

Zeitschrift: Theologische Zeitschrift
Herausgeber: Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel
Band: 60 (2004)
Heft: 4

Artikel: The Quest for Human Openness in the Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg
Autor: Wong, Kam Ming
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-877879>

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The Quest for Human Openness in the Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg

For Pannenberg, something which tends toward the realisation of the purpose of creation exists in the being of the human person, that is, a disposition pointing to the image of God. On that basis, human essence consists in openness for God. Openness for God, says Pannenberg, «is the real meaning of the fundamental structure of being human, which is designated as openness to the world in contemporary anthropology, although this designation means an openness beyond the momentary horizon of the world.»¹ The human person's question about his destiny expresses itself in this openness. Only when he lives in the openness of this question, when he is completely open toward God, does he find himself on the way leading toward his destiny. Admittedly, this goal of human openness is not yet universally actualised. Indeed, this is the reality of sin. It is, perhaps, worth clarifying at this stage that contrary to what Worthing seems to suggest, openness to the world is not, as it were, one of the two definitions of the image of God, when he says, «... not only does the concept of *imago dei* point to the human destination to communion with God but also to an openness to the world. Here we return to Pannenberg's concept of the image of God as world-openness ...»² Rather than simply equating one with another, to be precise on the intricate relationship between those key expressions, for Pannenberg it is by way of our human essence, as derived from our presently incomplete image of God and as expressed in openness beyond the world, that we are destined for fellowship with God as the full realisation of that image.

As we shall see over the course of this paper, the human disposition to God finds expression in openness to the world. Or, openness to the world constitutes the human disposition to God. This standpoint is given shape by a full discussion in Pannenberg's work of modern anthropology, especially the strand of philosophical anthropology that includes Scheler and Plessner, who founded the concept of openness to the world and its equivalent, exocentricity respectively in 1928.³ It is important to note that modern anthropology does

¹ W. Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, transl. L.L. Wilkins, D.A. Priebe, London 1968, 193.

² M.W. Worthing, *Foundations and Functions of Theology as Universal Science. Theological Method and Apologetic Praxis in Wolfhart Pannenberg and Karl Rahner*, Frankfurt/M. 1996, 183.

³ The term «openness to the world» is translated from the German word *Weltoffenheit* though some scholars prefer to translate it into «openness beyond the world» or simply as «world-openness». Interestingly, Pannenberg regards «the immortality of the soul» as the ancient expression of openness to the world, for it «was in fact an expression of the unending openness of man to go beyond any given situation, so that even death is not to

not follow the Christian tradition in defining the uniqueness of humanity explicitly in terms of God. Rather, it defines this uniqueness through reflection on the place of humanity in nature and specifically through a comparison of human existence with that of the higher animals, assuming continuity between the two kinds of species.⁴ Philosophical anthropology, in particular, shares with behaviourism and German behavioural research the principle that human beings must be interpreted in terms of their corporeality, especially of their bodily observable behaviour. The justification for going on this route has been given in one of Pannenberg's earlier works, where he states, «A thesis appealing to man's self-experience as it is accessible without scientific study ... is now too general to be satisfactory, however correct it may be. The same is true of metaphorical forms of expression ... What such turns of phrase imply must be demonstrated on the level of the problems of human biology, sociology and psychology as a constituent element of human nature.»⁵

Pannenberg's decisive thesis of openness to the world, extensively developed over the course of his academic life, is introduced as early as in the first chapter of *What is Man?* In his more recent work, *Theologie und Philosophie*, his views still have not changed: «... the relation of the consciousness of existence to the bodiliness of human Dasein remains under-determined.»⁶ However, he now places openness to the world in a wider philosophical context as part of what he calls the «post-Hegel turn to anthropology» (*nachhegelsche Wendung zur Anthropologie*). This turn is important to Pannenberg, for it forms the basis for his belief that theology must account for anthropology in its fundamental-theological task. As we explore his thoughts from the fundamental human openness to the world through to the fundamental openness to God, we shall see the irreducible dimension of human religiosity, which underlies all structures of human culture. In other words, he understands this innate or natural tendency toward God to mean that by nature, i.e., on the basis of creation, human beings are interiorly disposed toward God, and indeed it is even of their human essence to be open to God. «And that is why,» Pannenberg argues, «the religion of humanity in its perversions is not

be taken as a limit». See W. Pannenberg et al., *Revelation as History*, transl. D. Granskou, E. Quinn, London/Sydney 1969, 148.

⁴ In *Theologie und Philosophie: Ihr Verhältnis im Lichte ihrer gemeinsamen Geschichte*, Göttingen 1996, Pannenberg brings out a fine distinction: «Die Frage nach der «Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos» ist dabei zunächst einmal als Frage nach der Eigenart der menschlichen *spezies* unter den übrigen Lebewesen, nicht von vornherein auch als Frage nach einer von allen andern Lebewesen abgehobenen Sonderstellung zu verstehen, obwohl das eine leicht in das andere übergang.» (338).

⁵ W. Pannenberg, *Anthropology and the Question of God*, in: *Basic Questions in Theology III*, transl. R.A. Wilson, London 1973, 91.

⁶ Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie*, 338.

simply the expression of human idolatry, but always also the expression of inalienable referredness of humanity to its Creator.»⁷ This idea is important, as it provides a foundation for Pannenberg's assertion that their destiny as God's purpose for them is *internal* to their creatureliness. Thus, human destiny is no longer seen only in terms of Jesus Christ. Otherwise, the movement toward human destiny is made possible by purely *external* divine providence. Perhaps, one could argue that if God's love and care are as infinite as they are believed to be, the outworking of his grace and providence should be effected internally *as well as* externally.

To be sure, Pannenberg is aware of the limitation of the concept of openness to the world. Of course, human beings are not unrestrictedly open to the reality of things outside them. Pannenberg admits, «A capacity and readiness for objectivity are indeed present in principle, but are in practice always limited.»⁸ This, however, should not pose any serious problem, for «human beings are in a position to recognise, always in specific ways and even if to a limited degree, the partisan character of their perspectives and thus to move beyond these, to expand and, at least partially, to break through the boundaries set by their own interests.»⁹

The human disposition for the destiny of fellowship with God is not left to human beings to develop on their own. The destiny itself does not come across them as a distinct goal for them to achieve, but rather, in an indefinite trust that opens up the horizon of world experience and intersubjectivity, and also in a restless thrust toward overcoming the finite. For Pannenberg, the word, destiny, can be used in a meaningful way only if it means something toward which human's boundless dependence is directed. Otherwise, it would become an empty word. On the way to their destiny and in relation to it, human beings are not just subjects. They are the theme of a history in which they become what they already are. This becoming of their own identity is not a producing of the self but a history of its formation. One could even argue that given Pannenberg's stance of taking Herder's concept of human becoming, the idea of openness to the world is bound to prove irresistible to Pannenberg.¹⁰ Openness to God becomes, for Pannenberg, the bridge out of the poverty of the natural beginning point of humanity into the full realisation of human destiny.

⁷ W. Pannenberg, *Christologie und Theologie*, *KuD* 21 (1975) 159-175 (165).

⁸ W. Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, transl. M.J. O'Connell, Philadelphia 1985, 60.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

¹⁰ The idea of human becoming originates from Johann Gottfried Herder's major work: *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, and has subsequently been adopted by Pannenberg in shaping his concepts of the image of God and human destiny.

I. Experiencing Oneself in terms of the World

Rather than being a microcosm of the world, the human being is a decision-maker who is unwilling to fit into an order of the world or of nature, but instead wants to rule over it. In this sense, the world is only the material for his transforming activity. More specifically, Pannenberg claims, «Modern man for the first time no longer accepts the world as a home or as an order present at hand; instead he uses it as mere material for his activity ... In this way, man's self-perception becomes an endeavour that is never finished because the changed surroundings can always be changed further. Every new invention becomes a rung on the ladder to further, unsuspected possibilities.»¹¹ Hence, the so-called human openness to the world is not openness for any already existing world, but an openness that goes beyond any framework of the world that may take shape. Pannenberg defines «openness to the world» as the «unique freedom of man to inquire and to move beyond every given regulation of his existence.»¹² This term is intended to state the characteristic feature that makes human beings to be human, thereby distinguishing human beings from animals and lifting the former above non-human nature.¹³ «In the case of the human being, there is also what Scheler called «spirit» in a specific sense and what shows in relation to the other functions of life as «inhibition,» above all as inhibition of the instinctively directed impulse of drives.»¹⁴ It is this inhibition of the instinctive behavioural reactions that justifies the so-called human openness to the world and his ability of relieved objectivity of concrete perception and of corresponding freedom of his own behavioural orientation. Pannenberg continues, «Such «openness to the world by virtue of the spirit» also makes possible, according to Scheler, the detachment from his own life centre, therefore his self-consciousness through which we for ourselves can become objects.»¹⁵

Such a description carries a number of implications. First of all, it means that the human being *has* a world, whilst each species of animals is *limited* to an environment fixed by heredity. Even where something like an environ-

¹¹ W. Pannenberg, *What is Man? Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, transl. D.A. Priebe, Philadelphia 1970, 113.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ However, Pannenberg is aware that by virtue of its open-endedness and freedom of movement that is not goal-directed, the play behaviour of young animals is comparable in principle to human openness to the world. «The difference is that the openness and plasticity of the behaviour of young animals disappear as soon as they mature, whereas in this respect human beings remain at a stage of youthful development (neoteny) and retain this kind of openness to the world as a behavioural characteristic throughout their lives» (Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, 323).

¹⁴ Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie*, 338-339.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 339.

ment appears before the human being, it involves things established by his culture rather than inherited limits. This explains that, for instance, a hunter and a tourist would experience a given forest very differently, irrespective of their biological makeup. Unlike other animals, the human person is not bound through instincts to an environment, but is open to the world, to innumerable experiences and possibilities beyond his environment. That is why Pannenberg asserts strongly, «What mankind is, is never finally determined in the sense of a fixed concept of the human essence; in contrast to all animals, humans are essentially <open.> Man has the task of <constituting himself.>»¹⁶ He can always have new experiences that are different in kind, and his possibilities for responding to the reality perceived can vary almost without limit. Indeed, it is of the nature of the human form of life to be «exocentric» relative to other things and beings, in awareness of a horizon that transcends their finitude, and hence to be able to move on constantly to new experiences.

Instead of using the term «openness to the world,» Helmuth Plessner in *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928) characterises human uniqueness as his exocentric position, by which he means that man has a relation not only to his environment but also to himself, i.e., a self-relation. For Plessner, «the animal lives from its centre and into its centre,» whereas «the human being as the living thing that is positioned in the centre of his existence, knows this centre, experiences it and thus transcends it.»¹⁷ Plessner further explains that the human being «experiences the bond in the absolute here and now, the total convergence of the environment and his own body against the centre of his position, and is thus no longer bound by it.»¹⁸ In other words, unlike animals, the human being is exocentric, having his centre not only within himself but at the same time also outside himself. «Exocentricity,» according to Plessner, «is the form of frontal positioning characteristic for the human being against the environment.»¹⁹

In substance this exocentric characteristic presupposes the idea of openness to the world. For, Pannenberg explains, «only because man in open objectivity can linger with the <other>, which he finds before himself, is he able to come back to himself from that other.»²⁰ Similarly, Overbeck writes, «The human ability of objectivity contains an element of self-transcendence; the devotion to the object presupposes the knowledge of its otherness.»²¹ Thus,

¹⁶ W. Pannenberg, *On the Theology of Law*, in: *Ethics*, transl. K. Crim, Philadelphia 1981, 40.

¹⁷ H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie, Berlin 1975, 288.291.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 292. On the meaning of frontal position Plessner writes, «Diese besondere Position der Frontalität, d. h. der gegen das Umfeld fremder Gegebenheit gerichteten Existenz ...» (241).

²⁰ Pannenberg, *What is Man?*, 3 n. 1.

the exocentric structure of human living has an openness that is not restricted to the things of the world. The openness of the step which first makes possible the very perception of an object reaches beyond the totality of all given and possible objects of perception, i.e., beyond the world. Of course, only in reflection do we become conscious of this. Plessner's idea of exocentricity precisely points to the human ability to adopt an attitude toward himself, a capacity for self-reflection, which at the same time is the basis for his ability to stand back from things and treat them as objects, as things. Pannenberg elucidates this point through the example of social intercourse whereby human beings perceive their own vocal utterances and experience the reaction of others to these *as* a reaction to the sound they produce. «They thereby put themselves in the situation and role of the other and are able to see themselves from the vantage point of the other and thus from a distance, as it were ... the very fact of being able to attend, unburdened by instinct, to the connection between one's own sounds and the determinate reactions of others presupposes exocentricity.»²²

According to Pannenberg, we primarily seek to determine what we want and what we really are by means of the world in which we find ourselves. Indeed, «only in our turning to the world do we find ourselves with our place in this world.»²³ In other words, our knowledge of ourselves is mediated by our knowledge of the world and by the process of the appropriation of the world for us. Thus, we experience ourselves only in terms of the world, even though this is always incomplete, by coming across ourselves in particular relations with other things. The investigation of the world is, therefore, the path that one must pursue in order to learn one's needs and goals. As behavioural anthropology suggests, we must always orient our drives, which are originally without direction, through the detour of our experience of the world. Since human drives are not directed unambiguously from the time of birth, they are stamped distinctively by choice and habit as well as education and custom. However, the world as we find it is unlikely to be able to satisfy our nature as the sum of our drives. We, therefore, feel compelled to transform what we find around us. We proceed to construct an artificial environment, i.e., a cultural world. Specifically, in agreement with Gehlen Pannenberg states that human beings are by nature cultural beings in the sense that they are not simply individuals with social relations like the other animals but are social beings

²¹ F.-J. Overbeck, *Der gottbezogene Mensch. Eine systematische Untersuchung zur Bestimmung des Menschen und zur «Selbstverwirklichung» Gottes in der Anthropologie und Trinitätstheologie Wolfhart Pannenbergs*, Münster 2000, 125.

²² Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, 377.

²³ W. Pannenberg, *Gottebenbildlichkeit und Bildung des Menschen*, in: *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie, Gesammelte Aufsätze 2*, Göttingen 1980, 220.

in a specific sense. For human beings, existence is essentially a task to which they must constantly seek to give form.

However, Pannenberg disagrees with Gehlen on the degree of significance accorded to cultural formation for humans vis-à-vis animals. Gehlen believes that «human beings are oriented and disposed to culture just as other animals are to an environment peculiar to their species.»²⁴ In addition, from the outset human beings are disposed to *create* culture, which originates in the peculiar character of human beings as beings who act. Given his well-known thesis of human beings as *deficient beings*, Gehlen sees it as humanity's basic task to compensate for the deficiencies of the species. He argues that it is language and culture, above all, which make this compensation possible. They are the result of human action. As such, he calls the human being the *acting being*. «Through his action, the human being *unburdens* himself of the variety of stimuli besieging him by creating through language and culture a symbolic universe, which permits the order of that diversity and provides orientation to his own drives.»²⁵ To that extent, the human being converts the disadvantages of his initial biological condition into advantages in the sense of the mastery of the natural conditions of his *Dasein*.²⁶ This means that for Gehlen human beings are beings who create themselves by gaining control of their world. Or, to be more precise, as Dieckmann puts it, «Insofar as Gehlen summarises all cognitive events and cultural achievements under the concept of action, the human individual for Gehlen appears to be a being who creates himself through his action.»²⁷ In other words, human beings are self-creative in the strict sense of the term. But, Pannenberg questions, «Gehlen has however seldom put the question of how such a being actually becomes capable of acting, how he *can* <take position> to his environment and to himself.»²⁸ In addition, the capability of action already presupposes the peculiarity of human intelligence, which for Gehlen remains undiscussed. For Pannenberg, therefore,

²⁴ Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, 161.

²⁵ Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie*, 340.

²⁶ By now, one may wonder in what sense terms like «initial position» (*Ausgangslage*) and «natural conditions» (*Naturbedingungen*) are to be understood. Stock rightly points out, «Pannenberg zufolge handelt es sich dabei um die <Ichzentriertheit>, die eine notwendige Bedingung für jeden Akt von Selbsttranszendenz ist. ... Der Terminus <Naturbedingung> ist sinnvoll doch nur auf das zu beziehen, was exzentrisches oder selbsttranszendierendes Verhalten auf eine naturgesetzlich beschreibbare Weise ermöglicht, wie z. B. der Atmungsapparat das Sprechen. Exzentrisches Verhalten wie z. B. der Akt des Sprechens selbst hingegen ist keine Naturbedingung, sondern der von jeder Naturbedingung zu unterscheidende, wenn auch sie einschließende vernünftige oder geistige Akt der Zeichengebung.» See K. Stock, *Ist die Bestimmung der Person noch offen?*, *EvT* 45 (1985) 290-297 (293).

²⁷ E. Dieckmann, *Personalität Gottes – Personalität des Menschen. Ihre Deutung im theologischen Denken Wolfhart Pannenburgs*, Altenberge 1995, 46.

²⁸ Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie*, 341.

«the concept of action cannot simply replace the position of Scheler's spirit.»²⁹ This is in sharp contrast to what Dieckmann suggests, «According to Pannenberg's opinion, the same function applies to the concept of human action of Gehlen as to the idea of spirit of Scheler.»³⁰ Pannenberg argues elsewhere that «no cultural formation can have for man the significance that the given natural environment has for animals.»³¹ He continues, «Human questions go not only beyond nature but also out beyond all cultural accomplishments into that which is still open ... beyond man's natural environment and even beyond the cultural forms existing at the time.»³² For human culturally creative activity itself remains unintelligible if it is not comprehended as the expression of a questioning and searching that always reaches out beyond every cultural form as well as beyond nature.

II. To What is Humankind Open?

As indicated earlier, the human being is open to the world, and thus to constantly new things and fresh experiences. In modern anthropology, openness to the world cannot simply involve openness to the *world*. Otherwise, the relation of human beings to the world would not be fundamentally different from that of animals to their environment. In that case, the world would come to be viewed as nothing more than a gigantic, very complex environment. Openness to the world must mean that the human being is completely directed into the *open*, beyond every experience, situation and picture of the world. In short, he is always open beyond the world. This prompts Pannenberg to assert, «Such openness beyond the world is even the condition for man's experience of the world. If our destiny did not press us beyond the world, then we would not constantly search further, as we do even when there are no concrete incentives.»³³ In other words, the human openness happens out of necessity. As the human person seeks his destiny in openness beyond everything that he finds at hand, he cannot find lasting satisfaction in the world as it exists, either in his technology or his culture. He pushes beyond everything that he meets in the world. Yet, he is not completely and finally satisfied by anything. Pannenberg explains that «the pressure of human drives is directed toward something undefined. It arises because our drives find no goal that entirely satisfies them.»³⁴ The ensuing restlessness constitutes one root of all religious life. Everyone who calmly reflects on his position and de-

²⁹ Ibid., 342.

³⁰ Dieckmann, *Personalität Gottes – Personalität des Menschen*, 46.

³¹ Pannenberg, *On the Theology of Law*, 40.

³² Ibid.

³³ Pannenberg, *What is Man?*, 8.

³⁴ Ibid., 9.

stiny is haunted by questions of deep and unutterable moment. Speculation upon his origin and prospects, his relationship to the Creator, and to that dim and awful eternity that stretches out before him, must often fill him with anxious thought and inquiry. Indifference to these matters is unnatural. Pannenberg clarifies the issue succinctly, «Openness to the world is basically a questioning ... in the entire course of his existence he is himself a question that has not yet received its answer. Man's openness therefore points him beyond the world to a reality which is itself not the world.»³⁵

To examine the structure of human drives more closely, we have to understand that for the human being to be driven by impulses means to be dependent on something. His needs know no boundary, and his chronic need, his infinite dependence, presupposes something outside himself that is beyond every experience of the world. Thus, Pannenberg says, the human being in his openness to the world «is not only creatively free to shape and produce things ever anew, but is also thrown back upon a ground supporting both himself and his world, and which indeed supports him in such a way that it can not be identified with anything that shows up in the world.»³⁶ In other words, this supporting ground is outside the entire realm of existing beings. Moreover, in his infinite dependence, he presupposes a corresponding, infinite, never-ending, otherworldly being before whom he stands, even if he does not know what to call it. This presupposed being is beyond everything finite, a vis-à-vis upon which he is infinitely dependent, whether he knows it or not. Dieckmann explains, «The human exocentricity, which Pannenberg interprets as an original being present to the other, implies a dependence of human beings on a vis-à-vis.»³⁷ According to Pannenberg, we should, therefore, «speak of an openness beyond everything finite that itself also transcends the horizon of the world because only in awareness of the infinite can we think the thought of the world as the epitome of everything finite.»³⁸

Here is one of the areas of Pannenberg's theological anthropology that has attracted most heated debate. For many scholars argue that Pannenberg's concept of human openness *effectively* constitutes an anthropological argument for the existence of God, whether Pannenberg himself is aware of it or not.³⁹ In other words, whilst such an anthropological proof may not be inten-

³⁵ Pannenberg, *On the Theology of Law*, 41.

³⁶ W. Pannenberg, *The Question of God*, in: *Basic Questions in Theology 2*, transl. G.H. Kehm, Philadelphia 1971, 220-221.

³⁷ Dieckmann, *Personalität Gottes – Personalität des Menschen*, 35.

³⁸ W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II*, transl. G.W. Bromiley, Edinburgh 1994, 229.

³⁹ The stream of the secondary literature taking this stance includes: H. Fischer, *Fundamentaltheologische Prolegomena zur theologischen Anthropologie: Anfragen an W. Pannenger's Anthropologie*, *ThR* 50 (1985) 41-61; W. Hamilton, *The Character of Pannenberg's Theology*, in: *Theology as History*, ed. J.M. Robinson and J.B. Cobb, New York 1967;

ded by Pannenberg, his thought concerning human openness necessarily leads to an argument for the existence of God. Second, they believe that Pannenberg's thesis amounts to an attempt to ground natural theology in anthropology, in the available knowledge about human beings. In particular, Weischedel takes the critique one step further and asserts that Pannenberg's claim of human openness beyond the world to God can be upheld only if the existence of God is already presupposed by faith. This is echoed in a subsequent essay by Nicol who questions, «Does Pannenberg's appeal to <man's limit-transcending openness> to the future not in some sense involve faith in and knowledge of <the coming God>?»⁴⁰ Or, is there some implicit *a priori* notion of faith?

As early as in 1962, Pannenberg was already adamant, «To be sure, this (openness to the world) does not result in any theoretical proof for the existence of God.»⁴¹ That vis-à-vis is unknown (*unbekanntes Gegenüber*). Nothing has yet been determined about who or what that entity upon which the human being is infinitely dependent really is. On this, Pannenberg explains, «The question of man's existence does not refer directly to a person, and therefore not directly to God. Rather, at first it shows man as dependent upon being encountered by something that functions as a supportive ground for the existence of man in its transcending movement into openness, as well as for the totality of all extant reality, the world.»⁴² As cited earlier, for Pannenberg the human being himself is a question, and openness to the world is a questioning in the entire course of his existence.⁴³ In 1967, Pannenberg reiterated this view, and continued to argue, «... man is a <question> that finds its answer in the encountering reality of God ... The truth of religious experience – especially as experience of God – is not to be derived from man's structure as question, but from his being met by the reality that is experienced as the answer to the open question of his existence, and thus claims his ultimate confidence as the ground of his existence.»⁴⁴ Indeed, as Dieckmann writes, «if ... God should be regarded as the all-determining reality or ... as God of history, then it has to be pointed out that not only humanity but the reality as a whole is open to the question about God.»⁴⁵ However, it is important to emphasize that one cannot simply deduce from the openness of the question that God

W. Weischedel, Die Erneuerung der natürlichen Theologie bei Pannenberg, in: Der Gott der Philosophen: Grundlegung einer philosophischen Theologie im Zeitalter des Nihilismus, Bd. 2, Abgrenzung und Grundlegung, Darmstadt 1972.

⁴⁰ I. Nicol, Facts and Meanings: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Theology as History and the Role of the Historical-Critical Method, *RelSt* 12 (1976) 129-139 (134-135).

⁴¹ Pannenberg, What is Man?, 11.

⁴² Pannenberg, The Question of God, 222-223.

⁴³ Pannenberg, On the Theology of Law, 41.

⁴⁴ W. Pannenberg, Response to the Discussion, in: *Theology as History*, ed. J.M. Robinson and J.B. Cobb, New York 1967, 225.

⁴⁵ Dieckmann, *Personalität Gottes – Personalität des Menschen*, 33.

exists. In other words, the natural *asking about* God does not amount to a proof. For Pannenberg, only God can demonstrate God's existence. If humans were to prove God, the result of that proof would not be God at all. The so-called proof for the existence of God merely shows that the human individual must inquire beyond the world and himself, if he is to find a ground capable of supporting the being and meaning of his existence. This is particularly so, as Pannenberg claims in his dogmatics that knowledge of God is possible only by revelation of the divine reality, but «in view of the debatability of the existence of God that comes to expression in the attempts to offer proofs, one can hardly maintain that this revelation is already convincingly present in the fact of the world.»⁴⁶

Instead, Pannenberg attempts to demonstrate the religious dimension of human openness to the world by, amongst others, an analysis of the act of perception. To put in another way, Dieckmann writes, «Pannenberg's discussion of objectivity as the basic form of exocentricity leads beyond a clarification of the presuppositions of the specifically human self-relations to the question about the possibility and necessity of a religious interpretation of human exocentricity. It follows from further reflection on the implications of the perception of individual objects.»⁴⁷ According to Pannenberg, the fact that we can perceive an individual object as an individual object presupposes that we can locate the object in question in relation to ourselves and to other objects within a general framework. This «step into the universal» as 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. Schwöbel rightly interprets, «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.»⁴⁸ Thus, what can become the explicit object of religious consciousness is implicitly present in every turning to a particular object of our experience. Even when we move beyond all experience or idea of perceptible objects we continue to be exocentric, related to something other than ourselves, but now to an Other beyond all the objects of our world, an Other that at the same time embraces this entire world, thereby ensuring the possible unification of human lives in the world, despite the multiplicity and heterogeneity of it. Hence, even though, for Pannenberg, «it is the function of anthropological proofs to show that the concept of God is an essential part of a proper human self-understanding, whether in relation to human reason or to other basic fulfilments of human existence,» no anthropological argument can prove God's existence in the strict sense.⁴⁹ All that is maintained is we are referred to an

⁴⁶ W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology I*, transl. G.W. Bromiley, Edinburgh 1991, 95.

⁴⁷ Dieckmann, *Personalität Gottes – Personalität des Menschen*, 51.

⁴⁸ C. Schwöbel, *Theology in Anthropological Perspective?*, KTR 10 (1987) 21-25 (22).

unfathomable reality that transcends us and our world, with the result that the God of religious tradition is given a secure place in the reality of human self-experience.

According to Pannenberg, Scheler, Plessner and Gehlen all hold different views in this respect. For Scheler, intercourse with divine reality belongs to the *essence* of the human being just as much as self-consciousness and consciousness of the world. Religion is not a secondary addition to behaviour that is open to the world. Rather, *at the very moment* when this behaviour comes into being, the human being is driven to anchor his own central being in something beyond the world, for «the human being as spirit was to owe to the <highest Ground of Being.>»⁵⁰ Plessner, on the other hand, does not regard exocentricity as directly religious; instead, the religious thematic emerges from the exocentric manner of life because of the experience that this brings of the contingency of all things and of one's own existence. This is, indeed, what Pannenberg considers as the third and most important consequence of human exocentric position for theological anthropology: «It is the knowledge about the contingency of Dasein and because of that also, at least implicitly, about God, who gives support to the life of the human being in his contingency and in his distancing from all that exists.»⁵¹ For Gehlen, religion and God can become thematic only as human creations, as by-products of the human conquest of the world.

Meanwhile, there are other scholars who believe that Pannenberg has not advanced an anthropological argument for the existence of God. According to Tupper, the human openness does not constitute «a theory of religion a priori,» but it does «suggest man's openness to the revelation of divine reality.»⁵² In reaching out to a general horizon embracing all the individual objects of actual or possible perception, Pannenberg claims, human beings are «implicitly affirming at the same time the divine reality, even though they have not yet grasped this thematically as such, much less in this or that particular form.»⁵³ Worthing responds cautiously, «In light of Pannenberg's emphasis upon human beings as <question> (within the structure of their openness to the

⁴⁹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology I*, 92-93.

⁵⁰ Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie*, 340.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 345. The other two consequences are as follows, «Das erste lautet: <Als exzentrisch organisiertes Wesen muß er sich zu dem, *was er schon ist, erst machen.*> Menschen existieren von Natur aus künstlich, weil sie als exzentrische Wesen das Gleichgewicht ihrer Existenz immer wieder erst herstellen müssen, wobei jedes solche Resultat aber auch wieder überschreitbar und distanzierbar ist. Eine zweite Konsequenz der exzentrischen Lebensform ist nach Plessner die <vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit,> d.h. die Tatsache, daß alle Unmittelbarkeit menschlichen Lebensvollzugs schon vermittelt ist durch die reflexive Distanz zum eigenen Sein» (344).

⁵² F. Tupper, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, Philadelphia 1973, 71.

⁵³ Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, 69.

world) which points to God as the <answer> he would seem to be correct that this does not imply the necessary existence of God or constitute an anthropological argument for God's existence in the strict sense.»⁵⁴ In addition, Koch agrees that Pannenberg has only tried to show that humans are religious by nature, without producing any theoretical proof of the existence of God.⁵⁵ This view is more or less reiterated by Dieckmann: «This proof of a constitutive reference of humanity to an infinite reality, according to Pannenberg, must not be understood as a proof of the existence of God.»⁵⁶ For Schwarz, Pannenberg only elucidates the human striving for an infinite, which «does not prove the reality of God, but the reality of man's finitude,» so that his anthropological deduction «leaves us only with the phenomenal possibility but not with the phenomenal actuality of God's existence.»⁵⁷

In this respect, comments by Grenz are particularly insightful that by means of terms like exocentricism and basic trust and with help from Luther's understanding of faith, Pannenberg sketches the development of religious awareness, without equating the basic religious phenomenon with natural theology. As one experiences finitude and temporality in everyday life, an intuition of the infinite develops. Grenz, therefore, concludes that for Pannenberg the intuition of the infinite does not itself comprise knowledge of God. Rather, subsequent explicit knowledge mediated by religious traditions allows the human person to reflect on this earlier experience and to concur with the apostle Paul's claim that all people have knowledge of God.⁵⁸ Overbeck also lends support to this view, when he says that a disposition of the human being to religion is inseparable from his humanity. «But,» he adds, «it has still not led to a proof of the reality of God, who manifests himself in religion. The findings simply allow us to say that religion is essentially part of the humanness of our humanity, and that it is a necessary, albeit not yet a sufficient, condition for the truth of the claim about divine reality.»⁵⁹ As with Grenz, Overbeck believes that «Pannenberg places the onus of proof of the reality of God claimed in religion on the process of the religious life itself.»⁶⁰ This way of interpretation by Grenz and Overbeck has its most unequivocal endorsement, somewhat unexpectedly, in Pannenberg's 1990 essay on *Sünde, Freiheit*,

⁵⁴ Worthing, *Foundations and Functions of Theology as Universal Science*, 188.

⁵⁵ K. Koch, *Der Gott der Geschichte. Theologie der Geschichte bei Wolfhart Pannenberg als Paradigma einer philosophischen Theologie in ökumenischer Perspektive*, Mainz 1988, 199.

⁵⁶ Dieckmann, *Personalität Gottes – Personalität des Menschen*, 53.

⁵⁷ H. Schwarz, *The Search for God. Christianity – Atheism – Secularism – World Religions*, London 1975, 72.

⁵⁸ S. Grenz, *Reason for Hope. The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, New York 1990, 20-21.

⁵⁹ Overbeck, *Der gottbezogene Mensch*, 119.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 120 n. 79.

Identität: «God and gods are given only to our consciousness through concrete religious experience, and only after philosophical reflection on such experiences has linked the ideas of God with the concept of the infinite ..., can the fundamental, original awareness, for all human consciousness, of the infinite be later and retrospectively characterised as an (unthematic) knowledge of God.»⁶¹

Accordingly, it is surprising that first, Stock should find the intention and methodology of Pannenberg's anthropology contradictory, as he critiques it is Pannenberg's claim «to explain that the specific characteristic of human existence, in a clear contrast to the empirical sciences of man, cannot be adequately described without its religious dimension.»⁶² Second, Stock believes that «this religious dimension ... is made explicit only by way of theological argument.»⁶³ However, one has to realise that Pannenberg has gone to great lengths to be *scientific* in his case for the religious dimension in the concept of human openness, grounding his claim in observable human behaviour, such as perception, trust and so on. As a result, for Pannenberg the argument for human religiosity does not contradict his intention and approach to be empirical. Furthermore, as we have just seen, Pannenberg's deduction of the religious dimension in humanity does not have to draw on any theological argument whatsoever, but rather it is entirely within the domain of anthropology. Perhaps, Stock confuses the argument for human religiosity with the question of the existence of God.

Indeed, for Pannenberg due to the ultimate ground of human essence, the human being cannot avoid asking what his nature is, asking beyond the world, in the expectation that his question will find a reality as its answer. To this reality, language gives the name, God. Thus, God is at first only the unknown entity upon which the human being is dependent in his infinite striving, insofar as in this questioning and striving he stands in need of a fulfilment which he has not already attained, which he cannot attain on his own, but which from time to time comes to him in provisional form out of the future of the reality for which he is seeking. Since he cannot give the answer to the question that he himself constitutes, who God is cannot be derived from the openness of human existence. Like all questions that look beyond themselves for answers, the answer to the human person's question can be given only through the experience of the reality which this question is seeking, that is, through the experience of the reality of God. Hence, the question of himself, the question of his own destiny and the question of the ground beyond the world that sustains it and his life are one and the same question. In other words, the question

⁶¹ W. Pannenberg, *Sünde, Freiheit, Identität – Eine Antwort an Thomas Pröpper*, in: *Beiträge zur Systematischen Theologie 2*, Göttingen 2000, 244.

⁶² Stock, *Ist die Bestimmung der Person noch offen?*, 297.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

of human beings themselves and the question of the divine reality belong together. This connection implies that only in relation to God can human beings become fully themselves.

Human dependence upon God is infinite, for it never attains his destiny but must search for it. His unlimited openness to the world results only from his destiny beyond the world. This «beyondness» is what characterises the Christian understanding of what is echoed in the fundamental proposition of human self-transcendence or exocentricity in modern anthropology. As Macquarrie rightly interprets Pannenberg's viewpoint, the human being is not simply egocentric, but also exocentric in that «the being of man ... has a centre not only in itself but also beyond itself.»⁶⁴ Here, Pannenberg makes a justifiable comment on the concept of exocentricity that it is unclear as to what is the centre that makes it possible for the human being to stand outside himself and therefore to become capable of rational and generalised reflection. However, he continues, «The relationship and interconnection of centrality and exocentricity remain singularly vague. It is not surprising, then, that Plessner's replacement of the idea of openness to the world with the idea of exocentricity has found little favour.» That is odd, as Pannenberg has made extensive use of the exocentricity concept throughout his theological anthropology, for instance, by studying human beings as exocentric beings, human destiny as exocentric destiny and so on, essentially treating it as an equivalent to openness to the world. In *Theologie und Philosophie*, he sums up his view as: «So, for Plessner and similarly for Scheler, the exocentricity or openness to the world of the human being meant in the end openness to God, openness beyond all that is given in the world to an absolute ground of the world and of the human fulfilment of life.»⁶⁵ Commentators also tend to see the two expressions as synonyms. For instance, Stock writes, «In Pannenberg's argument, the terms <openness to the world>, <exocentricity> and <exocentric self-transcendence> exactly refer to the ability that corresponds to the specific freedom of drives to seize an object as a thing in its otherness or in its self-being.»⁶⁶

At any rate, the idea of having one's centre outside oneself does appear to make sense theologically. Pannenberg himself points out, «In the case of Jesus, this centre was certainly outside himself – it was the God who was to come, the Father.»⁶⁷ In this respect, Pannenberg is probably inspired by the christological doctrine of *enhypostasia* whereby the human nature of Christ has no hypostasis of its own; instead, it finds its hypostasis in the hypostasis of the

⁶⁴ J. Macquarrie, What is a Human Being? Review of W. Pannenberg's Anthropology in Theological Perspective, ET 97 (1986) 202-203.

⁶⁵ Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie*, 345.

⁶⁶ Stock, *Ist die Bestimmung der Person noch offen?*, 291.

⁶⁷ W. Pannenberg, *The Christological Foundation of Christian Anthropology*, transl. D. Smith, Conc 6 (1973) 86-100 (99).

Logos.⁶⁸ To that extent, the distinguishing features of the particular man who Jesus is, as well as the essential qualities of the species (humankind) to which he belongs, are attributed to the divine hypostasis. Thus, the unity of the humanity and divinity of Christ lies outside of himself.

As a result of human beings as exocentric beings, Pannenberg sums up his view in the claim, «What the environment is for animals, God is for man. God is the goal in which alone his striving can find rest and his destiny be fulfilled.»⁶⁹ For this reason, human openness to the world necessarily presupposes openness to God, and ultimately leads to a relation to God. Indeed, openness to the world, according to Pannenberg, is rooted in biblical thought. The Genesis account declares the human being to be lord over the world to exercise dominion for God as his representative, as his image. Accordingly, the human being learns to make nature subservient to himself, and thus to inquire beyond nature about the God beyond the world. On that basis, there seems to be a connection between the relation of human beings to God and their increasing mastery of the natural conditions of their existence. In particular, Pannenberg argues, «Precisely because human beings reach beyond the given, and therefore ultimately because human exocentricity is characterised by an impulse, inconceivable except in religious terms, to the unconditioned do they have the ability to rule over the objects of their natural world.»⁷⁰

It is interesting to see that Pannenberg appeals to the doctrine of creation rather than anything else for direct biblical support of the concept of openness to the world. This move is understandable, for Pannenberg seems to be keen to relate human openness, through the creation account, to the idea of the image of God, which is the ultimate human destiny. We, however, find salvation and covenant as areas, which also readily lend themselves to the application of the concept of human openness.⁷¹

First, the event of resurrection of the dead has already happened to one man, Jesus, though we still do not know what exactly happened there until our own resurrection. But, through our communion with Jesus Christ, our sharing of the attitude of waiting for the God as he lived and proclaimed it, we can be certain of our participation in the new life that already appeared in him. Thus, Jesus himself has become a promise to all humanity. Indeed, the Old Testament promises of God have found their ultimate content in Jesus. But, even

⁶⁸ The term *enhypostasia* was introduced by Leontius of Byzantium (c. 550) and later taken up by John of Damascus (c. 749).

⁶⁹ Pannenberg, *What is Man?*, 13.

⁷⁰ Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, 76.

⁷¹ Philosophically, Pannenberg in his work also relates the notion of «openness to the world» to many different aspects of human life, e.g. imagination, trust, after-death and so on, in order to demonstrate its depth, richness and multiplicity as a foundation underpinning the existence, essence and destiny of humanity. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to include these in our discussion.

the content of the promise now no longer obstructs the openness of the future; rather, it points human beings into the openness of God's future.⁷² Jesus is, therefore, the fulfilment of that unlimited openness which is constitutive for being human and whose truth is openness for God. Indeed, the openness to God that characterises Jesus' humanity in his dedication to the Father and shows him to be the Son constitutes his personal identity with the Son. This conception has the advantage of making the insights of modern anthropology about human openness to the world fruitful for christology. Openness to God is the radical meaning of that human openness in relation to the world that constitutes human's specific nature in contrast to all animals. One must understand, Pannenberg claims in *Jesus – God and Man*, «Jesus' unity with God as the fulfilment of openness to the world that is constitutive for man as such, if this openness has its real meaning in an openness extending beyond the world to God.»⁷³ One could even argue that salvation possesses in the openness of human beings to God an anthropological presupposition without which it would be meaningless. That is why only through Jesus can human beings have a future of salvation with God beyond all earthly suffering, which was concentrated in Jesus' cross. Of course, even though openness for always new possibilities belongs constitutively to human's anthropological structure, it can slacken. As Pannenberg cautions, «If the future expectation of a transformation of our world and of the resurrection of the dead should collapse, then the openness for the future of human existence would also lose its decisive impulse.»⁷⁴

The openness to the future and a life in constant anticipation of the future characterises human beings as human. This basic element of human existence was discovered first in the light of God's covenant, which illuminated Israel's path. Instead of looking to the past, the truth was sought in the future. This was helped by way of a mediating history that revealed the power of the future as the God of hope. Where what was promised did happen, as in the case of the promise of the land in the covenant with Abraham, the memory of that event was preserved as a vindication of God's faithfulness. The biblical writings are, therefore, documents of this path that leads to knowledge of the God of Israel as the God of hope through the history of the promises, which Israel received. God has given the promise, and he alone can assure its fulfilment. Trust in the future activity of the God of promise is based on earlier

⁷² Here, the term «promise» links our present, which needs salvation, to God's future, whilst at the same time it keeps them apart, for the promise as such is different from the consummation that is promised. The concept of promise alone, therefore, does not adequately characterise the work and fate of Jesus. If his work is seen only in terms of the idea of promise, this would make him no more than a prophet. However, Jesus is *more than* a prophet, for the promised fulfilment has already become present in him.

⁷³ Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, 200.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

fulfilment of promises that has previously been given. Only out of such a tradition can the view of human beings be directed into the open future in a hopeful way, beyond the preliminary objects of hope for the Israelites, beyond their fulfilment and beyond their announced failure, to the hope of a final act of Israel's God that would bring all history to its consummation in justice, peace and an everlasting life. Thus, the future of God, of the God of Israel, becomes the measure of all things, even the measure of the history of its own past origins. The Old Testament disclosures of God now, in retrospect, prove to have been only portents and anticipatory presentations of the future of God that is revealed and made accessible in the public ministry of Jesus and in the manifestation of the eschatological glory in him through his resurrection from the dead. However, our participation in the future of God can only come in such a way that we always have to leave behind what we already are and what we find as the given state of our world.

In the New Testament, God's faithfulness finds renewed expression in reconciliation through the new covenant. Basic in this regard is the thought of the new covenant that is linked to the institution of the Lord's Supper. Here, the cup that is handed round at the Lord's Supper gives a share in this covenant. This means that in openness to God believers have to look beyond the cup in order to claim its significance as a sign of the covenant in Jesus' blood, thereby in turn characterising table fellowship with Jesus as a covenant meal in the sense of Exod. 24:11, which states that Moses and the elders «beheld God, and they ate and drank.» Indeed, the cup saying goes beyond simply a reconstitution of the old covenant. For it also promises the disciples the presence of the divine lordship, which is bound up with the presence of Jesus in person, as a lasting gift, and thus establishes a lasting fellowship of the participants with one another. Moreover, insofar as the cup is seen as the new eschatological covenant, pointing beyond the world to the eschatological destiny, we may view all peoples, Jews and Christians alike, as parts of one and the same people of God, therefore attaining the unity of the people of God.

In this respect, it is interesting to note that Pannenberg applies the concept of play to liturgy, and argues that the Christian liturgy is a sacred play, a kind of representational play,⁷⁵ «at the centre of which is the supper that sums up the ministry and destiny of Jesus and links the created reality of human beings and their social life with their eschatological destiny.»⁷⁶ Consistent with what

⁷⁵ Following J. Huizinga's definition in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Pannenberg sees representational play as that which «finds its fullest embodiment in ritual that represents the mythical order of the cosmos» (*Anthropology*, 326). He continues, «Just as every fully developed game is self-contained and complete, so in ritual a world that is complete in itself stands over against the profane world» (*Ibid.*). In cult, the audience as well as the agents who perform the ritual drama are impacted by the same experience.

⁷⁶ Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, 337-338.

we have been depicting here, Pannenberg says, «For the community that remembers Jesus and awaits his future, that supper becomes here and now a meal shared with him; by means of it, Christians' lives and their world are made part of the history of Jesus Christ ... In play, human beings put into practice that being-outside-themselves to which their exocentricity destines them. The process begins with the symbolic games of children and finds its completion in worship.»⁷⁷ In particular, extending the thought of P. Brunner that has not been fully developed, Pannenberg asserts that «the salvation-historical activity of the divine Logos (the Wisdom of God) from creation on via reconciliation to the future consummation of the world will be seen as a divine game which is symbolically replayed in the liturgy.»⁷⁸ In short, through human openness, the eternity of what is represented becomes present in time, or the visibly material becomes a sign of the invisibly spiritual. For human beings are orientated to the presence of future eschatological salvation in Jesus Christ that is bound up with the institution of a sacrament. In the sacrament of the new covenant, and above all in the eucharistic bread and wine, all believers in their openness are taken up into the sacramental action of praising and honouring God.

Kam Ming Wong, Oxford

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 58.