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PANNENBERG ON THE TRIUNE GOD

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Abbreviations

IJST	*International Journal of Systematic Theology*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
KuD	*Kerygma und Dogma*
LW	*Luther's Works*
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
TLZ	*Theologische Literaturzeitung*
TRE	*Theologische Realenzyklopädie*
WA	*Luthers Werks, Weimarer Ausgabe*
ZTK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

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INTRODUCTION

In 1981, Wolfhart Pannenberg wrote an autobiographical piece in *The Christian Century*. Included in it were these words:

> In recent years, the doctrine of God has taken more and more definitive shape in my thought ... Hence today I feel much more confident to develop a doctrine of God and to treat the subjects of Christian dogmatics in that perspective. That doctrine will be more thoroughly trinitarian than any example I know of.[1]

This book is an examination of these remarks, especially the ambitious claim of the final sentence that his doctrine of God would be more thoroughly trinitarian than any example he knows of. In short, it answers just two questions: (1) what does Pannenberg mean by his theology being thoroughly Trinitarian? – and (2) how far has his subsequent work been successful in realizing his stated goal? It would be possible, of course, to consider Pannenberg's trinitarian theology in comparison with other trinitarian theologies, and so judge whether his doctrine was 'more thoroughly trinitarian' *than them*. That task we leave to others. Here we are not making the comparative point, but are considering how adequately trinitarian Pannenberg's theology in fact is.

Two assumptions are being made here, neither of which should raise any controversy. The first is that, since 1981, Pannenberg has kept to this goal. The second is that 'the most *trinitarian theology*' means not just that within a systematic presentation of Christian doctrine Pannenberg should include a section on God's triune nature that conforms to the highest standards of trinitarian orthodoxy, but also that an account of God's triunity should inform every part of his theological system. As for the first assumption, we need only note the wealth of publications Pannenberg has offered on trinitarian themes since he wrote those words. As well as a trio of important

1. 'God's Presence in History', *The Christian Century*, 11 March 1981, p. 263.

articles offered just before these autobiographical remarks[2] and the later *Systematic Theology* (*ST*)[3] that has a basic trinitarian structure, there have been a significant number of articles dealing with the Trinity since the early 1980s.[4] As for the second, Pannenberg states at one point in *ST* that

> under the sign of the unity of the immanent and economic Trinity the rest of dogmatics in the doctrine of creation, christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology will be part of the exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity. Conversely, the doctrine of the Trinity is an anticipatory sum of the whole content of Christian dogmatics. (1.355)[5]

We are still, then, dealing with 'a doctrine of God and ... treat[ing] the subjects of Christian dogmatics in that perspective'.

This study will be taken up with a detailed examination of the trinitarian theology contained within *ST*. It is this work that not only provides the most detailed, as well as the definitive, presentation of Pannenberg's understanding of the being and identity of the trinitarian God, but that also demonstrates more than any of Pannenberg's other works how the Trinity shapes his treatments of the other topics of Christian doctrine.

Before embarking on this, however, we need to make clear some of the interpretative decisions that inform the approach adopted here. In the remaining part of this introduction, therefore, we shall answer three questions. First, has Pannenberg's theology always been trinitarian? Second, why focus primarily on *ST*? And finally, what is the special contribution of *this* study in particular?

2. These are 'Die Subjektivität Gottes und die Trinitätslehre. Ein Beitrag zur Beziehung zwischen Karl Barth und der Philosophie Hegels', 'Christologie und Theologie' and 'Der Gott der Geschichte', which can all be found in W. Pannenberg, *Grundfragen Systematischer Theologie: Band 2* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1980) (hereafter *GST2*).

3. 3 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–97) (hereafter *ST*, and references in main text).

4. These include: 'Der Geist und sein Anders', in D. Henrich and R.-P. Horstmann (eds), *Hegels Logik der Philosophie in der Theorie des absoluten Geistes* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), pp. 151–59; 'Probleme einer trinitarischen Gotteslehre', in W. Baier *et al.* (eds), *Weisheit Gottes – Weisheit der Welt: Festschrift für Kardinal Ratzinger zum 60. Geburtstag* (St Ottilien: EOS Verlag Erzabtei, 1987), vol. 1, pp. 329–42, which was also published in English as 'Problems of a Trinitarian Doctrine of God', in *Dialog* 26 (1987), pp. 250–57; 'The Christian Vision of God: The New Discussion of the Trinitarian Doctrine', in *Trinity Seminary Review* 13 (1991), pp. 53–60; 'La Doctrina de la Trinidad en Hegel y su recepcion en la teologia alemana', in *Estudios trinitarios* 30 (1996), pp. 35–51; 'Eternity, Time and the Trinitarian God', in *Dialog* 39 (2000), pp. 9–14, expanded in C.E. Gunton (ed.), *Trinity, Time and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert Jenson* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 62–70.

5. Pannenberg also says that in dealing with the issue of 'the specific form that the unity of the divine life takes in the relation between the immanent and the economic Trinity ... our dogmatics will have to traverse the various areas of the creation, reconciliation, and redemption of the world' (1.447).

Has Pannenberg's theology always been trinitarian?

> 'It is a fact that what is lasting and reliable, and in this sense true, comes to light only in the future'. (1.54)

Pannenberg's theological career has among other things emphasized '[t]he awareness of the provisional form of all our knowledge of truth'.[6] Of course, by this Pannenberg intends the general point that one requires a certain hesitancy in advancing truth claims, since they can only be provisional hypotheses to be verified or not by the course of history. As for the general validity of this notion, we leave that to others, but we may perhaps see an instance of why it might be true by seeing how it applies to just a small part of universal history, namely, the field of Pannenberg scholarship. In a book of many valuable insights, Allan Galloway could have provided the most startling hypothesis that has subsequently been falsified. 'Pannenberg's approach to theology', he once wrote, 'signals the end of the great "prima donnas" in theology – the age of the multi-volume monograph in which a whole system of theology was elaborated as the achievement of an individual.'[7]

For the purposes of this study, we note another of Pannenberg's interpreters who has offered another hypothesis that in hindsight we can see is in need of correction. This is one of the first articles in English on Pannenberg's doctrine of God by Herbert Burhenn, which otherwise has some more perceptive comments. '[T]he paucity of references here to the doctrine of the Trinity', he writes, 'is entirely consistent ... with Pannenberg's own procedure'. He continues, 'The Trinity cannot function for Pannenberg ... as a structural principle of theology.'[8]

Against Burhenn, it must be stated at the outset that the Trinity has always been present in Pannenberg's theology. We take as examples two of his most substantial early works. The first is the 1961 collection *Revelation as History*, in which Pannenberg writes,

> In the fate of Jesus, the God of Israel is revealed as the triune God. The event of revelation should not be separated from the being of God himself. The being of God does not belong just to the Father, but also to the Son. The Holy Spirit also shares in the being of God by virtue of his participation in the glory of God that comes to life in the eschatological congregation.[9]

6. *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 54 (hereafter *IST*). On what Pannenberg means by doctrinal statements being hypothetical see *ST* 1.48–61, esp. p. 56, as well as *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), pp. 332–45.
7. *Wolfhart Pannenberg* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973), p. 133.
8. 'Pannenberg's Doctrine of God', *SJT* 28 (1975), pp. 535–36.
9. *Revelation as History* (London: Macmillan, 1968) (hereafter *RaH*).

The God whose historical self-revelation is the object of Pannenberg's concern in this work, therefore, is none other than the 'triune God' of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The second is *Jesus – God and Man*, the original German edition of which was published in 1964.[10] In this work there are certain criticisms of how other theologians have articulated trinitarian doctrine. As we shall note in chapter 5 of our study, the criticisms are not of the doctrine of the Trinity or of trinitarian theology, but of when the Trinity is presupposed. Pannenberg, then, is motivated not by a dismissal of trinitarian doctrine but by a deep concern for it. As in the later *ST* the criticisms are offered as a plea for a trinitarian theology that is grounded in God's historical revelation, for the doctrine of the Trinity is present in *JGM* too. This has been well brought out in *The Doctrine of the Atonement in the Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* by Herbert Neie. Although in that work Neie's purpose is not to refute views like Burhenn's, he nevertheless notes statements in *JGM* that 'construct the basis of a trinitarian doctrine'.[11] These include the following:

> If Father, Son and Spirit are distinct but coordinate moments in the accomplishment of God's revelation, then they are so in God's eternal essence as well.[12]

> That the distinctiveness of Father and Son is a distinction in the essence of God himself is the beginning point for the doctrine of the Trinity systematically as well as historically.[13]

> The Spirit ... [is] a person over against the Son and the Father, because he leads us to glorify the Son and the Father, and thus demonstrates himself to be distinct from both.[14]

And there can be no suspicion that these are proof-texts, since within *JGM* there is also a whole subsection entitled 'The Unity in the Trinity'.[15]

Furthermore, the doctrine of the Trinity is not just present in Pannenberg's early work, but it is also operative in a way that presages its later importance in *ST*. For instance, in *The Apostles Creed in the Light of Today's Questions*, the work of Pannenberg's early career that most resembles a mini-systematics, he writes:

> Is the description of God as Father not an obvious reflection of a patriarchal order of society? And if that is the case, can this word still be considered the natural expression of our experience of God in the altered

10. (London: SCM, 1968) (hereafter *JGM*).
11. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), p. 219.
12. *JGM*, p. 180.
13. *JGM*, p. 169.
14. *JGM*, p. 179.
15. *JGM*, pp. 179–83.

> conditions of present-day society? In answering such questions we must first notice that the creed does not simply make the baptismal candidate state that God is his Father; it talks about the Father *per se*, namely the Father of Jesus of Nazareth. Accordingly it is not, primarily speaking, important whether we can most appropriately talk about God in relation to ourselves through the image of fatherhood; the name 'Father' identifies the God about whom the creed is talking as the God of Jesus.[16]

Contra Burhenn, then, the Trinity *is* structurally significant to his theology.

Of course, as we shall see, there is expansion and development in what Pannenberg has to say about the Trinity. And there is not the same detail in the presentation in 1961 as there is in the *ST* of 30 years later. It is nonetheless the case, however, that the Trinity is present at each stage of Pannenberg's theological development, and significantly so.

Why focus primarily on Systematic Theology?

It is wrong to say that Pannenberg did not always hold to the doctrine of the Trinity, nor was he unconcerned about trinitarian theology and only later adopted it as something wholly new. he did not just discover the Trinity in 1981 when he wrote that piece for *Christian Century*, nor does his later work on the Trinity represent a fundamental change of orientation to his theology. Having said this, as we investigate Pannenberg's understanding of the triune God we shall nevertheless have as our primary focus the latter period of his theology. In particular we shall devote most attention to his *ST*, which is the culmination and comprehensive treatment of the topics that have occupied Pannenberg throughout his theological career. We offer three reasons in particular for this choice.

First, *ST* gives the most complete and detailed presentation of Pannenberg's trinitarian doctrine of God. When Pannenberg handles the topic of the Trinity elsewhere than in *ST*, the treatments are either brief remarks or sections within books devoted to a quite different topic, or articles that address particular issues within trinitarian theology. In neither case is there the sustained attention accorded the Trinity in *ST* chapter 5. Often what we have in those other sources can nuance or supplement this primary account, but to understand the doctrine that shapes that 'most trinitarian of theologies' it is to *ST* we must go.

Second, *ST* comes at the conclusion of the development of Pannenberg's trinitarian thought. As we have already noted, to say that the Trinity is present in Pannenberg's later theology but absent in his earlier work is inaccurate. To say instead that there is a development and increasing

16. *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions* (London: SCM, 1972), p. 31 (hereafter *AC*).

prominence of the Trinity in Pannenberg's theology when one compares the earlier and later writings is closer to the mark.

That there has been such a development is evident from Pannenberg's own autobiographical remarks. He says that since his appointment as professor of systematic theology in 1958, 'In my experience the most difficult subject to deal with was the doctrine of God'. he continues, that although he had addressed the question of God in a number of his earlier publications,

> In fact, not until the early 1980s did I begin to feel solid ground under my feet in this area ... It is only in a little book on metaphysics and in the first volume of my systematic theology ... that I have published an argument that deals with the idea of God in its own right. Everything else, however, remains insecure in theology, before one has made up one's mind on the doctrine of God.[17]

What are the developments that led to this confidence in treating the doctrine of God? There is barely any suggestion explicitly given within Pannenberg's written works, and we must await either further comment from Pannenberg or the results of future research for further clarity on the matter. Nevertheless, we note at least two developments that specifically affect the presentation of the trinitarian God, rather than the doctrine of God in general, which contributed to this increased confidence in approaching the task of a comprehensive systematic theology.

The first is his understanding of the mutual dependence of the trinitarian persons. In a recent article, 'Divine Economy and the Immanent Trinity', Pannenberg writes of a dilemma he had faced in trinitarian thought. Western and idealist treatments of the Trinity seemed to him to exhibit

> a one-way traffic from the Father to Son and Spirit, a conception that easily gives the impression of an ontological subordination of Son and Spirit to the Father. There is certainly an *ethical* subordination of the Son in his obedience to the Father, and in a similar way the Spirit glorifies, not himself, but the Son and the Father, but there is no ontological inferiority on the part of the Son and the Spirit as compared to the Father. Does not that require that as the Son and the Spirit are dependent on the Father, so also the Father [should] be dependent on his Son and the Spirit, though not in the same way?[18]

In part Pannenberg had already guarded against this as early as *JGM* by adopting the concept 'self-distinction' to express the Son's difference from the Father such that both persons are active subjects, rather than just the

17. 'An Autobiographical Sketch', in C.E. Braaten and P. Clayton (eds), *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Responses* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), p. 16 (hereafter 'Autobiographical Sketch').

18. Pp. 2–3 (hereafter 'DEIT').

Father. But this further step of seeing an ontological dependence to exist *reciprocally* between the persons only appears in Pannenberg's later work.[19]

Pannenberg himself states that it was John Zizioulas, who had called his attention to Athanasius' argument in the first treatise *Against the Arians.* There Athanasius states that even the Father would not be Father without the Son, even venturing 'to say that Jesus' claim that he is the truth and the life implies that he is the truth and the life of even the Father himself, so that the Father would have no truth and no life, if he were without the Son'. This enabled Pannenberg to achieve a new emphasis on the mutuality in the personal relations within the Trinity. Therefore, 'the Fatherhood of God depends on there being a Son. This seems to entail that even the divinity of the Father is not independent of his relationship to his Son.'[20]

The second development is his appropriation of field theory to explain the being and action of the triune God. In *ST* there are two primary ways in which Pannenberg uses notions of field taken from modern science. The first is to provide a concept of the divine essence as spirit that does not understand it in terms of the human mind. Field theory is used to articulate a concept of the divine being that avoids the allegedly modalizing drift of intellectual notions of spirituality in favour of one that does not threaten the divine Trinity. This first use will be taken up in our second chapter on Pannenberg's trinitarian understanding of the divine essence and attributes. The second is to explain the work of the Holy Spirit in creation. Pannenberg thinks that the concept of field is better suited than that of mind to explicate how the third divine person is active in the created realm, i.e., how he is neither dualistically set against the natural order nor materialistically made part of it. This second use of field theory, and its use in explicating a trinitarian doctrine of creation, will be taken up in our third chapter.

Although this thesis will frequently refer to Pannenberg's earlier works, it is right for our primary focus to be on the works published since the 1980s, when he began to feel 'solid ground'. What we have in the years leading up to *ST* is an increasing concern, focus, and ability to write an extended and in-depth theology with the trinitarian God at the centre. With *ST*, therefore, we see the culmination of Pannenberg's interest in and thinking on the Trinity.

The third reason for our specific focus on *ST* is that it, more than Pannenberg's other writings, shows how the Trinity fits within and shapes the rest of Christian theology. his other major works do include references to the Trinity, but mostly they remain fairly brief. Even after 1981 the two most substantial works other than ST devote little direct attention to the doctrine. In *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* there are a few short

19. The reciprocity of the triune relations is clearly set out at least as early as *Metaphysics and the Idea of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 40–41.

20. 'DEET', p. 3. Pannenberg refers to Athanasius *Contra Arianos* 1.14, 20, 29, 34.

remarks, although there is also an interesting short passage we shall investigate later that suggests social trinitarianism.[21] In *Metaphysics and the Idea of God* there is a short critique of certain Western and idealist views of the Trinity,[22] but not much else. What influence on the presentation the doctrine of the Trinity has in these works can be no more than implicit. For an explicit presentation of Pannenberg's trinitarian thought we must turn to *ST*. Just as its chapter 5, 'The Trinitarian God', represents the most sustained and detailed of all Pannenberg's treatments of the Trinity, so also chapters 6 to 15 demonstrate a more rigorously trinitarian outworking of his theological programme than do any of his other publications.

What, then, is the structure and argument of this study as a whole? Broadly speaking, there are three parts to it. There is this introduction in which we outline our general approach to Pannenberg. We not only introduce the topic and set out the basic outlines of the subsequent chapter. We also argue for a reading of Pannenberg, whose centre is to be found above all in his doctrine of God, and whose reliance on German idealism is not as great as many other commentators have suggested.

The longest section of this study comprises chapters 1 to 8, which deal with the content and use of the doctrine of the Trinity following the structure of *ST*. We devote the first chapter of our study, 'Pannenberg's Doctrine of the Trinity', to the treatment of the Trinity outlined in *ST* chapter 5 and in other places. The subsequent chapters trace how the rest of Pannenberg's theology is affected by his understanding of the triune God. In general we follow the order and content of the rest of *ST*. So, for instance, our second chapter, 'Pannenberg's Trinitarian Doctrine of God's Essence and Attributes', corresponds to *ST* chapter 6, 'The Unity and Attributes of the Divine Essence', and our eighth chapter, 'Pannenberg's Trinitarian Doctrine of the Final Consummation', to *ST* chapter 15, 'The Consummation of Creation in the Kingdom of God'. The intervening chapters deal with creation, anthropology, christology, soteriology and ecclesiology from the point of view of the Trinity. The emphasis in this second part is on both the explication of Pannenberg's trinitarian theology and critical analysis of the positions he adopts.

The final part of this study is the 'Conclusion', which both summarizes the content of the second section and, on the basis of our findings, evaluates in what ways and to what extent Pannenberg has succeeded and failed to offer a theology more trinitarian than any other.

21. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) (hereafter *ATP*). See esp. pp. 183–84, 235–37, 484. The apparent social trinitarianism is most evident on p. 531, and will be treated in chapter 4.
22. Pp. 39ff. (hereafter *MIG*).

What Is the Special Contribution of This *Study in Particular?*

In addition to the reading of Pannenberg adopted here and the various theological judgements made of his work that are given during the course of the presentation, broadly speaking there are three ways in which this study aims to make a contribution to contemporary systematic theology. In particular it seeks to develop the field of Pannenberg studies by offering the first work in English of this length devoted exclusively to his trinitarian thought and by suggesting a particular reading of his theology, and to contribute to the field of contemporary trinitarian theology in one important respect.

1. *A comprehensive treatment of Pannenberg's mature trinitarian thought*

There already exist several treatments of Pannenberg's doctrine of the Trinity, which fall into four broad types. First, there are works, which, though not devoted to Pannenberg specifically, discuss his thought within a more wide-ranging study of trinitarian theology in general. Ted Peters' *God as Trinity* and John Thompson's *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, for example, fit this category.[23] Second, there are works that offer an overview of Pannenberg's theology, which do treat his trinitarian thought, but only as part of a general treatment. Examples of this group include Stanley Grenz's *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*,[24] Frank Tupper's *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*[25] and Christiaan Mostert's *God and the Future: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Eschatological Doctrine of God*,[26] as well as two shorter contributions by Christoph Schwöbel.[27] Third, there are articles devoted to expositing aspects of Pannenberg's trinitarianism. There are a large number of such articles, probably the most interesting of which are Anselm Min's 'The Dialectic of Divine Love: Pannenberg's Hegelian Trinitarianism'[28] and Juan Martinez-

23. T.E. Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in the Divine Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), esp. pp. 135–44 and 166–68, and J. Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. pp. 34–36 and 136–39.

24. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

25. (London: SCM, 1974).

26. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002).

27. 'Rational Theology in Trinitarian Perspective: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Trinitarian Theology', in *JTS* (October 1996), pp. 498–527 and 'Wolfhart Pannenberg', in D. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the 20th Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, both the 1989 and 1997 editions).

28. In *IJST* 6/3 (July 2004), pp. 252–69.

Camino's 'Wechselseitige Selbstunterscheidung? Zur Trinitätslehre W. Pannenbergs'.[29]

The fourth and final group is of those books that are largely devoted to discussing Pannenberg's trinitarian thought. Two such books have been published in continental Europe over recent years. They are Michael Schulz's *Sein und Trinität*[30] and Klaus Vechtel's *Trinität und Zukunft.*[31] The former is an immense work which covers a number of Christian thinkers in detail, including Pannenberg, and the latter a study with a more limited focus on Pannenberg's philosophy and how it relates to his doctrine of the Trinity. We shall have occasion to use both these works in our presentation, but our study has a different aim. For one thing, it tends to be rather more sympathetic to passages within Pannenberg that to Schulz and Vechtel appear to offer a deterministic picture of God and suggest a residual Hegelianism. In this regard, we refer to Pannenberg's own published defence against their criticisms, 'Divine Economy and the Immanent Trinity'. For another, both works are content just to study the doctrine of the Trinity outlined in *ST* chapter 5, rather than to investigate how Pannenberg develops a comprehensive trinitarian theology covering the whole sweep of the divine economy.

Within English theology the last significant book-length treatment was Timothy Bradshaw's *Trinity and Ontology: A Comparative Study of the Theologies of Karl Barth and Wolfhart Pannenberg*,[32] which we must also include within this fourth category. Admittedly, this is a work that dedicates roughly equal attention to the trinitarian theologies of Barth and Pannenberg, but it is nonetheless a detailed analysis of Pannenberg's trinitarian thought. The chief drawback to using Bradshaw's work as a guide to Pannenberg's trinitarian thought is that it predates the publication of *ST*, written as it was in the mid-1980s.[33]

There presently exists, therefore, no book-length treatment of Pannenberg's trinitarian theology in English that is up to date.

2. *A particular reading of Pannenberg's theology*

In addition to providing a fuller understanding of Pannenberg's theology, we also offer a particular interpretation of it. What we have to say about his

29. In H.L. Ollig *et al.* (eds), *Reflektierter Glaube* (Frankfurt: Hänsel-Hohenbach, 1999), pp. 131–49.

30. (St Ottilien: EOS Verlag Erzabtei, 1997).

31. (Frankfurt: Knecht, 2001).

32. (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

33. This book was the result of Bradshaw's doctoral research, which was first published under the same title by Rutherford House Books in 1988, and whose writing predates the publication of *ST* volume 1 and the discussion of the Trinity therein. The 1992 work shows no substantial alteration to the 1988 publication.

trinitarian theology arises from definite understandings of the general thrust of Pannenberg's theology and its relation to other streams of contemporary thought. In particular, we note two areas in which our study hopes to offer some general guidelines to interpreting Pannenberg's work. These are, first, the question of the organizing centre of Pannenberg's theology, and second, the issue of Pannenberg's indebtedness to idealist thought, especially Hegel.

Already within secondary literature on Pannenberg's theology there has been debate on its key theme or topic. The risk of such a strategy is to put the complex thought of an intricate and nuanced thinker into the straightjacket of a rather rigid concept or narrow agenda, and readers of Pannenberg can be grateful to Shults for highlighting false trails of commentators' attempts to find the lynch-pin of his thought.[34] Notwithstanding such reservations, however, attempts to delineate something like an organizing centre to Pannenberg's thought can help the reader penetrate into the heart of his theological project and offer insight into his deepest concerns.

The key theme or concern at the centre of Pannenberg's theology, in our view, is the doctrine of God. One should see Pannenberg's whole *ST* as a detailed and articulate statement of the centrality of God, the Christian God, for understanding the world, our place in it and its salvation in the work of Jesus Christ. For as he writes in the first volume, 'God is the one all-embracing theme of theology as also of faith. Neither has any other theme beside him' (1.59).

The centrality of God is a point that Pannenberg makes in many places, but it is made most pithily in *IST*. 'In theology', he writes, 'the concept of God can never be simply one issue among others. It is the central issue, around which everything else is organized. If you take away that one issue nothing would be left to justify the continuation of that special effort that we call "theology".' It was central for the message of Jesus which otherwise 'might at best be remembered as a somewhat eccentric contribution to the cultural history of mankind. But without the reality of God, Jesus' teaching would be deprived of its core.' The same applies to the church, for 'though churches might continue as institutions that offer cheap substitutes for psychotherapy and occasions for moralistic advocacy and exhortation' their ongoing existence and importance rests ultimately on the strength of their truth claims. And this is no less true for theology. Pannenberg continues:

> The reality of God is crucial if one is serious in talking about a specific calling of the church as well as of a special task assigned to theology. Therefore, the concept of God cannot be exchanged for other concepts. It needs interpretation, but it is not a metaphor for something else, nor a symbol to express the changing desires of our human hearts, though

34. F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); see especially introduction and chapter 1.

> certainly an entire dimension of what it means to be human falls into oblivion where the word 'God' disappears.[35]

That theology needs to take up this task can be seen, Pannenberg argues, by viewing the situation of contemporary society and the contemporary church. In society there has been increasing scepticism about both the worth or meaning of the term 'God'. In Pannenberg's opinion,

> the word 'God' is not taken for granted, or if so, it is taken as a token of religious language, valid only within the enclave of religious discourse. The word is not self-evident as pointing to the ultimate reality that embraces, governs, judges, and explains everything else. The spirit of secularism keeps in suspense whether there is any such ultimate reality.[36]

And in the church, too, there is a 'more serious problem'. For,

> many in the clergy seem to feel insecure about the reality of God, and consequently they are even more desperate to adapt their message to the changing mood of the time ... Within the setting of a secularist culture it is even more important than in a religiously informed culture to urge the ultimate reality of God upon the hearts and minds of the people, and there are no other agents to do it than the preacher and the theologian.[37]

This is the challenge for the contemporary Western church as it lives in and against the surrounding culture. 'To insist upon the ultimate reality of God and its rightful claims upon our lives is to compensate for the basic deficiency in secular culture rather than to comply with its spirit .... .Thus the theologian is required to restate the doctrine of God in terms of rational argument.'[38] What we see in *ST*, we contend, is an example of a theologian restating the doctrine of God in terms of rational argument, speaking to and for the church in a society that senses God is absent.

This restatement of the doctrine of God requires some hard thinking in the face of a number of difficulties. Pannenberg mentions two in *IST*. The one is that 'the concept of God which was developed by medieval and early modern theology in close contact with classical metaphysics is in need of rather radical revision'. And the other is that 'the theological effort that reconstructing the Christian doctrine of God has to meet is the desolate state of metaphysics in modern philosophy'.[39] Given such concerns, we should not be surprised by the importance of philosophical treatments of the concept of God for Pannenberg's theology, or by his efforts to offer some initial concepts or criteria for the truthfulness of any God-talk, as he seems to offer in the early chapters of *ST*. This is part of his prescription for

35. Pp. 21–22.
36. P. 22.
37. P. 22.
38. Pp. 22–23.
39. P. 22.

the spiritual ills of modern Western society, but it is also suffering from neglect by theologians within that society. In modern theology (unlike earlier generations), he thinks, such rigorous conceptual argument 'has often been disregarded or even openly dismissed, to the detriment of the intellectual seriousness of the theological argument'.[40]

Our topic here, Pannenberg's doctrine of the Trinity, is part of 'a revised doctrine of God',[41] which he offers to modern Western society and to the modern Western church. So if, as we claim, the doctrine of God lies at the very centre of Pannenberg's theological enterprise, his doctrine of the Trinity is therefore to be accorded a place of high importance. It does not have the highest importance, since the doctrine of the Trinity is part of Pannenberg's doctrine of God and does not exhaust it, so there does exist the risk of exaggerating its significance. Another book would be required to deal with that topic. Nevertheless, as the Trinity occupies a pivotal and central position within this revised doctrine of God, the subject of our study here is nonetheless very important in getting to the heart of Pannenberg's theology.

To risk offering an over-simplification, we may say that the basic message of *ST* is that the trinitarian God is the true God. There are at least two ways in which this is so. Firstly, the trinitarian God is the true God, since from his revelation of himself in Jesus Christ we know that the one God is the Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit, and it is as such that he is the power that determines the world and everything in it. Second, the trinitarian God is the true God, since 'only the doctrine of the Trinity could basically clarify the question of the union and tension between transcendence and immanence' (1.415). According to Pannenberg, 'imagining God as a *merely* transcendent being *also* mistakes him for a finite reality'. If he is really to be the infinite God, he cannot be understood as the opposite of finitude, and thus be imprisoned in his transcendence. Rather, he says, 'the reality of God is not simply set over against the finite, but at the same time contains it in itself'.[42] It might be difficult to resolve this issue of God's infinity with a divine monad, but, 'The doctrine of the Trinity made it possible ... to link the transcendence of the Father in heaven with his presence in believers through the Son and Spirit' (1.415).

Since the centrality of God is, in our view, the organizing centre of Pannenberg's theology, in his eyes alternative theologies fail at this point. What sets the agenda for them – or at least, there is the risk of this – is ultimately not God, but some human conception. For this reason Pannenberg cannot follow some dominant lines of modern thought. An

40. Pp. 24–25.
41. P. 25.
42. *GST2*, p. 140.

important instance for his doctrine of God is his increasing distance from German Idealism. he writes,

> It is only since the early 1980s that the limitations of Kant's critique became clear in my understanding. At the same time, while writing my anthropology book, I became more confident that the principle of self-conscious subjectivity need not be accepted as the final basis of every discussion of metaphysics, as was the case in the entire tradition of German idealism.

Even on the philosophical level, then, German idealism is not the only matrix within which to understand Pannenberg's thought.[43]

A similar emphasis is evident not just in his philosophical judgements, but in his theological judgements too. Insofar as they fail to put God in the centre, this is the problem with many modern treatments of Christian doctrine which make religion, and therefore subjective belief, the basis of dogmatics.[44] 'Then', he writes 'it could become a question whether one would ever arrive at a concept of God as [the] proper subject of theology.'[45] It is also the problem with Barth, since in his case 'the foundation of theology is still anthropocentric, because it is based on a subjective decision'.[46] It is the problem too with German idealism's conceptions of the Trinity, including Hegel's, that view the Trinity after the model of the human consciousness.[47] That Pannenberg can find fault here with Hegel takes us to our next point.

We now take up the second general guideline to Pannenberg interpretation. This study will tend to lay less emphasis on the influence of philosophical idealism on Pannenberg's thought. In Bradshaw's work, for instance, German philosophical idealism is said to be the important context for understanding Pannenberg's trinitarian thought, as it is for Barth's also.

43. This may well have a lot to do with the reading of Descartes that he has held in recent years, which is also a possible candidate for the developments in Pannenberg's theology that has enabled his more sustained focus on the doctrine of God. Following some French interpreters, Pannenberg understands Descartes' approach not as the basing of all certainty on the human ego, but on the Infinite without which we cannot conceive anything finite. Such an interpretation fits with Pannenberg's own concern that divine reality, i.e. the Infinite, should be at the centre of our view of the world rather than human consciousness. This interpretation of Descartes has been outlined in a number of works dating from the mid-1980s; e.g., *MIG*, ch. 2, 'The Problem of the Absolute', pp. 22–42, *ST* 1.83ff., 113ff., 350ff., and *Theologie und Philosophie: Ihr Verhältnis im Lichte ihrer gemeinsamen Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996) (hereafter *TuP*), pp. 142–56. A more extended reading of Descartes along these lines can be found in P. Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 51–144.

44. See 1.26–48.

45. 'Theology Examines its Status and Methodology', unpublished paper, p. 1.

46. Ibid., p. 2. This same problem afflicts Barth's doctrine of the Trinity in Pannenberg's view. See 1.296 and *Problemgeschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie in Deutschland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1997), pp. 176–204.

47. 1.294ff.

For Bradshaw, 'such areas of similarity' between Pannenberg and Barth 'stem from a common influence exercised by the idealist tradition'.[48] 'There is no doubt', he writes, 'that Pannenberg's theology does not belong to the family of Process theology, but to the subtler school of absolute idealism.'[49]

In particular Pannenberg has often been termed a Hegelian. Again we cite Bradshaw, who states 'Pannenberg claims to renew Hegel's thought',[50] a remark whose context in *Trinity and Ontology* would seem to be a general description of his theological programme. And again we seek to question the ease with which Pannenberg's interpreters apply this epithet. Throughout the following exposition we shall come across elements of Pannenberg's theology that either adopt some of Hegel's ideas or at least make significant reference to them. We shall also come across aspects of Pannenberg's thinking which have been termed 'Hegelian' inaccurately. Given the frequency with which this claim is made, we should devote some detailed attention to the validity of this epithet when used of Pannenberg's theology, especially his trinitarian thought.

As a preliminary point, we should remember from earlier remarks that Pannenberg says he became increasingly aware that 'the entire tradition of German idealism' was wrong to posit self-conscious subjectivity as the foundation of all metaphysical schemes. This, at the very least, should arouse suspicion about calling Pannenberg either an 'idealist' or a 'Hegelian'. Yet we should be more than merely suspicious about the frequency of this classification of Pannenberg's theology.

Much of Pannenberg's theological development took place in Heidelberg, where from the years 1950 to 1958 he completed both his doctorate and Habilitationsschrift, and gave lectures. In discussing this period in an autobiographical piece, Pannenberg deals directly with the idea that he is a Hegelian. This is worth quoting in full:

> My lecture courses at Heidelberg were repeatedly devoted to the history of medieval theology and I could easily have continued in that particular field for the rest of my life. But I also had to teach courses concerned with the Lutheran Reformation and, especially, with the modern history of Protestant theology. It was *in this connection* that I came to appreciate the importance of Hegel's thought in the development of modern theology, but mainly as a challenge to theology. *I never became a Hegelian*, but I decided that theology has to be developed on at least the same level of sophistication as Hegel's philosophy and *for that purpose* I studied his writings carefully and repeatedly. Because my publications also gave evidence of this, the tenacious prejudice of my alleged Hegelianism

48. P. 1.
49. P. 343.
50. P. 337.