a reminder that God is still the Lord of creation and that human arbitrariness in dealing with it is not without limits or consequences.⁶⁹

The doctrines of the fall and of original sin offer an explanation of humankind's failures, including our mismanagement of the earth's environment. The fall presupposes an original state of innocence. This disagrees with the conclusion of science that we have evolved from earlier life forms and thus have always been marred by egoism and its consequences. Some, such as Barth and Brunner, have avoided this difficulty by relating the fall to an ahistorical dimension of human existence.⁷⁰ Pannenberg responds that such attempts have failed to show where there could be a place in human existence for human innocence. Just as there is no time in history where human innocence can be located, so is there no place of innocence in our individual lives. Pannenberg proposes that we abandon the idea of the fall and regard the *imago Dei* not as something we have marred but as a destiny toward which we are to move. This does not absolve us of responsibility, for we do have the capacity to respond to our destiny.⁷¹

This argument of Pannenberg's would have to be considered in the context of his understanding of sin, guilt, judgement and God's forgiveness - all beyond the scope of this essay. But the implication here is that human guilt is a consequence of present wrong actions and failures, not as a consequence of an inherent characteristic of human nature. For, if there was no fall and human nature is inherently inclined to sin, there is an implication that God's creation of humankind is imperfect. Pannenberg seems to infer that we are being brought from an original state of imperfection to a perfected state, which is the *imago Dei*.

Thus David Bryant is on solid ground when he suggests that, although most of Pannenberg's argument (as set out in *Anthropology in theological perspective* and outlined above) is convincing, Pannenberg fails to demonstrate a relationship between our ultimate origin, what we are now and what we are to become. Without this,

Bryant contends, our goals can only be arbitrary or the result of short-term expediency; there is no reason for an already determined 'destiny'. Nonetheless, in *Systematic theology*, Pannenberg is quite clear that our destiny is "fellowship with God on the basis of our creation in the divine image".⁷² Our creation in God's image means that, "from the very first as God's creatures we are destined for fellowship with God, for 'life with God'. The point of likeness to God is fellowship with him."⁷³ Again, the drawing power of the future is crucial to Pannenberg's thinking.

We humans, Pannenberg affirms, are called to exercise ethical autonomy, conducting ourselves according to our own choices. But only by accepting our own finitude and being reconciled to our creator can we rightly act with God in rulership over creation and achieve the outworking of God's image.⁷⁴ This requires giving other creatures respect within the limits of their own finitude. Consequently, our creation in God's image cannot, "remain external to the actual living of our lives."⁷⁵ The *imago Dei* has profound ethical implications for our present life and conduct, including in matters relating to ecology and God's creation.

§6. *Criticisms and responses*

In discussing the potential contribution to ecological theology of Pannenberg's ethics, this essay has repeatedly noted the orientation of his thinking towards the future. Pannenberg not only looks towards the future, but he argues for an ontological priority of God's future.

As [Jesus' message of the immanence of the Kingdom] is proclaimed and accepted, God's rule is present and we can even now glimpse his future glory. In this way we see the present as an effect of the future, in contrast to the conventional assumption that the past and present are the cause of the future.⁷⁶

The difficulty with this orientation to the future is to understand how the future can determine the present. If Pannenberg's ideas are vulnerable on this question, it might be argued that much of his theological project is in jeopardy. Therefore, though an argument at length cannot be encompassed in this essay, some note must be taken of criticisms of the priority that Pannenberg affords to the future.

For example, Philip Heffner comments that when Pannenberg speaks of the future as determining the present,

He seems to be asking us to reverse our prevailing notions of causality, so that the customary earlier/later relationship between cause and effect which we presume can be overturned. Conceptually, I find this to be a very difficult thing to accomplish.⁷⁷

In response, Lewis Ford suggests that, while only the earlier can effect the later, the future need not always be conceived of as later than the present.⁷⁸ Though this is so for beings, he says, it is not necessarily so for becoming, which concerns a process of determination, not a succession of events. Something expected in the future can be said to 'cause' actions, processes of becoming, in the present. Thus Pannenberg says,

"Determination" of the present by the future is not the same sort of determination as in the case of past events that determine the future outcome. It does not, therefore, prevent human freedom in terms of contingent decisions. To the contrary, it makes such freedom of decision possible.⁷⁹

Pannenberg sees a connection between God as the power of the future and the establishment of human freedom, for if God were both omnipotent and always present, there would be no human freedom.⁸⁰ To give divine omnipotence and human freedom each their due place is not easy but, for Pannenberg, the power of the future frees humankind from presently existing ties, liberating us for our future and giving us our freedom.⁸¹

Luco van den Brom argues that there is difficulty in the idea of God's acting and coming from the future into the present because this implies the co-existence or simultaneity of all of the past and present with the future.⁸² This renders the direction of time illusory, creating difficulties with the very concept of history. If all stages in the 'historical' process exist synchronously, history is reduced to a singularity that excludes even the possibility of transience.⁸³ Van den Brom argues that Pannenberg's and Moltmann's ideas presuppose that God's future exists simultaneously with the past and present of, for example, the creation and Calvary. Thus salvation history itself only appears to be historical and cannot be temporally ordered - at least from God's point of view.⁸⁴ Though humans subjectively experience events as ordered in time, from God's objective external perspective, temporal events co-exist next to each other.⁸⁵ As argued by Pannenberg, God's whole life and the created reality are present to God and in God's control simultaneously.⁸⁶ The consequence, van den Blom says, is that all causes and effects are 'already' given, though not perceivable by human observers. The *eschaton* and the whole course of the history of creatures are already

in place, being established with creation. Such a schema, though we think we have freedom, in fact implies that human freedom from necessity does not exist.⁸⁷ The very process by which Pannenberg finds freedom to be guaranteed, in van den Blom's view removes human freedom and "neglects the value of history that is supposed to be saved in the first place."⁸⁸

Neils Gregersen argues that Pannenberg's conception of the eternal unity of divine agency is made possible by the trinitarian structure of his theology. The incarnation of the Son involves God in the temporal dimension of history and the limitations it implies.⁸⁹ The Spirit also can be affected by the experience of the creatures. To this, van den Blom replies that the involvement of God in the temporal world is nonetheless (in Pannenberg's theology) eternally created from God's transcendent future.⁹⁰

John Polkinghorne notes that there is a "rather banal way" in which science could accommodate Pannenberg's concept of the drawing power of the future.

It is well known that the field equations of physics admit of two mutually exclusive forms of solution. One, based on what are called retarded potentials, describes a situation in which effects propagate from past to future, the other, based on advanced potentials, describes a situation in which effects propagate from the future into the past. However, it is a physical fact (whose origin is not well understood) that our universe appears to be one whose processes are generated by retarded potentials only.⁹¹

Sam Powell comments that the idea of the future's causal priority is "undoubtedly Pannenberg's most recondite and counter-intuitive conception."⁹² However, Powell suggests that Pannenberg's idea can be readily understood from what Pannenberg himself regards as the most illuminating instance of the priority of the future - the resurrection. The resurrection was not caused by prior events - it was genuinely new. The resurrection is a case in point of the future exercising a causal effect on the past as it had a retroactive effect on events in its past. Through the resurrection, Pannenberg contends, it is decided that Jesus is and was already one with God, not only to our knowledge, but also in reality. Only with the resurrection did it become true that Jesus is in fact the Son of God.⁹³ One can see that the resurrection of Jesus is perhaps the best example of what Pannenberg seeks to establish. However

I suggest that one can still argue that the resurrection was a consequence of God's prior determination to demonstrate Jesus' eternally pre-existing Sonship (John 1.1).

Jürgen Moltmann's understanding of our relationship to God's future has similarities to and differences from Pannenberg's. However, he offers a more accessible explanation of the relationship between present experience and God's future. To Moltmann, God's future is experienced simply wherever this future happens in our history - wherever God gives the future of the kingdom in advance.

Thus, for example,

According to the Jewish idea, this future of God's occurs *discontinuously* in time on the sabbath, in the sabbath year and in the Year of Jubilee; and will one day be present *continuously* in the messianic time.⁹⁴

The foregoing is but a cursory comparison of some differing views. But it illustrates that the validity of Pannenberg's concept of the ontological priority of the future remains the subject of current debate, with reputable scholars on opposing sides of the discussion.⁹⁵ The question is partly epistemological. That is, it is unclear that there could be conclusive evidence for or against Pannenberg's proposal.

§7. *Summation*

Pannenberg proposes an ethics based on anticipation of the coming of God's kingdom and an outworking in our lives of God's love towards creation. This love is supremely expressed in and through Jesus Christ. As we act in the power of God's love, the image of God in Christ finds expression in us.⁹⁶

Pannenberg places great importance on the causal priority of the future. Ethics that look forward to God's future as Pannenberg proposes can stand independently of this concept. However, in Pannenberg's thought, the ontological priority of the future is important because God's movement toward us from the future empowers our actions according to God's purposes. Nonetheless, even if Pannenberg's conception of the power of the future were to fail, this would not gainsay the availability to us of God's power through the Spirit.

Pannenberg's demonstration of an eschatological perspective for Christian ethics offers a rich resource to those who look for God's kingdom to be made known in the world. Ecological ethics draws on an understanding of God's role and purposes in

creation. Pannenberg has shown that it may also draw confidently on an appreciation of God's future.

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, the discussion in Polkinghorne, J. Eschatology: some questions and some insights from science. In *The end of the world and the ends of God: science and theology on eschatology*. Polkinghorne and M. Welker (eds). Trinity, Harrisburg, 2000, pp. 29-41.
2. Pannenberg, W. *Systematic theology*. (3 vols.) Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991-98, v. 3, p. 589.
3. "Transformation, not annihilation - that is the unanimously held doctrine from Irenaeus onwards, by way of Augustine and Gregory the Great, Aquinas and the whole of mediaeval theology down to present day Catholic dogmatics." (Althuas, P. *Die letzten Dinge*. G*tersloh, 1922, p. 350, as quoted and agreed with by Moltmann, J. *The coming of God: Christian eschatology*. Fortress, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 268.)
4. See Moltmann, J. *The coming of God: Christian eschatology*. Fortress, Minneapolis, 1996, pp. 267ff.
5. Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 3, p. 587-9.
6. Santmire, H. P. *The travail of nature: the ambiguous ecological promise of Christian theology*. Fortress, Philadelphia, 1985. See also Phan P. C. Eschatology and ecology: the environment in the end-time. *Dialog and Alliance* 9(2):99-115, Fall/Winter 1995, pp. 99-115.
7. Catherine Keller argues that the very notion of the end of the world has been distorted by human capacity to effect a man-made apocalypse. Eschatology, she says, must be renegotiated and its ideas 'recycled'. "Unless it can meaningfully and effectively address the green apocalypse, Christian theology becomes a trivial pursuit at the end of the second millennium. ... [A] responsible eschatology is an ecological theology." (Keller, C. Eschatology, ecology and a green ecumenacy. In *Reconstructing Christian theology*, ed. R. S. Chopp & M. L. Taylor. Fortress, Minneapolis, 1994, pp. 326-345, at p. 328.) Eschatological hope, Keller contends, must be rooted not in hopes of otherworldly escape, but in the renewal of the earth - "a promising place (and time) that is the possible healing of this one. (*Ibid.*, p. 343.) See also Keller, C. Why apocalypse, now? *Theology Today* 49(2):183-195, July 1992. Cf. McFague, S. Human beings, embodiment, and our home the Earth. In *Reconstructing Christian theology*, ed. R. S. Chopp & M. L. Taylor. Fortress, Minneapolis, 1994, pp. 141-169.
8. White, L., Jr. The historical roots of our ecologic crisis. *Science* 155(3767):1203-1207, 10 March 1967.
9. See, for example, Barr, J. Man and nature: the ecological controversy and the Old Testament. *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 55:9-32, 1972.; and Peacocke, A. R. On 'The Historical roots of our ecological crisis'. In *Man and nature*, ed. H. Montefiore. Collins, London, 1975, pp. 155-158.
10. Sean McDonagh provides an excellent simple overview in *To care for the Earth*. Chapman, London, 1986. Following a substantial historical survey, Paul H. Santmire in *The Travail of nature: the ambiguous ecological promise of Christian theology* (Fortress, Philadelphia, 1985) provides what he describes as a schematization of an ecological reading of biblical theology (pp. 189-218). In *Loving nature: ecological integrity and Christian responsibility* (Abingdon & the Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy, Nashville & Washington, 1991), John A. Nash argues for priority to be given to eco-theological values in re-evaluating Christian doctrine and practice, and proposes principles to undergird this. Charles Birch, in *On purpose* (NSWU. Pr., Kensington, 1990) discusses God and human in creation from a holistic perspective centred in process thought and a thoroughgoing background in the history of science. A feminist perspective is provided by Rosemary Radford Ruether in *Gaia and God: an ecofeminist theology of Earth history* (Harper, San Francisco, 1992). Thomas Berry is an important contemporary thinker on ecological theology. For an introduction to Berry's thinking, see Collins, P. *God's earth: religion as if matter really mattered*. Dove, North Blackburn, 1995, pp. 150-163. Collins argues the spiritual importance of caring for 'God's Earth'. See also Fox, M. *Creation spirituality: liberating gifts for the peoples of the Earth*. Harper, San Francisco, 1991. Jürgen Moltmann's theology of creation is found in his *God in creation: a new theology of creation and the Spirit of God*. Fortress, Minneapolis, 1993 and is summarised in Bauckham, R. *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*. T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1995, pp. (183-198.
11. The other virtues commended by Nash are *adaptability* - accommodation to aspects of nature which cannot be changed; *relationality* - an holistic approach brought about by an acute awareness of the interconnectedness of all things; *frugality* - thrift, moderation, efficiency and simplicity of lifestyle; *equity* - justice in the distribution of goods and services; *solidarity* - commitment by the international community; *biodiversity* - which is both a fact and a value to be pursued; *sufficiency* - application of solutions genuinely

- proportionate to the task at hand; and *humility* - recognition of the limits of human knowledge, ingenuity, morality and importance.
12. *Op. cit.*, p. 139.
 13. "Who, when this spectacle [the resurrection of the dead] is quite rightly delayed, shall be able to lull us comfortably to sleep by adding at the conclusion of Christian Dogmatics a short and perfectly harmless chapter entitled - 'Eschatology'?" (Barth, K. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Oxford, London, 1933). Also in *Romans* (p. 314), Barth famously asserted that, "If Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever with Christ."
 14. There is a helpful survey of twentieth century developments in Christian eschatology in Schwab, C. Last things first? The century of eschatology in retrospect. In *The Future as God's gift: explorations in Christian eschatology*, ed. D. Fergusson and M. Sarot. T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 2000, pp. 217-241.
 15. Thus Ernst Conradie, for example, classifies twentieth century eschatological development under nine distinct headings: The "consistent" eschatology of Weiss and Schweitzer; the "transcendental" eschatology of the early Barth, Brunner and Althaus; the "existential" eschatology of Bultmann and Tillich; the salvation history approach of Cullmann in debate with Dodd and Schweitzer; the "futuristic" eschatology of Moltmann, Sauter and Pannenberg; the evolutionist eschatology of Teilhard and his followers; the contributions of process theologians; the prophetic approaches of liberation, Black, feminist and ecological series; the millennialist, dispensationalist and apocalyptic views of popular authors like Hal Lindsay and numerous others." (Conradie, E. M. In search of a vision of hope for a new century. *Journal of Religion & Society* 1:1-24, 1999).
 16. Less well known, but in the view of some also important, is the work of Gerald Sauter, now becoming available in English. See Sauter, G. *What dare we hope? Reconsidering eschatology*. Trinity, Harrisburg, 1999.
 17. Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 3, p. 531, 605f; Moltmann, J. *The Coming of God*, p.287. Carl Braaten, argues that the horizon of the future can break the dualism between the two "rigidly self-sufficient horizons" of the biblical texts and of contemporary secularism. "What is needed today", he says, "is a new correlation between the eschatological origins of Christian faith and the present revolutionary forces that seek to build a new and better future for mankind." Braaten, C. E. *The future of God: the revolutionary dynamics of hope*. Harper & Row, New York, 1969, p. 23.
 18. Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, vol. 3, pp. 544f.
 19. Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, 3 vols. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991-98, v. 3, p. 530.
 20. Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 3, p. 546.
 21. Pannenberg, W. Contingency and natural law. In *Toward a theology of nature: essays on science and faith*, ed. T. Peters, Westminster, Louisville, 1993, p. 93.
 22. Pannenberg, W. Theological appropriation of scientific understandings: response to Hefner, Wicken, Eaves, and Tipler. *Zygon* 24(2): 255-271, Jun., 1989, at pp. 266-7.
 23. Lorenzen, T. *Resurrection and discipleship: interpretive models, biblical reflections, theological consequences*. Orbis, Maryknoll, 1995, pp. 17-18.
 24. Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 1, p. 54.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 257. See also Grenz, S. J. "Scientific" theology / "theological" science: Pannenberg and the dialogue between theology and science. *Zygon* 34(1):159-166, March 1999.
 26. See Pannenberg, W. Eschatology, God and creation. In his *Theology and the kingdom of God*, ed. R. J. Neuhaus. Westminster, Philadelphia, 1969, pp. 51-71. See also the discussion in Schwab, C. *Op. cit.* pp. 227-231.
 27. Pannenberg. *Theology and the kingdom of God*, p. 145.
 28. Pannenberg, W. Theology and the kingdom of God. *Una Sancta* 24(2), Pentecost, 1967. Reprinted in his *Theology and the kingdom of God*, ed. R. J. Neuhaus. Westminster, Philadelphia, 1969, pp. 51-71, at p. 51.
 29. Weiss, J. *Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God*. Fortress, Philadelphia, 1971 [German original 1982]. For an discussion of Weiss's work and subsequent developments, see Patterson, S. J. The end of apocalypse: rethinking the historical Jesus. *Theology Today* 52(1):29-48, Apr., 1995.
 30. Pannenberg. *Theology and the kingdom of God*, p. 52.
 31. Pannenberg, W. The God of hope. In his *Basic questions in theology*, vol 2. SCM, London, 1971, p. 242.
 32. "The gospel of the kingdom is not news from another world about another world. It is gospel born from the history of God in this world for the sake of this world's future in the Kingdom of God." Braaten. *Op. cit.*, p. 138.
 33. "Rather does the future have an imperative claim upon the present, alerting all men to the urgency and exclusiveness of seeking first the Kingdom of God. As this message is proclaimed and accepted, God's rule is present and we can even now glimpse his future glory. In this way we see the present as an effect of the

- future, in contrast to the conventional assumption that past and present are the cause of the future."
Pannenberg, *Theology and the kingdom of God*, p. 54.
34. Pannenberg. *Theology and the kingdom of God*, p. 145.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 53 (emphasis original).
 36. Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 2, p. 53. See also v. 3, p. 581
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
 38. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
 39. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
 40. "But according to Christian theology, this is achieved in one instance of human life, in the person of Jesus, because in human the intended destiny of the human creature (and thus the destiny of all created existence) is in relation to God was realised. ... Thus, in the case of Jesus Christ there is indeed continued existence in a form that includes control over the processes of the universe, while the existence of all other persons is "remembered" in the eternity of God in order to be granted a share in Jesus' kingdom in the eschatological future when they will be raised from the dead." (Pannenberg. *Theological appropriation ...* p. 267.) "In the undivided present of the eternity all that happens in creation becomes ... a revelation of the love of the Creator and Reconciler of the world who by the power of his Spirit can change the dissonance of judgement into the peace of God's kingdom and the many-voiced harmony of the praise of God that will sound out from the mouth of renewed creation." (Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 3, p. 630.)
 41. Pannenberg. *Theology and the kingdom of God*, p. 102ff.
 42. See Peters, T. Pannenberg's eschatological ethics. In *The theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. C. E. Braaten & P. Clayton. Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1988, pp. 239-265, at p. 241.
 43. Pannenberg. *Theology and the kingdom of God*, p. 107.
 44. *Ibid.*, p. 111. Cf. Pannenberg, W. *Ethics*. Westminster, Philadelphia, 1981, p. 181.
 45. Pannenberg, *Systematic theology*, v. 3, p.667.
 46. Pannenberg. *Theology and the kingdom of God*, p. 113. Cf. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 242.
 47. William Schweiker describes Pannenberg's proposal as a Christian 'moral cosmology'. (Schweiker, W. Time as moral space: moral cosmologies, creation and last judgement. In *The end of the world and the ends of God: science and theology on eschatology*, J. Polkinghorne & M. Welker (eds.), Trinity, Harrisburg, 2000, pp. 124-38.) When in *Systematic theology* Pannenberg uses the term, 'the world', it seems not to be always clear (at least in the English translation) whether he simply refers to planet Earth or to the whole created order.
 48. Pannenberg. *Theology and the kingdom of God*, p. 114.
 49. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
 50. Pannenberg, W. A response to my American friends. In *The theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. C. E. Braaten & P. Clayton. Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1988, p. 331.
 51. Pannenberg. *Theology and the kingdom of God*, p. 114-5.
 52. Pannenberg. A response ..., p. 332.
 53. Sauter, G. *What dare we hope? Reconsidering eschatology*. Trinity, Harrisburg, 1999. As reviewed by Kenneson, P. D., *Modern Theology* 16(3):569-571, Oct. 2000.
 54. Peters. *Op. cit.*, p. 246.
 55. Pannenberg, W. *Anthropology in theological perspective*. Westminster, Philadelphia, 1985, p. 477.
 56. Pannenberg. *Ethics*, p. 19. In similar vein, Pannenberg is an internationalist, not a nationalist. Transformation of the United Nations so that it "truly transcends national sovereignty" would not bring about the kingdom of God. But it would be "its best possible expression in our day." *Idem*.
 57. Peters. *Op. cit.*, p. 248.
 58. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
 59. A summary of research and debate on the in the century to 1998 on the meaning of the *imago Dei* in Genesis can be found in Jónsson, G. A. *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a century of Old Testament research*. Almqvist & Wiksell, Stockholm, 1988.
 60. Thus, for example, in God in creation (pp. 215-243), Jürgen Moltmann brings a Messianic perspective to discussion of the *imago Dei*. "The true likeness of God is to be found", he says, "not with God's history with mankind but at its end." (p. 225) The Genesis commissions to dominion are not identical with the likeness of God, Moltmann observes - they are an addition to it. (p.224) The likeness of God is not found essentially in rulership. In the New Testament, Paul uses the concept of likeness to God to present Jesus as God's true image (2 Corinthians 4.4-6). Thus, Moltmann says, the *imago Dei* is fulfilled and mediated to us in the *imago Christi*. The appointment of humankind to rulership appears as the 'ruling with Christ' of believers (Revelation 5.10).

61. Sherlock, C. *The doctrine of humanity*. Inter-Varsity, Downer's Grove, 1996, p.33. On p. 89, Sherlock attributes this idea to Karl Barth.
62. Barth's ideas are discussed in Cairns, D. *The image of God in man*. Rev. ed. Collins Fontana, London, 1973, pp. 170-186.
63. Westermann, C. *Creation*. SPCK, London, 1974.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
65. Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 2, pp. 202ff.
66. *Ibid.*, v. 2, p. 204.
67. *Ibid.*, v. 2, p. 204, n. 92.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 204. See also Pannenberg. *Anthropology*, pp. 74ff.
69. Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 2, p. 205.
70. Bryant, D. J. *Imago Dei*, imagination and ecological responsibility. *Theology Today* 57(1):35-50, Apr., 2000 at p. 39
71. Pannenberg. *Anthropology*, pp. 55-8.
72. Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 2, p. 227.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 224.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
76. Pannenberg. *Theology and the kingdom of God*, p. 55.
77. Hefner, P. Questions for Moltmann and Pannenberg. *Una Sancta* 25(3):32-5, 1968, p. 45.
78. Ford, L. S. The nature of the power of the future. In *The theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. C. E. Braaten & P. Clayton. Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1988, pp. 75-94, at p. 83.
79. Pannenberg. A response ..., p. 322.
80. *Idem*. See also Mostert, C. From eschatology to Trinity: Pannenberg's doctrine of God. *Pacifica* 10(1):20-83, Feb., 1997.
81. Pannenberg. *The God of hope*, p. 243.
82. Van den Brom. *Op. cit.*, p. 160.
83. *Idem*.
84. *Ibid.*, pp.160-161.
85. Here Van den Blom quotes Pannenberg's conception of creation as an event in which, "As one eternal act God's creative action embraces the whole cosmic process and permeates all phases of the divine action in its history." (Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 2, p. 41).
86. See Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 1, pp. 404-410.
87. Van den Blom. *Op. cit.*, p. 163.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 165. Van den Blom also argues that Pannenberg's concept of God's divine agency is difficult to distinguish from the classical Protestant idea of God's eternal counsel (concilium aeternum). However the doctrine of concilium aeternum distinguishes the eternal decree of God from the thing decreed. The execution of the eternal decree in history respects contingent secondary causality in the creation itself. In Pannenberg's conception, van den Blom argues, divine agency happens from a determined eschatological context that already co-exists with the present created universe. God always remains free to act as God wills. But contingency at the level of creation, at the level of secondary cause, is excluded because the future is already realised.
89. Hence Mark 13:32: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (NRSV)
90. Summarised by Van den Blom, *ibid.*, p. 165-6. Van den Blom cites: Gregersen, N. H. Einheit und Vielfalt der schöpferischen Werke Gottes; Wolfhart Pannenburgs Beitrag zu einer trinitarischen Schöpfungstheologie. *Kerugma und Dogma* 45:102-129.
91. Polkinghorne, J. Wolfhart Pannenberg's engagement with the natural sciences. *Zygon* 34(1):151-158, March 1999, at p. 157.
92. Powell, S. History and eschatology in the thought of Wolfhart Pannenberg. *Fides et historia* 32(2): 19-32, 2000, p. 8.
93. Pannenberg. *Systematic theology*, v. 2, pp. 343ff.
94. Moltmann, J. The liberation of the future and its anticipations in history. In *God will be all in all: the eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. R. Bauckham. T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1999, pp. 265-289, at p. 279 (emphases original).
95. E.g. papers in Fergusson, D. & Sarot, M. (eds) *The Future as God's gift: explorations in Christian eschatology*. T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 2000. (Society for the Study of Theology. Explorations in contemporary theology.), including Scott, P. The future of creation: ecology and eschatology, pp. 89-114.

96. Here, Moltmann's view of the relationship between God's future and our present ethical behaviour is similar to Pannenberg's. "What we ought to do and can do is to correspond to the future of the coming God. ... In Christian ethics, earthly justice is not just intended to *correspond* to the heavenly justice of God. It should also *prepare the way* for God's coming kingdom. Christian ethics are eschatological ethics. What we do now for people in need we do filled with the power of hope, and lit by the expectation of God's coming day. (Moltmann, J. *The liberation of the future* ..., p. 289 (emphases original).)

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