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Pannenberg on Divine Personhood

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Abstract

Does the notion of 'Trinitarian persons' have any practical value for the lives of Christians today? While theologians such as Karl Barth and Karl Rahner have famously argued that 'person' is an outdated term that can no longer adequately speak to contemporary Christians because of shifts in the term's meaning, others like Wolfhart Pannenberg are convinced that these shifts are the precise reason that the term 'person' is more valuable than ever for trying to understand God and the divine/world relation. This article seeks to set forward a clearer definition of Pannenberg's use of the term 'person' in contrast to the definitions set out by Barth and Rahner and will use this definition to demonstrate the significance of Trinitarian personhood for theology.

Keywords

Barth, divine personhood, Pannenberg, Rahner, Trinitarian theology

In the first volume of *Church Dogmatics* published in 1932, Karl Barth argued that the term 'person' commonly used to denote the distinctions within the one divine essence was imprecise, confused, and easily misunderstood given the meaning of the word suggested by modern philosophy.[1] He therefore suggested that the term 'person' be largely abandoned in favor of a more precise alternative. Karl Rahner also shared this concern that the term 'person' had become too affected by the modern usage of the term which implies individual consciousness and may serve to undermine Trinitarian monotheism.[2] Thus two of the most influential theologians in the recent resurgence of Trinitarian theology have argued forcefully and to great effect the that the term Christians have used for centuries to describe the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is misleading and perhaps

1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol 1.1, trans. G.W. Bromiley, 2nd edn, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 355–359.

2 Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*. trans. Joseph Donceel, with an introduction by Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 104–115.

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inappropriate. This conversation has sparked debate about what term might be used in place of 'person' and about the nature of the distinctions within the Godhead.

Wolfhart Pannenberg in his recent writings on the doctrine of the Trinity has taken up this question in an important and profound way. However, unlike Barth and Rahner, Pannenberg seeks a renewed appreciation of the concept of divine personhood in light of some of its more modern connotations. This article seeks concisely to articulate Pannenberg's insights regarding divine personhood, put these insights into conversation with the concerns of Barth and Rahner, and discuss some of the practical contributions Pannenberg's definition of divine personhood has made to Trinitarian theology.

Self-Distinguishing Centers of Divine Activity

Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–) has been a well-known theological figure since the mid-1960s. He is perhaps best known for his writings on revelation and Christology. However, the publication of his three-volume *Systematic Theology* helped to demonstrate the importance of Trinitarian theology for his overall theological project.[3] Central to his understanding of the Trinity, and indeed the entire doctrine of God, is his appreciation of the divine persons and the ways in which they relate to one another. However, despite its importance, Pannenberg never offers a concise definition of the term 'person', but rather allows its meaning to permeate his treatment of the doctrine of God.

Nonetheless it is possible to distill Pannenberg's understanding of divine personhood to a few key concepts. These include the notion of self-distinction, mutual or reciprocal relations, persons as centers of divine action, the Trinity and love, and the world as the history of God. This section will explain these concepts and show how they influence one another.

Pannenberg's study of the doctrine of the Trinity and his understanding of divine personhood begins with the concept of the self-distinction of Jesus from the Father. Jesus' divinity is rooted in the fact that throughout his life, during his ministry, and particularly in his death, Jesus distinguished himself from the Father.[4] Chief among the scriptural witnesses to this distinction is Jesus' rejection of the title 'Good Teacher' because only the Father in heaven is good (Mk 10: 17–19). In fact one of the major goals of Jesus' work was to establish the kingdom on the Father's behalf and then to hand over this kingdom to the Father. However, it is in this act of self-distinction from the Father that the divinity of Jesus is revealed.[5] This idea follows a thesis from one of Pannenberg's

3 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–8). Hereafter abbreviated as *ST*. On the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity to Pannenberg's overall work cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'An Autobiographical Sketch,' in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques, with an Autobiographical Essay and Response*, eds Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 11–8; Stanley Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 2nd edn, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 57–102; Iain Taylor, *Pannenberg on the Triune God* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), esp. 182–207.

4 Pannenberg, *ST* 1:310.

5 Ibid, 263–266.

earlier works on spirituality: 'Communion and unity with God increase in the same proportion as the modesty of the creature in distinguishing itself from God.'[6] Thus, in the absolute distinction that Jesus draws between himself and the Father, the work of the Father is revealed in the Son. It is this relation to the Father that establishes Jesus' status as the Son, for he is Son only in his relation to the Father and receives his divinity through this relation to the Father. In fact this element of self-distinction is central to the way Pannenberg understands the Trinitarian persons, because the Father, Son, and Spirit each receive their divinity precisely through an act of self-distinction from the others.[7] For the Spirit this comes in his work of giving glory to the Father and to the Son; the Son in the resurrection and the Father in the Son's future handing over of the kingdom. The Father distinguishes himself in his receiving his divinity back from the Son and the Spirit. This concept is central to Pannenberg's doctrine of the Trinity and to his understanding of Trinitarian personhood because the self-distinction of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit establishes the concrete quality of their mutual dependence upon one another. This leads directly into Pannenberg's understanding of the reciprocal relations of the divine persons.

Pannenberg follows the teaching of the tradition which dates back to the Cappadocians that divine personhood is derived from the relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to one another.[8] For the Cappadocians the relations of the Trinitarian persons (*υποστασεις*) were seen completely in terms of their origin in the Father. Thus, the person of the Son was constituted by his being begotten by the Father, the Spirit was constituted by his procession from the Father, and the Father was identified as the origin of the divinity of the other two and thus the source of the Godhead. However, Pannenberg is concerned that this leads to an implicit subordinationism within the doctrine of the Trinity.[9] He argues that defining the divine persons solely in terms their relations of origin is insufficient. This is where he makes use of the principle of self-distinction. For Pannenberg each of the Trinitarian persons is defined by their relation, not only to the origin of their divinity but also to the other persons.[10] More concretely this means that the Son receives his identity and divinity not only from the Father who sent him, but also from the Spirit who gives glory to him in his resurrection.[11] The Spirit receives his divinity not only in

6 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 82.

7 'The self-differentiation of the Son from the Father on the one side and the Spirit on the other forms a basis for the thesis that there is a threefold distinction in the deity' (Pannenberg, *ST,* 1: 272).

8 Ibid., 279. See J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. edn (New York: Harper Collins, 1978), 263–269: G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1975), 179–196.

9 'In this regard the Cappadocians went back to the older thought that the Father is the source and principle of deity, that the Son and the Spirit receive their deity and their unity with the Father from him, and that the Father alone, therefore is without origin. But this thought had been linked to subordinationsim in pre-Nicene views of the Trinity and it had been an obstacle to recognition of the full deity of the Son in the battle for the Nicene formula' (Pannenberg, *ST* 1:279).

10 Ibid., 319–321.

11 Ibid., 310; 315.

his spiration from the Father but also in his being received by the Son.[12] Most radically, the Father too is dependent upon the Son and the Spirit for his divinity, in that he depends upon the work of the Son and the Spirit to establish his lordship over creation.[13]

It is particularly interesting that this does not mean for Pannenberg that the monarchy of the Father is lost.[14] On the contrary, the monarchy of the Father is seen in this light as the goal of the united activity of the Trinity in relation to the world. Perhaps no element of Pannenberg's understanding of divine personhood is more central to his doctrine of the Trinity than his concept of the reciprocal relations. This is because Pannenberg's argument for the mutual relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one of the main ways that he seeks to correct what he perceives as the long-standing problems of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity.[15] Each of the other components of Pannenberg's definition of divine personhood either seeks to clarify this point or to avoid the potential dangers of this position.

The reciprocal relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit find concrete expression in the activity of each of the divine persons, both in respect to one another and with respect to the world.[16] The Father is dynamic in his act of complete self-giving to the Son and the Spirit and in his sending them into the world.[17] The Son's act of obedience to the Father is the basis for the establishment of the kingdom. The Spirit is defined by his acts of glorifying the Father and the Son. Thus, at the very center of Pannenberg's definition of divine personhood is the notion that the persons are distinct centers of activity. In this way they can be identified with the modern notion of subjects. This idea of three distinct centers of divine activity flows naturally from the idea that the Trinitarian persons receive their divinity from one another. However, Pannenberg is careful to point out that while the Father, Son, and Spirit each constitute an active subject, they are completely united in their activity.[18] That is to say that the Father's act of creation, the Son's work in redemption, and the Spirit's efforts at consummation are all fundamentally identical. This is how Pannenberg understands the traditional doctrine of perichoresis. The same

12 Ibid., 315–316.

13 Ibid., 312–313; 316.

14 Much has been written in recent years on whether the notion of divine monarchy continues to be a helpful term for understanding God's relationship to creation, especially in light of feminist and liberationist critiques of the term (e.g. Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987], 63–69). However, Pannenberg is responding in particular to the critique of divine monarchy as presented by Jürgen Moltmann. For Moltmann the concept of divine monarchy is also connected to monotheism, which constitutes a much deeper critique of traditional Trinitarian theology than Pannenberg is interested in making (Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 129–150; 192–202).

15 Pannenberg is deeply concerned that the subordinationism that some have detected in the Cappadocians has led in the Western tradition to a hidden modalism which has contributed to a lack of appreciation of the doctrine of the Trinity and an overly static and transcendent concept of God (see Pannenberg, *ST*, 1: 280–299).

16 Ibid.,319; 384–393.

17 Ibid., 322–325.

18 Ibid.. 319–321; 325.

must be said of the activity of the three persons in relation to one another. Each person's activity must be seen as the activity of the one divine essence in that each person depends upon the others for his own personhood.[19] This connection between personhood and activity is crucial because it gives a distinctly existentialist cast to Pannenberg's use of the term 'person' in his doctrine of the Trinity in which the free activity of a person is conceptualized as an expression of self-consciousness.

In light of Pannenberg's strong emphasis on the distinctions between the Father, Son, and Spirit (which allows for the possibility of speaking of three divine subjects of activity), he must have an equally strong understanding of the unity of the three persons in the divine essence to avoid the charge of tri-theism. Pannenberg clearly shows his acceptance of this responsibility in his discussion of methodology. When systematic theology addresses the doctrine of the Trinity before discussing the divine essence, the challenge is in establishing the unity of the distinct Trinitarian persons in order to avoid tri-theism.[20] Pannenberg offers two arguments for the unity of the three divine persons. The first is rooted in his re-interpretation of the spirituality of the divine essence along the lines of field theory as developed by modern physicists.[21] He prefers this approach to understanding the divine essence first because it disassociates the divine essence from the classical emphasis on the divine mind or reason which he feels has contributed to the stress on the divine essence as the only proper place to discuss the personality and subjectivity of God. He also sees the concept of God as Spirit as providing a better basis for discussing the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit, each of which is an equal manifestation of the divine essence which has no concrete form without the divine persons.

Pannenberg's second major argument for the unity of the divine essence is rooted in the scriptural statement that God is love in 1 John 4: 8, 16.[22] Pannenberg understands this in personalist terms. That is to say, the persons of the Trinity offer themselves to one another completely in the act of love. In this way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit completely give and completely receive their divinity from the other persons.[23] Thus love is at the very core of the divine essence since it is what each of the persons share in common and what endows them with their divinity. This also serves to link the immanent life of God with the economy of the salvation of the world, since it is the goal of God's action in relation to the world to bring creation into the Trinitarian life of love. Pannenberg's description of the divine essence in terms of love and spirituality adds to his relational definition of divine personhood. In fact, it is in these sections that Pannenberg argues most succinctly for the need to make the category of relation more fundamental than

19 Ibid., 390–391.

20 Ibid., 442–443.

21 Ibid., 382–384.

22 Ibid., 442–448.

23 'Each receives his or her self afresh from the other, and since the self-giving is mutual there is no one-sided dependence in the sense of belonging to another. The personality of each I is constituted by the relation to the Thou, but the basis of its being thus constituted is not the Thou as such, as another I; as Buber saw, it is the mystery that holds sway between the I and the Thou' (ibid., 426–427).

substance in the definition of the term essence.[24] This means that for him essence is most fundamentally a relational concept.

Pannenberg understands the world as the history of God. By this phrase Pannenberg means that once God chose to create, God's very deity was put at risk.[25] This is because if God is truly God then he must be able to demonstrate his lordship over everything. However, God has not yet fully established his lordship over creation. According to Pannenberg, in order to accomplish this fact the Father is dependent upon the work of the Son and the Spirit in creation.[26] This echoes the Father's eternal dependence upon the Son, for the Father is only the Father in relation to the Son. Pannenberg's understanding of the world as the history of God once again serves to show the unity of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity.[27] This is important to Pannenberg's understanding of the term 'person' because it shows that the events of the history of the world affect God and each of the Trinitarian persons.[28] This also involves a substantial revision of traditional theological understanding of the immutability of the divine essence. Pannenberg, however, is critical of the importation of this concept from Greek philosophy. He finds the core of truth in the patristic notion of divine immutability in the idea of God's fidelity to himself and to Israel that is expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures.[29] However, scripture is also able to provide a much more involved portrait of God's interaction with the world than the one that is provided by traditional theism. More concretely this means that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are truly affected by the life of the world; for example, there is an actual change in the divine life in the incarnation.[30] In this way it is through the actions of the Son and the Spirit that creation is brought into a real loving relationship with the Trinity.

Pannenberg's concept of divine personhood makes it possible to arrive at a definition of this term. A divine person is a self-distinguishing center of divine activity characterized by its mutual relations and self-gift to the other divine persons which allows the divine essence to form a real relation with creation. This definition not only combines the key elements of Pannenberg's understanding of divine personhood but it also relates to almost every aspect of his understanding of the doctrine of God. Thus,

24 Ibid., 367.

25 Ibid., 329.

26 Ibid., 322–323.

27 This is in clear reference to Rahner's axiom regarding the identity of the immanent and economic Trinity (Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel, with an introduction by Catherine Mowry LaCugna [New York: Crossroad, 1997], 21–23). However, Pannenberg accepts the interpretative corrective of Walter Kasper that this rule should not be understood in such a way that means the absorption of the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity (Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew O'Connell [New York: Crossroad, 2002] 273–277).

28 Pannenberg, *ST,* 1: 327–336.

29 Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology' in *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 2, trans. George H. Kehm, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) esp. 157–173.

30 Pannenberg, *ST*, 1:327ff.

it is difficult to underestimate the importance of this concept for his understanding of theology in general.

Few criticisms have been leveled specifically at Pannenberg's definition of divine personhood. However, his Trinitarian theology in general has been the subject of some substantial critical debate. The most persistent of these criticisms has been the charge that Pannenberg's theology has been too uncritically influenced by Hegelian philosophy and thus the being of God is too closely tied to the history of the world or that the freedom of God is restrained by this relation.[31] However, Pannenberg draws very carefully and critically on Hegelian philosophy and attempts to avoid the charges of pantheism by emphasizing that it is through a divine act of freedom that God chooses to relate to the world so closely.[32] Another group of criticisms classify Pannenberg's theology as rationalism and take issue with the distinction between his epistemological method and his ontological claims.[33] While each of these charges is distinct, they share a common concern regarding Pannenberg's reliance upon human reason to understand and evaluate Christian truth claims. Such an approach however is consistent with Pannenberg's attempt to treat theology as an academic discipline that can and must interact with other academic disciplines to evaluate to truth of Christian doctrine. However, this position should not be confused with attempts to prove the existence of God or the Trinity. Rather, he argues that 'although God's majesty transcends all human concepts, it does not follow that we do better to be silent about God than to speak about him, or that nothing definite is conceivable in our talk about God.'[34] Nonetheless, the full implications of Pannenberg's eschatological ontology and its relationship to a theological epistemology remain elusive. Lastly, Pannenberg's Trinitarian theology has been criticized as tri-theistic because of its emphasis on the divine persons as centers of divine action.[35] However, our presentation of Pannenberg's doctrine of the Trinity has demonstrated his efforts to locate the unity of the divine persons not only in the concept of *perichoresis*, but also in his presentation of God as Spirit and love.

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31 This criticism was leveled against Pannenberg as early as 1982 in William J. Hill, *The Three-Personed God: The Trinity as a Mystery of Salvation* (Washington: CUA, 1982), 155–166; 199–200, and continues to be an influential critique as can be seen in Paul Molnar, 'Some Problems with Pannenberg's Solution to Barth's "Faith Subjectivism",' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48 (1995): 315–339, and Ian Taylor, *Pannenberg on the Triune God*, 40–42.

32 Indeed Taylor provides a strong response to those who would claim that Pannenberg is a Hegelian while remaining critical of the close correlation between the immanent and economic Trinity in his work (ibid., 10–21).

33 See Eberhard Jüngel, 'Nihil divinitas, ubi non fides: Ist christliche Dogmatik in rein theoretischer Perspektive möglich?: Bemerkungen zu einem theologischen Entwurf von Rang,' *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 86 (1989): 355–370; Philip Clayton, 'Being and One Theologian,' *Thomist* 52 (1988), 645–671; Roger Olson, 'Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine of the Trinity,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990): 175–206.

34 Pannenberg, *ST*, 337–338.

35 Christoph Scwöbel, 'Wolfhart Pannenberg' in *The Modern Theologians*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 129–146.

Comparing Pannenberg with Rahner and Barth

More than any other theologian in the twentieth century, Karl Barth (1886–1968) is responsible for defending the doctrine of the Trinity and bringing its centrality in Christian theology back into focus.[36] Barth was deeply influenced by and concerned with the theological insights of Schleiermacher and others in the Liberal Protestant tradition that was passed on to him. Much of his work is motivated by a concern to prevent the imposition of foreign human standards into our understanding of the Being of God. This means, on the one hand, that he rejects Schleiermacher's approach which in his judgment makes God an object of reflection for modern standards of human knowing. On the other hand, he also rejects the approach of natural theology, which in his judgment makes God the object of creaturely standards of being and perfection. For this reason, Barth's treatment of the Trinity is not relegated to an appendix, as was Schleiermacher's, nor is it treated after a philosophical discussion of the divine attributes.[37] Rather it is dealt with in the earliest chapters of the *Church Dogmatics* as the irreducible Subject of revelation, who is identical with his act of revelation and also identical with its effect.[38] Thus, for Barth, the doctrine of the Trinity is at the very center of his understanding of revelation and is integrally related to the rest of his dogmatics, as can be seen in his presentation of the doctrines of election, creation, and reconciliation. 'In giving this doctrine a place of prominence our concern cannot be merely that it have this place externally but rather that its content be decisive and controlling for the whole of dogmatics.'[39]

Barth begins his analysis with the insight that the doctrine of the Trinity is in no way to be understood as contradicting monotheism. This position is not so much explained and argued out, as it is asserted as an unquestionable presupposition of any theological discussion. 'It may be said of this essence that its unity is not only not abrogated by the threeness of the "persons" but rather that its unity consists in the threeness of the "persons." Whatever else we may have to say about this threeness, in no case can it denote a threeness of essence.'[40] Given this starting point, the difficulty is not so much in establishing the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as it is in explaining how the one God is three.

Barth intentionally uses quotation marks around the word 'person' each time it comes up in connection with the doctrine of the Trinity to express a double reservation with the term which is essential to his understanding of God. First, the ancient concept of person

36 The body of secondary literature on Barth's Trinitarian theology is voluminous. Some of the most important works include Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming*, trans. Horton Harris (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic, 1976); Alan Torrance, 'The Trinity' in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. J.B. Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000), 72–91; Geoffrey Bromiley, *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 13–34.

37 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 2nd edn, trans. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1928), 738–739.

38 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol 1.1, trans. G.W. Bromiley, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 296.

39 Ibid., 303.

40 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1.1:349–350.

which was used to express the distinctions in the Godhead is not equivalent to the modern idea of personality. Discussions of the personality of God are foreign to patristic and medieval theology and only develop in the effort to combat modern forms of naturalism and pantheism which deny that God has a 'personal' way of relating to his creatures. In this context, Barth is comfortable using the word 'personality' in the doctrine of God. However, in the divine essence, to speak of three divine personalities is to fall into tritheism. It is imperative that this valid understanding of the divine personality as one and personal not be confused with the traditional term 'person'.

This points to the second reservation that Barth has with the term 'person'. Barth finds the category 'person' to be a very untidy and imprecise term to use in addressing the already challenging discussion of the distinctions within the one divine essence. This is true for three reasons. (1) Barth argues that the term 'person' (as it relates to the doctrine of the Trinity) was never adequately clarified by the Church. (2) This lack of technical clarity is further complicated by the confused history and etymology that lie behind the word. Behind this one word lies a bevy of other words used by ancient authorities to describe the distinctions within the Godhead. The Greek words *προσωποω* and *υποστασις*, of fundamental importance in expressing the doctrine of the Trinity during the second and third centuries, bear a strained and confused relationship with the Latin word *persona* which became the decisive term in the West. This infuses the word 'person' with shades of meaning inappropriate for the Trinity. (3) In the centuries that have passed since the patristic period, the term has become associated with the concepts of self-consciousness, individual freedom of thought, personal autonomy, and volition. Each of these concepts is summed up for Barth in the term 'personality', which is not at all applicable to the distinctions within the divine essence.

Given the great confusion associated with the term 'person', Barth advocates the use of a different term to express the same concept. Rather than using 'person' in a highly technical sense or attempting to incorporate the notion of self-consciousness into the doctrine of the Trinity, he proposes that *Seinsweise* (mode of being or way of being) carry this burden. He views this as the literal translation of the term *υπόστασις* into modern theological conversations without the excess theological and etymological baggage of the term 'person'. 'Hence we are not introducing a new concept but simply putting in the center an auxiliary concept which has been used from the very beginning and with great emphasis in the analysis of the concept of person.'[41] Barth appeals to the notion of relation in order to describe the differences among the three divine *Seinsweisen*. The Father, Son, and Spirit are distinguished from one another by the fact that they each have a distinct relation of origin which guarantees the equality of essence and divinity of each. While Barth believes that the term '*Seinsweise*' helps to avoid many of the issues that have resulted from the imprecision of the concept of person, he acknowledges that it is not an objectively superior term in that all of the 'great central difficulties which have always beset the doctrine of the Trinity at this point apply to us too'.[42]

Karl Rahner's *The Trinity* is the English translation of a long article from the second volume of *Mysterium Salutis*, a multi-volume systematic theology originally published

41 Ibid., 359.

42 Ibid., 367.

in German in 1967. Rahner's contribution to the re-emergence of the doctrine of the Trinity in Catholic theology takes the form of a scathing critique of major elements of the Neo-Scholastic manual theology that he inherited from the generation of Catholic theologians that preceded him. Thus, while elements of his Trinitarian theology are clearly inspired by Barth and the discussion initiated in Protestant circles, the article bears the tone and character of the deep interaction with and reform of Neo-Scholastic theology characteristic of Catholic theology in the late 1960s. Rahner's understanding of the Trinity is characterized by three main concerns: (1) the growing isolation of the doctrine of the Trinity from the rest of dogmatic theology, (2) the identity of the immanent and economic Trinity, and (3) the correct use of the term 'person' in understanding the Trinitarian relations.[43] For the purposes of the article we will only treat the third of these concerns.

Rahner, like Barth, finds the term 'person' problematic because, despite the history of its use among theologians, it tends to imply an individual consciousness and center of activity in modern philosophical usage. Rahner feels that the implicit (or explicit) application of such categories to the divine *hypostases* serves to undermine Trinitarian monotheism. However, he disagrees with Karl Barth that the word is inherently ill-suited to express its intended meaning and affirms that the term must be kept because of the history of its use. Yet, he also argues that the word has developed to the point that it is 'not in every respect well adapted to express what is meant and that it does not lack certain disadvantages'.[44] For this reason, Rahner offers the term '*Subsistenzweisen*' (modes or manners of subsisting) to help clarify the ambiguities that he believes have become a part of the contemporary context and use of the term 'person'. He argues that this category 'is better, simpler, and more in harmony with the traditional language of theology and the Church' than Barth's *Seinsweisen* because it says exactly what Thomas means by 'person' and because it appeals to our experience of the Father, Son, and Spirit as revealed in salvation history.[45]

Thus, one concern that Karl Barth and Karl Rahner share with the use of the term 'person' in association with the doctrine of the Trinity is precisely the kind of development in the term 'person' that Pannenberg values. To Barth and Rahner it seems absolutely incompatible with the divine essence to speak of three free and self-conscious subjects. However, this is because both Barth and Rahner basically accept the modern understanding of 'person' and seek to avoid it because of the perceived incompatibility of the term with the Trinity. Pannenberg, on the other hand, only accepts the modern understanding of 'person' in a qualified sense. While he supports the modern emphasis

43 For more detailed studies of Rahner's presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity and his influence on contemporary Trinitarian theology see William V. Dych, *Karl Rahner* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992), 148–162; J.A. Di Noia, 'Karl Rahner,' in *Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1, ed. David Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 196–198; Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 55–71; Mário de Franca Miranda, O mistério de Deus em nossa vida: a doutrina trinitária de Karl Rahner, Colecão Fé e realidade, vol. 1 (São Paulo: Edicões Loyola, 1975).

44 Karl Rahner, *Trinity*, 44.

45 Ibid., 110.

on action, he is suspicious of the importance of consciousness as constitutive of divine personhood. This is because self-consciousness deals with the identity that is developed between the self and the I in human beings and the realization that we as humans are not fully identical with ourselves. Pannenberg argues that as humans we develop our own identity in relation to the other who helps to mediate this identity for us.[46] However, this notion of self-consciousness is only applicable to the divine persons by extension because, while they do receive their identity in the mutual relations of the persons, they do so perfectly and without the inauthenticity characteristic of human personhood.[47] Pannenberg sees this difference between human and divine personal identity as so radical that it may not even be appropriate to use the term self-consciousness with regard to the divine persons.

Pannenberg chooses to focus on the historical acts of the divine persons, rather than on the notion of self-consciousness, for his understanding of the Trinitarian distinctions. He does so in explicit contrast to Barth. 'If the Trinitarian relations among Father, Son, and Spirit have the form of mutual self-distinction, they must be understood not merely as different modes of being of the one divine subject but as living realizations of autonomous centers of action'.[48] This concentration on the notion of autonomous centers of action is crucial for Pannenberg because action is always understood as the expression of the acting individual (*υποστασις*). Thus divine activity can only be properly attributed to the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit and cannot be characterized by the activity of divine essence as if it were a fourth person that stands behind these three. Pannenberg states his position succinctly: 'Only the three persons are the direct subjects of the divine action.'[49] The one divine essence has its existence, both eternally and in relation to the world, only in the divine persons. This means that if God is in any sense active, this activity must always be located in the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Pannenberg, however, follows the Cappadocians in insisting that properly speaking there is only one divine activity in relation to the world that is shared by each of the Trinitarian persons.[50] This insight and the doctrine of the perichoretic unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit are an expression of their unity in the divine essence. However, as we have already seen, the Cappadocians only express this unity by deriving the Trinitarian persons from the divine essence, which is associated with the person of the Father as the origin and source of the Godhead.

Pannenberg seeks to sidestep this move and the difficulties that he associates with it by re-evaluating the traditional association of the spirituality of God with reason. From

46 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 191–314.

47 Pannenberg, *ST*, 1:377–378.

48 'Wenn die trinitarisschen Beziehungen zwischen Vater, Sohn, und Geist die Form wechselseitiger Selbstunterscheidung haben, dann können sie nicht nur als verschiedene Seinsweisen eines einzigen göttlichen Subjekts, sondern müssen als Lebensvollzüge **selbständiger** Aktzentren aufgefaβt warden' (Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 1:347).

49 Pannenberg, *ST*, 1: 384.

50 See Gregory of Nyssa, *Quod non sunt tres Dei*, PG 45: 128A-C; Gregory of Nazianzen, *Orations*, 31.14 (PG 36: 149A).

the time of Philo and Origen to the work of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, the Judeo-Christian tradition has understood the scriptural assertion that God is Spirit through the Platonic and Aristotelian category of *nous*.[51] Given the schools of ancient philosophy this made sense considering the fact that the only other option for understanding the pneumatic nature of the divine essence was found in Stoic materialism. Pannenberg links the tendency to think of the divine essence in terms of reason with the tendency to assign subjectivity to the divine essence.

In contrast, he offers an alternative understanding of the spirituality of the divine essence developed from modern physics. Drawing upon Michael Faraday's notions of a universal force field (and noting its ancient roots in Stoicism), Pannenberg argues that it is possible to re-conceptualize the divine essence as an autonomous field that is fully manifested in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[52] Faraday posited the existence of a universal force field in relation to which all material and corpuscular objects are considered secondary. Pannenberg imports this language of modern physics and uses it to describe the divine essence as a field of power which 'can find equal manifestation in the three persons [of the Trinity]'.[53] This concept can be opened up to include a number of human persons and the notion of the Church. Human persons remain independent of the field while the Trinitarian persons are the eternal forms of the one divine essence. Pannenberg relates the proposition more concretely to the divine persons by way of the Holy Spirit. Since Pannenberg defines the Holy Spirit as the person who unites the Father and the Son in love, he easily makes the next step in describing the Spirit as the force field of the fellowship of the Father and the Son.[54] In this way the Holy Spirit is both a personal center of action who proceeds from the Father and is received by the Son and the impersonal field of power that unites the Father and the Son in love.

Pannenberg sees many benefits coming from this re-conceptualization of the divine essence. For example, the divine persons can now be seen as subjects without first being derived from the divine essence. 'As modes of being of the one divine life [the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit] are always permeated by its dynamic through their mutual relations.'[55] He thus defines the Trinitarian persons as centers of divine action which do not at all differ from the one divine essence that permeates them all.[56] In other words, the

51 'God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth' (Jn 4: 24).

52 Pannenberg, *ST*, 1: 383. Pannenberg cites William Berkson as the source of his interpretation of Faraday, but also points out that the significance of field theory extends through the work of Einstein on fields. (Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'The Doctrine of Creation and Modern Science' in *Toward a Theology of Nature*: *Essays on Science and Faith*, [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993], 37–41).

53 Pannenberg, *ST*, 1:383.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., 385.

56 A complete discussion Pannenberg's use of field theory is more than can be accomplished with the limits of this article. For a more thorough treatment of this topic consult Ian Taylor, *Pannenberg on the Triune God*, 78–80; 187; Rodney Holder, 'Creation and the Sciences in the Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg,' *Communio Viatorum* 49 (2007): 248–251; Philip Hefner, 'The Role of Science in Pannenberg's Theological Thinking,' *Zygon* 24 (1997): 139–140.

activity of the divine essence takes form only in the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit both in their mutual relations and in their activity in the world.

By locating the definition of Trinitarian personhood in the notion of divine centers of action, Pannenberg is also attempting to correct the vestiges of modalism that he detects in both Barth and Rahner. Although both Barth and Rahner argue that increased methodological primacy needs to be given to the doctrine of the Trinity, even over the presentation of the essence and attributes of the one God, Pannenberg argues that they fail to do this. Following the critique of Robert Jenson and Jürgen Moltmann, Pannenberg argues that Barth and Rahner begin their understanding of the Trinity by presupposing the unity of the divine persons and conflating the person of the Father with the godhead.[57] Thus, God the Father is always seen as the unoriginate source of the divinity of the Son and the Spirit and does not rely on them in any way for his own divinity. This leads inevitably to the type of implicit modalism that Rahner himself recognizes is prevalent in contemporary theology, but is unable to avoid. This implicit modalism prevents Barth and Rahner from taking the essential significance of the divine personhood. They each follow mainstream Christian tradition since the time of Augustine in failing to assign any ontological importance to the notion of the divine relations. Rather, these relations are merely accidental qualities of the one divine essence.

Contributions

The preceding discussion has not only demonstrated the depth and subtlety of Pannenberg's definition of divine personhood; it also has shown how his work draws on the efforts of Barth and Rahner to restore priority to the doctrine of the Trinity. In this last section of this article I would like to suggest some of the unique contributions that he has made to the debate over divine personhood. In particular, I will focus on Pannenberg's consistency in use of the term 'person', his understanding of persons as centers of divine action, his focus on relationality in connection with the eschatological orientation of his work, and his use of field theory to describe the unity of the Trinitarian persons. The analysis of each of these contributions will thus demonstrate the practical value of Pannenberg's definition of Trinitarian personhood.

Pannenberg's definition of Trinitarian personhood is particularly valuable because it allows him consistently to apply it to every area of theology. Persons are of primary interest to the work of theologians in all areas of theology (e.g. Trinitarian theology, Christology, Anthropology, Spirituality, Liturgy, etc.). Put in another way, Theology is the attempt of faithful persons to reflect rationally on their relationship with the tri-personal God in light of their contemporary experience of relating to other persons and their context in the world. The difficulty is that too frequently the meaning of personhood is either developed in isolation from other proper uses of the term or is used in an unreflective way. Pannenberg's definition of personhood manages the awesome task of bringing consistency to its use, whether it refers to human or divine persons without conflating the

57 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 139–148. Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), esp. 13–18.

two. Thus the focus on relationality and action are applicable to both the divine persons and human beings. Moreover, because Pannenberg has developed some consistency of usage for the term, it allows him to delve more deeply into the mystery of the Incarnation in a way that helps to explain how humanity and divinity are irrevocably joined in one person. Further, the divine personhood of Christ does not have to be played off against or seen as a reduction of his human personhood. The term 'person' when developed in a consistent fashion becomes the very point of mediation between humanity and divinity in the person of Jesus Christ.

As we have demonstrated, one of the ways that Pannenberg develops this consistency of use is through his understanding of persons as centers of action. This is particularly helpful because it re-contextualizes all of the tricky issues of identity and consciousness in light of personal activity. Thus, human beings develop their identities before God through the entirety of the actions.[58] 'Action' here must be understood not simply as outward or physical movement. If it were, it would hardly be a helpful term to describe God who transcends the limits of physical space and time. On the other hand, 'action' also must not be reduced to a theoretical construct or intent that lies behind individual acts. Rather, 'action' encompasses a wide range of activities, including speaking, reflecting, creating, working, and loving. These specific actions are helpful examples because they encompass both the theoretical and practical elements of action and can be understood as reflecting both human and divine activity. Thus, Pannenberg's notion of personhood is developed out of a wide notion of activity that is holistic and embraces both humanity and divinity.

Pannenberg's definition of divine personhood also makes a unique contribution to theology in light of his emphasis on relationality and prolepsis as ontological categories. First, as we discussed, it takes up the critique advanced by both Moltmann and Jenson that theologians from the Augustine to Rahner have tended toward modalism as a consequence of an ontology of substance that conceives of relationality as only an accidental quality of the divine essence. However, Pannenberg is able to avoid the dangers of tri-theism that plague Moltmann and Jenson's projects by placing relationality in the context of giving an ontological priority to the future. This principle of eschatological ontology theology holds that God's being is his rule and that as the monarchy of the Father is established by the work of the Son and the Spirit in the process of history, the being of God is increasingly made manifest in history. This account of God's presence in history explains the reality of atheism and agnosticism in a world that is ruled by an omnipotent and omnipresent God and the imperfection of Christian knowledge of God despite the fact that God has fully revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, Pannenberg asserts that it will be obvious in the end to all that God always has existed as triune and always has been the ruler of creation from the perspective of the eschatological consummation of the kingdom. Thus while God is and always has been a Trinity of divine persons united in the one divine essence, God relates to the world in such a way that creation is free to respond to the divine initiative and in a way that really matters to who God is.

58 See various treatments of action in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 224–244; 502–515

One of the most intriguing contributions of Pannenberg's Trinitarian theology is his appeal to field theory as developed in modern physics to describe the activity of the Holy Spirit in the Spirit's capacity both as principle of divine unity and as the Spirit of God's presence in the world. While more work needs to be done to analyze and critique the full implication of this interdisciplinary work, Pannenberg's use of field theory holds great possibilities both in terms of its model of application of interdisciplinary research and in terms of its implications for the too frequently neglected area of pneumatology. In particular, the concept of a field of force as the context for the unity of distinct subjects and the interplay between matter and spirit has the potential to be an incredibly powerful symbol for theology.

Each of these distinct and significant contributions to the work of Trinitarian theology might be summarized by saying that Pannenberg's definition of divine personhood makes a significant step in the direction of demonstrating the practical importance of the Trinity in lives of Christians. Much has been said about the decline in appreciation for the doctrine of the Trinity as an essential and pragmatic element of Christianity. Pannenberg's work makes a significant contribution in this direction. The consistency of his use of the term 'person', for example, helps us to understand more clearly our own human personhood. The human person, then, is not shut off or in opposition to the divine persons. Instead human persons are relational beings who find their eschatological and ontological fulfillment through participation in the divine life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His association of personhood with action not only forces us to understand God precisely through God's self-communication in history, but also contextualizes our own human practice in light of the divine practice—God's holistic relation to the world. Pannenberg's emphasis on the ontological significance of the categories of relation and prolepsis help to undergird the fundamental human intuition that life of the world and the creatures that inhabit it really matter to God and are not simply accidental qualities. His development of the analogy of the Spirit as a field of force seems to hold some real potential not only as a model for interdisciplinary research, but also for the development of a deeper appreciation for the interrelation between spirit and matter, mind and body.

In the final analysis we can see, then, that much more is at stake in Pannenberg's definition of the term 'person' as it applies the Trinity than just a theoretical debate about the relative appropriateness or inappropriateness of a word. Instead what is really at work here is a way of reflecting on who God is, who we are as human persons, and how God relates to the world. The result is not fundamentally an argument for holding onto a tired, old, worn-out word that has been over-burdened and out-matched since the second century. It is the effort to revitalize the meaning of that word in light of our experience of the divine and to rediscover the centrality and practicality of the doctrine of the Trinity.

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