

STROMATA

The Graduate Journal of Calvin Theological Seminary

VOLUME 58

NUMBER 2

SPRING-SUMMER 2017

Calvin Theological Seminary
c/o Student Senate
3233 Burton Street SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49546-4387

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Journal Information

Anchored in the Reformed tradition, *Stromata* is a publication that seeks to promote critical thinking into theology and religious studies, and aims to be a vehicle for scholarly expression. *Stromata* was founded in 1956 in the 80th year of Calvin Theological Seminary, and is currently managed, edited, and reviewed by graduate (doctoral and master-level) students.

Digital issues of *Stromata* from 2001 to the present are available online at our website: www.calvinseminary.edu/stromata.

All printed issues of *Stromata* are held at the Hekman Library of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI.

ISSN 2476-1095: Print

ISSN 2476-1109: Online

STROMATA

Edited for the

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EXPOSITORY PAPERS

PANENTHEISTIC ELEMENTS IN WOLFHART PANNENBERG'S NOTION OF GOD

Isaias D'Oleo Ochoa

Introduction

This paper will focus on the panentheistic elements found in Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology Vol.1* based on section 6.4 "God's Spirituality, Knowledge, and Will" and section 6.5 "The Concept of Divine Action and the Structure of the Doctrine of the Divine Attributes" respectively.¹ In his exposition, Pannenberg dialectically explores the possibility of a redefinition of the notion of God and rejects the anthropomorphic analogies and the Greek understanding of God as *nous* in order to emphasize the idea of God as Spirit and thus facilitate the intersection between the natural sciences and Christian theology. Thus, based on the Hebrew notion of the spirit as "wind/breath" and using a naturalistic framework, Pannenberg offers an insightful yet panentheistic view of the Spirit of God as a field of force that binds the Three Persons of the Trinity.

God as Reason vs. God as Spirit

Pannenberg begins section 6.4 "God's Spirituality, Knowledge, and Will" by discussing the concept of God as a personal being in relation to his self-conscious acting. He argues that in the early stages of Christian theology God was not necessarily conceived as a "supreme, incorporeal reason."² Pannenberg cites 1 Cor. 2:11, 2 Cor. 3:17, and John 4:24 as evidence that New Testament writers seemed to understand God as *pneuma* (spirit) and not as *nous* (reason/mind), as Philo and Middle Platonism conceived.³ Pannenberg then asserts that such a trend (the Greek notion

¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

² Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 371.

³ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 371.

of God as *nous*) was not uncommon at all because of “the emphasis on the incomparability of God with created things.”⁴ In this respect Pannenberg claims that because of the closeness of the incomparability with the incorporeality of God, it was not difficult that Christian theology could also understand God as reason, as Origen did.⁵ However, as Pannenberg also writes, “Certainly Socinian theology noted the exegetical problem of equating the biblical concept of spirit with the idea of incorporeal reason.”⁶ Among some of the explanations that support such a view, there is the fact that the Hebrew term *ruah* does not mean reason. Then Pannenberg claims that every statement of the New Testament about the Spirit must be understood according to the Jewish perspective, since the connotation of the word *ruah* as spirit/wind is not only found in Hebrew but also in Greek: *pneuma* has the connotation (at least since Anaximides) of “breath, wind, air, life-force.”⁷ This leads Pannenberg to assert that the understanding of *pneuma* as a rational or conscious spirit is linked with the [Neo] Platonic school rather than the Stoics' Pantheistic philosophy, something that favored, according to him, the transcendental view of God.⁸ Now, such a link seemed to be problematic for Pannenberg, who considers that “the identifying of *pneuma* and *nous* put theology on a path that is alien to the biblical view of God –and the path of a much too anthropomorphic view of God.”⁹ The problem with Pannenberg’s assertion here is that he does not consider whether the Spirit can be rational (both *nous* and *pneuma*) but not merely rational (only *nous*).

Redefining the Notion of God

Pannenberg goes on further to claim that the anthropomorphic understanding of God is product mainly of understanding God as rational

⁴ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 371.

⁵ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 372.

⁶ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 372.

⁷ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 373.

⁸ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 374.

⁹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 374.

spirit or reason, position that came to us via Anselm's heavy use of Augustine's analogies of the Trinity and the use of Aristotelian metaphysics in High Scholasticism.¹⁰ With Scholasticism, the anthropomorphic view of God was strengthened and was linked to the concept of the will of God, which led "the Christian view laid itself open to serious criticism."¹¹ Because of this, Pannenberg emphasizes Spinoza's philosophy of separating *will* and *intellect*, since for Spinoza the only way we can talk about God's will and intellect is metaphorically.¹² To support his position, Pannenberg briefly mentions other philosophers who, similar to Spinoza, criticized the ingrained notion of God of their time: Hume discarded the idea that God is responsible for design (something that presupposes a rational God); Fichte rejected the idea of a personal and anthropomorphic God for a divine self-consciousness; Hegel promoted the idea of God as an Absolute Spirit emerging out the world.¹³ After discussing briefly Hegel's conception of God and his understanding of the Trinity, Pannenberg returns to the discussion with Spinoza of divine reason and reaffirms his position that one should talk of the divine intellect only metaphorically.¹⁴ He writes,

Those who are aware of the difficulties will have to agree with the verdict of Spinoza that it is just as metaphorical to speak of the intellect of God as to call God the "rock" of our salvation...or the "light" on our path, or to speak of the Word of God.¹⁵

It is noteworthy to observe Pannenberg's emphasis in mentioning Spinoza, Hegel, and other philosophers who worked with the notion of God were characterized by a highly-rationalized philosophy of religion. This might serve us as a hint about what Pannenberg is trying to do in this

¹⁰ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 375.

¹¹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 375.

¹² Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 375.

¹³ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 377.

¹⁴ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 379.

¹⁵ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 379.

section about God's spirituality: a redefinition of the notion of God that might work simultaneously for both natural sciences and theology.

God's Knowledge and Will

In regard to the divine knowledge, Pannenberg believes that the fact that God has knowledge means that all things are present to him. He states, "When we speak of God's knowledge we mean that nothing in all his creation escapes him. All things are present to him and are kept by him in his presence. This is not necessary knowledge in the sense of what is meant by human knowledge and awareness."¹⁶

In regard to God's will, Pannenberg is of the opinion that the Old Testament "has no single concept of the will of God" but commands and a series of terms for the divine good pleasure. In the New Testament, claims Pannenberg, one finds the idea of the divine will of Jesus (cf. Matt. 6:10, 7:21, 12:50, 21:31, 26:42 and John 4:34, 5:30, 6:38-39), and notes the link between the divine word and the Spirit of God.¹⁷ The Spirit of God, Pannenberg adds, "finds expression in the divine good pleasure...[and] is imparted to those with whom God is well pleased."¹⁸ Pannenberg highlights here the connection between the will of God and the Spirit, and affirms that such a connection is consistent with the Scriptures. In this respect, he asserts that the Spirit of God is not simply *nous*, but a "creative and life-giving dynamic."¹⁹ Further, based on Psalm 139:7, Pannenberg creatively writes, "The Spirit is the force field of God's mighty presence."²⁰ As Pannenberg affirms, his understanding contrasts with Origen's understanding of God as reason and the Stoic corporeal *pneuma* (Pantheism).

¹⁶ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 379-80.

¹⁷ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 382.

¹⁸ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 382.

¹⁹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 382.

²⁰ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 382.

The Spirit of God as a Field of Force

Pannenberg's discussion provides his readers at least plausible suggestions of panentheistic elements in his theological exposition. Nonetheless, this does not mean Pannenberg embraces Panentheism in its totality, but that he strongly uses panentheistic ideas to support his theological vision. Pannenberg's understanding of God may be of interest to Christian theology for its novelty and the doors that open. He writes, "Some astonishing possibilities thus open up for a new understanding of the relations between the trinitarian persons and the divine essence that is common to all of them" (383). Now, there are still some remarkable aspects which must be highlighted, and which illuminate us about Pannenberg's deviation from the traditional view of God in his theological construct. By using Michael Faraday's Force Field Theory, Pannenberg presents his readers with some stimulating ideas understand God's divine essence:

- a) *The deity as field of force can find equal manifestation in all Three Persons of the Trinity.* The Spirit of God would work as a binding force of the Three Persons. In that regard, it is important to pay attention to Pannenberg's comment that says, "The trinitarian persons...are simply manifestations and [eternal] forms of the one divine essence."²¹ In other words, the Three Persons of the Trinity are "modes" or manifestations of the Deity that are always actualizing themselves.
- b) *The Spirit of God is the essence of God.* "The one God is the living God comes to expression in the living fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit," Pannenberg writes. Thus, the Spirit would be the "force field of the Father and Son's fellowship."²²

As seen, in Pannenberg's argumentation, it is necessary to discard the idea of *nous* (reason/mind) as the subject of divine action. This matter is discussed in section 6.5 titled "The Concept of Divine Action and the Structure of the Doctrine of the Divine Attributes." What allows Pannenberg not to assign divine action to the Deity is his understanding

²¹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 383.

²² Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 383.

of God as the eternal divine essence which is impersonal, and not itself subject. In that respect, Pannenberg claims that only the Three Persons of the Trinity are the direct subjects of the divine action.”²³ With this statement, much confusion arises concerning the personhood of the Spirit of God. Some readers might question Pannenberg’s understanding of the Spirit of God as a force field, where the Spirit’s personhood is apparently downplayed. It seems that for Pannenberg the Spirit of God and the Holy Spirit are two different things.

Discussing divine action, Pannenberg affirms that action “denotes the outward activity of a will...an activity which produces effects that are different from itself...[thus] [t]he commonality of action [of the Three Persons]...can be only a manifestation of the unity of life and essence by which they are always linked already.”²⁴ The problem of divine causality is also brought to the table: the Spirit of God seen as a field of force is incorporeal and impersonal, but it might affect the natural world. In regards to the eternal nature of God, Pannenberg understands such an attribute, as “God’s present embraces the past as well as the future.”²⁵ In doing so, Pannenberg departed from the common Platonic understanding in early Christian theology, and instead embraced Plotinus's view of eternity as "the presence of the totality of life.”²⁶ For Pannenberg, saying that God is eternal means that for God, all time is before him as a whole –past, present, and future. As he writes, “any span of time is simply like yesterday in the sight of God.”²⁷ This discussion is important since for Plotinus, as Pannenberg notes, time is conceived as “the dissolution of the unity of life into a sequence of separate moments, and yet it is constituted a sequence by the references to the eternal totality”²⁸ in contrast to the Platonic, and thus Augustinian, view of time as “a creation of God and

²³ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 384.

²⁴ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 385.

²⁵ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 403.

²⁶ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 403.

²⁷ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 402.

²⁸ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 404.

thus separate from God's eternity."²⁹ Examining this further, Pannenberg talks more about the influence of Plotinus's view of time in Boethius (though he does not endorse it) and goes on critically with Barth's understanding of the eternity of God and the relation between the concept of time, eternity as divine attribute, and the Trinity.³⁰

Usefulness of Plotinus's Conception of Time

Noteworthy to mention is Pannenberg's comment on Plotinus's concept of time and its potential usefulness for Christian theology: He states,

Christian theology let slip the chance to combine NT eschatology and the understanding of God's eternity with the help of Plotinus's analysis of time...In the future of the divine rule the life of creation will be renewed for participation in the eternity of God. In it eternity comes together with time.... It is the place of eternity itself...the source of the mighty working of his Spirit.³¹

Therefore, world history is for Pannenberg of high interest because it is a means where God is manifested and actualized. Besides, for Pannenberg the future seems not to be actual but a possibility. Having this in view, history would be "the path that leads to the future of God's glory."³² Thus, "[t]he past remains present to the eternal God and the future is already present to him."³³ Pannenberg asserts that the divine presence fills everything, heaven and earth, in the sense that such a presence "permeates and comprehends all things."³⁴ This idea of permeability of God's presence might resemble, at least indirectly, pantheistic ideas that the divine is

²⁹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 404.

³⁰ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 406.

³¹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 408-09.

³² Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 409.

³³ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 410.

³⁴ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 411.

present in all and in everything all the time, though one should consider that this point could also be made from classical theism as well.

Other Reflections about the Spirit

In Vol.2 of his *Systematic Theology*, Pannenberg asserts again that “[t]he Spirit of God is the creative principle of movement as well as life.”³⁵ One sees here a reinforcement of Pannenberg's panentheistic understanding of the Spirit. For Pannenberg while the Holy Spirit is personal, the Spirit of God is, instead, an impersonal field force.³⁶ In this respect he states, “the person of the Holy Spirit is one of the personal concentrations of the essence of God as Spirit in distinction from the Father and the Son. The person of the Holy Spirit is not himself to be understood as the field but as a unique manifestation (singularity) of the field of the divine essentiality.”³⁷

Even though Pannenberg clarifies some points about the distinction between the Spirit of God and the Holy Spirit in his theology, I find that his position might still arise at least some ambiguity regarding the personhood of Spirit: God's Spirit is both the Holy Spirit (the Third Person of the Trinity/a concrete manifestation of the Spirit of God) and a field of force that binds the Trinity (God's divine essence).

Conclusion

Pannenberg tries to dehellenize Christian theology by rejecting the Greek understanding of God as *nous* (reason/mind) and rescuing the Hebrew idea of *ruah* as “wind/breath.” Although Pannenberg's theology is innovative and brings significant insight into Christian theology, such insights regrettably have a cost: First, although many scholars consider that Pannenberg is not trying to promote a panentheistic understanding of God, his view of God sometimes seems to resemble Panentheism in several areas—his concept of time, history, and God (cf. Plotinus' view of God as the One, Reason, and Spirit). Second, even more serious is the

³⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 79.

³⁶ Cf. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, 383.

³⁷ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol.2*, 83.

tension in Pannenberg's theology between his notion of God as field force and the notion of God traditionally found in early Christian theology. This tension makes Pannenberg's theological vision to be susceptible to a series of questions regarding the plausibility and coherence of his arguments and ideas. One of the areas of concern I find, for instance, is the downplay of the personhood of the God alongside his appropriation of the natural sciences—the Field Force Theory—in theology. I ask, if the Spirit is both an impersonal field force and a personal manifestation of the Trinity, how can we know with certainty who the Spirit really is? It seems that Pannenberg collects divergent pieces from different areas of study in order to construct his theological view of the Spirit: He rejects the Greek notion of God as *nous*, but at the same time, he uses a lot of Plotinus's Pantheistic material where the concept of *nous* is central. He tries to rescue the Hebrew notion of God as Spirit in Christian theology by discarding the Greek notion of God as reason/mind, but at the same time, there is a strong rationalization in his theology of the Spirit, which is alien to the Hebrew thought. Besides, Pannenberg is oblivious that the Hebrew term *ruah* does not only mean “wind/breath,” but it also refers to “God, spirits, gods, and so on.”

Overall, Pannenberg's exposition of his theology of the Spirit and the divine attributes does not reduce Christian theology to natural sciences, though Pannenberg does strongly rationalize the theistic understanding of God. If Pannenberg wanted to establish a notion of God that works simultaneously for both classical theism and science, he would have been better off focusing on a notion of God that might understand the Spirit as both *pneuma* (life-force) and *nous* (reason/mind).