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# The theological scene

## Theologians of hope: Moltmann and Pannenberg

OF German Protestant theologians now working in the field of systematic theology, the two most important are Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Their theologies have certain similarities, and in particular their common emphasis on eschatology has sometimes led to their being classed together as 'theologians of hope'. They also share a determination to free theology from the restrictions imposed by Existentialist theology, in which God was confined to the subjectivity of the individual. Moltmann and Pannenberg are both concerned to speak positively of God in relation to the whole of man's world, his political and social life, his history and his future. But both are highly original thinkers of individual genius, with differences as important as the similarities.

Few recent theological works have enjoyed as much influence as Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (1965). Its great merit was to utilize the modern rediscovery of biblical eschatology. Eschatology—concerned not simply with the fate of the individual after death, but with the future of the world—plays a decisive role in New Testament theology, but modern theologians have all too often found this an embarrassment. Moltmann restored eschatology to its proper place in systematic theology, making it no mere appendix to theology but rather the future orientation of the whole of theology. 'The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set.'

Christian hope, according to Moltmann, arises out of the resurrection of Jesus, which is the promise of God for the new creation of all things. This promise is relevant in the present, because it arouses hope which drives history on towards the promised future. Specifically hope finds its present embodiment in the mission of the church, which is concerned with the transformation of the world in anticipation of the promised new creation. The church 'is like an arrow sent out into the world to point to the future'. Moltmann's theology of hope is also a theology of mission, designed to serve the mission of a church whose very existence derives from its mission. This is a theme to which he returns, with deepened insight, in his most recent major work, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (1975).

The most important element in the church's mission is the proclamation of the gospel. Moltmann, unlike some who have been influenced by his theology, does not obscure this first priority. But mission also concerns the political, social and economic aspects of life, and Moltmann has given much attention to these. The hope of a new creation in which righteousness and freedom will prevail demands and gives direction to the struggle for justice and liberation in the present. This is the point at which Moltmann's theology has influenced contemporary 'theology of liberation' and 'theology of revolution', but he must not be credited with all of the excesses covered by those labels. For Moltmann the gospel has political implications but it is not dissolved in a political programme. Christian hope motivates Christian action in the present, but good works do not build the kingdom of God.

In his second major work, *The Crucified God* (1972), Moltmann turned from a stress on the resurrection to a stress on the cross, and produced certainly the most penetrating recent study of the cross. If a superficial reading of *Theology of Hope* could give an impression of Moltmann's theology as a facile Utopian optimism, such an impression was dispelled by *The Crucified God*. Christian hope for the new creation of this godless world arises from the resurrection of the crucified Jesus in His identification with godless men. Moltmann labours to restore theological awareness of the bleak horror and godforsakenness of Jesus's death, in which he sees God's loving solidarity with man in all his guilt, suffering, death and damnation. Not the least important aspect of the book is its contribution to a Christian attitude to the problem of suffering.

If Moltmann's theology began with the rediscovery of eschatology, Pannenberg's began as a fresh approach to the problem of faith and history. Pannenberg is characteristically a 'post-Enlightenment' theologian, determined to do theology in the light of the new intellectual situation which the modern world owes to the Enlightenment. No longer may theology appeal to an authoritative church or an authoritative scripture whose authority cannot be rationally established. Nor should it appeal to the purely subjective illumination of faith. Theology

must share in the Enlightenment spirit of free enquiry and argue its case to the satisfaction of critical reason.

The sphere in which critical rational enquiry has most troubled modern theology has been the sphere of history. Christian faith rests on a revelation of God in history. Is this history open to investigation by modern historical method? Can the historian confirm or disprove the historical basis of Christian faith? The problem of faith and history has dogged theology for a century and more. One extreme solution is Bultmann's: Christian faith is not concerned with history, for the truth of the Word of God cannot be subject to the results of historical research. Pannenberg's solution proposes, in effect, the opposite extreme. All attempts to secure the immunity of God's revelation from historical enquiry must be rejected. Critical history need not be spurned as a threat to faith; it should rather be embraced as a basic tool of theology. Faith does rest on history and it may be verified by critical historical method.

Pannenberg thus insists on the fully historical character of God's self-revelation. God reveals Himself on the public stage of history in events which are open to all men to see. They are not accessible merely to faith, by special illumination; they are accessible to all men in the only way historical events can be accessible today, by critical historical investigation. This means that the theologian cannot surrender history to the secular historian who denies that the historian can affirm such an unparalleled event as the alleged resurrection of Jesus: at that point the theologian must criticize and reformulate the conventions of historical method. But so long as historical method does not exclude *a priori* the possibility of verifying such an occurrence, Pannenberg believes that the resurrection of Jesus can be demonstrated historically. The truth-claims of Christianity are properly historical ones, open to rational debate like all other historical questions, and able to hold their own in the market-place of ordinary truth-claims where all men may test them.

Many will feel that Pannenberg's rationalism goes too far. It is not, as some have claimed, a new natural theology. Pannenberg does not believe that man can know God apart from His revelation of Himself to man, but he insists that God's revelation convinces man's reason. There is something refreshing about Pannenberg's attempt to bring theology out into the arena of common intellectual discussion and to show that belief in God and the traditional content of Christian faith can be sustained in rational argument. His latest full-scale work, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (1973), is a powerful argument for the scientific status of theology as 'the

science of God'. There he refines and develops his views on the verification of theological statements.

There is much else to Pannenberg's theology. The role which eschatology plays in his thinking is somewhat different from but as important as its role in Moltmann's thought. But perhaps the most important area to mention is his Christology, in *Jesus—God and Man* (1964), a work remarkable for its integration of biblical, historical and dogmatic approaches. Pannenberg abandons the traditional theological method of 'Christology from above', which begins with the divinity of Christ and seeks to understand the incarnation. This method results in the doctrine of the two natures, which Pannenberg regards as incapable of doing justice to the historical particularity of the man Jesus. It also ignores the most important task of Christology today, which is to justify the confession of Jesus' divinity. Pannenberg's method of 'Christology from below' begins with the historical Jesus of Nazareth and arrives at the confession of His divinity on the basis of His resurrection. Unlike many other modern practitioners of 'Christology from below', Pannenberg does argue for belief in Jesus' unity of essence with God, but his method allows this to be perceived in a way which does not prejudice the authenticity of Jesus' humanity. *Jesus—God and Man* is a fine example of Pannenberg's success in combining a positive appreciation of the church's theological tradition with the creative rethinking which the modern situation demands.

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*Major works in English translation*

J. Moltmann

*Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967)  
*Hope and Planning* (London: SCM Press, 1971)  
*Man* (London: SPCK, 1974)  
*The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974)  
*The Experiment Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1975)  
*The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1977)

W. Pannenberg (ed.)

*Revelation as History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1969)

W. Pannenberg

*Jesus—God and Man* (London: SCM Press, 1968)  
*What is Man?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970)  
*Basic Questions in Theology*, 3 volumes (London: SCM Press, 1970-3)  
*The Apostles' Creed* (London: SCM Press, 1972)  
*Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976).  
*Faith and Reality* (London: Search Press, 1977)