Pannenberg’s Theology of Religions


**The concept of ‘religion’ [p.120-129]**

Are the concepts of religion and knowledge of God separate concepts or are they inseparable?

Cicero (106BC - 43BC, Roman Philosopher) = They are separate. Religion is to do with cultic practices / rituals and their observance. The knowledge of God is not equated with religion. Knowledge of God is necessary to keep in check cultic expressions of religion.

Augustine = They are inseparable. Doctrine and worship belong together. True religion was found in the teachings revealed by God in the Christian religion.

There was little discussion of the idea of the religion in the middle ages. The concept of religion only becomes important when there is a plurality of cults and religions that shape a culture.

**Religion is both human and divine [p.136-143]**

Early in the modern period the various religions were seen as distortions of one original religion which Christianity was the pure example of. The focus was on a common religion to all humanity.

It then became more fashionable to seek the original reality of religion in the historical religions of the peoples. What linked the religions together was a general concept of religion and not a common history.

What happened then was that the concept of God became detached from the definition of religion. God is one religious view amongst many and the definition of religion then needs to describe both monotheistic and non-monotheistic religions.

Despite people trying, Pannenberg says there has been no satisfactory definition of religion. Why? The attempt to detach the concept of God from religion is the reason. Detachment of the concept of God means the definition of religion becomes purely an anthropological (human) definition. Religion simply becomes a dimension of human life. Subjective religious experience then becomes the focus and there is no consideration of religious experience as an encounter with God.

Pannenberg says that in opposition to the view of religion as a purely anthropological (human) phenomenon, modern religious studies rightly describes religion as a two-sided entity. It embraces deity and humanity, but in such a way that God emerges as preeminent.
Pannenberg supports the conclusions of Van der Leeuw who argued that reducing religion to simply a human phenomenon brings the study of religion into opposition to the goal of religion itself (God). In religion God is the cause of humanities religion, but the study of religion only looks at humanity’s relation to God and tells us nothing about God’s action. The methodology of the study of religions is wrong because it misses the priority of deity.

**How do we respond to the issue of plurality which has existed right from the start of religious history? [p.147-149]**

The problem of the uncertainty between one God or many gods from the start of religious history. The uncertainty regarding the unity and plurality of deity offers a starting point for explaining the possibility of development in divine figures and especially for the tendency to associate additional spheres of operation with them.

Gods were not restricted to a single function, but may specialise in a polytheistic system eg. a god which was the god of war, a different god which was the god of the harvest etc.

A historically developed deity was assigned a whole complex of functions eg. the deity was both the god of war and the god of the harvest etc.

The development of deity seems to have taken place in such a way that its power was found to be at work in other spheres which were not at first associated with it eg.

- When Israel was delivered out of the hands of the Egyptians at the Red Sea, God came to be seen to be a ‘man of war’ (Exodus 15:3).
- God of Israel when Canaan was occupied was found to be also the author of the fertility of the land, as Baal had been formally regarded.
- Yahweh was seen to be the God of creation even if they people did not at first realise this. He became equated with the Ugaritic Canaanite god El.

There was an extension of the zone of influence of the deity.

The history of one deity was always that of conflict with competing deities and truth claims. The shape of the deity might emerge in the process of competition. In the God of Israel what emerged was monotheism.

What does this mean for the truth of the God of Israel? If this view of the development of the world’s religions is true, it is natural enough to regard the history of religion as a history of the appearance of one God which God himself controls on the path of self-revelation ie. God controlled the process!!

**How do we decide what religious ideas are true? [p.153-171]**

Defining the nature of religion does not answer the questions of its truth. The various criticisms of religion take the truth claims seriously but deny the claims are valid eg. Marx, Freud etc. [p.151]

*By Experience of the individuals? NO! [p.153-154]*
Most defenders of religion appeal to religious experience in their defence ie. they appeal to subjectivity when the question of truth arises. ‘I have had an experience of God, therefore he exists’. Truth is disclosed to those who have personal religious experience. Recent protestant theology tends to justify its content by experience or decision of faith. The problem is that the experience presupposes the God it claims to prove.

*By universal human experience of religion? NO! [p.154-157]*

Suggesting that there is a religious disposition that is part of our humanity enables us to make general claims for the truth of religious consciousness and its manifestations BUT not claims about the specific truth of a particular religions claims about God ie. appeals to a universal religious experience do not really prove the truth of one religious claim above another.

Pannenberg does support the idea that religion is a constitutive part of humanity because:

- Religion’s universal occurrence from the beginnings of humanity
- Religion’s importance for all cultures
- The possible importance for the origin of speech. The universal presence of religion corresponds to the feature of human behaviour called self-transcendence.

It is in this sense that Pannenberg says we might speak of a religious ‘disposition’ which is inseparable from humanity.

But even if we can argue that humanity has a disposition towards religion it does not necessarily follow religious statements about God are true. Pannenberg says we cannot rule out the possibility that the disposition is actually entangling us in a natural illusion.

For Pannenberg the idea that religion is an important part of the makeup humanity is a necessary condition for the truth of religion, but not adequate in itself. Religion being a part of the makeup of humanity is especially important for monotheism. If God is the creator of the human race then we must have an awareness (however inadequate) of our origin.

*By God’s actions? YES! [p.159-171]*

How do we decide what religious ideas are true? Only as the world proves to be controlled by the God of our thinking and belief can the religious awareness be sure of its truth. The question as to the truth of religious statements about God finds an answer in our experience of the world, as the world shows itself to be determined by God.

This is not a cosmological proof (ie. moving from the world to God) as religious belief in the concept of God is already the starting point for the appeal to experience of the world (ie. moving from God to the world). Experience has the function of either confirming or not confirming the truth which is already claimed in the religious concept of God.

It can be a positive confirmation = a self-demonstration of the God of faith in the medium of experience of the world.

It can be a negative confirmation = the God of faith is found to be a subjective human concept ie. not true
For Pannenberg the truth of religions are found in experience. The gods of the religions must show that they are the powers they claim to be. He also notes that there are gods which disappear in the process as their impotence is evident.

In the course of religious history the concept of revelation has become a description of the result of the self-demonstration of God in the process of historical experience. The fact that history is the place of the self-demonstration of the deity of God was a discovery of Israel, into whose inheritance Christianity has stepped ie. God has shown himself in history as being true.

(The difference from the appeal to experience criticised above?? The difference for Pannenberg seems to be that above the experience was about ‘I experience God, therefore he exists’ - I make the judgement. Here Pannenberg focuses on the experience of God manifesting / revealing himself and confirming the truth of religious statements – God proves himself and we observe this in experience.)


This article is a response to Hick’s Christian Pluralism:

The problem of pluralism [p.96-97]

The situation of religious pluralism is not new. There was in history a plurality of religions first and the emergence of the current world religions from them. The thing that is new is an experience of plurality for everyone due to the new communication technology, mobility and cultural exchange. In history some cultures experienced plurality (Roman / Hellenistic) and others experience uniformity in terms of religion (Christian medieval society). Since the Reformation there has been a relativising of the differences of religious belief as an attempt to deal with pluralism. What is new today is that pluralism is felt to challenge the foundations of Christian doctrine. Pannenberg admits that this is probably due to an erosion of confidence of theologians of the truth of Christianity, but he also says we need to deal with the issues raised by the discussion about pluralism.

John Hick and Pluralism [p.97-98]

John Hick promotes pluralism in Christian theology and has argued for a ‘Copernican revolution’ – a move from Christianity at the centre and all religions revolve around it, to God and the centre and all religions (including Christianity) revolve around him. He claims to argue his case on the basis of Christian theology and Pannenberg seeks to show his arguments are wrong in this paper.

Salvation – exclusivism vs. Inclusivism [p.98-100]

John Hick seeks to call for a move from Christian exclusivism (no salvation outside the church) to pluralism. Pannenburg responds positively saying that Hick offers a convincing argument against a narrow Christian exclusivism. How?
1) The majority of the human race in history have not been able to know Christ – God is seeking to save all humanity but would he have ordained that only a few to receive this salvation,

2) The gospels do not support a narrow exclusivism – Luke 13:29, people from all nations will come into the kingdom; Matthew 25:40, the sheep and goats, there is no reason for limiting the sheep to Christian believers, many will be admitted into God’s kingdom ‘on the basis of their works’ although they did not know Jesus. However, Jesus and his proclamation are the basis of whether they enter the Kingdom, even though who did not know Jesus in this lifetime.

Pannenberg argues for a Christ-centred inclusivism. Many people do belong to Jesus who are not in the church but the similarity of their lives to Jesus is decisive in their salvation. Jesus remains the final criterion for all human beings, while only the members of his church know about this criterion and can be certain about their salvation providing they live according to their faith.

Hick says this Christian inclusivism does not go far enough. All the world’s religions have to be equally valid ways of salvation.

Hick argues that Christian inclusivism is inadequate because it is an artificial attempt to make ‘no salvation outside the church’ acceptable. Pannenberg says he is wrong. Why? 1) A Christ-centred inclusivism is not a way of getting around exclusivism (no salvation outside the church) as some suggest it is. It was not a later invention to save a theory, 2) The idea is found in the 2nd century (Justinus), 3) The Christian inclusivism view goes back to Jesus, 4) No salvation outside the church looks like it was imposed later.

What about Acts 4:12 (“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”)? The seeming exclusiveness of this verse doesn’t say those who never knew Jesus had no chance of participating in the Kingdom to come. It says salvation is accessible through Jesus now and if you encounter the message then ones chance of salvation is at stake.

The idea of no salvation but in the name of Jesus needs to be interpreted inclusively: Even in the case of those who participate in the Kingdom of God without having encountered Jesus in their earthly life, Jesus will be their saviour, no matter what form of religion they were following.

The uniqueness of Christ [p.100-101]

Pannenberg says that Hick’s problem with inclusivism is actually a problem with Christology. He wants a rethinking of the doctrine of the Incarnation. For Hick the Incarnation should not lead to the unique superiority of Christianity. Hick needs to demolish the idea that Jesus is the incarnate son of God and selectivity uses the literature on Christology. The problem is that Jesus himself uses language that implies incarnation. Jesus’ claims about himself led to an incarnational theology. Jesus’ eschatological message and activity also spoke of the uniqueness of the incarnation.

Hick claimed that the experience of the disciples was interpreted in a Christological way by the church ie. it was a development of the church and the claim of the early disciples. However, it was not the experience of the disciples but Jesus’ claims about himself that led to an incarnation theology. The Christian claim of the uniqueness of Christ is bound up with Jesus’ eschatological
message, especially with the eschatological finality of God’s kingdom as becoming present in his activity.

Hick’s view of salvation is about the present transformation of lives and this allows him to see salvation in many forms of religious experience as people experience transformation in many different religions. The NT view of salvation is about eschatological judgement and involvement in God’s kingdom – this was true for Jesus and Paul. The uniqueness of Christ is implied and is not a later development.

The extent of the truth claims we can make [p.102-103]

For Pannenberg the truth claims of a religion cannot be judged finally with absolute certainty but provisional judgement is found in whether the religion continues to illuminate the life of its adherents in the context of their world. Does one religion provide superior illumination to another? This is how truth is judged provisionally in the conflict of religions.

In the midst of the conflict of religions we need to incorporate from other religions what is recognised as truth, but not give up the specific truth claims of one own tradition. For Pannenberg playing down Christian truth claims would be a disaster.

How can Christianity deal with pluralism? It must be open and ready to accept whatever truth the Christian can accept and learn from other religious traditions in order to incorporate those elements of truth into our own understanding of God and of his revelation. But that does not require relativizing the claim of the Christian faith to eschatological finality. Eschatology should remind us of the provisionality of our understanding and our need for deeper insight.

What about the followers of other religions? [p.103-104]

For Pannenburg when in dialogue with people from other religious traditions we may recognise Christ in them. As Christians we may recognise the work of the providence of God in their lives and the development of their traditions BUT they may not be able to recognise it. There will be an ambiguity in religious dialogue till they turn to Christ.

Is the God worshipped in Islam, Hinduism etc. the same God as the Christian? This is a question to be decided by God and not us.

The same is true with regard to the religious life of the followers of those other ways. The question is does religious transformation of other religions adherents correspond to the eschatological hopes of the Christian? Some religious transformations will look like what we hope for. Human experiences of salvation are ambiguous – it depends on if there is communion with God and Christ. Communion is promised to Christians if they continue in faith.

When it comes to the basis of our Christian confidence in our future salvation, if the spiritual life that Christians experience among themselves remains ambiguous how could it be less ambiguous in the case of non-Christians? We hope for grace on them as well as upon us.

The one difference remains: The Christian has the promise of God in Christ. The other religious traditions do not provide that particular promise.