

Theta Phi Talkback Session with Wolfhart Pannenberg

Question One: I understand you to be saying that the oneness of God is "impersonal" and that this oneness is the basis of defining the coming kingdom of God, whereas the "personal" character of God is the three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) whose history is to be actualized in the world in relationship with the history of finite persons. If I heard you correctly in this regard, does this help to explain that difficult statement in your book, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (p. 56), where you say, "In a restricted but important sense, God does not yet exist"?

Pannenberg: Well, of course this was sort of a daring statement. At the time when America was moved by that fad of death of God theologians, some of them thought, after all, I might be one of them. Of course, the process theologians also thought that I might be one of them because obviously I was thinking that God was not yet quite complete. But this was not what I wanted to say actually. I wanted to express that in the present situation of the world the issue whether God exists is debated. And there are serious reasons for this—especially the reasons of the presence of evil in the world, but also others—serious reasons that speak against the affirmation of the reality of God in the experience of the world we live in. And we have to know as Christians that this is not just a theoretical matter. This situation that the reality of God is debated and debatable in this world will go on to the end of time. It will be solved only in the eschatological completion of the second coming in the ultimate arrival of the kingdom of God in its fullness. We can-

During his presentation of the annual Theta Phi lectures at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wolfhart Pannenberg responded to these questions posed by listeners. Dr. Pannenberg is professor of systematic theology at the University of Munich.

not separate the eternal reality of God and the status of the reality of God in our world. Because if there is a Creator of the world and the world is not dependent on Him, that is contradictory. If there is one God who created the world then nothing can be completely independent from that God, even the very independence of creatures, as such, has to be dependent on that God. And we are not now experiencing this in an unequivocal way. Only by anticipation we do. Thus the kingdom of God has not yet fully arrived and thus the being of God has not yet fully arrived. Of course God could have not created a world. But if He created a world, and since He did, the divine identity of God, the existence of God, is inseparable from His kingdom in His creation. And therefore questions of the reality of God in our present world also include that only in the end will we know that God has been God all along the way and we can confess to this only by anticipating the eschatological completion of the kingdom of God in this world. And that is to say, by faith.

Question Two: I came here this morning to ask you a question about Christology from below in relationship to Barthian Christology from above—but I'm impressed to ask you a personal question. Please share with us a bit of your personal spiritual travel and what you consider to be the hallmark of your life of faith in relationship with God.

Pannenberg: I could talk about that at length and I have to be very brief now. I may refer you to the volume on my theology that has been edited by Carl Braaten and Philip Clayton. I wrote a biographical introduction there where I refer in some way to what you ask for.

I was raised as an atheist in the time of nihilism during the years of the Nazi regime. I was nourished on Nietzsche's philosophy. But shortly before the end of the war, shortly before we had to become refugees from Eastern Germany when the Russian Army was moving swiftly into East Germany, I had an experience. It was January of 1945, and I took the long way home from my piano lessons to the place where we were living. The sun was setting and, though I had experienced many sunsets before, there was a moment when there was no difference between myself and the light surrounding me. This is not easy to describe. It may be the kind of experience that young people at the age of sixteen have otherwise (I don't claim uniqueness to that experience), but it made me think. It opened me to the mystery of reality. And I experienced this as a kind of vocational call. I didn't know what I was called to at that time, but I started to concern myself increasingly with philosophy and searching for answers. This is also why, later on, I came to be interested in Christianity—largely in order to find out what finally it was all about, because I had learned from Nietzsche that Christianity is to be charged with everything that went wrong in history. This was how I decided to start studying theology in addition to philosophy. For a long time I

wasn't sure whether I would finally end up in philosophy or theology. But then the sheer profundity of the content of Christian doctrine kept me aboard. So I didn't make a decision of faith in some way, although I had an experience of vocation. Later on I came to think that it was not accidental that it happened on the sixth of January—the feast of Epiphany. And I came to understand the vocation as the vocation to witness to the glory of Jesus Christ. And that's what my theology is all about.

Question Three: My question deals within the context of your lecture on the Trinity. I'm interested in hearing you explain to me your concept of God as person.

Pannenberg: The main point is God is not one person. The most widespread heresy in modern Christian thought is that God is one person, one personal God. That language is at least very misleading, because God is one personal God only in terms of existing as three persons. And there is no one personal God besides the three persons of Father, Son and Spirit. Those who start with the idea of one personal God and consider Father, Son and Spirit as aspects of that one personal God consistently end up in modalism. And Barth quite frankly said so. There has been a tendency to modalism because one wanted to derive the three-foldness of God from the concept of one God who was conceived of as mind—and mind is easily understood as personal. But that is contrary to the trinitarian dogma. According to the trinitarian dogma, the God we believe in is one God in three persons—the one God being complete only as Father, Son and Spirit (the Father through Son and Spirit as I tried to indicate in the end of my lecture). But this is the way God is completely personal. Not just by being one personal God out there somewhere. That is an anthropomorphic idea of God and it rightly fell to the attacks of atheism.

Question Four: Professor Pannenberg, the Trinity has always been a difficult doctrine for me and your lecture was really helpful although I'm still rather confused. Coming from a Hebrew Christian perspective, it is especially difficult for me to explore these concepts with other Jewish people who do not accept Christ simply because they cannot accept the Trinity. You said the trinitarian doctrine includes an element which is impersonal. Is this what you mean by the impact of the trinitarian doctrine on the concept of God as one? "The impersonal element," the kingdom "transcending each of the persons in the Trinity" and also the use of the kingdom and the "divine essence" are very abstract concepts for me. Could you clarify this?

Pannenberg: Well, when I speak of an impersonal aspect in the life of the trinitarian God, you must not understand that as if that was some reality in itself to be set apart or even prior to the personal aspect. But the one God is concrete only as Father, as Son, as Spirit. That is, the one God is concrete

only in the *personal* reality of Father, Son and Spirit. But precisely in that personal reality (and it belongs to the personal reality as we conceive it on the basis of the Christian tradition even in application to the human person), there is something transcending the person, each individual person, that is constitutive of personality itself. This aspect of transcending the individual person is at the same time what makes for the communion of the three persons of Father, Son and Spirit.

And now coming back to the start of the question. In talking to informed Jews, I would always start with the God of Jesus. The God of Jesus is the God of Israel. And it is the God of Israel whom Jesus addressed by the name Father. And so the God of Israel was understood in a somewhat different way than perhaps ordinarily in Jewish tradition. There is something specific in Jesus talking about and addressing the God of Israel as *Abba*. We need to refer to Jesus to explain what this way of addressing God implies. Thus, addressing God as *Abba* is inseparable from the one who addressed God that way. Therefore, the one who addressed God that way is inseparable from the very eternal identity of the Jewish God, the Father of Jesus. And further, the way Jesus addressed God is not to be understood other than through the medium of the Spirit of God—and that according to Jewish tradition. It's not an exception, not in every respect an exception, in Jewish tradition that the person who is close to God received the Spirit of God in order to enable that person to be close to God. So the communion of Jesus as the Son with the Father is always already involving the Spirit. But the Spirit becomes manifest as a third entity only after the death and resurrection of Jesus, after his ascension, by glorifying Jesus as Son in the hearts of the faithful. It's not only we as human beings who are recognizing Jesus to be the Son of God. It is something that elevates us beyond our finite reality in the act of glorifying Jesus to be the Son of the Father and glorifying the Father as having sent His son into the flesh in order to save the world through the person of Jesus. And that's the work of the Spirit, not just of ourselves. And this is the point where the Spirit becomes manifest as an entity of its own. But it is always related to the Father as the one God. Thus we can have the Jewish God as the one Jesus addressed as Father, not in separation from the one who addresses God in this ultimate way. And this is what the doctrine of the Trinity is all about. This had a prehistory in Jewish thought. You could tell your Jewish friends this. Because the more the one God of Jewish faith became transcendent during the time after the exile, the more important became those realities that were believed to represent that transcendent God within the people of Israel. That is to say within this world. And that is the "name" dwelling in the temple, the "glory" dwelling in the temple but leaving the temple before the destruction of Jerusalem according to Ezekiel, that is the presence of God was leaving the temple to destruction. The temple couldn't be destroyed as long as the glory of God was residing in it. Therefore, according to Ezekiel it was leaving before the temple could be destroyed by the Babylonians. So the glory. Then later on the Shekinah was

thought to represent the transcendent God in this world.

Now the question how do these modes of representing the transcendent God in this world relate to the identity of the transcendent God Himself? Is it that transcendent God that is also present in His name, in His glory, in His wisdom, and so on? Or is it something inferior to the transcendent God? If it would be the latter then it is no longer God who is present. And I think this issue, which is an issue of Jewish faith itself, has been resolved in some definitive way in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. But it is an issue, a concern that must be a concern of Jewish faith itself and was in fact always a concern of Jewish faith itself. How is the transcendent God in His utter transcendence from this world nevertheless present? What are the forms of His presence in this world? But then the core point is: the forms of His presence couldn't be the form of His presence in reality if they were not identical with His divine essence. So in some way the doctrine of the Trinity is implicit already in the history of Jewish thought.

Question: Let me follow up on just one particular thing. You said that in addressing God as *Abba*, Jesus is identifying Himself, but not identifying Himself as God.

Pannenberg: That Jesus is not identifying Himself with God is precisely the condition of being one with the Father.

Question: I don't understand that. It seems so paradoxical.

Pannenberg: Yes, it is somewhat paradoxical. But of course being one with the Father is based upon the inseparability of Jesus as the place of addressing God as *Abba* from the definition of what that term actually means. The inseparability of the identity of that address from the person of Jesus is the basis for affirming the unity of Jesus with the Eternal God, the inseparability from the affirmation of God the Father. Now a condition for that is that Jesus did not identify Himself with the Father. Because if He had identified Himself with God, that would have amounted to the utmost degree of idolatry. He would have been rightly put to death by his Jewish opponents. The utmost degree of idolatry is self-idolization. And we learn especially in the Gospel of John that Jesus was understood to identify Himself with God in allocating to Himself an authority that could be only God's. And therefore this was the basic ambiguity surrounding the earthly ministry of Jesus. And only in the solving of that ambiguity could Jesus be confessed as being confirmed by the Father over against accusations to that point. And that is the precondition of His being in communion with the Father, of His being one with the Father.

