

# God and History in the Book of Revelation

New Testament Studies in Dialogue with  
Pannenberg and Moltmann

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## CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	page xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiii
<b>1 Setting the scene: a modern debate about faith and history</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 The challenge of Ernst Troeltsch	2
1.3 Rudolf Bultmann: a dualistic response	5
1.4 Wolfhart Pannenberg: a unitive response	11
1.5 Jürgen Moltmann: radical eschatology	16
1.6 Conclusion	19
<b>2 Relating scripture and systematic theology: some preliminary issues</b>	<b>20</b>
2.1 Introduction	20
2.2 Scripture and theology: the interrelationship of historical and theological disciplines	21
2.3 Scripture and theology: the nature and appropriation of scripture	32
2.4 Conclusions	43
<b>3 Ways of approaching the Book of Revelation</b>	<b>45</b>
3.1 Introduction	45
3.2 Revelation as the key to history?	45
3.3 The rhetorical impact of the text	57
3.4 The genre of the Book of Revelation	72
3.5 Conclusions	79
<b>4 The spatial dimension of the Book of Revelation</b>	<b>81</b>
4.1 The spatial setting of the text	81

4.2	The spatial dynamic of the text	83
4.3	Analysis of the text	85
<b>5</b>	<b>The temporal dimension of the Book of Revelation</b>	<b>109</b>
5.1	Introduction	109
5.2	The temporal categories of the text	110
5.3	Analysis of the text	115
5.4	Conclusions	140
<b>6</b>	<b>Pannenberg, Moltmann, and the Book of Revelation</b>	<b>143</b>
6.1	Introduction	143
6.2	Preliminary questions: the nature of divine self-revelation and its appropriation	145
6.3	The dynamics of history	164
6.4	Prolepsis: the transformation of the apocalyptic framework	179
6.5	Eschatological consummation	186
6.6	The present in eschatological context	193
6.7	Conclusions	199
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>201</b>
	<i>Bibliography</i>	208
	<i>Index of passages cited</i>	224
	<i>Index of modern authors</i>	230
	<i>Index of subjects</i>	233

# 1

## SETTING THE SCENE: A MODERN DEBATE ABOUT FAITH AND HISTORY

### 1.1 Introduction

The starting point for this study lies in twentieth-century debates about the relationship between history and faith. These debates are one of the most enduring features of the modern theological scene. As far as New Testament studies are concerned, the debates have most often arisen in the context of the application of the historical-critical method to scripture. The two most obvious examples of this have been the various ‘quests’ for the historical Jesus, and the continuing discussions about the extent to which the resurrection of Jesus is accessible to the historical-critical method.

However, this study is concerned with a rather different question, which relates not so much to the exercise of the historical-critical method, but rather to some of the underlying assumptions made about the nature and significance of history as such. This more fundamental question is about the relationship between divine reality and the world of historical events. Of course, this question cannot be isolated from issues relating to the application of historical criticism to the biblical record. Three of the main protagonists to whom I refer in this opening chapter – Troeltsch, Bultmann and Pannenberg – have engaged in great depth with both sets of questions, and a major point of Pannenberg’s programme is precisely the illegitimacy of dividing the two sets of questions from each other. Nonetheless, the focus in this study will be especially on the debate about the significance of history *per se*.<sup>1</sup>

Two opposing approaches have been particularly influential in the exploration of this question. One approach is marked by a conviction

<sup>1</sup> The distinction I am making between two sets of questions in the theological disciplines is paralleled in history and philosophy by a distinction between ‘speculative’ philosophy of history, dealing with attempts to discern a meaning in history as a whole, and ‘critical’ philosophy of history, dealing with methodological questions such as the extent to which the writing of history inevitably entails interpretation as well as the reporting of fact. Walsh (1951) and Dray (1964) give standard accounts of both areas of the philosophy of history.

that there is a fundamental discontinuity between the world of historical events and divine reality. An important proponent of this view has been Rudolf Bultmann. In contrast, other theologians, notably Pannenberg and Moltmann, have reacted against the tendency in dialectical theology to draw this sharp distinction between the realms of faith and history. They have sought to re-emphasize a fundamental unity embracing both the divine and the historically contingent. The approaches adopted by Pannenberg and Moltmann are not identical. Pannenberg stresses underlying continuity in the historical process, which he sees as the self-revelation of God, culminating in the eschaton, at which point the coherence and purpose of history will be manifest. Moltmann stresses the hope of future *transformation* of reality by the inbreaking of the power of God. However, both of these theologians represent a reaction against the epistemological dualism inherent in Bultmann's work. In developing their theological positions, Pannenberg and Moltmann have both made use of ideas from apocalyptic literature. For Pannenberg, the attraction of apocalyptic is the idea of an ultimate eschatological horizon within which the whole of reality might be situated. For Moltmann, the attraction is the apocalyptic theme of the transformation of reality in the dawning of the new age.

The present study is an examination of the extent to which a reading of one particular apocalyptic text, Revelation, might be used to support or question the proposals of Pannenberg and Moltmann, and the extent to which their proposals provide a fruitful starting point for a contemporary interpretation of the text. In chapters 3–5 I shall examine the text of Revelation in detail, and in chapter 6 I shall relate my reading of the text to an analysis of Pannenberg's and Moltmann's theologies of history. The purpose of this opening chapter is to introduce the main contours of the twentieth-century debate about the theological significance of history. This will enable Pannenberg and Moltmann to be placed in context, and give an indication of the issues at stake. I am not offering a comprehensive account of the debate as a whole, but will highlight some of the main questions by describing briefly the work of two key figures, Ernst Troeltsch and Rudolf Bultmann, before considering Pannenberg and Moltmann. I hope to identify in particular some of the longer-term intellectual influences which have shaped the views these writers have expressed, and also the ways in which they relate to one another.

## **1.2 The challenge of Ernst Troeltsch**

The German theologian and philosopher Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) saw clearly the challenges which modern historical method posed to traditional theology. Assessments vary as to how well he succeeded in

meeting those challenges. But the problems to which he drew attention are enormous and have influenced the work of theologians and biblical scholars ever since.

Troeltsch was convinced of the validity of the historical-critical method, established in the nineteenth century by von Ranke and others. He claimed that the modern idea of history had ‘developed into a unique mode of thought and research that has authenticated itself with most brilliant results’.<sup>2</sup> In an important early essay, ‘Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology’, published in 1898, he described three important elements of modern historical method.<sup>3</sup> First, he identified the principle of *criticism*, according to which ‘in the realm of history there are only judgments of probability’ and hence no certainties.<sup>4</sup> This principle applied to the history of religions, including Christianity, as much as to any other history. Second, Troeltsch described the principle of *analogy*: ‘Agreement with normal, customary, or at least frequently attested happenings and conditions as we have experienced them is the criterion of probability for all events that historical criticism can recognise as having actually or possibly happened.’<sup>5</sup> Lying behind this second principle was an assumption of the ‘basic consistency of the human spirit and its historical manifestations’.<sup>6</sup> Troeltsch’s third principle was *correlation*, according to which ‘all historical happening is knit together in a permanent relationship . . . inevitably forming a current in which everything is interconnected and each single event is related to all others’.<sup>7</sup>

These three principles have far-reaching consequences. As Troeltsch himself remarked: ‘Give the historical method an inch and it will take a mile. From a strictly orthodox stand-point, therefore, it seems to bear a certain similarity to the devil.’<sup>8</sup> Troeltsch argued that the rigorous application of the historical method (which he regarded as inescapable) was incompatible with traditional dogmatic theology. The principle of criticism opened the Bible up to the thoroughgoing scrutiny which would be applied to any other ancient text. This process was of course already well advanced by the time of Troeltsch. More generally, if historical enquiry was to regard ‘facts’, even those related in the New Testament, as merely more or less probable, then this struck at the heart of the traditional direct

<sup>2</sup> Troeltsch (1972), p. 45. *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, from which this quotation comes, was first published in 1902.

<sup>3</sup> For an assessment of this essay against the theological background of the time, see Drescher (1992), pp. 70–97.

<sup>4</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 13. This and the next four references are from ‘Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology’, 1898.

<sup>5</sup> Troeltsch (1991), pp. 13–14. <sup>6</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 14. <sup>8</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 16.

connection between faith and fact. As Van Harvey puts it: 'If the theologian believes on faith that certain events occurred, the historian regards all historical claims as having only a greater or lesser degree of probability, and he regards the attachment of faith to these claims as a corruption of historical judgment.'<sup>9</sup>

The principle of analogy also implied a fundamental reassessment. Instead of taking tradition on trust, historians were bound to apply the criterion of their own experience. If recorded 'facts' such as the resurrection or the ascension did not correspond at all to current experience, then historians were bound to judge them to have been improbable. The whole edifice of external supernatural miraculous warrant, which Troeltsch saw as underpinning traditional Christianity, was at risk.

The principle of correlation meant that all 'facts' had to be seen in the context of other events, traditions and beliefs which surrounded them. It was no longer legitimate to treat Christianity as if it were in a privileged position, isolated from the rest of history. Troeltsch attacked what he termed the 'old dogmatic method' for perpetuating an invalid distinction between sacred and profane history: 'By its principles this method is absolutely opposed to the historical one. Its essence is that it possesses an authority that, by definition, is separate from the total context of history, not analogous to other happenings, and therefore not subject to historical criticism and the uncertainty attaching to its results.'<sup>10</sup>

Despite Troeltsch's hostility to traditional dogmatics, the overall aim of his theological programme as a whole was positive. His objective was not to undermine Christianity, but rather to re-present it in a way which was compatible with the application of historical method. He advocated a 'history-of-religions' approach, which would draw conclusions about Christianity from historical study, rather than from dogmatic preconceptions. He ruled out vigorously all notions of supernatural explanation. In a stance which nowadays appears strange, however, Troeltsch also remained a child of German idealism, accepting the existence of a universal principle, the Absolute, as a spiritual driving force within history. He attempted to reconcile this with his attachment to historical method by seeing the Absolute not as a pre-existent principle which imposed itself on historical events, but rather as a teleological principle, or 'the Goal towards which we are growing'.<sup>11</sup> Deductions about the nature of the Absolute could only be made following detailed historical study, and

<sup>9</sup> Harvey (1967), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 20. From 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology', 1898.

<sup>11</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 105. From 'The Dogmatics of the History-of-Religions School', 1913.



even then it would not be possible to describe the Absolute clearly. It could not simply be identified with historical Christianity, even though for Troeltsch historical Christianity, of all known religions, came the closest to the Absolute.

At the heart of Troeltsch's theological system was a contradiction, which he found increasingly difficult to reconcile. He was fully committed to the unrestricted application of historical method; yet he sought to maintain the assumption of a universal principle lying behind historical events. Indeed, his examination of the history of religion revealed a picture of such complexity that it became impossible to detect the operation of such a universal principle in any coherent way.

Troeltsch was committed to seeking to bridge the gap between contingent historical events and the work of God; he was opposed to any solution which would resort to a reimposition of a natural/supernatural division. As Coakley argues, he held 'a religious objection to the idea that God has two distinct modes of activity: one relatively unimportant and humdrum, which critical scholarship is allowed to probe, and the other salvifically decisive but sealed off from critical scrutiny'.<sup>12</sup> Yet seeking to avoid such a division was an uncomfortable task. On one side, the 'historical' end of Troeltsch's bridge was eroded: the failure of the historical method *per se* to reveal the workings of God in history meant that Troeltsch had to admit that some element of faith presupposition was essential if divine action was to be identified.<sup>13</sup> At the opposite, metaphysical end of the bridge, a different process of erosion took hold: by the end of his career, the complexity of the historical process had led Troeltsch to doubt whether one single universal principle was at work after all.

For present purposes, the importance of Troeltsch lies in his brilliant yet flawed attempt to use the historical-critical method to trace a universal divine purpose working in history. Holding this programme together coherently was ultimately beyond him, but the challenge he laid down has never been totally answered. In the remaining sections of this chapter I shall examine briefly different responses to that challenge.

### **1.3 Rudolf Bultmann: a dualistic response**

Bultmann's response to the problems exposed by Troeltsch was marked by a series of dualisms.<sup>14</sup> He embraced wholeheartedly the principles of historical investigation set out by Troeltsch, yet sought to protect faith

<sup>12</sup> Coakley (1988), p. 83.      <sup>13</sup> Coakley (1988), pp. 86–7.

<sup>14</sup> For a perceptive account of the dualisms at the heart of Bultmann's theology, see Roberts (1977).

from the rigours of such investigation by postulating a fundamental discontinuity between the world of contingent historical events on the one hand and divine reality on the other. Thus, faith could be isolated from the ambiguities and uncertainties of historical criticism.

In this respect, Bultmann's thought needs to be seen as standing in an intellectual tradition stretching back to Kant and Lessing. Each of these thinkers developed views of the relationship between faith and history which assumed a dualistic model of the perception of reality. Kant made a fundamental distinction between the realm of the 'phenomenal' (that which is knowable by being accessible to scientific investigation) and the realm of the 'noumenal' (which includes transcendental concepts relating, for example, to God, and which cannot be 'known'). Since God lies beyond the phenomenal, nothing may be known about him save that he is transcendent. Thus there is an epistemological dualism at the heart of Kantian thought between the phenomenal and the noumenal, the immanent and the transcendent.<sup>15</sup>

Lessing's work assumed a logical dualism between the uncertain and approximate world of historical knowledge and the world of eternal truth. He argued that it was illegitimate to base conclusions relating to eternal truth on the foundations of contingent historical events, formulating the problem most famously in his image of a ditch:

If no historical truth can be demonstrated then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths. That is: Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason . . . That, then, is the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap.<sup>16</sup>

Lessing's ditch was thus an expression not so much of a *temporal* distance between the Christ event and the modern believer, but rather a *logical* distance between two kinds of truth, contingent and eternal. At one level, this appears to be a major difficulty: how can the realms of history and faith be brought together? However, for Lessing, this difficulty in fact dissolves away. Since the eternal truths of reason cannot in any case be

<sup>15</sup> Yovel (1980) has demonstrated how this division works itself out in Kant's philosophy of history. Yovel argues that Kant ultimately failed to explain how his notion of a transcendent reason in the realm of the noumenal interacted with the phenomenal world of events.

<sup>16</sup> This passage appears in 'On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power', published in 1777, reprinted in Lessing (1956), ed. Chadwick, pp. 53, 55.

derived from history, there is no need to bring history and faith together in that sense.

The point, then, is that Lessing does not have to leap the ditch for which his essay is most famous . . . he is in effect rejecting the notion that the truth of authentic religion is dependent upon the occurrence of certain historical events or on the emergence at an identifiable moment in time of a truth not previously available to us.<sup>17</sup>

In effect, history becomes a vehicle for disclosing truth of a non-historical character. A consequence of this line of argument is that religious truth becomes effectively insulated from the scrutiny of historical research. There are clear resonances with certain strands of twentieth-century dialectical theology, with their attempts to safeguard faith from the advance of historical criticism.<sup>18</sup>

These are the long-term intellectual influences against which Bultmann should be seen. More immediately, he was influenced by the Neo-Kantianism of nineteenth-century scholars such as Cohen and Natorp.<sup>19</sup> Their distinctive contribution was to radicalize Kant's epistemology: they argued that not only can we not know 'things-in-themselves', but even the senses through which we experience the world cannot be depended upon. Thiselton argues that in Bultmann's case this development of Kant was fused with a brand of nineteenth-century Lutheranism, which stressed the need to avoid seeking one's security in anything but God. The combination of these two influences led Bultmann not only to dilute the importance of empirical historical enquiry for faith, but to regard any attempt to base faith on historical fact as misguided.<sup>20</sup> This is the source of Bultmann's fundamental mistrust of anything which 'objectifies' faith on the grounds that this will inevitably consist of worldly knowledge rather than genuine encounter with the transcendent. Thiselton comments: 'Bultmann . . . accepted the Neo-Kantian assumption that knowledge which objectifies

<sup>17</sup> Michalson (1985), p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Bultmann's approach is also strongly influenced by Kierkegaard's critique of Lessing. Although Kierkegaard kept Lessing's and Kant's distinction between the world of faith and the world of history, he emphasized the importance of the particular moment in the mediation of divine truth to the believer. Eternal truths were inaccessible to fallen human reason without God's initiative at particular moments. See Michalson (1985), pp. 61–92.

<sup>19</sup> See Thiselton (1980), pp. 208–12.

<sup>20</sup> Carnley (1972) argues that Bultmann's radical dilution of the importance of historical events as a foundation for faith is based on a mistaken view of the nature of historical evidence. While it may be true that any particular view of a piece of historical evidence is provisional and open to correction, that does not mean that all historical knowledge is necessarily uncertain in principle.

in accordance with law is a knowledge in which *man* does the shaping and seizes the mastery. Therefore, in the light of his Lutheranism and his dialectical theology, talk of God cannot take this form.<sup>21</sup>

How does this Neo-Kantian inheritance work itself out in Bultmann's theology? The epistemological dualism between the world of faith and the world of historical research which I noted in the thought of Kant, Lessing and Kierkegaard is also present in Bultmann, albeit expressed in a different way. Bultmann's statement that 'the world which faith wills to grasp is absolutely unattainable by means of scientific research' is a typical summary of his position.<sup>22</sup> At the heart of Bultmann's position is a fundamental dichotomy, which occurs throughout his thought in different contexts. On one plane is the merely actual, the world of empirical history and factual knowledge. On a quite distinct plane is authentically and specifically human existential encounter and the self-understanding of human individuals in their historicity. Nothing in the first plane can claim to have ultimate value, and as long as individuals understand themselves in terms of this plane, their true selves remain in bondage, in inauthentic existence. In his consideration of history, Bultmann expresses this distinction by means of two German words: *Historie*, to represent the world susceptible to historical investigation; and *Geschichte*, to represent the world of authentic existence which cannot be accessed by historical investigation. This accords with Bultmann's theological conviction that we cannot and must not seek knowledge of God from objectified sources (i.e. from data which can be assessed and explained using human reason). For Bultmann, 'God does not stand still and does not put up with being made an object of observation. One cannot *see* God; one can only *hear* God.'<sup>23</sup> Hence his assertion that he actually welcomed negative results of historical criticism, since they discouraged the founding of faith on the wrong premises.

Along with this dichotomy, Bultmann held to a view of history as a closed continuum of events, in effect applying Troeltsch's two principles of analogy and correlation to exclude the idea of special supernatural intervention in history.<sup>24</sup> Unlike Troeltsch, Bultmann did not believe that the results of historical investigation could bear the theological weight of

<sup>21</sup> Thiselton (1980), p. 226.      <sup>22</sup> Bultmann (1969), p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Bultmann (1985), p. 144. From 'Science and Existence', 1955.

<sup>24</sup> Morgan argues that Bultmann's commitment to the thoroughgoing application of the historical-critical method places him in some respects close to Troeltsch. 'Both theologians [Bultmann and Troeltsch] do their history according to modern critical norms, and try to draw out its theological significance. They both stand opposed to Barth, whose theological method resists the autonomy of modern critical history' (1976, p. 60).

presenting the Christian message. However, it is important to understand that Bultmann is *not* saying that God is not active at all; he is merely saying that God's action cannot be seen by empirical observation. It is possible to speak about God's act only in the context of existential encounter. 'God's act is hidden from all eyes other than the eyes of faith.'<sup>25</sup>

Bultmann's most sustained discussion of the nature of history and how it relates to faith and authentic existence comes in his *History and Eschatology*. He traces the development of different ways in which scripture conceives of the relationship between history and faith. He contrasts Old Testament prophecy, which he sees as speaking of the execution of God's judgement within history, with later Jewish apocalyptic, which saw divine judgement bringing about the end of this world and the dissolution of history. For Bultmann, the New Testament draws on both of these views, although the apocalyptic element predominates in the earliest traditions, such as Jesus' proclamation of the inbreaking of the eschatological reign of God. Passages such as Mark 13 and 1 Corinthians 15 also appear to show little interest in any continuing history or divine judgement within it: in effect, history is swallowed up by eschatology in the context of intense expectation of an imminent parousia.

Bultmann interprets Paul in an existential light, as stressing 'the historicity of man, the true historical life of the human being, the history which everyone experiences for himself and by which he gains his real essence'.<sup>26</sup> This concept of the historicity of the individual is vital for Bultmann. It functions almost as a redefinition of what is truly significant in history, once one accepts his contentions that nothing which is objectified is of ultimate value and that authentic existence is glimpsed only in existential encounter. When Bultmann speaks of the 'historicity' of the individual, he therefore means something very different from the world of historical investigation.

For Bultmann, the Fourth Gospel takes this process further and, unlike Paul, dismisses any concept of future eschatology, so that eschatological reality is seen as breaking into the present. (This argument depends of course on Bultmann's ploy of regarding the references to future eschatology which appear in the text as being the work of an 'ecclesiastical redactor'.) Bultmann therefore detects in both Paul and the Fourth Gospel (for him the most important parts of the New Testament) a sense that the present time, swallowed up in eschatology, has a particular character as a 'time-between'. In Paul it is the time between the resurrection and the

<sup>25</sup> Bultmann (1985), p. 111. From 'On the Problem of Demythologizing', 1952.

<sup>26</sup> Bultmann (1957), p. 43.

parousia, in John the time between the glorification of Jesus and the death of the individual believer.<sup>27</sup> In each case, the present time is more than merely chronology. For Bultmann this represents a valuable perspective, since eschatological reality and therefore existential possibility are woven into the present.<sup>28</sup>

One senses the tone of regret as Bultmann argues that with the delay of the parousia this view of the present became unsustainable, and a sense of history re-emerged distinct from eschatology, so that eschatological reality came to be understood primarily as anticipation, rather than as current reality. Only with the Romantic reaction against the teleology of the Enlightenment, and with what Bultmann sees as the modern sense of man's historicity, is there a renewed opportunity to glimpse the reality of history as personal encounter and decision:

the present is the moment of decision, and by the decision taken the yield of the past is gathered in and the meaning of the future is chosen. This is the character of every historical situation; in it the problem and the meaning of past and future are enclosed and are waiting, as it were, to be unveiled by human decisions.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, for Bultmann, meaning in history is to be found in momentary existential encounter in the present moment, rather than by historical investigation. In the believer's experience of Christ, what matters is not whatever can be pieced together about the history of the Christ event, but rather Christ's summons to decision in the present. And Bultmann is strongly opposed to any notion that a meaning is to be found in the broad sweep of history. Schemes such as those developed by Hegel or Marx which depend upon a view of history as a whole are for Bultmann illegitimate because a vantage point from which the whole of history may be seen is unattainable.<sup>30</sup>

Bultmann is representative of one possible response to the challenges laid down by Troeltsch at the beginning of the twentieth century. He accepts Troeltsch's historical-critical agenda, yet, under the influence of his Neo-Kantian inheritance, seeks to preserve a secure zone within which faith might be appropriated, safe from the rigours of historical investigation. This is not, however, the only possible response.

<sup>27</sup> Bultmann (1957), p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> In fact, Bultmann's use of scripture can be attacked as arbitrary and selective. As Roberts points out, the New Testament includes a variety of eschatological perspectives, and not merely the realized eschatology detected by Bultmann; see Roberts (1977), ch. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Bultmann (1957), pp. 141–2.

<sup>30</sup> Bultmann (1985), pp. 137–8. From 'Science and Existence', 1955.

#### **1.4 Wolfhart Pannenberg: a unitive response**

Wolfhart Pannenberg has responded to Troeltsch's challenge in a way which is fundamentally opposed to that of Bultmann. I shall discuss Pannenberg's proposals (and those of Jürgen Moltmann, whose approach bears key similarities to that of Pannenberg) in more detail in chapter 6. However, at this stage I shall examine some of the salient points of Pannenberg's approach, to set the scene for the chapters which follow.

Whereas Bultmann's thought owes much to the intellectual tradition represented by Kant, Lessing and Kierkegaard, Pannenberg clearly owes a strong debt to Hegel. Although Pannenberg distances himself from Hegel's conclusions at important points, he shares some of Hegel's central concerns. The first of these is Hegel's conviction that reality should be understood in a unitive, rather than a dualistic, way. Plant places this conviction in the context of Hegel's Germany, arguing that political and religious divisions, together with increasing intellectual specialization in the eighteenth century, had led to a sense of social fragmentation, which Hegel sought to overcome.<sup>31</sup> In particular, Hegel reacted strongly against Kant's distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal, and against Lessing's distinction between accidental and necessary truth, both of which he regarded as fostering ontological and epistemological dualism. The second concern of Hegel of particular importance to Pannenberg is the sense of an unfolding dynamic meaning in history as a whole. For Hegel, life (and therefore history) was characterized by constant dynamic process. Although he believed in the ultimate unity of reality, there was a sense in which this ideal had not been achieved, and history represented a constant struggle to realize it. Hegel argues that the process by which the unity of reality is achieved is dialectical. It contains three movements, which constantly recur. The first phase is that of the concept, existing in unconscious identity: it is characterized by unity, but lacks consciousness of itself. In the second phase, differentiation, the concept is objectified: this is simultaneously both the same in content as the concept and also its utter negation. In the third phase, the objectified form and the concept are united in a way which both reconciles them *and* preserves concept and negation in a greater unity. This logical process is the basis of Hegel's dialectic. In the context of history, Hegel sees the concept as Spirit, and this is the role God plays in his system. Thus, by a constant process of

<sup>31</sup> Plant describes Hegel's aim as 'the recreation of a whole man in an integrated, cohesive, political community' (1983, p. 25). Significantly, the intellectual and religious environment into which Hegel was born was partly shaped by apocalyptic thought; see Dickey (1987), pp. 1–137.

objectification of itself in the world and reconciliation back with its own concept, Spirit aims through history to emerge into self-consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

Pannenberg picks up the Hegelian themes of the unity of reality and universal history. This is reflected in the central thesis of *Revelation as History*, which Pannenberg produced with a group of colleagues in 1961. The central argument of the book is an attempt to rehabilitate the idea that divine self-communication comes through historical events, over against the stress, in Bultmann and others, upon a distinction *between* the plane of faith commitment and the plane of historical events.<sup>33</sup>

From the idea of revelation as history come the principal elements of Pannenberg's programme. He rejects the Neo-Kantian division between fact and value which lies at the heart of Bultmann's thought. Events and their meaning are inextricably entwined. He attacks Kähler and Bultmann, for whom reports of historical facts are accompanied by testimony to their revelatory value, which is supplementary to the events in themselves, and which exists for faith alone.<sup>34</sup> Pannenberg expresses a parallel concern in respect of the appropriation of faith by the believer. He rejects the idea that reason and faith should be seen as existing in two separate planes. Rather, the self-revelation of God is in events which are publicly observable: faith must be built on the foundation of history: 'In no case is theology... in the position of being able to say what was actually the case regarding contents which remain opaque to the historian.'<sup>35</sup> The reverse side of this coin is that faith cannot be insulated from historical criticism. This leads Pannenberg to accept Troeltsch's principles of criticism and correlation.

Pannenberg embraces the historical-critical method highlighted in Troeltsch's first principle, since to seek to insulate Christianity from historical criticism would imply a division in ultimate truth and hence vitiate the principle of unity. At the same time, Pannenberg is aware of the danger that the historical-critical method can itself threaten the unity of truth: he criticizes its anthropocentric tendency, 'which seems apt to exclude all transcendent reality as a matter of course'.<sup>36</sup> He is also in principle prepared to accept Troeltsch's criterion of correlation, since he believes

<sup>32</sup> Some of Pannenberg's later writing about the relationship between the infinity of God and finite reality is strongly influenced by Hegelian dialectic (Pannenberg, 1991, pp. 397ff.)

<sup>33</sup> See my discussion, in chapter 6, of the support which Pannenberg derives from scripture for his position, and of the various criticisms which have been made of the idea of revelation as history; although he has refined his position in various respects (see pp. 145–54), he has continued to hold to the basic principle of divine self-revelation in historical events. See Pannenberg (1991), pp. 243–57.

<sup>34</sup> Pannenberg (1970), pp. 85ff.; and (1991), p. 250. Pannenberg is also highly critical of Bultmann's Christology, with its lack of interest in the historical Jesus (Pannenberg, 1968, pp. 21–32).

<sup>35</sup> Pannenberg (1970), p. 50.      <sup>36</sup> Pannenberg (1970), p. 39.



events to be comprehensible ultimately only in relation to the whole of the rest of history:

It belongs to the full meaning of the Incarnation that God's redemptive deed took place within the universal correlative connections of human history and not in a ghetto of redemptive history, or in a primal history belonging to a dimension which is 'oblique' to ordinary history . . . if, indeed, it has not remained in an archetypal realm above the plane of history.<sup>37</sup>

The best-known application by Pannenberg of this idea is his assertion that the resurrection is in principle accessible to historical investigation.

A further implication of the idea of revelation as history is that, for Pannenberg, history is a universal whole. History has a unity and coherence which form the basis for theology: 'History is the most comprehensive horizon of Christian theology. All theological questions and answers are meaningful only within the framework of the history which God has with humanity and through humanity with his whole creation.'<sup>38</sup> Pannenberg finds support for this position in the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions in scripture. He argues that the early traditions of the fulfilment of divine promise in past events such as the exodus gradually develop into the apocalyptic expectation of the future demonstration of divine glory, in an eschatological perspective. Building on this biblical foundation, Pannenberg outlines a picture of history characterized by dynamic purpose: 'Within the reality characterized by the constantly creative work of God, history arises because God makes promises and fulfils these promises. History is event so suspended in tension between promise and fulfilment that through the promise it is irreversibly pointed toward the goal of future fulfilment.'<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, Pannenberg emphasizes the ultimate sovereignty and freedom of God. God is not constrained by a plan of history which works towards its conclusion regardless. A universal horizon and a fundamental unity of truth must be maintained if God is God. But any attempt to impose a pattern on historical development is illegitimate because, being of human design, it must be finite and cannot take account of the history of the future yet to happen. The only solution for Pannenberg is to hold the idea of universal history together with the idea that history is radically contingent. This is one of the areas in which Pannenberg distances himself most sharply from Hegel. He is concerned that the grand sweep of Hegelian dialectic has the effect of 'flattening out' the

<sup>37</sup> Pannenberg (1970), pp. 41–2.

<sup>38</sup> Pannenberg (1970), p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Pannenberg (1970), p. 18.

particularities of history in order to fit them into the scheme as a whole. Pannenberg concludes that: 'in spite of all [Hegel's] efforts to allow the particular and individual to receive their due... he remained fixed in the primacy of the universal'.<sup>40</sup> For Pannenberg, there *is* a pattern to history, but until the end of history, when all events will be comprehensible in their full context, humans will remain unable to discern the pattern fully. His concern to stress the freedom of God makes him doubtful about Troeltsch's third principle (analogy) because it can be used to limit the openness of the future. He is concerned that this principle will inevitably tend towards anthropocentrism, and skew historical judgement by reinforcing the interpreter's own presuppositions. He argues rather that: 'if the historian keeps his eye on the nonexchangeable individuality and contingency of an event, then he will see that he is dealing with nonhomogeneous things, which cannot be contained without remainder in any analogy'.<sup>41</sup>

Hegel's system, which postulates a universal Absolute gradually realizing itself through history, is essentially evolutionary: what takes place in the future is an organic development from what has already taken place. But this, for Pannenberg, would compromise the freedom of God, who, for all his involvement in the unfolding of history, remains both transcendent and immanent. For Pannenberg, therefore, the dynamic flow of history is not from the past into the future, but rather from an open future into the past.<sup>42</sup> Truth in history can be seen only *in retrospect*, and then only provisionally, since events still in the future will alter the context within which past events are seen. Pannenberg's conclusion is that the one 'earth-shaking objection' to Hegel's philosophy of history is that future truth is excluded from his system.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Pannenberg (1971), p. 23. Attempts by Hegel and others to produce an overall theory of historical development, within which all events may be located, have been attacked, notably by Collingwood in *The Idea of History* (1994, especially pp. 263–6: originally published in 1946).

<sup>41</sup> Pannenberg (1970), p. 46. Pannenberg argues that the use of analogy *does* have a proper place in historical method, but that its true value lies *not* in a principle that historical deduction depends on the interpreter being able to identify analogy. Instead, its value is in showing the *limits* of the applicability of analogy to historical events: 'The most fruitful possibility opened up by the discovery of historical analogies consists in the fact that it allows more precise comprehension of the ever-present concrete limitation of what is held in common, the particularity that is present in every case in the phenomena being compared' (1970, p. 47).

<sup>42</sup> See the discussion (in chapter 6, pp. 171–6) of Pannenberg's complex idea that ontology is driven from the future, and Moltmann's parallel arguments in favour of 'anticipation' over 'extrapolation'.

<sup>43</sup> A common criticism levelled at Hegel by historians relates to his apparent belief that history had in a sense reached its end with the rise of the Prussian state. Interestingly,

At the same time, it is a central element in Pannenberg's thinking that in the resurrection of Christ, understood against an apocalyptic background of hope for the general resurrection of the dead, the end of history has been revealed proleptically. Even this, however, is still provisional, since it requires its ultimate vindication by God at the eschaton. Hence, although Pannenberg locates his thought in an apocalyptic framework, it is apocalyptic as transformed in the light of the Christ event.

The key areas of difference between Pannenberg and Bultmann should now be clear. Pannenberg completely rejects the Neo-Kantian division between fact and value which lies at the heart of Bultmann's position. This has three implications. First, there is for Pannenberg no secure realm for faith beyond historical investigation. As Michalson puts it, '[for Pannenberg] the strategies that Lessing, Kierkegaard and such successors of theirs as Herrmann and Bultmann adopt to neutralize historical-critical difficulties are a greater threat to faith than historical criticism itself'.<sup>44</sup> Second, the world of contingent historical events cannot be held to be in some way irrelevant for faith (as Bultmann claims); on the contrary, it is precisely on the self-revelation of God in history that faith must take its stand. Third, as the self-revelation of God, history as a universal whole acquires a fundamental meaning, which will finally be revealed at the eschaton. In Pannenberg's scheme, the whole of the historical process, past, present and future, is a unity. This is fundamentally at odds with Bultmann, who stresses rather the importance of the present moment of decision for the individual.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, Pannenberg represents a third position alongside those of Troeltsch and Bultmann. Like Bultmann, he accepts Troeltsch's principles of criticism and correlation. However, he applies them more radically than Bultmann, since he will not accept a bifurcation between faith and history which would leave the former secure, isolated from historical investigation. Yet that same refusal to divide faith and history leads Pannenberg at another level to part company with Troeltsch, since he is not prepared to reduce historical method to a positivist conception which (on the basis of

recent years have seen the revival, in various different forms, of the idea that history has effectively ended. Although such ideas often take the form of post-modernist reactions against metanarrative, they are to some extent still dependent on detecting grand patterns in history – in this case, the pattern of an end to historical development. See Niethammer (1992) for a helpful survey of this movement.

<sup>44</sup> Michalson (1985), p. 123.

<sup>45</sup> See also Löwith (1949), pp. 252–3, for a similar critique of Bultmann's concentration on the present moment. Pannenberg studied philosophy with Löwith at Heidelberg in the early 1950s.

Troeltsch's principle of analogy) would rule out the possibility of divine intervention in history in ways which burst through the limits of previous experience. As Thiselton comments:

Pannenberg refuses to accept a dualism from which (with Troeltsch) we abstract facts for the historian but relativize the meaning; or from which (with Kähler and Bultmann) we abstract meaning for the theologian but relativize, as it were, the facts. Pannenberg refuses to allow the wholeness of the tradition to be torn apart, and either the facts or the interpretation to be evaporated.<sup>46</sup>

### 1.5 Jürgen Moltmann: radical eschatology

Moltmann's approach to the theology of history bears strong similarities to that of Pannenberg, and in many respects stands in the same tradition. Like Pannenberg, Moltmann distances himself from Bultmann. He attacks dialectical theology for its espousal of what he terms 'transcendental subjectivity', which implies a static, ahistorical, view of the historical process. In Bultmann's case, Moltmann argues that this takes the form of the 'transcendental subjectivity of man', with a concentration on the call for decision by the individual in the present moment, at the expense of a truly historical perspective. Moltmann traces the origins of Bultmann's approach back to Kant and a dualism which divorces faith from history.<sup>47</sup>

As with Pannenberg, the influence of Hegel is apparent, although, like Pannenberg, Moltmann is highly critical of Hegel in places. In Moltmann's case, Hegel's ideas are mediated through the work of the Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch, in particular Bloch's monumental *The Principle of Hope*.<sup>48</sup> The assumption underlying Bloch's work is that the world is not a settled, stable entity, but is rather in process and unfinished. He is attracted to the idea of eschatological history present in the Old Testament. He also draws heavily on Hegel, although he reorders Hegel's dialectic radically, removing from the picture what he saw as Hegel's false subject (the World Spirit) and Hegel's spiritualized account of the

<sup>46</sup> Thiselton (1980), p. 81.

<sup>47</sup> Moltmann (1967), pp. 46ff. He has recently returned to this theme (1996, pp. 19ff.), arguing that Bultmann's position leads to the swallowing up of history by eschatology.

<sup>48</sup> First published in 1959. Pannenberg also acknowledges the importance of Bloch in reawakening interest in eschatology (1971, pp. 191ff.).

process. The process becomes a purely earthly one, with the 'subject' as the working man. Bloch also sought to rehabilitate the concept of utopia, as fundamental to the nature of reality as something unfinished. Like Pannenberg, Bloch argues that Hegel's system is insufficiently open to the future. For Bloch, Hegel's epistemology is backward-looking, restricting knowledge to the knowledge of what has become, while his ontology also looks backward to a mythical first point when all was present in potential. Since Bloch sees the ontological structure of the world as essentially unsettled and unconcluded, he regards any epistemology or ontology based on a backward-looking orientation as deficient. Bloch also uses the concept of transcendence, though not in the usual sense of a reality existing 'above' the earthly present, but rather as an immanent, eschatological concept. But the role that utopia plays in relation to the world at hand is not merely eschatological: it is also dialectical. It interacts with the world at hand in a process which includes a role for utopia in judging the inadequacies of the world at hand. This framework becomes highly significant for Moltmann's idea of hope as contradiction of the present, which is one of the most important ways in which his approach differs from that of Pannenberg.

In the introduction to *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann writes that 'from first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present'.<sup>49</sup> This statement is a good summary of some of the basic themes in his thought. First, Moltmann's theology has a fundamentally future, eschatological orientation. Eschatology is not simply a branch of Christian doctrine appearing at the end of volumes of systematics: it is fundamental to theology as a whole. Second, this stress on the future means that hope is central to the Christian faith: 'Where the bounds that mark the end of all human hopes are broken through in the raising of the crucified one, there faith can and must expand into hope . . . in the Christian life, faith has the priority but hope the primacy.'<sup>50</sup> Third, Moltmann emphasizes the role of hope in revolutionizing and transforming the present. Hope in the future of Christ is necessarily a contradiction of the sinful world in which the Christian lives.

It is partly this stress on the future which leads Moltmann to distance himself from Bultmann's preoccupation with the present moment. However, Moltmann's emphasis on an open future and the need for future transformation leads him also to differentiate his approach from that of

<sup>49</sup> Moltmann (1967), p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> Moltmann (1967), p. 20

Pannenberg. Moltmann argues that Pannenberg does not go far enough in his criticisms of Troeltsch's principle of analogy. Merely asserting, as Pannenberg does, that there must be room for contingency within history, is insufficient:

The rediscovery of the category of the contingent does not in itself necessarily involve the discovery of a theological category. For the raising of Christ involves not the category of the accidentally new, but the expectational category of the eschatologically new . . . The resurrection of Christ does not mean a possibility within the world and its history, but a new possibility altogether for the world, for existence and for history.<sup>51</sup>

While Pannenberg responds positively towards Jewish apocalyptic literature because of the universal historical horizon within which he takes it to operate, Moltmann is more ambivalent. He criticizes the apocalyptic genre for propounding a determinist view of history, in which events unfold according to a preordained plan, in an almost deist system. In this system, what matters is the fulfilment of the plan, not the freedom of God to act in new ways. Moltmann therefore argues that the interpretation advanced by Pannenberg, to the effect that apocalyptic represents a cosmological interpretation of eschatological history and therefore is a key source for a view of universal history, is inadequate. Moltmann argues that apocalyptic needs to be seen as the radical historicizing of the cosmos, not the cosmologizing of history; this reflects his concern, following Bloch, for a radical, transforming eschatology and his desire to avoid any move towards a settled view of the nature of the cosmos.<sup>52</sup>

Moltmann's attitude to the concept of universal history neatly encapsulates the similarities and differences between him and Pannenberg. On one level, he agrees with Pannenberg about the need to maintain a universal historical horizon, for example in the interpretation of the New Testament. However, Moltmann parts company with Pannenberg when it comes to defining the *shape* of universal history, and the points on which they differ provide a helpful summary of the more general difference in their overall approaches. Moltmann's argument here is that what links the past and the future is not the *substance* of history but rather the hope which points beyond any given moment. The promise is constantly re-actualized, but it remains promise, and it is this eschatological sense which forms the link between the past and the future. In a criticism aimed

<sup>51</sup> Moltmann (1967), p. 179.      <sup>52</sup> Moltmann (1967), pp. 137–8.

partly at Pannenberg, Moltmann declares: ‘The theologian is not concerned merely to supply a different *interpretation* of the world, of history and of human nature, but to *transform* them in expectation of a divine transformation.’<sup>53</sup>

## 1.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to indicate some of the main developments in twentieth-century theology on the subject of the relationship between faith and history, placing the work of Pannenberg and Moltmann in the context of earlier contributions to the debate. I began by outlining the significance of the adoption by Ernst Troeltsch of the three principles of criticism, analogy and correlation, and the challenges which this has posed ever since to attempts to relate faith and history together. One reaction to this challenge, articulated most influentially by Bultmann, has been to assume a fundamental epistemological separation between the planes of faith and history, emphasizing the importance of faith-response in the present moment of decision, and radically diluting the significance for faith of the historical process. Pannenberg and Moltmann represent in their different ways an alternative reaction to Troeltsch’s challenge, seeking to keep faith and history together, and to emphasize the coming of God from the future. I shall consider the arguments of Pannenberg and Moltmann in greater detail in chapter 6, in the light of my reading of the Book of Revelation in chapters 3–5. However, exploring the relationship between systematic theology and scripture raises certain important methodological issues, and it is to these that I turn in chapter 2.

<sup>53</sup> Moltmann (1967), p. 84. This is an application to theology of Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it’ (Feuer, 1969, p. 286). Moltmann also suggests (1977, pp. 213–15) that Pannenberg’s use of the category of universal history has the effect of simply reimposing an authoritarian framework in the vacuum left by his rejection of the authoritarian concept of the Word in Barth and Bultmann. I return in more detail to the views of Pannenberg and Moltmann on universal history in chapter 6, pp. 164–70.