

Ted Peters, "Pannenberg's Eschatological Ethics,"
The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg, eds., Carl E.
Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 239-265.

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PANNENBERG'S ESCHATOLOGICAL ETHICS

Ted Peters



As we approach the dawn of the third millenium we strain to see what the first rays of new light will reveal about our future. Our apocalyptic anxiety engenders the fear that we will create our own artificial light—a temporary thermonuclear light—which may shortly plunge us back into an oblivion of darkness. And, if we are successful at postponing such a holocaust, we still fear that we may stumble on in a self-inflicted darkness that hides the hovels of the poor, covers over the scars of oppression, disguises the tyranny of an exploitative economic order, and camouflages the forces that make for injustice.

These concerns, combined with the ecological concerns which the Club of Rome a decade and a half ago dubbed the *world problematique*, have produced a contemporary consciousness that is global, pluralistic, wholistic, futuristic, and apocalyptic. Our consciousness is *global* because we realize that the economy and safety of every location in the world are interdependent, that a major upheaval in one land necessarily affects life everywhere. It is *pluralistic* because of the rising tide of a sense of entitlement, the spreading conviction that ethnic and cultural traditions have a right to extend themselves without the domination of a single cultural or political empire. As the flip side of pluralism, our

consciousness is *wholistic*, because we recognize that the protection of one group's integrity is incumbent upon all groups, and that all together make for a richer whole. It is *futuristic* because we recognize the open-endedness of events and because we believe that creative action by the present generation can lead to something new and better in the decades to come. Finally, it is *apocalyptic*, because what might happen could be of ultimate significance to the future of the human race and perhaps even to life in general on our planet. Ours is a time calling for serious thinking about matters ethical and political, about ultimate values and social commitments, about the will of God and the deeds of humanity. Christians along with all other people of good will need to ponder the theory and inspire the action appropriate to the challenges of the 21st century.

What we need today are ethical sanctions which justify as well as inspire the call to a future-oriented, global-oriented co-creatorship. By the term *sanction* here we mean something close to what Amos Wilder does, namely, an intersubjective consideration, tacit or expressed, which enforces a moral imperative.¹ In other words, a sanction provides the reason for pursuing what is good while defining what is good. The fundamental biblical imperative is no secret: love God and neighbor. This imperative, which Jesus calls the two great commandments, is no matter of personal taste. Nor is it an obligation enjoined only upon those individuals who happen to have chosen to follow Jesus. It is an imperative enjoined upon us all. What is its sanction? We will suggest here that the command and paradoxical freedom to love creatively are grounded in—and sanctioned by—God's promise for the consummate fulfillment of all things.

What we need, then, is an eschatological grounding for ethics which, on the one hand, takes seriously the contributions of human activity in mundane history while, on the other hand, affirming that eschatological salvation is a free act of God which comes to us as a gift regardless of human contributions to it. We need in addition a universal ethical vision with compelling power, an inspiring vision which in itself calls for and enlists the support of people of good will.

1. Amos N. Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper, 1939, 1950).

Our thesis here is that, of the contemporary alternatives, the proleptic eschatology of Wolfhart Pannenberg most adequately serves to establish the foundation for such an ethical vision. It is more adequate than a more disjunctive eschatology, such as that of John Howard Yoder, because the Pannenberg approach affirms human effort aimed directly at the secular world and is not limited to the church alone. It is also more adequate than the strictly conjunctive eschatology of John Cobb which, because it lops off the consummate end to history, vicescerates the power of the symbol of God's kingdom to sanction ethical commitment. It is also more adequate than the combination conjunctive-disjunctive eschatology of the liberation theologians, because the Pannenberg approach better takes into account the global and wholistic dimensions of political intentions. I will also suggest in passing that Pannenberg's ethics provides much more support for the revolutionary agenda of liberation theology than his critics or even Pannenberg himself will normally admit. It is to the basic structure of Pannenberg's ethics that we first turn.

THE HEART OF PANNENBERG'S ARGUMENT

Pannenberg works with an axiological ethic, a theory of the ground of value. The fundamental problem is to establish the ground for valuing independently from the arbitrariness of subjective preference. We need an ontological foundation for ethics. What this means is that we need to locate the point of convergence between the source of the good and the source of being. The point of such a convergence for any Christian theologian, of course, is going to be God. It is God who determines both what is and also what is good.

That convergence cannot be located in the present state of being, however. What exists now is not itself good. We are constantly seeking for what is good, for a good which we at present do not have. Socrates even defined the good as that which all people lack and after which they strive. Present being is not good enough. We must go beyond. The source of the good is transcendent. Where Pannenberg takes us is to the future which transcends the present. The being of the future has a priority over everything extant. It is the future of God which determines the good.

His [God's] rule, and therefore the full revelation of his existence too, is still future. This corresponds to the futurity of the good which is not conclusively possessed but always the object of our striving. Thus it may be asserted that God, as identical with the coming of his imminent Kingdom, is the concrete embodiment of the good. This good has priority over against all human striving for the good. In this sense the Kingdom of God defines the ultimate horizon for all ethical statements.²

Pannenberg's next step is to move from the transcendent source of being and goodness in the future to the situation in the present. The present is slated for transformation. God loves the world. So do we. "The striving for God as the ultimate good beyond the world is turned into concern for the world."³ It is God's intention to transform the world through his rule of the world. The most constructive consequence of such an ethic is the Christian idea of love which affirms the present world while seeking its transformation. The individual moves beyond the pale of his or her own personal happiness in the present, realizing that the fulfillment of the individual is interdependent with the fulfilling of the whole of creation. Pannenberg calls this a "conversion to the world."

Pannenberg stresses that our love for the world participates in God's love for the world. Loving God and loving the world are not two separate things. Pannenberg's ontology seeks to correct a past error here. In the past Christians have been tempted to think of God as a transcendent *being*, an entity which exists in some heavenly realm separate from the world in which we live. When God is so conceived, ethicists can speak of a "vertical" love for God in combination with a second love, a "horizontal" love, which we have for one another. This is a mistake. We can remedy this mistake by conceiving of God proper as God's rule. Pannenberg identifies the being of God with the coming kingdom or rule of God. By loving one another and by loving our world now, we are actually participating in the transforming power of God's rule, of God's love.

2. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Kingdom of God and the Foundation of Ethics," in *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 111. Cf. *Ethics*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 181.

3. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 111.

We need more clearly to see that love for fellowmen is participation in God's love; that is to say, love for fellowmen is participation in the coming Kingdom of God. The priority of God's coming Kingdom and the possibility of our participating in the coming Kingdom is, properly understood, the meaning of grace.⁴

This means that the absolute good transcends the relative good as the ultimate future transcends the dynamic present. The way we express our love and participate in God's love, then, is to throw ourselves into what is temporal, changing, and provisional. Commitment to what is provisional is essential to Christian faith in the coming kingdom of God. To withhold such a commitment because we are waiting for something transcendent would mean betraying the kingdom. And yet it is the special contribution of the eschatological understanding of the yet outstanding kingdom that it does not allow for any particular social institution to become absolute. Everything we accomplish and appreciate now is provisional. It is subject to transformation by a still higher good. This wipes away the ground for any conservatism which seeks to maintain the established order at all cost. The futurity of God's rule actually serves to open up possibilities for ethical action while still denying any human institution the glory of perfection which might warrant its making an absolute claim on us for obedience. The kingdom of God, just because it is eschatological, draws us beyond the present state of being and prohibits the claim to totalitarian rule by any temporal dictator.

These qualities of openness and provisionality serve to give love a dynamic and creative character. There is no divine law or moral code which can in advance delineate what a loving person ought to do. Loving is not conforming. It is creating. Pannenberg says that love involves "creative imagination." While commenting on the question in Luke 10 which led to Jesus' telling of the parable of the good Samaritan, "Who is my neighbor?" Pannenberg says we should not simply wait around for our neighbors to show up and identify themselves. We should be going out to create new neighbors.⁵ Love is

4. *Ibid.*, 113.

5. Pannenberg, *Ethics*, 65.

creative and aggressive and ever seeking new ways to cultivate domains of communal wholeness.⁶ "True love nurtures wholeness," he writes.⁷

This leads, then, to what we are calling a *proleptic ethic*. It is an ethic of anticipation, participation, and creation. We begin by recognizing that God loves the world with a creative communion. We participate in this communion of creative transformation. God loves with a "creative love which supports all creatures, grants them their limited duration, and brings them to fulfillment of life by relating them to one another. . . . His love is creating unity, the particular unities which go to make up the individual, and the unities which integrate individuals in society. . . . If a particular action springs from the spirit of creative love and contributes to individual and social integration, unity, and peace, then that particular action expresses the spirit of God's Kingdom."⁸ When we as parts contribute to the harmony of the whole, we participate anticipatorily in the unity which all things will ultimately find in the eschatological kingdom of God. Ethical action in the present is proleptic in structure.

PROLEPTIC POLITICS

This has implications for politics. Citing Plato and Aristotle, Pannenberg holds that the human being is a "political" animal; and he agrees with Reinhold Niebuhr that the human community is primordial.⁹ This corresponds appropriately to his belief that the eschatological kingdom of God will be as wide as the creation. It will be inclusive and unitive. It will not give priority to the interests of the individual person or the individual nation over against those of the whole community. A foundational principle of Pannenberg's political ethics is that the unity of the human race corresponds to the universality of the one God. This

6. Pannenberg analyzes Jesus' golden rule (Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31) to show how it is rooted in divine love; then he argues that the religious foundation for ethics is laid when this love produces our readiness for community.

7. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 118.

8. *Ibid.*, 117f.

9. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 445. "Human beings are indeed destined for a social life, and only in society can they live in a way that accords with their destiny. Their destiny is therefore in fact political . . ." (*ibid.*, 476).

means that the global human community is given priority over national, ethnic, and class interests.

Hence, concern for the commonweal, understood primarily in terms of peace and justice,¹⁰ ought to be elevated above the sovereignty of the people. The common good takes precedence over what any individual might perceive to be his or her own private good. It takes precedence over the programs of special-interest groups. "Politicians must have the courage to recognize the difference between the wishes of the people, even of a majority of the people, and the common good. . . . In its relevance to a particular social situation, the Kingdom of God is manifest in the common good."¹¹

On this basis Pannenberg pits nationalism over against internationalism. He strongly favors the latter. Nationalism divides. Internationalism unites and thereby corresponds anticipatorily to the universal unity indicative of the coming kingdom of God.

It has been the distinctive message of Jesus that the coming Kingdom of God as something future is already determining the present. In the light of the originally political nature of the hope for the Kingdom, this must hold true also for political life, and not only for the private life of Christians. And in political life the supreme concern will be the quest for a universal order of peace and justice.¹²

Concomitant with his stress on a *universal* rather than just a local or national order of peace and justice, Pannenberg finds theological support for the concept of democracy and its ethical ideals of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité*. Democracy is inherently universal in its conception, because it is based upon the dignity and rights of individuals regardless of their respective ethnic history or national citizenship. Even though empirically we can see that many people in our world today do not in fact enjoy freedom and equality, we recognize that such is their God-appointed destiny. All "are called to a freedom and equality

10. "There is a correspondence between the justice of the state and the divine will to justice, the definitive accomplishment of which Christians await in the future of the reign of God" (ibid., 449).

11. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 123.

12. Pannenberg, *Ethics*, 135.

before God, which is not yet present, but in which they believe."¹³ What this means for us ethically and politically is that when confronted with actual enslavement and inequality, we are called to work creatively to make freedom and equality a historical reality. "Equality in the Christian sense means that everyone should be raised up through participation in the highest human possibilities. Such equality must always be created; it is not already there."¹⁴ To pursue creatively the task of making freedom and equality an actuality gives expression to our sense of solidarity, our sense of brotherhood (*fraternité*), our sense of the oneness which the human race enjoys before God.

DISJUNCTION AND CONJUNCTION

One of the abiding questions raised by any eschatological theory which takes temporal movement seriously is the relationship between future and present. Is it disjunctive, i.e., will the ultimate future be so radically different from the present that there will be little or no continuity? Or is it conjunctive, i.e., will actions in the present have significance for the reality yet to come? If the relationship is totally or strictly disjunctive, then it would follow that present ethical actions would be irrelevant to God's future; eschatology could not function as a sanction for intrahistorical ethics. If the relationship is strictly conjunctive, then we could argue that present ethical actions would have a determining impact on what will ultimately come; but we would do so at the risk of collapsing eschatology into history and losing the salvific contribution of divine grace. There is no doubt that an ethic based upon Christian eschatology must affirm both. One of the merits of Pannenberg's proleptic eschatology is that he can affirm both in a healthy complementarity.

On the one hand, Pannenberg certainly assumes a disjunction. One of the constant themes throughout his work is the contrast between the future kingdom of God and present reality. He warns us not to confuse them. Present reality is at best provisional. It will not endure.

The human destiny of the individual can never be adequately fulfilled by the political order. The latter has but a provisional function: to ensure

13. *Ibid.*, 140.

14. *Ibid.*

a peaceful communal life for human beings. Human salvation, however, can only be awaited in the coming world of God, and any participation in that future world is mediated in the present life not by the state but only by the sacramental and symbolic communion of the church.¹⁵

Pannenberg argues that the church should exist as an institution independent of the state just so it can remind the state of its provisionality. No temporal power is ultimate. No present institution is eternal. The church must exist as a prophetic witness and critic, reminding us of the disjunction between the divine future and the human present.¹⁶

The above-cited statement needs some further interpretation, however. He says that participation in the future world is mediated to us in the present. It is mediated by the sacramental and communal life of the church. This is what motivates Pannenberg's passion for ecumenism. We should seek Christian unity, he argues vehemently, because such unity embodies ahead of time the same unity which will characterize the unity of humanity in the coming kingdom of God.¹⁷

It would seem from this quotation that participation in the future kingdom is not mediated by the state. Elsewhere, however, Pannenberg comes close to saying that nonecclesial social structures such as the body politic can in fact anticipate the eschatological kingdom of God. In particular, international political structures which correspond to the universal domain of divine lordship provide contemporary expression of God's kingdom. This is in contrast to the individual nation-state which tends to exalt itself and then in the arena of competing nation-states pursue domination. Nationalism is divisive; internationalism is unitive.

Neither the United States of Europe nor the transformation of the United Nations into an organization that truly transcends national sovereignty with specific supreme laws would finally usher in the Kingdom of God on earth. But it might well be the case that efforts should be made in

15. Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, 477.

16. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 377; and *Human Nature, Election, and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 31, 67, 81.

17. Pannenberg, *Ethics*, 19; *The Church*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 20f., 151f.

this direction which would lead to the form of the promised Kingdom of God that while still temporary, would be its best possible expression in our day.¹⁸

If this form of internationalism could count as the "best possible expression in our day" of the "promised Kingdom of God," then it appears that for Pannenberg there must be conjunction between eschatology and history, even secular history. The conjunction is proleptic in character. The point of prolepsis is that the future enters the present and exerts influence.¹⁹ The role prolepsis plays for Pannenberg is akin to that which the incarnation plays in classical theology. Its significance is that the holy has entered profane history and claimed it. Should there follow a radical disjunction in which the future departs completely from present history, then the incarnation would be erased. Therefore, we could argue, there must be at minimum a continuity between the historical Jesus Christ and the eschatological salvation which he came to effect. In addition, there must be some continuity with the tradition of the effects which Jesus has had on human history (*Überlieferungsgeschichte*). This would include, among other things, later developments in cultural ideals and ethical systems. It would include as well contemporary visions of a united humanity, of a single body politic for the whole world. This would seem to indicate that contemporary ethical behavior, influenced by the inspiration of Jesus which reaches us through the transmission of tradition, would have to have some eschatological significance.

Terms such as *consummation* and *fulfillment* would be appropriate for developing this notion of continuity. They indicate that the present is incomplete. It lacks its full quiddity. Present reality is provisional, awaiting something different. But that which we await is not a total departure but rather a completion of what has been started, a fulfillment of that for which we hope.

What concerns Pannenberg—and what should concern us—is the primary direction of causal efficacy. It is important for Pannenberg to observe that God's future has had and continues to have an impact

18. Pannenberg, *Ethics*, 136.

19. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 66, 206, 367; "The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth," in *Theology as History*, *New Frontiers in Theology* 3, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 125.

upon our present situation. The direction of force comes from the future. God's tomorrow will not be the mere product of what we humans do today. The political systems we create, the international peace we establish, the social justice we achieve and other such accomplishments will not in themselves bring the kingdom of God into existence. Rather than causing God's future, Pannenberg would have to say, such accomplishments are better thought of as effects of God's future. They at best anticipate a fullness which is yet outstanding. They participate proleptically in what is yet to come. By giving priority to the future, Pannenberg can preserve emphasis on the initiation of God, on divine grace.

DISJUNCTION: JOHN HOWARD YODER

On the contemporary theological scene there are alternative ways to conceive of the relationship between eschatology and ethics. Some tend more toward excessive disjunction and others more toward excessive conjunction. Mennonite John Howard Yoder, for example, tends to drive such a wedge between eschatological salvation and social ethics that the tie becomes severed.

Yoder advocates an ethic of discipleship. As disciples of Jesus we conform to the law of love and thereby participate in the divine reality of love. What is relevant about Yoder's view is that he understands discipleship eschatologically.

In his book *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder states that Jesus inaugurated the eschatological kingdom of God in his person. He brought the order of God's future aeon to bear on the present, but, according to Yoder, the order of God's rule is simply not comprehensible within our present aeon. The future and the present are fundamentally alien to one another. To be a disciple of Jesus, then, consists in embodying the new and strange amidst the old and familiar. It consists in radical obedience to God's future in direct conflict with all that the reality of the present world stands for. The church, which is made up of Jesus' disciples, becomes a deviant community. It does not complement the world. It contends against the world.

Yoder believes Jesus' disciples must make a hard choice between effectiveness and obedience. We cannot be effective in the present

world, he contends, because the present aeon is fundamentally and irredeemably opposed to the eschatological aeon. All that we can do is be obedient. All that we can do is exhibit our citizenship in the future city of God while living now in an alien land. This path will lead undoubtedly to social rejection and our own condemnation to the cross.

A significant corollary for Yoder is that as disciples of Jesus we should not attempt to guide the course of historical events. We should not employ coercive political action for the purpose of trying to create a better world. It is not our task to manage world affairs. In fact, only when we have been freed "from the compulsiveness of the vision of ourselves as the guardians of history" can we "see ourselves as participants in the loving nature of God as revealed in Christ." Because we are plagued by the "urge to manage the world" we are unable to recognize God's "invitation to a servant stance in society."²⁰ Yoder is serious about Christians playing the servant role, but as servants we are not supposed to guard, guide, or manage. Here we must pause to ask Yoder: How then should we serve? This question reveals a problem with Yoder's position.

There is a fallacy in Yoder's argument. It is the fallacy of false alternatives. On what grounds must we decide between management and servanthood? Is it not possible to engage in both? When Joseph served Pharaoh—a slave to the Egyptian king—he worked as an executive manager of court affairs. Joseph was a steward. The concept of steward in the time of Jesus incorporated the combination of servanthood and management, and stewardship is often used as a metaphor for the life of faith. We might even observe that management and servanthood imply one another. How can one be a servant unless one does something? What is the opposite of management? Mismanagement? Nonmanagement? Noninvolvement? Twiddling one's thumbs while letting someone else do it? What does servanthood mean if it takes no responsibility for the course of ordinary historical events? If servanthood consists solely in obedience to a future reality which is alien to the present aeon, then it eviscerates any sense of stewardship of present resources and responsibility for the wider society of which

20. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 248.

we are a part. Direct social or political action lacks an eschatological sanction.

In his more recent work, *The Priestly Kingdom*, Yoder argues that the reason we cannot manage the world is that we—members of the post-Constantinian church—are too small a group. We are a minority. We are impotent. Nevertheless, the church wishes to be “an instrument for serving and saving the larger culture.”²¹ The means for doing so is through a “modeling mission,” i.e., existing now in the form that the world will exist ultimately.²² There is a proleptic tone to what Yoder is proposing here, but it applies only to the company of Jesus’ disciples and is not understood as having any direct effect on the world. Whereas in Yoder’s earlier work we find the radical disjunction cast between future and present, here in his later work it is cast more as a disjunction between church and world.

The severity with which Yoder separates future from present seems to break the continuity between our obedient servanthood and the world around us which “God so loved” that he sent his Son into it. Much more amenable to what we are doing here is the work of James McClendon. McClendon follows Yoder in developing an eschatological ethic based upon the resurrection of Jesus, what he calls an “anastatic” ethic. Like Yoder he affirms the notion of the two aeons and the disjunction between Jesus’ resurrection and ordinary life in the present aeon. But McClendon does not stop here. He presses on to ask just what implications the eschatologically new reality has for our day-to-day responsibilities to the world of nature and to human society.²³ Like Yoder he starts with the church, but McClendon moves more directly toward our responsibilities for the social world.

The reason we need an approach which is distinctively proleptic is the recognition that, even though we are dealing with two otherwise discontinuous aeons, the new aeon has entered the old and has left an impact, the impact of divine love upon it. Yoder would agree with this in part. But where he would differ with Pannenberg is that for Yoder

21. John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11.

22. *Ibid.*, 92.

23. James William McClendon Jr., *Ethics*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 248-253, 266.

this proleptic impact belongs strictly to the church. For Pannenberg, in contrast, it belongs to the church, to be sure, but to the world as well. If the state—or better, an international order—exercises justice, for example, it too participates anticipatorily in the eschatological justice of God. Even though the church is a leaven, so to speak, it is still the case that prolepsis is creation-wide.

Thus, there is a subtlety regarding the nature of our call to love that is overlooked by Yoder. If we pose the question, "Should we love the world?" we could line up both negative and positive answers and support both with biblical references. Texts such as 1 John 2:15 tell us not to love the world. The meaning in this case is plainly to avoid concupiscence or the type of love that seeks to possess that which is alien to God. But there is another dimension of God's *agapē* that leads to a positive love for the world. It is the divine love which led God himself down the path of the cross towards the redemption of this world, toward the fulfillment of God's creation. It is this of which John 3:16 speaks. It is this to which our ethical sanctions appeal. Alien or not, this is a world which we are commanded to love as God loves and, if we respond to the command in obedience and stewardly service, then we will actually participate in the divine *agapē*. And when we participate in the divine *agapē* our love for God, for the world, and for one another becomes authentic self-realization, an expression of who we truly are as human beings. It goes almost without saying that this will require involvement and even what Yoder disparagingly calls "management."

CONJUNCTION: JOHN COBB

Whereas with Yoder we see excessive disjunction, in the process theology of John B. Cobb Jr. we find such a degree of conjunction that the transcendent eschaton loses all force. Eschatology is almost exhaustively collapsed into the world process. What human beings do on the plane of history, then, becomes nearly decisive for our destiny, a strictly historical destiny.

Process theists in general, and John Cobb in particular, applaud Alfred North Whitehead for providing grounds for hope in history. Whitehead does this by asserting the openness of the future. This means

that we are free to fill the future with the results of our decisions and the outcomes of our actions. We are free to write new chapters in the history of the world. This means that genuine progress is possible. Institutions and ideals can be changed for the better. The present is always ready for new acts which will transform the today and create a different tomorrow. And, as a special bonus, the products of these transformative acts have an impact upon God: they are retained in the everlasting divine memory. All this openness inspires hope in the likes of John Cobb.²⁴

The only drawback, of course, is that such openness also means we can choose the opposite of progress. There is no assurance that the human species will move forward. We may choose to perpetuate human misery through political tyranny and economic exploitation, to increase our contamination of the biosphere with pollutants, or to burn it all in a thermonuclear firestorm. Progress is not guaranteed. Only process is.

The key point in process eschatology is that there is no end, no consummate fulfillment to conclude the present temporal process.²⁵ God is constantly at work in the world, of course, seeking to lure all occasions toward their proper fulfillment through the power of divine persuasion. God is constantly redeeming our experience for perpetual remembrance in the divine memory, transforming mundane enjoyment as well as mundane suffering into heavenly enjoyment. But there will never come a time when God will so act as to put a temporal end to sin, evil, suffering, and death. Rather, as the process continues unabated, God will take our evil experience up into the divine memory in such a way as to transform it into positive divine enjoyment.

Process theism . . . cannot provide the assurance that God's will is always done. It does affirm that, no matter how great the evil in the world, God acts persuasively upon the wreckage to bring from it whatever good is possible. . . . Because of God, life has meaning in the face of victorious evil. That meaning is that both in our own enjoyment and through our

24. John B. Cobb Jr. and David R. Griffin, *Process Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 112.

25. *Ibid.*, 117. "The process of the world does not aim at some remote Omega point. Its teleology is simply the creation of values moment by moment" (Charles Birch and John B. Cobb Jr., *The Liberation of Life* [Cambridge: At the University Press, 1981], 189).

adding to the enjoyment of others we contribute everlastingly to the joy of God.²⁶

Thus, salvation, in the sense of actually overcoming evil, is something God enjoys even if we do not. This contrasts with Pannenberg, for whom the consummate end to history signals salvation for the world, not just for God.

What is significant for our discussion here is that for Cobb the sanctioning or drawing power of the future does not reside in some future actuality. In fact, if such a future actuality were promised, then this would contravene human freedom and openness for the future, at least as Cobb understands them. What the idea of the kingdom of God does for Cobb is to present us with an ideal, with an image, with a transcendent lure to draw us continually forward. The kingdom is not, however, a forthcoming actual state of affairs. The process as presently constituted, evil and all, is everlasting.

Cobb recognizes that what he shares with Pannenberg is an emphasis on the future, on the possibility of novelty and the power of the not-yet to shape what happens now. But what Cobb cannot accept is Pannenberg's insistence on an eschatological end, on the divinely promised consummation of history. To Cobb this seems to reduce or eliminate openness, not enhance it. In his essay in this book, Cobb says he associates openness *to* the future with openness *of* the future. As evidence he remarks that the danger of human self-destruction is a very real one, as if to say that if such self-destruction would occur then the consummation could not. Cobb's implied argument misses the point, I think, because one point of positing the eschatological end is to emphasize disjunction: if God can transform Calvary into Easter then God can transform human self-destruction into consummation.

With regard to the problem of freedom, Pannenberg's case is built on the observation that determination by the consummate end opens present history to freedom. It does not close it off. If the course of events were determined in advance, say by an act of predestination fixed in the past, then we would not have freedom in the present. But by positing an eschatological end which is essentially transformatory,

26. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 118, 123.

in that it introduces salvific newness, and by positing that this future transformatory work of God is effective now proleptically, in that it shares with us now its power to create the new, then it is the eschatological reality which provides the condition for the possibility of authentic freedom within history.

What Cobb has done is take the notion that the kingdom of God is calling us forward and jettison the promise that someday God's will will "be done on earth as it is in heaven." Cobb admits that Jesus' original message regarding God's kingdom included the expectation of "the consummation of all things" which would be a "sharp break with the past." But due to certain reasons, e.g., the failure of the kingdom to arrive in Jesus' own imminent future and also the rise of modern consciousness which puts a gulf between ancient and modern understandings of how the world works, theologians today cannot simply repeat Jesus' beliefs. We need a formulation for our time. So Cobb proposes that we focus on the *call forward*, which is understood as a dynamic principle common to human experience and indicative of the world process as a whole. God is the one who calls us forward. How far forward is God calling us? All the way to the end, i.e., all the way to the consummation of history? No. We are being called forward to a certain quality of life within history. "The call forward is toward intensified life, heightened consciousness, expanded freedom, more sensitive love. . . ." ²⁷

This I would dub the fallacy of unwarranted abstraction. Cobb has abstracted the call forward along with his own version of the fruit of the Spirit, but he has discarded the essential content which gave the symbol of the kingdom of God its power in the first place, namely, God's promise that it would actually come. We now have the call, but we have lost the kingdom which originally issued the call. If we think that the kingdom will never come in actuality, then it functions only as an unrealistic ideal and it loses its power to sanction and inspire ethical principles in the present.

Cobb does not think so, of course. He plunges on to provide theoretical justification for what may be the most comprehensive and wholistic ethical vision in contemporary theology. He combines the

27. John B. Cobb Jr., *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 56; cf. 44ff.

political and economic aspirations of the liberation theologians with the ecological concerns put forward by scientists and futurists. Using the powerful metaphor of "the web of life," Cobb and his colleagues follow the World Council of Churches in emphasizing the twin concerns for justice and sustainability.²⁸ We must pursue justice to make life worth living; yet we must pursue ecological sustainability if there is to be a just life to live. It is the concept of cosmic connectedness and the doctrine of internal relations in Whiteheadian philosophy which makes the transfer to a wholistic ethic so easy for Cobb. Everything is related to everything else; so all it requires is one small step to affirm that everyone has a responsibility for everyone else.

In many ways Cobb has given more attention than Pannenberg to working out the middle axioms and practical applications of his ethical principles. Even so, the Pannenberg ontology is no less universal or less wholistic than Whiteheadian metaphysics. Its applications are equally as broad. In addition, the Pannenberg eschatology provides stronger sanctions and a more powerful lure because of the divine promise of fulfillment.

In sum, by eliminating the notion of an eschatological end, Cobb has turned the symbol of the kingdom of God into a cipher for an unreachable ideal. He then places the whole weight of his ethics into the intrahistorical process. The result is total conjunction, i.e., we free human beings have the power to create a future destiny, a destiny which may be either utopia or oblivion, but it will be a destiny which we will have to live (or die) with. God's activity in behalf of the kingdom cannot significantly alter the course of events as far as we are concerned. Yes, of course, God can transform such events as they are absorbed into the divine memory, but the only effect this has on us is in their reappearing as a persuasive lure. There will never occur for us any freedom from or victory over the vicissitudes of the historical process.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY: CONJUNCTION PLUS DISJUNCTION?

One salient feature of the many current liberation theologies—Latin American, feminist, and black—is the unabashed eschatological excitement. José Miguez Bonino, for example, says that an eschatological

28. Birch and Cobb, *Liberation of Life*, 234.

faith makes it possible for us to invest our lives in the building of temporary and imperfect political orders with the certainty that this work is not meaningless or lost, that as stewards of the creation we actually participate "in love, the final justification of all fight against evil and destruction."²⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether assigns a utopian function to the eschatological vision, a prophetic "vision of the new age to come in which the present system of injustice is overcome and God's intended reign of peace and justice is installed in history."³⁰ Letty Russell uses the term "advent shock" to make this same point, i.e., we in the present are maladjusted when compared to the anticipated future fulfillment which God has promised.³¹ And James Cone explains how the promised eschatological fulfillment functions as both judge and lure:

If death is the ultimate power and life has no future beyond this world, then the rulers of the state who control the policemen and the military are indeed our masters. They have our future in their hands and the oppressed can be made to obey laws of injustice. But if the oppressed, while living in history, can nonetheless see beyond it, if they can visualize an eschatological future beyond the history of their humiliation, then "the sigh of the oppressed," to use Marx's phrase, can become a cry of revolution against the established order. It is this revolutionary cry that is granted in the resurrection of Jesus.³²

What the eschatological vision does for the liberation theologian is employ God's promise for a transformed future as the key which unlocks the fetters binding us to the present and past. The newness of the new creation provides us with critical distance over against the old forms of political tyranny and economic oppression. For us in our present generation to take up arms against injustice is to participate in the divine plan to establish a kingdom of justice in history. Gustavo Gutierrez draws the connection: "The attraction of 'what is to come'

29. José Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 152.

30. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 24.

31. Letty Russell, *The Future of Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 102.

32. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 160.

is the driving force of history. The attraction of Yahweh in history and his action at the end of history are inseparable."³³

The decisive move in liberation theology is to draw a close connection between eschatological salvation at the end of history and political liberation within history. The precise nature of that connection is subtle, perhaps even ambiguous, and hence it has become the focus of considerable debate.

To ferret out the nature of this connection, we begin by noticing what position the liberation theologians oppose. They oppose an eschatology of radical disjunction, especially one which so spiritualizes the kingdom of God that it has no impact on our current social and political life. Gutierrez says that "a poorly understood spiritualization has often made us forget the human consequences of the eschatological promises and the power to transform unjust social structures which they imply. The elimination of misery and exploitation is a sign of the coming of the Kingdom."³⁴ Furthermore, Gutierrez says that the impact of the eschatological kingdom is not simply beyond history; it is within history. "The grace-sin conflict, the coming of the Kingdom, and the expectation of the parousia are also necessarily and inevitably historical, temporal, earthly, social, and material realities."³⁵

The practical objective of the liberation theology project is the creation of a new humanity, a social humanity; it is the establishment of a truly human and humane society, one characterized by political and economic justice and by the freedom to be free.³⁶ This is God's work. It is our work. They are conjoined. Hence, Gutierrez can define "liberation" with reference to

three levels of meaning: political liberation, the liberation of man throughout history, liberation from sin and admission to communion with God. . . . These three levels mutually affect each other, but they are not the same. One is not present without the others, but they are distinct: they are all part of a single, all-encompassing salvific process, but they are to be found at different levels.³⁷

33. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973), 164.

34. *Ibid.*, 167.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 22, 67, 238.

37. *Ibid.*, 176.

It is at this point that the critics attack liberation theologians in general, and Gutierrez in particular, for excessive conjunction, i.e., for unnecessarily conflating eschatological salvation beyond history with liberation within history. Pannenberg is one such critic. With regard to Gutierrez's above-mentioned three levels of liberation, Pannenberg complains that there may be no more than a mere verbal connection between them. He inquires about the warrant for seeing these three as different levels of the same process. He asks, "What if the conception of human history as a process of human self-liberation emerged in diametrical opposition to the Christian affirmation that human beings become free, not by themselves, but only by the spirit of Christ? How is it possible to harmonize such a conflict by speaking of 'levels' in one and the same process? But Gutierrez does not try to harmonize, he merely overlooks the problem."³⁸ In other words, we get our modern ideas of freedom from the Enlightenment and from Marxism. But the Enlightenment was critical of Christ-centeredness and Marxism was outright atheistic. From the driver's seat of history they removed God and substituted human self-initiation. Human freedom is now assumed to be the accomplishment of human freedom. So, Pannenberg is asking, if Christians begin with the axiom that true freedom is found in Jesus Christ, and if Jesus Christ plays no role in the Enlightenment and Marxist views of freedom, then how can Gutierrez so glibly identify both of these as belonging to the same process?

Pannenberg renders a second criticism. He argues that Gutierrez and others fail to work from an adequate theory of justice, and this makes them unable to discriminate between legitimate and nonlegitimate claims to represent genuine liberation. Or, to put it another way, there is nothing in the process of liberation so conceived which will protect us against the rise of a new tyranny. "It [liberation theology] does not offer any means to prevent tyrannical rule by an elite that might obtain power under the pretext of 'liberating' the people from oppression. . . . Some liberation theologians are so unaware of the dangers at this point that they even reject the distinction in European eschatological theology between the ultimate future of God's Kingdom and the provisional and fragmentary anticipations of that future in

38. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 65.

human action.”³⁹ Langdon Gilkey’s criticism is parallel. He too objects to

the apparent *identification* of liberation and especially of political and social liberation with the salvation promised in the gospel. This is expressed through the identification of the eschatological kingdom with a perfect historical society, a fully just political and social reality. . . . [This view] forgets that self-determination is the ground not only of the fullest humanity but also of sin—for it is in our use of our *freedom* that we each sin against our neighbor. . . . The freeing of freedom frees us for sin as well as for good works, for the creation of injustice as well as the creation of justice. . . . Thus the “freeing of freedom” in human society, even if it were to be achieved, and however valid a political and a Christian goal it may be, would by no means represent the final redemption of mankind or of history; for it is in freedom that we all sin. . . . Only a new relation of mankind to God, to self, and to the neighbor can achieve that goal, an achievement far beyond the range of political activity.⁴⁰

What Pannenberg and Gilkey are saying is that it would be a big mistake to conflate eschatological salvation with intrahistorical liberation, i.e., to have exhaustive conjunction with no remaining disjunction. Even the greatest achievement of political and historical freedom would not touch the fundamental problem of human sin, the fundamental problem of alienation between one human being and another and between all of us and God. Freedom is as much the condition for the possibility to sin as it is the redemption from sin. Whatever eschatological salvation is, it must be more than what can be achieved through political and social transformation within history.

But, we might ask, have the liberation theologians actually conflated eschatology and history? One critic, Dennis McCann, interprets Gutierrez as distinguishing though not separating the two. He notes that here Christian eschatology and utopian aspirations are intimately correlated but not identified. What they have in common is that “history is one,” but they are distinct in that Christian eschatology remains in

39. *Ibid.*, 63. At this point Pannenberg refers us to Hugo Assmann, not Gutierrez.

40. Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Seabury, 1976), 236f., Gilkey’s italics.

tension with political aspirations. This tension is maintained, not by contrasting history with an eschatological reality beyond history, but rather by perpetuating the revolutionary process of liberation. Liberation becomes a process, not an achievement. Each achievement will be open to further transformation. All social and political gains are still surpassable. "The eschatological promise, in other words, symbolizes transcendence, but a transcendence immanent to history itself."⁴¹ In short, the McCann critique is that although Gutierrez retains a disjunctive or transcendent component to his eschatology, it does not bespeak an actual end to history or consummation to history. It is rather a mere cipher for the ongoingness of the transformation process. Or, to put it another way, Gutierrez comes out looking a lot like John Cobb.

I believe the McCann interpretation is closer to accuracy than that of Pannenberg and Gilkey, but it is not close enough.⁴² Gutierrez does not simply conflate salvation and liberation. Eschatology is not exhaustively swallowed up by history. Eschatological salvation still counts for something which intrahistorical liberation cannot of itself achieve, and this would ordinarily imply that there must be an actual consummation for it to count. Gutierrez does not actually deny a temporal consummation.

This is not an identification. Without liberating historical events, there would be no growth of the Kingdom. But the process of liberation will not have conquered the very roots of oppression and the exploitation of man by man without the coming of the Kingdom, which is above all a gift. Moreover, we can say that the historical, political liberating event is a salvific event; but it is not *the* coming of the Kingdom, not *all* of salvation.⁴³

That there remains some sort of disjunction between temporal

41. Dennis P. McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981), 193. The heart of McCann's criticism of Gutierrez is that he fails to clarify the theological relationship between liberation and salvation (*ibid.*, 4).

42. Matthew Lamb will not grant that McCann even comes close. He objects vehemently to McCann's contention that transcendence for Gutierrez is immanent to history itself. Lamb cites Gutierrez to the effect that salvation in Christ conducts history "above and beyond itself" to a fulfillment that is not within the reach of human foresight or any human effort ("A Distorted Interpretation of Latin American Liberation Theology," *Horizons* 8:2 [Fall 1981]: 359).

43. Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 177.

achievement and eschatological grace should be clear. Thus, the Pan-
nenberg and Gilkey criticisms—especially if applied to Gutierrez—
border on committing the straw theologian fallacy here. If Gutierrez
and other liberation theologians exhaustively collapsed eschatological
salvation into political liberation, then their criticisms would definitely
apply. But this is not the position Gutierrez actually takes. He is aware
that an intrahistorical utopia is beyond the scope of sinful human striv-
ing and that the gospel includes, among other things, the promise of
divine grace to achieve what we cannot on our own achieve. If there
is a weakness in the Gutierrez project, it is his failure to spell out with
clarity just what are the conjunctive and disjunctive components of his
eschatologically inspired process of liberation. But they are both there.
It would seem to me that a carefully thought-through liberation
theology—especially with its emphasis on revolution—should be a
logical extension of Pannenberg's eschatology. Pannenberg's view pro-
vides both the vision for transformation as well as the critical judgment
that renders all temporal achievements as but provisional anticipations
of what is yet to come. On the one hand, we want to acknowledge
that the power of God's eschatological future is being mediated to
human history proleptically and that this has a transforming effect on
the course of events. On the other hand, because salvation itself is a
free act of God's grace, the eschatological kingdom cannot be ex-
haustively actualized prior to the end of history as we know it.
Perhaps El Salvadoran liberation theologian Jon Sobrino takes
a better account of these concerns. He employs his own version of the
"eschatological reservation" in order, first, to affirm that the kingdom
of God is mediated to history through liberation politics while, second,
providing the judgment that no social achievement within history can
be considered the last word. The eschatological kingdom of God does
not confirm the present reality of oppression; but rather it passes judg-
ment on that reality in order to recreate it. It also involves a "temporal
fulfillment of the world which, strictly speaking, is not the work of
people insofar as it is a fulfillment. It is the work of the God who
comes." He recognizes the "tension between fashioning the Kingdom
on the one hand and asserting that God is drawing near in grace on
the other. On the basis of Jesus' own eschatology we can say that both

aspects are real and important. . . ."⁴⁴ Such a position ought to escape the criticism of Pannenberg. It should, because Sobrino borrowed it from Pannenberg.

Certainly Carl Braaten saw the revolutionary potential in Pannenberg's eschatology when he wrote his "little dogmatic," *The Future of God*, nearly 20 years ago, at a time before the term "liberation theology" became a commonplace.⁴⁵ He argued that it was Pannenberg's understanding of the future which marks the "breakthrough" to a theology of revolution. Braaten said that once we grasp the significance of eschatological newness we will see how it applies to social and political transformation within history. Yes, of course, Braaten shares with Gilkey and Pannenberg the criticism that liberation theologians risk losing the significance of human sin and the need for grace proclaimed in the gospel; that they risk losing the disjunction between history and eschatology. But he applauds them for recognizing that God is pressing for the historical liberation of human beings, not just through the church, but even through a host of secular media.⁴⁶ The liberation theologians have recognized that the gospel has called Christians to the front lines of history to practice the good news of liberation for all humankind, beginning with the poor and the oppressed.

With this in mind Braaten goes on to offer a "holistic theology of the Kingdom of God" through which he hopes to give expression both to the depth dimension of the eschatological idea of salvation as well as to the breadth dimension of the historical concern for liberation. "Holistic salvation is both other-worldly and this-worldly, present and future, somatic and spiritual, personal and social, religious and secular, historical and eschatological. Persons cannot be saved minus their world. Thus, *liberation* is not a new word *for* salvation; it *is* salvation under the ambiguous conditions of history."⁴⁷

What the Pannenberg vision could add to the liberation vision is universality and the kind of wholism of which Braaten speaks. The

44. John Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis, 1978), 65f.; cf. xviii, 355.

45. Carl E. Braaten, *The Future of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 12.

46. Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 134.

47. Carl E. Braaten, *The Flaming Center: A Theology of the Christian Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 150.

ethical limitation of liberation theology is that it presupposes the class struggle as axiomatic, so that the Christian must always choose to side with one historical group over against another. The group we should choose is the poor, say the liberationists, because God too chooses the poor. We side with the poorer classes within a given nation, and we side with the poorer nations against the richer nations. The liberation theologian can at best give only lip service to the concept of a single universal humanity. Our actual ethical decision-making is limited to an advocacy which perpetuates competition. The result is pluralism to the exclusion of wholism.

The Pannenberg ethic, in contrast, is universal and wholistic. The eschatological vision of the coming kingdom of God in Pannenberg's thought is as comprehensive as the human race itself, as comprehensive as even the creation itself. Consequently, the burden of proleptic ethics is on those principles and actions which move us toward greater unity, toward overcoming class divisions for the edification of everyone and not just the underclass. The justice he seeks is a universal justice which goes beyond mere redress for the victims of oppression. This universalist thrust should also press our ethical vision beyond justice concerns to include ecological concerns. John 3:16 reports that God loved the *world*, not just some of the people within the world. It is the universality of this vision which corresponds to—and hence participates proleptically in—the coming kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

In sum, what Pannenberg shares with the disjunctive eschatology of John Howard Yoder is the proleptic task enjoined upon the church to witness to God's future and to decry all claims to absolutism by political regimes by reminding them of their provisionality. What Pannenberg should share with the conjunctive process theology of John Cobb is a more intentional interweaving of political and ecological agendas. Similarly, Pannenberg should recognize there is a greater affinity than he usually admits between himself and the liberation theologians on the call for revolution in the name of justice.

The achievement of Pannenberg has been to lay a foundation for a universal ethic based upon the promised eschatological act of God

whereby history will be consummated and reality will attain its final quiddity. It is a view which maintains the disjunction between history and eschatology, between human achievement and divine gift, between sin and grace. It recognizes the necessary newness which the final advent of the kingdom of God will embody, a newness required if it is to be identified with salvation. Yet this view also maintains the notion of conjunction. It does so with the idea of prolepsis. What prolepsis takes from eschatology and invokes within history is the dynamic of newness, the dynamic of creativity as an expression of freedom and as a force for healing. Revolutionary work within history can, if it issues from the anticipated justice and peace of the promised kingdom of God, actually participate in the divine love which transforms the world. It is this vision of what is to come which provides the sanction for a political and even an ecological ethics.