A NEW HOPE

A NEW HOPE:
Wolfhart Pannenberg and the Natural Sciences on Time

By

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Stephen Lakkis
Taipei
Good Friday, 2014

INTRODUCTION

A NEW HOPE

This book touches on a deep aspect of the Christian life and faith, namely that peculiarly optimistic hope that we carry for the future, a continually new hope in a future that will not only bring about transformation in history and creation, but will also ultimately reveal a final meaningfulness to our current historical experiences of suffering and evil. Of course, this is a hope shared by many people outside the church, who also wait for the future to bring something radically new that will improve the condition of their lives, bring happiness and joy, and end the brokenness in their societies, personal relationships, and own hearts. In contrast to the difficulties and struggles of the present, the future stands as a realm of openness and possibility, and we all wait expectantly in history for that hope to encounter its fulfilment.

The root of our Christian hope in the future is buried in an ancient Jewish witness to the God who acts both unexpectedly and in transformative ways in history. The old stories of the biblical traditions reveal a God who introduces into time contingent and novel experiences of liberation and hope: the promise to an elderly couple of children and a future home; sudden and unexpected liberation and freedom from persecution for those who were enslaved; the promise of a future renewal for a people scattered and exiled. These contingent and unexpected experiences of hope that the community of faith encountered together reached their consummation in the astounding event of the death and resurrection of a beloved Son. In the experience of this extraordinary, sudden, and radically new event of the resurrection of Christ, everything was transformed. History and its significance were changed, and through this startling, novel event life was infused with a sudden and unanticipated sense of hope.

Yet since the Enlightenment, the secular hope in the advancements of history as well as our Christian hope in the radically contingent, salvific, transformative and liberating action of God in time, were under-

mined and even negated by the rise of a new scientific view. This new understanding of time and the universe rejected temporal and historical contingency in favour of a world view based on the absolute lawfulness of natural processes, a lawfulness which discarded the idea of radical novelty in history, and turned its back on unexpected divine action in time—especially for any event as radical and "unlawful" as a resurrection from the dead. This ideology of strict lawfulness and the associated ontological absence of contingency found deep support in the amazing predictive power of classical Newtonian physics, and reached its pinnacle in the twentieth-century with relativity theory's understanding of the universe as a determinate, and unchanging four-dimensional solid. Suddenly, we were faced with a curious ideological tension. On the one hand were the historical and theological sciences (together with popular opinion) which still worked with a belief that the future was open and free at least in some sense to be written or changed. On the other hand, the physical sciences were operating with an understanding of the strict lawfulness of the universe, of the power of science to calculate that future using natural laws, which determined how the past shaped the present and in turn would concretely form the future. The fused, four-dimensional space-time of relativity theory then set about describing the universe as an invariant block which excluded radical contingency, sudden novelty, and future change. Society was then left with a deep tension, if not open conflict, in the fundamental ways that it perceived time and history. If the scientific models were correct, did we still have good reasons to expect novel events from the future? Could we really continue to see the future as an open and unwritten stage for unique and unprecedented human and divine action? In the context of such belief in a strictly lawful, determinate universe, was there any room left for a Christian hope in indeterminate, radically contingent and transformative divine actions and events in time? Was there even room for new hope in history?

In this book I want to analyse this point of friction by examining the work of German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg and his understanding of time. What makes Pannenberg's work so interesting in this context is not only his impressive scholastic rigour and his novel approach to a theological understanding of time and history, but his attempt to provide a theological theory with broad objective, universal validity. In the interdisciplinary discussion with the natural sciences, Pannenberg takes his

skills as a theologian and attempts to construct an understanding of time which not only incorporates theological truths but which would also account for scientific aspects of lawfulness and regularity. Whereas other theologians may be content to limit their studies and reflections only to the field of theology, Pannenberg pursues a long-term interdisciplinary project that aims to offer results that are universally sufficient both for theology and the natural sciences. In his study of time, the crux of the issue is whether in the end we are finally subjected to the all-determining laws of nature or are reasonably able to place our hope for the future in the work, guidance and activity of God.

Over the following chapters we will discover that Pannenberg understands time as a direct expression of God's absolute and omnipotent power and rule over creation. This absolute power of God calls into question scientistic claims about the lawfulness of the universe. In presenting such an argument, Pannenberg's position is genetically connected with a medieval doctrinal position based on the absolute power of God (*potentia Dei absoluta*). Furthermore, we will find that since Pannenberg shares an understanding of time as both linear, objective, and determined, his work on time is not diametrically opposed to the concept of time offered by theoretical physics. However, whereas classical physics stresses the rule of natural laws in a system of time which extends from past to future, Pannenberg stresses the ultimate and absolute rule of God in a system of time which moves from future to past. God's faithful and absolute rule finds its location and expression in God's continuing creation of every discrete moment of time and history.

In this respect, Pannenberg presents a novel approach to the interdisciplinary discussion of time. But unfortunately it is not without serious problems. We will see that Pannenberg fails to adequately understand or sufficiently critique the current scientific models of time. More importantly, Pannenberg's stress on God's absolute power and rule over time launches an arms race between theology and the sciences, with the spoils being absolute control over the physical universe. Furthermore, Pannenberg's approach serves to instrumentalize time, transforming it into a weapon of divine punishment. This leaves him unable to respond authentically to experiences of suffering, sin and evil in time (a problem the sciences avoid since they do not hypothesize the existence of a good God) or to deal adequately with time's own state of fallenness. We will

see that the bulk of these problems stem from Pannenberg's insufficiently nuanced understanding of God, whom he sees starkly and necessarily as an "all-determining reality". I will argue that Pannenberg's approach, with its focus on the absolute power of God, resurrects a concept of God developed by Thomas Bradwardine in the fourteenth century and used in the conflict against Averroism's own conception of natural, physical determinism.

I will also argue that both Pannenberg's theory of time and the deterministic scientific view of the universe share a common weak point, namely a reductionistic understanding of the concept of lawfulness. Therefore, this volume will close with two main arguments: (1) that theology must consistently incorporate the insights of a *theologia crucis* into its work on time if it wishes to engage satisfactorily with the fallenness of time, and avoid skewed ideas of determinism based on God's absolute divine power and rule. (2) Both theology and the sciences could benefit from a more differentiated understanding of the concept of lawfulness—an argument I make by turning to the distinction in jurisprudence between "rule by law" and "rule of law". This conceptual reworking of the concept of lawfulness is already well underway in quantum physics; our theologies would also benefit from adopting this distinction.

The main story of this volume—the critical analysis of Wolfhart Pannenberg's work on time in discussion with the natural sciences—progresses in six parts. It will be helpful here to offer a brief overview of the major plot points along the way.

1 Discussing Time in a Postcolonial Context

From the perspective of the natural sciences, an examination of the concept of time may strike us as a purely theoretical one, rooted in scientific objectivity and described by the rigorous language of abstract mathematics. But outside the natural sciences, this view has attracted critique. The ways in which we understand the concepts of time and history reflect a deep cultural engagement with the "problem of time" itself. Various cultures in various ages have had widely different understandings of time and the way that past, present and future interrelate. Even something as simple as the mental diagram which pictures time flying like an arrow

from left to right, with the past behind us and future in front of us, falls apart in various cultural contexts (such as in Taiwan and China) where we stand with our backs towards the future.[1] While it is therefore a given that the majority of Western theological and philosophical discussions of time will occur from a Western viewpoint and thus be coloured by Western assumptions about reality, it will be helpful for us to thematize the issue of culture and cultural perspectives at the very beginning. Chapter One sketches out some of these difficulties facing an investigation of time in a postmodern and postcolonial context.

This examination is particularly important given that Pannenberg's stated theological aim is to provide a theology with "universal validity",[2] in the same way that the sciences are seen to offer objective "universal validity" in their models. The foundations of Pannenberg's own work on time (laid in the 1950s) predate an awareness of postcolonial issues. As an example of the problems this can raise, we will see that Pannenberg remains heavily dependent upon a modernist historiographical concept of neutral or objective "universal history"—a position which, though shared in part by the natural sciences, has now become academically awkward. Western attempts to portray history as a single, unified story have become linked with the suspicion of cultural and political dominance.[3] Therefore the question whether such an "objective" or neutral perspective on time exists (either in theology, philosophy or the natural sciences) will need to be examined briefly.

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1 In Mandarin, when discussing spatial locations, *qián* (前) signifies "in front of" while *hòu* (後) signifies "behind". When discussing time, *qián* signifies the past (*qiántiān:* the day before yesterday) and *hòu* the future (*hòutiān:* the day after tomorrow).

2 Cf. e.g. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective,* trans. M. J. O'Connell (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 15.

3 Pannenberg's work on universal history was heavily influenced by the important role given to such a unified history in Gerhard von Rad's theology of the Old Testament. Modern biblical scholarship is revealing the extent to which von Rad's work practises just such a reductionism, forcing the Old Testament sources into a universal historical model and excluding sources which are critical of that universalist approach. Pannenberg's adoption of von Rad's universalist approach is understandable given the era in which he was working, but it makes the reception of his ideas more difficult for us today.

One of the aspects that makes Pannenberg's approach interesting is his claim to universal validity, and his conviction that theology should not only strive for internal coherency but should also seek agreement with the external descriptions of reality provided by other disciplines.[4] To his credit, Pannenberg is not interested in withdrawing theology back into a "safe harbour" disconnected from the truth claims of the sciences, and he is critical of those theologians whom he feels have taken this approach. If we take Pannenberg's claims to universal validity and universal coherence seriously, then this external coherence offers us a vital criterion for assessing Pannenberg's work on time. Is Pannenberg's work able to satisfactorily account for the phenomena and descriptions of time witnessed to by other disciplines? And if we draw here on Ockham's Razor, then to what degree is Pannenberg's theological concept *better* able to account for these phenomena, and thus supersede those other theories rather than just duplicating them?

We may suspect that theological conceptions of time, with their division of time into "earthly temporality" and "divine eternity", purposefully create such a safe harbour, keeping the sciences out of theology's private discourse on the eternal. But Pannenberg rejects this type of division and argues instead for a unification of all time into a single "omnitemporality". As a result, one the one hand scientists and theologians can share the same object of enquiry and participate in the same discourse. However, on the other hand an overly quick unification of these concepts begins to muddy the long-standing historiographical distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte,* between the underlying ontological structure of time and its content. The tacit agreement between classical physics and the philosophy of time is that their own fields attempt to deal with the objective structures (ontology) of temporality. This then relegates the historical or social sciences to a second order examination of subjective occurrences in time. The development of relativity theory has overcome this distinction by fusing the ontic structure of space and time together with their contents. Yet this has reinforced the conviction of the sciences that they can once again begin writing an overarching metanarrative for an assumed objective, universal, "cosmic history"—at the precise mo-

4 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology,* trans. G. W. Bromiley, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991–97), ii. 21–2.

ment when many postmodern and postcolonial voices seek to free themselves from the dominance of such a single metanarrative.

Today we are highly aware of the role that culture and biography play in our academic discussions. We need to bring the same awareness to our discussion of time. Indeed, early in Pannenberg's career James Robinson insightfully noted that Pannenberg's personal experiences of the Second World War were influencing the development of his theology.[5] This insight prompts us to introduce a very brief biographical sketch of Pannenberg's early life, noting his strong focus on medieval theology and the concepts of God's "power and judgement" over the world, as well as his disillusionment with the "liberal democratic tradition".[6] Robinson's insight into the importance of Pannenberg's early biography will be an important key in understanding Pannenberg's work in this study. While much of the current literature examining Pannenberg's work focuses narrowly on his *Systematic Theology,* in this volume I will argue that it is particularly in Pannenberg's earlier works and essays where we find the formative material that grounds, shapes and gives vital context to his work in the *Systematic Theology* and beyond. If we want to appreciate the impressive consistency of Pannenberg's thought and the full arc of his thinking on time, then we must examine the roots of his thought, rather than simply performing a truncated analysis of his *Systematic Theology* alone.

2 Categorizing Temporal Systems

The intercultural and interdisciplinary discourse on time must deal with a wealth of differing temporal systems. Thus Chapter Two will provide an overview of these different approaches, and offer a simple guide for grouping and categorizing these systems so that we can better map and locate Pannenberg's work on the broad horizon of discourse on time. The

5 James M. Robinson, "Revelation as Word and as History", in id. and John B. Cobb, Jr. (eds.), *Theology as History* (New Frontiers in Theology: Discussions among Continental and American Theologians, 3; New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 1–100 at 3.

6 Wolfhart Pannenberg, "God's Presence in History: How My Mind Has Changed", in *Christian Century*, 11 March 1981, 260–3 at 261, 263.

method I will argue for is based on the vectors of linearity, objectivity and reference. *Linearity* refers to the vectorial nature of time: the degree to which it represents a linear extension in one direction. The opposite pole of a linear temporal system is represented by circular temporal systems (typical in many Eastern models of time). The second measure, *objectivity,* refers to the hypothesized "location" of time: i.e. whether time is a construct within human consciousness (*subjective*) or whether it has its own ontic basis outside of human consciousness (*objective*). The final measure is *reference.* Simply put, whereas objectivity measures the location of time, reference measures its "number". If a model views time from a singular, unified and universal frame of reference, we can describe it as unireferential; if the perception of time is inherently divided across multiple, equally valid frames of reference, we can class it as multireferential. While these three measures are necessarily reductionistic, together they provide a helpful basis for categorizing a range of temporal systems, and also help to highlight points of similarity and difference between systems. Using this categorization, we will be able to see that whereas special relativity presents time as linear, objective and multireferential, we can classify Pannenberg's concept of time as linear, objective and unireferential.

The danger behind developing a guide for categorizing and assessing varying concepts of time is that it assumes that we actually have a range of concepts to work with. In reality, this is becoming less and less the case. The dominance of scientific views on time has left little significant space for competing conceptions. What this means *de facto* (to the disappointment of philosophers, theologians and historians) is that in popular and academic discussions, science stands as the final authority and arbiter for our understandings of the reality of time. In this context, can theology even re-enter the discussion of time or create a new space in the discourse where alternate theories can be advanced? The common tendency to segregate the sciences and theology into mutually exclusive academic discourses (for example, under the assumption that the sciences speak the language of "fact" while theology speaks only the language of "value"[7]) limits theology at best to discussion of some

7 Cf. Ted Peters, "Science and Theology: Toward Consonance", in id. (ed.), *Science and Theology: The New Consonance* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), 11–39, esp. 17–18; Ted Peters, "Naturwissenschaft und Religion. Ein wachsender

secondary form of "theological time". At worst, it forcefully silences and removes theology from the discourse. Yet, again, if we are willing to take seriously Pannenberg's own demands regarding the possible universal validity of theology and its truth claims, then such a segregation need not be accepted. Schools of theoretical physics admittedly dominate the discourse on time, yet theology has a special role in creating a space in the discussion for highlighting what it sees as the shortcomings of those scientific concepts. Without this initial step (which forms the bulk of Chapter Three) theology would remain unable even to voice the relevance of its own contributions to the discussion, or raise reasons why it should be readmitted to the discourse.

By the same token, despite the general dominance in the West of objective theories of time, we should not completely shut out the important counter-arguments raised by the proponents of subjective theories of time. Their insights offer valuable opportunities to temper our views of objective time. Therefore, Chapter Two closes with a brief overview of the insights developed in key subjective theories of time. On the one hand, this provides better contrast for the following discussion of objective time; on the other hand, it will make clear why those subjective theories have failed to gain significant traction in the Western discourse.

3 Making Space for Time

In a context dominated by scientific conceptions of time, is there really any way for a theologian to regain access to the discussion? If we are unsatisfied with a conceptual segregation that relegates theologians and scientists into different corners of the room and demands that each group play with their own form of time, is there then any way that theologians can make space in the scientifically dominated discourse and reintroduce a theological perspective? What is needed here is a careful analysis of the insufficiencies of the scientific models, together with ways that a theological conception could address those problems. To do this, we need to engage with and critique scientific models of time within their own contexts. Chapter Three aims at just such an engagement, offering

Forschungsbereich", *Verkündigung und Forschung*, 49 (2/2004): 52–72, esp. 57–8.

a brief philosophical (rather than detailed mathematical) overview of Minkowski space-time and Pannenberg's own critique.

This type of philosophical engagement between physicists and theologians already has a long and valuable history.[8] Using this method from the history and philosophy of science, Chapter Three will draw upon texts from the watershed period of development in relativity theory (1904–1927). We will examine the impetus for the development of space-time theory, namely difficulties which began to arise with the concept of stable frames of reference within classical physics. We will find that rather than continue with a Newtonian conception where time was absolute and formed the container within which the physical universe "moved",[9] Poincaré and Einstein disassembled belief in the absoluteness of physical measures, including time, and replaced such absolutes with a relativistic system. It was then Hermann Minkowski who discovered the means to regain the "absolute" nature of the universe by re-combining spatial and temporal dimensions into a single invariant solid. In this way he provided the basis for the manifold theory of space-time and the "block universe".[10]

The development of Minkowski space-time had a far-reaching impact on the philosophical discussion of time in physics, philosophy, and theology, particularly with regard to the philosophical issues of restriction, invariance, and determinateness in the universe. The inherent restrictions of space-time redefined the future away from being a field of open and infinite possibility and limited it to a description of an object's already existent extension in four dimensions. Space-time's stress on the integrated nature of temporality and spatiality also effectively limited a theology which tried to understand God as active in time yet lacking spa-

8 It was clear from the beginning that new physical theories on the nature of time would immediately impact on theological and philosophical understandings of reality. We see this e.g. in the impressive early work of Arthur Eddington, *Space Time and Gravitation: An Outline of the General Relativity Theory* (Cambridge: CUP, 1920), and especially in his Gifford Lectures, Arthur Eddington, *The Nature of The Physical World* (1928; London: Dent, 1964).

9 Isaac Newton, *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (3rd edn., London: Motte, 1729), 9–10.

10 Hermann Minkowski, *Raum und Zeit: Vortrag, gehalten auf der 80. Versammlung Deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte zu Cöln am 21. September 1908* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1909).

tial corporeality, and also raised problems for a theology of divine omnipresence (which assumes presence *across* various frames of reference rather than *within* a single one). Invariance stresses the static nature of space-time, or the inability of time to flow (since it lacks another temporal metadimension in which it can move). Philosophically, this leads to the radical permanence of matter in the Minkowski universe. The invariance of this extension in four dimensions also suggests that the "future" state of these objects is already set and unchanging, which brings us to the problem of determinateness. Since the "future" already exists within the space-time manifold, we seem to be left with a rejection of any (human or divine) interventionist activity in history.

It is here that Pannenberg launches his critique of the space-time model, providing two points of critique. First, Pannenberg opposes scientific reductionism which focuses on small parts of a bigger picture. He reiterates his long-standing argument that parts necessarily presuppose a whole, and that by concentrating on the divisions of time, physics has overlooked the necessary pre-existing unity of all time. Unfortunately, we will discover the limitation of this critique, arising from Pannenberg's misunderstanding of the absolute and invariant nature of the Minkowski universe. Pannenberg's second critique stresses that absolute space-time should not be correlated with God's eternity, and that the space of relativity is not "the space of God's omnipresence". While the theological concern here is to avoid the dangers of pantheism, we will see that it is unclear whether Pannenberg is presenting an ontological or an epistemological critique of relativity. The ontological option presupposes a division between a divine space and time and the absolute space-time of relativity, avoiding pantheism but also losing the concept of God's omnipresence. Furthermore, by appealing to different forms of space and time, Pannenberg reintroduces an ontological distinction, leading us back to segregated concepts of theological and scientific times. The epistemological option views space-time simply as a geometrical concept, one unable to accommodate God's reality. Here again, if the epistemological systems of theoretical physics are unable to understand time as theology does, then we once again have a failure in the basic premise of the interdisciplinary discussion: that we can both investigate the same object and arrive at some sense of universal validity.

This is not to say that Pannenberg is wrong in his intentions to critique the dominance of relativity theory, merely that his attempts fail to hit the mark or stay true to his own theological motives. I will, however, attempt to extend and strengthen Pannenberg's critique by highlighting limitations in the model, specifically by pointing to non-theological aspects of reality that relativistic mechanics is unable to incorporate. I will argue that as a system of mechanics, relativity is useful for understanding the extension of substantial realities, but is finally ill-suited for understanding non-substantial realities such as information and pattern (drawing on Whitehead), language (J. L. Austin), as well as pain and consciousness. Rather than take issue with Minkowski space-time itself, I will argue instead against those philosophers and theologians who misapply the model, promoting a reductionistic physicalism that sees space-time as a sufficient system for describing the "totality of all that is".

But there are not only points of critique to be made between physics and theology. Curiously, through space-time's unification of all time into a single universal history, which is then combined with all reality to form a single unified whole; in its view of the universe as bound within an (eternally) determined course; in its rejection of efficacious change within that unified "reality–temporality" (so much so that universal change can only occur via the destruction of one block universe and the creation of another), we find that the four-dimensional, invariant, block universe of Minkowski space-time actually carries all the hallmarks of a biblical apocalyptic world view.

4 Laws of Nature, Rule of God

In Chapter Four, we will find that Pannenberg's concern with the dominance of the natural and historical sciences represents a long-running motif in his theology. He is particularly concerned that their epistemologies and academic approaches can lead to an unjustified rejection of the doctrines of the Christian faith. One aspect of the physical sciences that deserves detailed attention, he believes, is the Newtonian concept of inertia. Since inertia provides a determined, lawful and mathematical basis for tracking the progression and location of an object into the future, and provides objects with their own continuity across time, Pannenberg sees

the theory of inertia as impacting upon doctrines of the direct divine control of the natural world.[11] Thus inertia effectively offers a form of creaturely independence over against God which not only impinges on God's absolute control but also constricts the future, making it regulated and predictable. The rule of natural laws removes contingency from the future and makes the future a wholly knowable state based on the present. Such a regulated future then allows no space for divine contingencies, particularly a resurrection from the dead. Thus for Pannenberg, dealing with the problems raised by the principle of inertia stands as one of the most crucial tasks to be addressed in the dialogue between science and theology.[12] If we accept the rule of natural laws, then time becomes a mere development, the growth into the future of a seed that was already planted in the past. Such an entelechy would not allow for true contingency, and the future would never contain anything qualitatively new.[13]

But Pannenberg's critique extends beyond the natural sciences. He raises particular concern about the way the ideology of strict lawfulness has infiltrated the historical sciences, centred around the principle of analogy which argues that the historian can only accept as true those historical events which correlate to his or her own experiences (or the accepted experiences of others). Pannenberg fears that if analogy becomes the criterion by which the truth of historical events is determined, then there is no chance to accept anything truly novel occurring in history. It would also be impossible on these grounds for Christians to defend the historical truth of a radically novel event such as the resurrection.[14] Thus Pannenberg's aim is to defend theology against scientific and historical models which stress a universalizing law or are based on the absolute rule of universal natural laws. These models destroy an understanding of the contingency of the universe and thus either lead people to reject

11 Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Theological Questions to Scientists", in id., *Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith,* ed. Ted Peters (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 15–28 at 20.

12 Pannenberg, "Theological Questions to Scientists", 20.

13 While it has become common to read Pannenberg as a Hegelian, we will see that Pannenberg's strenuous critique of any entelechy within history places him in opposition to Hegel.

14 Cf. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology,* ii. 285.

doctrines of God's contingent action in creation, or promote a form of deism which prohibits God from acting in time now.

In response, Pannenberg enters an arms race against these deterministic natural laws, seeking to trump and overpower them with an even greater, more powerful Ruler: the absolute power of the all-determining God. Thus the development of Pannenberg's concept of time will revolve around a defence of this doctrine of God.

For Pannenberg, if, via inert and the rule of natural laws, the past determines the present which then determines the future, then scientific concepts of inertia and natural law infringe on the power of God and must be rejected. If the development of the universe is determined by natural laws then theology would no longer be free to speak of the contingent acts and decisions of God in history. In response, Pannenberg offers the following thesis: It cannot be the past which determines the present and future via the rule of natural laws, but rather it is the future which must determine the present and the past, based on the rule and faithfulness of God.[15] In a reversal of our normal understandings of time, Pannenberg argues that God creates each new discrete moment through the absolute power of his divine will and control, and then places those new moments into time to form the present. In this process of backward linkage (*Rückbindung*), each new present moment is a direct act of God's continuing creation of time which God then links back to each immediately previous present, ensuring the coherency of the new moment of time with its immediate past. Thus for Pannenberg, what we call the past is simply the remnant of previous free and contingent acts of God being pushed from the future into the past. Since the direction of time comes from the future, the residue of time which forms the past lacks any determinative power over either the present or the future.

Five points are vital for understanding Pannenberg's concept of time. First, time is linear, but sterile. Time progresses linearly from future to past, but because the progression of time is reversed no temporal event can form the basis of any subsequent future moment. If time were not sterile, it would lead to an entelechy. Second, the concept relies upon an imperial model of the absolute sovereignty and rule of God to produce

15 Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Theology and the Kingdom of God", in id., *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 51–71 at 59.

each and every temporal event. For Pannenberg, this absolute, dominating rule of God over time and the universe is non-negotiable, and it is the marker of his doctrine of God: "The deity of God is his rule".[16] Third, the truth of time is not located in human consciousness, but in the powerful acts of God. Thus time is objective. Fourth, since time stems from God's absolute and omnipotent will, *all* temporal events (both natural and historical) are radically contingent at an ontological level and come directly from the hand of God. Thus, fifth, if the historical or natural sciences experience a thread of continuity and coherency between two events, such continuity must be based solely upon God's will and desire for that continuity to exist. Continuity in nature and history is thus disconnected from any sense of natural lawfulness. God's faithfulness and power replaces inertia and natural law as the basis and driving force of historical continuity. Conversely, if historical continuity is *not* maintained, Pannenberg interprets the resulting destruction as God's judgement.

A doctrine of God infused with the concepts of divine power and control forms the foundation of Pannenberg's understanding of time, and the present in particular. For Pannenberg, the present tense is defined and delimited by experiences of control, and since he sees all creation as functionally open to God's control, God thus perceives time as an "eternal present". Eternity (the gathering together of all time under God's power and control) thus becomes the ontic "truth of time", and (using the language of special relativity) God's divine frame of reference.

Thus by stressing (a) the absolute rule and sovereignty of God, (b) God's absolute control over time and all temporal events (either in creative support or in destructive judgement), (c) the lack of any determination of the past over future events, and (d) the final impotence of what the sciences claim to be determinative natural laws, Pannenberg replaces a scientific "rule by natural laws" with a theological "rule by divine power", swapping out a form of temporality based on natural determinism with one based on divine determinism. In this way, Pannenberg can defend the activity of God in time and creation by promoting an image of God as an ultimate and unchallengeable power, outbidding the laws of nature with the *potentia Dei absoluta,* the absolute power of God. But is

16 Ibid. 55.

such a move defensible? Is it not theologically flawed and Christologically untenable?

5 The Ultimate Cause of Evil

In Chapter Five I will argue that Pannenberg's work on time is in essence a reworking of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century debate with Averroism, particularly the appeal to the *potentia Dei absoluta* in defence against Averroism's teachings on cosmic determination. This approach was championed especially by Thomas Bradwardine, an approach we can follow through Pannenberg's own analyses of Bradwardine's thought. Pannenberg, as a scholar of medieval theology, explains how Averroism presented Christian theology with an influential, academic system which argued for a process of natural cosmic determinism. Because it effectively limited the immediate activity of God in the natural world, it was perceived as a threat to doctrines of the sovereignty of God.[17] At the same time, early Scholastic realism was engaged in the pursuit of "universal and eternal truths", which also effectively endangering the concept of "historical particularity". The response among Nominalists and the Oxford-based *schola Augustinia moderna* was to shift focus from historical ideals to historical particulars, and to appeal to God's *potentia absoluta* as the basis both for all such contingent, historical particulars[18] as well as for their integrated continuity in the natural world. But it was Thomas Bradwardine who pushed this dependence upon the *potentia Dei absoluta* to its final end, extending its jurisdiction as truly *absolute* to all temporal events: to all events in the lives of human beings, and to

17 Wolfhart Pannenberg, review of "Gordon Leff: Bradwardine and the Pelagians. A Study of his 'De Causa Dei' and its Opponents (= Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought N. S. vol. 5). Cambridge (University Press) 1957. 282 S.", *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte,* 69 (1958): 355–61 at 359, 357; hereafter as "Bradwardine and the Pelagians".

18 Wolfhart Pannenberg, review of "Heiko Augustinus Oberman: Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine. A Fourteenth Century Augustinian. A Study of his Theology in its Historical Context (= Diss. Utrecht 1957). Utrecht (Kemink en Zoon) 1957. XI, 246 S., hfl 10.–", *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte,* 72 (1961): 173–5 at 174; hereafter as "Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine".

all temporal phases, past, present, and future. In so doing, he defended God's sovereignty and power as well as the historical particularity and contingency of all events.

We find here an astonishing number of parallels to Pannenberg's approach in his response to the natural sciences. Pannenberg enters into a discussion where he sees modern theologians challenged by the dominant physical sciences which promote a natural form of lawful determinism (either via the principle of inertia or the invariable space-time manifold), and exclude the immediate activity of God in time. Furthermore, the focus on universal truths (in the form of natural laws or historiography's analogical method) led to a scientific rejection of novel and contingent events, and a historiographical rejection of particularity. Thus I will argue that we see in Pannenberg's response to the natural sciences is a return to Bradwardine's theology (via Martin Luther), characterized by an appeal to the absolute power and rule of God and a divine determinism, all in order to protect faith against an extra-theological natural determinism. His work on time revives a stress on the absolute power of God and the inability of history and nature to provide coherent development in time on their own. It argues for God's power over nature, God's creative ability to call into existence and maintain naturally disconnected, radically contingent, and historically particular events. It asserts God's power to link these events into a coherent order in accordance with God's faithfulness. It draws heavily on the absolute power of a God who expresses absolute control over all time from the realm of his omnipotent, eternal present. And his approach proclaims the absolute sovereignty of a God whose power defines his very being. In essence, Pannenberg resurrects the Bradwardian method and its unyielding stress on the divine *potentia absoluta*. Yet we will see that this leaves Pannenberg vulnerable to the same problems that Bradwardine encountered, most notably the final attribution of all sin and evil to God.

In his early work, Pannenberg indeed accepts that God is the final cause of sin and evil.[19] Following Luther and Bradwardine, he also argues that the concept of human free will (*liberum arbitrium*) was used in error by the church fathers to stress a human role in sin. Such a position clash-

19 Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Christliche Glaube und menschliche Freiheit", *Kerygma und Dogma,* 4 (1958): 251–80 at 275.

es with the claim that God is the sole subject and actor of history. To flesh out this idea, Pannenberg turns in his later work to social and cognitive psychology to find a method for attributing sin to the human being without the need to include historical or temporal action. He focuses on the concept of egocentricity, which he can then use to distance the concept of personhood from its embodied dimensions and from the physical actions that such an embodied individual may perform. This disconnects the concepts of sin and evil from expression in physical events and rather locates them solely in cognitive-psychological states.

I will argue that Pannenberg's attempt fails for several reasons. First, his psychological reinterpretation of sin as a pietistic, personalized, individualistic egocentricity fails to do justice to the biblical testimony of the broad dimensions of sin and evil, or even to our experiences of corporate and cultural evils which transcend individuals and tyrannize and oppress them. Second, it abandons a nuanced concept of the human being in its full corporeality, and confuses a cultural context for a universal, genetic trait. Third, and most seriously, Pannenberg's reworking of time and causality disrupts our basic ethical understandings of action, and this disruption spills over into the field of jurisprudence. In a legal setting, if there is no historical coherence, then it is meaningless and even perverse to speak of an ethical matrix of causality and responsibility which lead to legal attributions of blame and subsequent judgement. The entire range of historical evils and injustices that the law seeks to constrain must finally be revealed as instances immediately created by the all-determining hand of God.

In Pannenberg's neo-Bradwardianism, we find that he does indeed reinterpret all temporal moments of death and suffering as expressions of the immediate will and action of God. Thus he is led to the same problems Bradwardine encountered. First, since suffering comes from the hand of God, the reality of such life-destroying evil is relativized or denied by claiming that such experienced suffering must ultimately be good if only perceived from God's perspective, if viewed with eternity as the truth of time. Second, such a reworking serves to instrumentalize time, specifically the arriving, unknown future. The future is transformed into a weapon of God's judgement, bringing heavenly salvation or divine destruction and damnation with each newly created moment. As a result, Pannenberg can no longer see time itself as a creature in need

of fulfilment and transformation under the healing power of God. Time is excluded from the need for redemption and becomes simply a tool of divine revelation and judgement.

Finally, in his *Systematic Theology* and later works, Pannenberg attempts to rework the structure of his approach using T. F. Torrance's work on fields of force. Yet while the metaphor of his model has changed, Pannenberg's underlying goals and premises remain consistent. We find the same stress and reliance on God's absolute power and rule, on time that flows from future to past, on a rejection of creaturely independence. God's *potentia absoluta* remains the core around which all else revolves. Therefore, even with the change of metaphor Pannenberg is unable to escape from the range of difficulties that necessarily accompany his idea of God as all-powerful, all-determining reality.

For Pannenberg, God's divine being is always to be correlated with God's ultimate, supreme and absolute rule. The "supreme being is called God in virtue of his all-embracing power and lordship (*potestatem et imperium*). Without these he would not be God".[20] Yet how can such an autocratic and imperialist concept of God cohere with the figure of a Christ who suffers, is tortured and executed? In Pannenberg's defence of God before the powers of the natural sciences, he focuses on God's insurmountable and absolute might, yet in doing so he leaves little room for the development of a satisfactory *theologia crucis.* Any serious theological discussion on the concept of time must take as its starting point not a speculative and philosophical conception of God but rather the One who was incarnated into time and savagely pushed back out of it. If we begin with a *theologia crucis,* if we begin with the perfect self-revelation of God within the framework of the destruction and suffering of life in time, and if we want and maintain a truly Christian hope for redemption and salvation from that suffering in both the present and future, then we must allow for a concept of time which reveals the cruciform nature of all creation, including created time itself. In Christ, God suffers under the fallenness and brokenness of time, suffers under its true power for violent destruction; and through Christ's resurrection God points to a process of healing and transformation of all creation, including time. It is not in the *potentia absoluta* but rather in the weakness of the crucified

20 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology,* i. 417 n. 173.

Christ that power is made perfect. By pursuing a neo-Bradwardianism that utterly subjugates everything to God (*"Gott gänzlich unterworfen"*), Pannenberg finally fails to escape the traps of divine determinism, and is unable to deal satisfactorily with the unavoidable problem of historical suffering.

6 Rule by Law, Rule of Law

In Chapter Six, this volume concludes by re-approaching the interdisciplinary discussion on time from a new perspective on the concept of lawfulness. Pannenberg's argument with the natural sciences is that they have developed an interpretative framework based on the priority of natural laws and the ability of these laws to specify the development of all temporal/historical events. Pannenberg's own response to this situation was simply to outbid the scientific view of "rule by natural laws" by appealing to a theological "rule by divine decree" based on God's unsurpassable and illimitable *potentia absoluta*. At this point, we can see that Pannenberg's debate with the natural sciences is actually fuelled by a shared understanding of the concepts of rule and law, and who has the rights to that system. But both models are ultimately reductionistic and unhelpful.

In an attempt to sketch a possible way forward, I will argue that we should return to a jurisprudential distinction between "rule *by* law" and "rule *of* law". In broad terms, authoritarian "rule *by* law" refers to those instances where laws are used as an instrument of (societal) determination and control. In contrast to this type of instrumentalization of the law (which seeks to use "lawfulness" as a tool of authoritarian control), "rule *of* law" systems establish a *constrained yet supportive* framework within which free and contingent action can still occur. Under the rule of law, the law is pre-eminent and can serve as a check against the abuse of power, whereas under rule by law, the law serves as a tool of suppression.[21] Classical and relativistic physics as well as Pannenberg himself all advocate a rule *by* law system. They offer an instrumentalization of

21 Cf. Brian Z. Tamanaha, "The Rule of Law for Everyone?", *Current Legal Problems*, 55 (2002): 97–122 at 101.